

Slipping and Sobriety; the Functions  
of Drinking in Alcoholics Anonymous

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**Summary.** A.A. groups create pressures and provide expectations that encourage some members to resume drinking. Members' responses to these relapses contribute to group solidarity and strengthen the boundaries between the norms of sobriety and deviant behavior.

The purpose of the present report is to illustrate the dynamics and importance of "slipping" - a relapse in drinking by a recovering alcoholic - to Alcoholics Anonymous. This report also views slipping in the broader theoretical framework of the sociology of deviance.

It is apparent from a number of studies (1-4) that slipping is a common occurrence in A.A. In a study of A.A. groups in London, Edwards et al. (1) pointed out that 57% of their respondents had slipped at least once and 18% had slipped five or more times. These findings led the authors to suggest, "The number of times members have 'slipped' since joining A.A. serves to emphasize that A.A. is as much a society of alcoholics who are having difficulty in remaining sober as it is one in which they are staying off drink" (1,p.383). In a study of North American A.A. groups,\*\* the A.A. General Service Board reported that 41% of the respondents had not had a drink since first attending A.A.; by implication, 59% had slipped at least once. Data presented by Bailey and Leach (2) and Edwards et al. (1,3) indicate that the number of A.A. members reporting a year or less of abstinence was double the number reporting a year or less of A.A. membership. Again, the implication is clear that members frequently slip. The actual percentage of A.A. members who had actually slipped was probably higher than that reported by Edwards et al. (1,3), because newcomers, who tend to have high rates of slipping (2) were excluded from their analysis. Other studies (4-6) show higher rates of slipping, but because of methodological problems the rates cannot be meaningfully interpreted.

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\*\* ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS. GENERAL SERVICE OFFICE. A.A.'s 1968 Membership Survey. New York; 1968 [Unpublished.]

These studies (1-6) illustrate that slipping is a common occurrence, but it is possible that it serves a function in A.A. The following observation suggests that A.A. groups create pressures and provide expectations that encourage slipping, a deviant behavior, and that the function of this deviance is boundary maintenance.

### **Slipping As A Reaffirmation Of Norms**

Starting with Durkheim (7), sociologists have been aware of the normalcy and function of crime and deviance in human subjects. Crime is "an integral part of all healthy societies" (& p.67) and its primary function is that of boundary maintenance (8). Commenting on his work and on Durkheim, Erikson (8) states, "The deviant act, then, creates a sense of mutuality among the people of a community by supplying a focus for group feeling. Like a war, a flood, or some other emergency, deviance makes people more alert to the interests they share in common and draws attention to those values which constitute the 'collective conscience' of the community. Unless the rhythm of group life is punctuated by occasional movements of deviant behavior, presumably, social organization would be impossible" (12, p.4). Mead (9) makes a similar point.

The "collective conscience" and group boundaries are reaffirmed because deviance draws people together and encourages them to dichotomize deviant and normal behavior. Deviant behavior reaffirms not only the norms involved in the specific type of behavior but other norms as well. For example, when a delinquent is apprehended for stealing a car, not only the norms regarding theft and honesty but also norms related to the assumed causes of the behavior are reaffirmed. The person who stole the car may have violated curfew, may have been "hanging out" at a pool hall or may have been truant from school. A violation such as theft, then, reaffirms norms regarding honesty and private property as well as the norms associated with the assumed cause of the these. Similarly, when someone in A.A. slips, the norms of "sobriety" as well as the norms violated before slipping are reaffirmed. The present discussion of slipping considers norm violations antecedent to slipping in addition to the violation of sobriety.

The A.A. groups that I observed met in a city I shall refer to as Midwestern City. For 16 months during 1973 and 1974, I attended at least 1 of the 70 A.A. meetings held during a typical week in this city of approximately 200,000 population. I emphasized to the A.A. members whom I observed my role as a researcher concerned with learning about alcoholism and A.A. By establishing rapport with members, I gained access to closed meetings, open houses and the homes of A.A. members. Most of the observations discussed in this report were made at open houses, since member's conversations at these functions generally focus on the A.A. program. Also, open houses are one of the most likely places for interaction between abstainers and those who have slipped. Other sources of data were testimonials delivered at open A.A. meetings, informal conversations with A.A. members in a variety of settings and taped interviews of 6 A.A. members.

A.A. members frequently mention circumstances and behaviors that must be avoided in order to avoid slipping. These include depression, jealousy, fatigue, having a love affair, arguing with friends, not paying attention at A.A. meetings, not following the A.A. program, criticizing the program, being dishonest, being too concerned with finances or other problems, being too happy or cocky, getting low grades or failing when high grades or successes are expected, recalling old drinking memories, failing to avoid questionable persons, places or things, and not attending enough A.A. meetings.\*

The following statements, taken from discussions among members at open house meetings, are characteristic of the statements that members use to disseminate information about these circumstances and behaviors: "The mental part of this thing [alcoholism] can creep up on you when you get tired, and if it does, the next thing you know you will be drinking"; "If you don't keep active in the program you will probably slip"; "As soon as you think you've got this program made and are feeling pretty good, you will probably slip"; and "We must always be careful of self-pity. One minute you might be feeling sorry for yourself and the next you will be slipping."

Mideastern City A.A. members I observed constantly told each other to avoid these circumstances lest they slip. The range of situations to be avoided is so broad and the normative structure is so highly specified that one would expect many norm violations and, therefore, many who slip. Although the studies cited earlier clearly indicate that slipping is a common occurrence, neither my data nor those of anyone else cited explain slipping rates. At the normative level, however, A.A. members believe that these norm violations frequently lead to slipping and that once a norm violation occurs, slipping can be avoided by seeking reinforcement from the group. It is extremely important to note that in either case (I.E., norm violation followed by slipping or norm violation followed by group support) the boundaries of the group are strengthened and reaffirmed.

Frequently, when a member who has slipped returns to a group for the first time, there is discussion of the circumstances of his slipping. Such discussion reflects A.A.'s emphasis on "being honest with yourself." During this type of discussion other members find out what circumstances engender slipping, and what they should avoid doing. At one meeting, a member described a situation prior to an affair between two members who subsequently slipped, "When I saw him making eyes at her I knew they were headed for trouble." One person returning after having slipped said, "Just take a look at me. Take a good look. If you take a drink you will end up like me. At least I'm here though - That's what's important." When asked, "How did it happen?" a woman replied, "I'm not sure. I was feeling real good. I thought I had this program made. The next thing you know, I was drinking."

\* These behaviors and the norms they exemplify are not exhaustive of all A.A. norms. Gellman (10) presents an excellent discussion of the normative structure of A.A.

The following statements show that when a member avoids slipping by going to the group for support, boundaries are reaffirmed:

"Sue was depressed. It seems that she may get a C in her course and she usually gets A's and B's. I think she will be alright since we talked about it."

"My financial situation had been pretty bad for a long time, but I was thinking about it yesterday and the whole thing began to snowball. I began to feel worse and worse, but it's okay now. At least I'm here."

"My daughter had on this old record. I began to think of those days when I was drinking and hanging around bars and doing a lot of partying. I turned it off and came right to the meeting. I told you about it and got it off my chest."

During discussions such as these, in which persons who came close to slipping talked about it with others, not only the norms pertaining to sobriety but, the norms involved prior to slipping and the norm of seeking group support were reaffirmed.

I believe that A.A. encourages deviance by creating a normative structure that is almost impossible to follow. Members then use deviance to reaffirm and strengthen the boundaries of the group. This idea is not surprising, for sociologists (e.g., 11) have frequently emphasized that deviance is likely to appear at those points in the normative order where it is most severely proscribed and that it is generated by the same values that generate conforming behavior. According to Erikson, "Every human community has its own special set of boundaries, its own unique identity, and so we may presume that every community also has its own characteristic styles of deviant behavior. Societies that place a high premium on ownership of property, for example, are likely to experience a greater volume of theft than those which do not, while societies which emphasize political orthodoxy are apt to discover and punish more sedition than their less touchy neighbours" (\*, pp.19-20).

Some of the comments I have made - particularly my suggestion that A.A. encourages deviance - are inferences based on my observations. A.A. members are apparently aware, however, that slipping, by reminding them of "what it was like" and allowing them to help others who slip, has beneficial aspects. Statements illustrating the importance of seeing and helping members who have slipped include, "It does a lot for me to see what drinking can do for you [At this point the respondent pointed to a member who had slipped and was 'sleeping it off' on a couch during an open house meeting.] I can remember when I was like that." and "Every time I confront a slipper it reminds me of what I was like and what I could be like if I don't follow the program perfectly. If you ask me, helping slippers is what makes the program tick." Also, Roy, who had slipped, asked, "When did you have your last drink, Fred?" and Fred replied, "Right now, you just had it for me." These statements indicate members awareness that their abstinence is dependent on interaction with those who slip. This awareness of the necessity of slipping indicates that slipping and the responses it generates are significant in boundary maintenance and, by implication, group solidarity. Gellman (10) has pointed out that

the response to slipping in A.A. - sympathy and understanding - enhances group solidarity.

Slipping also points out to all A.A. members the vulnerability that they must acknowledge daily if they are to remain "recovering alcoholics." From members' perspectives, slipping is a dynamic mechanism that makes A.A. work by continually reminding them of their vulnerability and by focusing constant attention on the normative structure in A.A. that promotes abstinence. A.A.'s response to members who slip is characterized by tolerance and assistance (10, 12). This response, which includes discussion of members' slipping, encourages a nearly constant flow of prescriptions and proscriptions associated with the A.A. program in general and with slipping in particular. This response allows the group to develop and share information about drinking, and it allows abstinent members to participate vicariously in the experiences of those who have slipped (13). In broader sociological terms, slipping is a normal feature for the group, and the response to slipping strengthens group boundaries (7,8,14,15).

### **Conclusions**

A.A.'s highly specified normative system and the manner in which this system is interpreted by A.A. members encourages some members to slip. Slipping and members' responses to those who slip appear to strengthen group boundaries as well as the abstinence of individual members. Perhaps the normalcy of slipping and its dynamics help explain why the A.A. program has been successful in reintegrating many alcoholics into the community.

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