

The "Crisis Cult" as a Voluntary Association:  
an Interactional Approach to Alcoholics Anonymous

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In a recent paper Madsen (1974) has indicated that the "crisis cult" concept is useful for understanding some aspects of Alcoholics Anonymous (hereafter, AA). "Crisis cult" typically is used in a specialized way in the anthropological literature, and Madsen demonstrates an awareness of this usage, defining crisis cults as spiritually toned movements, frequently the "last desperate effort by conquered aborigines to negate the destructive power of their conquerors"(1974:27).

It is my contention that Madsen's reference to AA as a crisis cult constitutes the overextension of a useful term. The purpose of this article is to point out limitations of the crisis cult approach and to suggest a broader anthropological perspective for the study of AA. The scheme that will be developed is an interactional one which is well suited for understanding AA as a voluntary association.

Although Madsen gives an excellent account of some aspects of AA, he does not develop support for his usage of the crisis cult label. Thus he appears to use the term as an attention-getting device rather than as a scholarly assessment.

Nonetheless there are certain outcomes that result from use of the crisis cult model. One is Madsen's focus on the newcomer, the convert in crisis cult terms. Another is his stress upon decidedly spiritual aspects of the AA program. Third is emphasis on the visionary experience of an AA cofounder. These phenomena are significant features of crisis cults and they are worthy of attention. But they are not necessarily the important features of AA for many of its members. For example, there are AAers who do not know about the "spiritual experience" of the cofounder. For those who do, it is apparently not a topic of concern since it is rarely discussed.

These remarks should not be construed as wholly negative. Madsen's use of the crisis cult term is a clue to a more comprehensive anthropological approach to the problem at hand. A crisis cult is a kind of voluntary association. As a concept, voluntary association has breadth suitable for the study of AA. Voluntary associations may be operationally defined as social units whose members have freely chosen to join the group (Brown 1973:310). As a concept, voluntary association directs attention not only to newcomers and founders but to the entire scope of interaction among members.

For present purposes interaction among recovering alcoholics has been studied by a traditional anthropological fieldwork procedure, participant observation. Hence the following discussion makes little use of AA literature. Quotations are from AAers'

verbal interaction during AA meetings, although many of these quotations originate in AA literature.

Before discussing the AA meeting as an interactional setting I shall consider whether AA membership is actually voluntary and I shall show that the central aim of AA is achieved in a manner that contrasts with the activities of crisis cults.

**VOLUNTARISM.** The voluntary aspects of recruitment might be questioned since many AAers indicate that they were coerced to attend their first AA meeting. This is especially true of people who attend a few meetings under court orders.

Nonetheless, assertions made by AAers evidence the fundamentally voluntary nature of the association for people who consider themselves members. Most explicit is the saying, "AA is for those who want it, not those who need it." A sentence from the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* is often quoted in conversations: "If you want what we have...you are ready to take certain steps" (1955:58).

The unpressured acceptance of newcomers further underscores the voluntary aspect of AA. Though it is often said, "no one gets here by mistake," the newcomer who is not sure he wants sobriety is told to go out and try some more controlled drinking. This is a simple recognition that an alcoholic must want sobriety before the program will work for him.

**POWERLESSNESS.** Madsen asserts that AA members, like crisis cult members, believe in the supernatural in order to feel they have "control in a situation that otherwise seems uncontrollable" (1974:27). Seeking control does characterize crisis cults, especially cargo cults. The motivation for joining AA is to gain control over a seemingly uncontrollable behavior. But AAers do not themselves seek to exert this control over their situations. AAers seek a relationship with the supernatural in order to cease managing their own lives. This is an important contrast with the measures used by crisis cults to remedy uncontrollable situation. Cargo cult members attempt, for example, to control airplane landings. But AAers seek to discontinue all controlling behavior by delegating the management of their lives to some Higher Power, usually a supernatural power.

The AA concept of control differs significantly from the concept of control presented to drunkards by the rest of society. The active alcoholic is often advised to control drinking, develop some backbone, or strengthen moral character. Sober members joke about the unsuitability of such advice. Its inappropriateness is that it enables the alcoholic to repeat his self-destructive behavior. As the victim of an overwhelming compulsion to drink, the alcoholic who attempts to control his drinking himself is bound to fail. AA, in contrast, tells the newcomer that his life is unmanageable and that it is ridiculous for him to try to manage it. The genius of AA is that it insists that an alcoholic is powerless and that such powerlessness must be conceded. Admission of powerlessness and discouragement of controlling behaviors have significant practical consequences. Whereas cargo cultists do not effect airplane landings, AAers do maintain sobriety. By

deliberately denying the ability to control their lives, AAers former drunken situations are brought under control.

The positive evaluation of the absence of control was indicated in the description of the newcomer who is never forced to want sobriety. Similarly, sober members do not attempt to control each other. One member may advise another, if asked, but no one is resented for not following advice. During a meeting members may mention their attempts to manage the lives of family and friends. Such managers are reminded that the desire to control others may lead to drinking.

Most importantly, abstinence is not considered a kind of control. The individual who comes to AA in order to control his drinking will be disappointed. AAers insist that abstinence is possible only when powerlessness is conceded. AA offers supportive interaction in which powerlessness comes to be positive value.

**THE AA MEETING: AN INTERACTIONAL CONTEXT.** The principles of voluntarism and powerlessness were discovered in the verbal activity of AA members. Turning now to the context of that verbal interaction, I will describe some pertinent aspects of AA meetings. The type of meeting to be considered is the discussion meeting (1).

Most discussion meetings have a chairman. There is no authority attached to that role. He simply opens and closes the meeting and calls on assembled members to speak, one by one. The person who plays the role of chairman may change from week to week, or less frequently depending on the desires of the group. Such desires are made known in casual conversation, before or after the hour-long meeting. The chairman is not necessarily the person who has maintained sobriety longest. This role and other responsibilities do not serve to rank members, for they are alternately shared by all.

The chairman directs only the sequential order in which members' contributions are heard. Though he may suggest a discussion topic, no one is obliged to address it.

The chairman opens the meeting and identifies himself as an alcoholic, as do other members when they are called upon. Comments from some members indicate that this self-labeling serves as a levelling device. Whatever differences exist among members, they share a fundamental similarity as alcoholics.

As the chairman calls on one and then another member, each talks about anything he cares to discuss. If he does not want to talk, he simply "passes." Usually each member gives a brief monologue.

Despite the large amount of "experience, strength and hope" verbalized during AA meetings, the format of meetings is nonconversational. Thus the term "monologue" is used in this discussion. Member's monologues are put "on the table," with or without reference to anything said by previous speakers. One speaker may describe a recent traumatic event in his life. The next speaker may discuss something trivial by comparison. This does not mean that the traumatized member is ignored in favour of minor concerns. Members are not talking past each other. The net result of an evening's monologues is to level the highs and lows of all

members. Such levelling is of practical significance to members who assert that despair and elation are equally dangerous to sobriety.

The one-at-a-time format is not rigidly followed. For example, one alcoholic couple reveals the brittle nature of their relationship by interrupting and commenting on each other's monologue. This is an extreme example, yet it illustrates the tolerance that members extend to each other. This couple displayed such "deviance" for a year yet no one voiced objection to their departure from the standard format.

It was indicated above that the act of self-labeling as "alcoholic" operates as a levelling device. In keeping with this, the length of sobriety is rarely mentioned by an alcoholic in his self-labeling. Contradictory notions exist as to the importance of sheer length of sobriety. Thus, if a member mentions his term of sobriety he is likely to add, "the person who got up earliest today is the one who is sober the longest." The saying, "one day at a time" is taken seriously. There is similar meaning in the expression, "we are all just one drink away from a drunk."

Most discussion group monologues have the structure, "what I was like, what happened, and what I am like now." Contrary to Madsen's comparison of the AA member to the religious convert, "what I am like now" is rarely in stark contrast to "what I was like." "What I am like now" often consists of a list of character defects that have been carried over from drinking days. In further contrast to religious converts, AAers attest to a long process of personal improvement. Many long-term members indicate that their personal growth and development did not begin with the onset of abstinence. Some say that all they did in the early years of sobriety was "not drink and come to meetings." Older members advise newcomers to "take it easy" and "don't compare your insides with other peoples outsides." Hence I suggest that, in the minds of sober alcoholics, the interactional sphere of AA is more crucial to sobriety than a philosophical or theological sphere. Attending meetings and observing other sober alcoholics is more important than introspection or reading AA literature. Interaction with sober alcoholics is valued by members. Interaction, not philosophical tenets, is the most appropriate focus of investigation.

**EGALITARIAN INTERACTION.** Much of the foregoing discussion characterizes AA as an egalitarian group. In egalitarian groups members are not ranked. Rights and privileges do not accrue to members differentially. Leadership is flexible and does not constitute authority. The egalitarian nature of AA contrasts with the hierarchically structured society within which it exists.

Despite members' remarks that "AA has the largest admission fees of any organization in the world," no one who desires sobriety may be excluded.

The egalitarian nature of AA, corroborates some assertions made by Bateson (1972). For Bateson, AA philosophy provides drinkers with relationships of complementarity as opposed to the competitive, risk-taking relations that lead the drinking alcoholic again and again to challenge the power of the bottle. Bateson comments that AA is an excellent illustration of a Durkheimian religious system, i.e., a system in which concepts of how man

relates to God are directly reflected in patterned human interaction (1972:333). According to Bateson, the AA notion of God is a Higher Power that neither rewards nor punishes. Bateson concluded that this idea of God is paralleled in the "strictly democratic" interactions among members, as these interactions are outlined in AA literature.

Though discussion here has focused on people rather than theology, members often remind each other, "AA is a spiritual program." Interpretation of this statement is up to the individual. An individual may identify his Higher Power as "God," as the AA group itself, or whatever he chooses. By focusing on interaction of members "on the ground" this discussion stresses the social aspect of spirituality. The social manifestations of spiritual principles seems more important to AAers than theological notions. This is borne out in a member's remark: "AA is here, not to save your soul, but to save your ass." Like sobriety itself, any spiritual growth attained by members must be shared rather than kept to oneself. It is said that, "you can't keep it unless you give it away." "It" is best shared in the interactional context of meetings.

It is possible to provide only a sketch of AA meeting interaction here. Other aspects of relationships among recovering alcoholics are significant for understanding the recovery process. Description of interaction before and after meetings as well as more refined analysis of interaction during meetings is needed.

**CONCLUSION.** An aim of this paper has been to clarify the importance of group interaction for recovering alcoholics. It is not my intention to give artificial primacy to the study of interaction over study of values. Ideational and interactional realms are inextricably linked. But it does not seem that the understanding of currently proliferating self-help groups will be more reflective of members' perceptions if investigators scrutinize on-the-ground interaction of members rather than the literature of the groups.

Field work methods have been developed by anthropologists for the study of small groups of nonwestern peoples. These methods, especially the participant observation technique, are equally fruitful for the study of groups in industrialized societies. But anthropological labels such as "crisis cult" that were devised to categorized specific nonwestern phenomena must be used cautiously when extended to urban, western people.

#### NOTES

(1) "Brands" of AA are varied in different parts of the United States. Consequently, the description of a discussion meeting herein characterizes the type found in a single midwestern community; however, similarities have been observed in discussion meetings elsewhere.

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