Alcohol Recovery in Self-Help Groups: Surrender and Narcissism

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ABSTRACT: This study was designed to determine if subjects participating more actively in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) were higher on surrender and lower on pathological narcissism than those less involved in AA or participating in Rational Recovery. Male subject groups scored as predicted on surrender. As hypothesized, surrender also correlated negatively with pathological narcissism and was not associated with nonpathological narcissism. Results failed to support the predicted relationship between levels of participation in AA and pathological narcissism. A sex difference was found both on pathological narcissism and on surrender. Females scored lower on narcissism and higher on surrender than males.

Since its inception in 1935 as a self-help program for alcohol dependence or abuse, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) has been shown to be a very potent influence in shaping an understanding of the nature and treatment of alcoholism. 1 At least a subpopulation of alcoholics has found AA to be an effective treatment modality as well as on-going support for sobriety. 2 Despite its popularity, much remains to be learned about the change process among successful affiliates in AA. 3

At its core, AA’s treatment approach addresses preoccupation with self. 4 AA’s basic text, Alcoholics Anonymous, tersely states, “Selfishness—self-centeredness! That, we think is the root of our troubles. . . . The alcoholic is an extreme example of self-will run riot.” 5 Psychiatrist Harry M. Tiebout chronicled AA’s approach to treatment in its early years 6 and was the first to recognize that AA’s approach to the treatment of alcoholism was directed primarily at the narcissistic dimension of the disorder. 7

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Psychoanalytic theories posit a relationship between narcissistic deficits and etiology of alcoholism. Such theories maintain that early childhood narcissistic "injuries" predispose individuals to addictive behavior. Having had their emotional needs frustrated early in life and despairing of others satisfying these needs, some people are prone to turning to substitutes, such as alcohol.

On the other hand, Mack noted that addictive drinking may itself produce the observed pathological narcissistic traits. He further cautioned against assuming the necessity of premorbid narcissistic personality characteristics in the etiology of alcoholism. Until the origin of these characteristics is more clear, Mack suggests that it is presumptuous to speak of the "narcissistic core" of the disorder.

Alcoholics Anonymous describes alcoholism as "an illness which only a spiritual experience will conquer." Tiebout termed the change process he observed in AA participants as "conversion," and he opined that it happens when alcoholics hit bottom, surrender, and have their ego reduced.

The process of change begins when alcoholics "hit bottom," a personally defined intolerable situation. At that point they must make an act of surrender. Tiebout felt that surrender happens when the individual no longer fights life but accepts it.

Four aspects of surrender have been articulated by Tiebout: an acceptance of one's limitedness, a giving up of control to a power greater than oneself, a shift from negative and aggressive feelings to more positive ones, and a sense of being at one with the world.

Tiebout noted that if alcoholics truly accept the presence of a power greater than self, they, by that very step, modify at least temporarily and possibly permanently their deepest inner structures. When they do this without resentment or struggle, then they are no longer typically alcoholic. Brown and Spahr concurred that developing a concept of a higher power sustains surrender and aids recovery.

Rational Recovery (RR) is also a self-help program for people with alcohol problems. RR's theoretical orientation is rooted in Albert Ellis's rational-emotive therapy. As with AA, RR advocates abstinence and is designed to help people deal with the irrational thinking and the negative emotions that perpetuate alcoholic behavior.

Unlike AA, RR maintains that people can fully control what they put into their body and suggests that it is irrational to believe that one must give up control to a higher power to manage alcoholic behavior or any aspect of life. RR also contends that people feel the way they think. Therefore, it is rational to believe that people can maintain enormous control over their emotions and whatever else disturbs them.

The present study examines the relationship of surrender to narcissism among participants in these self-help programs. It is predicted that degree of participation in AA among both males and females will be positively related