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Ernest Kurtz, “Research on Alcoholics Anonymous: The Historical Context,” pp. 1-22 of Ernest Kurtz, *The Collected Ernie Kurtz*, Hindsfoot Foundation Series on Treatment and Recovery (New York: Authors Choice, 2008; orig. pub. 1999).

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*In February of 1992, NIAAA sponsored a conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico, on the topic of “Research on Alcoholics Anonymous: Opportunities and Alternatives.” Attendance was by invitation only and was limited to scholars who had published research on A.A. Among attendees were Bill Miller and Barbara McCrady, the conference’s conveners, and such scholars and practitioners as Margaret Bean, Linda Beckman, Stephanie Brown, Chad Emrick, Fred Glaser, Nick Heather, and Alan Ogborne. After a brief introduction by Bill Miller, I opened the conference with the following paper, which remains a challenging review of the perils and promise of researching Alcoholics Anonymous.*

## **Research on Alcoholics Anonymous: The Historical Context**

**by Ernest Kurtz**

Alcoholics Anonymous has been around for almost sixty years; research on Alcoholics Anonymous has been going on for more than fifty years. Yet we still hear mainly about how “inconclusive” are the results of what now number many hundreds of articles. Projects such as this volume seem to verify the law that Mark Keller formulated in 1972: “The investigation of any trait in alcoholics will show that they have either more or less of it.” That seems even truer of those alcoholics who are members of Alcoholics Anonymous.<sup>1</sup>

Both Dickens and Goethe suggest that “Those who have no memory have no hope.” And so if it is important to see Alcoholics Anonymous over time, it is also important to see *research on Alcoholics Anonymous* over time. For research on A.A. has its own history, and the story of *what* we have learned about Alcoholics Anonymous, and of *how* it was learned, reveals certain patterns that it would be irresponsible to ignore.

One such pattern is the incomplete parallel, over the past half-century, between research on alcoholism and research on Alcoholics Anonymous. The former has emphasized, in turn, the psychological, the sociological, and the biological. The pattern of research into A.A. runs differently: first came the sociological, then the psychological, and now more and more interest is shown in the spiritual. Throughout that pattern, uneven though it may be, we find two recurrent motifs; and it is under those headings of, for want of better terms, *accuracy* and *objectivity*, that this paper is organized.

### ***The First Motif: Accuracy***

Most of the earliest research on Alcoholics Anonymous was conducted by sociologists. Their primary method was careful, attentive listening to A.A. members, both within and outside of A.A. meetings, followed by analyses of what they had heard and seen. The names of Robert Freed Bales, Selden Bacon, and others are surely familiar.<sup>2</sup>

The scope of this earliest research was limited, but the questions asked did derive from accurate, exact data. Later researchers, who ask more sophisticated questions, have not always continued that criterion. One example from the conference that engendered these papers. In conversation, a participant mentioned three studies, observing almost parenthetically that they “demonstrated that Alcoholics Anonymous doesn’t work.” But as Chad Emrick promptly pointed out, the articles in question all studied individuals mandated to A.A. by the courts. “What those articles demonstrate,” Emrick observed, “is that *coercing* people into Alcoholics Anonymous does not work.”<sup>3</sup>

Another example, more obvious but also more common: whatever the terms used, failure to advert to the A.A. distinction between mere *dryness* and true *sobriety*, between “putting the cork in the bottle” and attaining a degree of *serenity*, signals a very poor understanding of Alcoholics Anonymous. And so claims that “Alcoholics Anonymous emphasizes that drinking is the principal cause of its members’ life problems,” awaken in the aware reader wonder that an apparently serious student of A.A. seems unfamiliar with the chapter of its book titled “How It Works,” wherein may be found the obvious key sentence: “Self-centeredness! That, we think, is the root of our troubles.”<sup>4</sup>

Why this confusion? Why the decline of accuracy? Are more recent researchers less careful students? Probably not. A large part of this problem can in fact be laid at the door of Alcoholics Anonymous itself. For especially in recent years, there is a very real sense in which, increasingly, there is no such thing as Alcoholics Anonymous – rather there have developed Varieties of the Alcoholics Anonymous Experience.<sup>5</sup>

Under the impact of alcoholism treatment (through which an increasing number of new A.A. members arrive at the fellowship), shaped also by cultural pressures to widen the concept of addiction, Alcoholics Anonymous, decentralized as it is, now presents itself in a vast variety of groups, of formats, of understandings even of such basic-to-A.A. realities as *serenity*, not to mention spirituality. This can be a difficult point for people like us to accept, people who want to study Alcoholics Anonymous. Even when we study process, we like our phenomenon to hold still. At the very least, we want it to *be* phenomenon rather than a multiplicity of phenomena.<sup>6</sup>

But A.A. doesn’t hold still, and increasingly it mutates. Current research suggests that most A.A. members agree that it is no longer possible to assume that every meeting listed in an A.A. meeting-list is an A.A. meeting. To take an example recently offered: “I went to this place where a meeting was listed, in Akron itself, for God’s sake, and they began by suggesting we go around the table and tell

‘how we had nurtured our inner child today.’ Hell! I’m a drunk, so I left: that wasn’t the kind of meeting I need to keep me sober.”<sup>7</sup>

Note the *kind of* variety addressed here: this point has nothing to do with the different kinds of *subjects* investigated: young or middle-aged or old; also using or not using drugs other than alcohol, legal or illegal; and other such obviously important differences. The point here concerns the varieties of *experiences* available within Alcoholics Anonymous – and the consequent reality that *all* generalizations about Alcoholics Anonymous need careful qualification.<sup>8</sup>

But there is a consolation connected with this caution: Although the *breadth* of A.A.’s varieties is a new phenomenon, the reality of diversity within Alcoholics Anonymous is not merely recent. A.A.’s differences were one reason why it developed in so decentralized a fashion. Early researchers were aware of that, but they fell into the easy (and enduring) trap of researching what was available – studying those A.A.s who welcomed their research. Influenced also by the secularization hypothesis shared by most sociologists of the era, they tended to overlook the Akron birthplace of A.A. and its more Oxford Group-oriented offspring, concentrating their attention on New York A.A. and its derivatives. The affiliations (and so the locations) of those early students also suggest that they found East coast A.A. more convenient to research. Then too, the strong personality and central role of Bill Wilson had much to do with this focus. Although Bill himself to a perhaps surprising extent welcomed diversity and even disagreement, seeing in them a useful spur to the spiritual virtue of *tolerance*, not all members agreed with him, even about that.<sup>9</sup>

Because most of the differences within A.A., then and now, concern “the spiritual,” this point will be picked up below, when we examine that aspect of research’s history. A final example, however, may helpfully conclude this introduction to the importance – and the difficulty – of *accuracy*. Many recent researchers refer to Alcoholics Anonymous as a “self-help” program. As validly as that term may reflect sociological precision, as useful as it may be to

distinguish from help-by-professionals, when the phrase spills over to questionnaires or interview schedules, it implicitly sorts the sample: only relatively recent A.A. adherents accept that term. A majority of those with over ten years sobriety, my research indicates, object to that label, saying: “No, we tried that, self-help, and it didn’t work – that’s why we’re a God-help program.”<sup>10</sup>

And so we are brought back to that ungainly topic, “the spiritual.” Because “the spiritual” is a delicate if not difficult topic for most academicians, let’s approach it from a more familiar and congenial direction: our commitment, as researchers, to objectivity.

### ***The Second Motif: Objectivity***

By *objectivity* I mean, first, care that *the kind of questions* asked are *true* to the phenomenon being studied. Recently, ornithologist Robert McFarlane reminded that “Science is the art of phrasing questions and identifying their attendant assumptions.”<sup>11</sup> And so in the name of science, let me as a practitioner in the humanities raise some questions about the assumptions that have attended the history of research into Alcoholics Anonymous – questions raised by my research into the way later researchers have used earlier research on A.A.

Why is it that the most richly accurate as well as most objectively balanced recent studies of Alcoholics Anonymous come in dissertation form, from new rather than established scholars – Taylor, Johnson, Vourakis, Smith?<sup>12</sup> Why is it that there are so few references to this literature among the major figures currently publishing in the field? Should not research scholars keep abreast of and make available more widely the newest contributions to knowledge? And why are certain other articles so frequently cited – at times in ways that raise questions about the assumptions attending their citation?

Let me be specific. Many continue to cite Seiden, whose 1955 master’s thesis was based on an *n* of 50, to the effect that “the use of A.A. members in research as representative of the total alcoholic population is unwarranted.” Given the date, that discovery was a

real contribution, meriting mention even if only for historical reasons. But in all the references to it over the most recent 15 years, I have yet to see any mention of one finding that led Seiden to his conclusion: “Whether in terms of amount of ego strength, comparability to psychiatric populations or recovery from alcoholism, the A.A. [members] appear to be psychologically ‘healthier,’ i.e. deviate less from the theoretically normal (nonalcoholic) personality.” Is that totally irrelevant . . . or merely unwelcome at a time when the ruling assumption seems to be that only those inclined to “infantilism,” “authoritarianism” and “religiosity” will do well in Alcoholics Anonymous?<sup>13</sup>

Another example: Studies of A.A. and spirituality seem bound to cite Robert Kenneth Jones’s examination of the “Sectarian Characteristics of Alcoholics Anonymous” (again with an *n* of 50). One wonders how carefully those who cite Jones have read his 1970 article, which blends keen sociological insight with the kind of errors inevitable in an analysis based on however detailed observations of A.A. in just one locality (Merseyside). But the habitual citation of Jones troubles for a deeper reason: the context for his description was the religious situation in England, which – with its established church and categories of “dissenters” – differs from most other cultures in its understanding of *sectarian*; yet Jones is almost always cited without any advertence to that British context. Why? Because the implications of his terminology are congenial?<sup>14</sup>

A final example: the continued citation of Aharan’s 1970 criticism that A.A. members “can’t express feelings of depression, disillusionment, fear.” Aharan worked out of London, Ontario, and so until I moved to the Detroit area, with its convenient bridge and tunnel, I wondered whether a peculiar reticence might characterize Canadian alcoholics. Not so. But in any case, we are talking about citation. And so it is justified to wonder: At how many meetings – and at *what kinds of* meetings – have those who cite Aharan carefully listened? How many sponsors have they interviewed? Even more importantly, have they attended any after-the-meeting gatherings, the importance of which for understanding A.A. has been

detailed by Rudy, Denzin, Smith, and others? Given our awareness of the impact of treatment therapies on A.A. practice, Aharan's complaint would seem to invite follow-up study rather than uncritical citation of a two-decade-old generalization that was questionable even when first formulated.<sup>15</sup>

Question: Do we not have some responsibility to evaluate previous research, or at least to place it in some kind of context . . . or is our obligation solely to pile up the names of those who seem to support some point we are making? This is a pragmatically important as well as a methodologically valid question, for the biases that can creep in are not merely benign. We are all familiar, at least in theory, with the Hawthorne and Heisenberg effects: the impact of the observer on the observed. What, then, are the effects of the condescension some researchers show towards Alcoholics Anonymous? How self-fulfilling, for example, become prophecies about who will do well, and who poorly, in A.A.? Not only can such judgments influence who gets sent to A.A., but do you think for a moment that the newly sober drunk does not have antennae attuned to the referrer's attitudes?

Let's examine another example. After finding that "affiliates who are younger, male, and lower in SES [socio-economic status], have more slips, are in AA a shorter time [and] tend to be less stable," Joseph Boscarino made it the main point of his 1980 article that such individuals should still be referred to A.A., but that "additional efforts should be made to maximize the effectiveness" of such referrals. Most citations of Boscarino refer to his "findings" and ignore his recommendations. Which would seem unfortunate, because a decade after Boscarino, research by Keith Humphreys *et al.* indicated that "it would be unwise . . . to assume that there is a requisite level of education or social stability that must be attained before a client will affiliate with NA or AA." Examining another common assumption, Humphreys's co-authors observed that while it was possible to assume that clients in residential settings were more likely to attend A.A. because they had more severe problems, it was also possible to assume that higher attendance was due to the staff

members in such settings more vigorously encouraging clients to such involvement because they themselves were more likely to be “in recovery from substance abuse and to endorse the philosophy of AA/NA.” As always, the choice of assumptions lies with the one doing the citing.<sup>16</sup>

A final example of how the failure of respect can shape assumptions that may flaw the interpretation if not the results of research. In 1964, Mindlin reported that those “who had attended A.A. meetings were less likely to describe themselves as isolated, lonely, or socially ill at ease.” Two decades later, Ogborne and Glaser (1984) offered her observation as evidence that Alcoholics Anonymous served best those with a developed “capacity to function in group settings.” That is one possible reading, but might there not be the barest possibility that A.A. attendance helps some to overcome loneliness and isolation? This latter interpretation is supported not only by Bacon’s (1957) comments on A.A.’s “Re-socialization” of the alcoholic, but by Tremper’s almost model sensitivity to the which-comes-first question in his 1972 study of “Dependency in Alcoholics.”<sup>17</sup>

By this time, I am sure, you sense my own bias on these questions – and so let me speak directly to it, lest my very real animus be misunderstood. I carry no brief for Alcoholics Anonymous. There are many things about and in A.A. that merit questioning, and my sole act of faith here is in the ultimate value of all real research. But the tradition of historical research within which I work holds it to be a fundamental ethic of scholarship that one seeks *first* to understand any phenomenon in and on its own terms; only then can interpretation and criticism worthy of the names result. The ideal is perhaps clearest in the physical sciences . . . to be open-minded in the sense of *respecting* what one studies, whether it be the human genome or Jupiter’s moons or the AIDS virus. Such respect is not “bias”: it is rather the pre-requisite for accurate study.<sup>18</sup>

When A.A.’s co-founder queried his physician about his “spiritual experience” in Towns Hospital in December of 1934, what

if Dr. Silkworth had conveyed the attitude toward spirituality that seems to characterize some researchers? Why is it that some who choose to research Alcoholics Anonymous seem to bring to that task attitudes toward “the spiritual” that if held toward homosexuality would be termed homophobic? Why, to be more concrete, are pejorative terms such as *religiosity* and *authoritarianism* preferred to the as-descriptive-words *spirituality* and *commitment*? We carefully eschew ethnic epithets and gender slurs: Why can researchers not show a similar sensitivity to the sensibilities of the alcoholics we study? Is it fair to ask their respect if we are unwilling to offer them ours?<sup>19</sup>

Why do I raise so sensitive a point? Because research is that sensitive. An enduring issue in studying Alcoholics Anonymous has been “cooperation.” Given the decentralized nature of the A.A. fellowship, the autonomy of its groups, the thrust of its Traditions, researchers are frequently frustrated in their attempts to get cooperation from members of Alcoholics Anonymous. I empathize: historical research, which relies on access to documents, also requires cooperation; and I have discovered that just as we generalize about “members of Alcoholics Anonymous,” A.A. members generalize about “researchers.” And so if you gain respect, my research may be easier. And if I violate and lose respect, your research may suffer. As researchers into Alcoholics Anonymous, we are all in this together, whether we like that or not! A.A. members, after all, are human beings: one thing they do not like – any more than we do – is being scorned, having those realities that hold precious meaning for them demeaned and dis-respected.<sup>20</sup>

Let’s review but one manifestation of this concern. Respect touches on *ethics*, and our research may require a special sensitivity in this area. Recall the questions raised by Fred Davis in his discussion of a research project of John F. Lofland and Robert A. Lejeune. Wishing to investigate “what features of the social structures of A.A. groups may facilitate or deter affiliation,” Lofland and Lejeune undertook field observation of about 70 A.A. groups (all in Manhattan) to which they sent “agents” who “posed as” A.A.

newcomers. Davis questioned whether there might not be an ethical problem in such “premeditated deception,” objecting that in the name of scholarship, it “constitutes a travesty upon A.A.’s identity.” Davis went on: “This is not to say . . . that the sociologist is compelled to accept as truth the ideology by which the organization represents itself to outsiders. But, it is a far cry from intellectually detaching oneself from an organization’s values to engaging in acts which effectively make a mockery of them.”<sup>21</sup>

Note that the point here – the *impartiality* that can be guaranteed only by *respect* – concerns not criticism of Alcoholics Anonymous, which has been available for over four decades, but the specific history of critical research on the fellowship and its program. That history reveals a consistently recurring motif: the problems inherent in attempts to research “the spiritual” in the broadest sense of that much abused term. The story of those research efforts suggests that, for our purposes, it may be helpful to approach that theme from a sensitivity to the distinction between quantitative and qualitative research – or, from another perspective, to the differences between the research approaches of distancing and of immersion.<sup>22</sup>

The earliest research into Alcoholics Anonymous was primarily qualitative, and that remained the norm until relatively recently when, paralleling alcoholism research’s turn to the biologically concrete in preference to the psychologically and sociologically amorphous, research on A.A. also took a strong turn toward quantification. Unlike alcoholism research’s yoking of this emphasis with the concretely physiological, however, researchers on A.A. set off on the quantitative trajectory at just the point where the most interesting research questions seemed to deal in some way with “the spiritual.”

*Why* the turn to quantification took place, although an intriguing question, lies beyond our research concern here; but it does seem worthy of note that the explosion of quantitative studies and the burst of insistence on operationalizing directly correlate in time with the availability of funding disbursed by bureaucratically administered institutions.

At first glance, the turn to quantification would seem a real boon. How better guarantee accuracy and objectivity than by the quantitative approach? Numbers are so precise, so verifiable, so unemotional – apparently, at least, so objectively accurate. Yet quantitative research also has assumptions: not only do we look for what we expect to find, but we see what we look for, as was several times demonstrated at the Conference that gave rise to this book. Early in the proceedings, for one vivid example, Robin Room noted that “Nine per cent of the American population have at some time attended a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous – that is a number greater than practically any other institution, save the public school and the Catholic Church.” A bit later, Don Cahalan, citing the same research study, observed that “*Only* nine per cent of the U.S. population has even attended an A.A. meeting” (italics in his voice). Research practitioners, in other words, continue to rediscover the problems inherent in what Nietzsche termed “the doctrine of the immaculate perception.” All data are theory-laden: “Perceivers without concepts, as Kant almost said, are blind.”<sup>23</sup>

For the deeper difficulty arises from the assumption-turned-demand that “the spiritual” can and should be operationalized. The language is new, but the point at issue is ancient. And although the story of this effort does not necessarily reveal that it *cannot* be done, that history does suggest wariness of claims to achieve measurement of spiritual entities. Some campuses are still afflicted with the lecturer who each year convinces some freshmen that love can be equated with genital tumescence – a not inappropriate parallel, if we recall psychiatrist Leslie Farber’s analysis of how the demand to prove love is but one example of the futility of demands to impose will on the spiritual, demands for which addiction affords such a fascinating metaphor.<sup>24</sup>

From our perspective, here, perhaps the best evidence that “the spiritual” cannot be directly measured may be found in our ready (and appropriate) acceptance that there exists no “scientific proof” of the efficacy of Alcoholics Anonymous – this despite descriptions by hundreds of thousands of members of Alcoholics Anonymous who

attest that A.A. has saved their lives and made it possible for them to live lives worth living. If we have no such proof, despite all the efforts expended over the years by talented and sophisticated researchers, that very lack (1) supports A.A. members' claims that their program and the spiritual cannot be separated and (2) challenges us to think out research strategies that *respect* that reality.

A review of research suggests that past endeavors to operationalize the spiritual have produced the same results as attempts to trisect the angle or to prove that four colors suffice the map-maker. Yet recognizing that need not provoke despair. If we can lay aside demands that would require the spiritual to be somehow material, we discover that the spiritual can still be investigated. Historically, in fact, two lines of research into Alcoholics Anonymous have shown particular promise in this area: studies of the affiliation process, and the methodology of content-analysis.

Mindful of the danger of falling into thinly veiled re-pursuits of the alcoholic personality, researchers on affiliation have recently returned to exploring its *process*, in this recapturing a research suggestion implicit in a little-known aspect of A.A. history. A.A. co-founder Bill Wilson, together with medical researchers Abram Hoffer and Humphrey Osmond, discovered early on that some kind of *capacity for the spiritual* seemed to be required if an alcoholic was to get the A.A. program. They understood that capacity not as related to church-going or creedal affirmation or upbringing, but as some kind of process potentially present in every human being, a process that could be prodded. Their efforts to learn the nature of this process in fact underlay Wilson's experimentation with LSD. I do not recommend that readers continue that particular exploration, but awareness of it may help researchers deepen sensitivity to the complexity of the pursuit of spirituality, for which "sober intoxication" is a more than two-millennium old image.<sup>25</sup>

"Capacity for the spiritual" is not a new research category: John Clancy broached the topic three decades ago. Others have touched on it more recently, albeit less directly. To the best of my

knowledge, only one person, a hobbyist rather than a scholar, is currently researching how early A.A.'s bibliotherapy worked – the practice of assigning certain books to be read, which was seen as an effective way of “opening to the spiritual.” But studies of the A.A. practice of sponsorship do follow up on another early hunch about how to achieve that opening. If those who investigate the relationship that is A.A. sponsorship can approach that phenomenon not as a manifestation of “authoritarianism” or “infantilism” but as evidence of the capacity to learn by listening and of a potential for the classic virtue of *humility*, then perhaps we are on the road to researching “the spiritual.”<sup>26</sup>

The second promising line of research, although so far more hinted at than carried out, is content-analysis – examining the words and concepts used by speakers or in discussions. Used sensitively, content-analysis can happily marry quantitative methodology with qualitative sensibility. I can point to no major formal study, but limited examples are sufficiently plentiful both to offer hope and to point out pitfalls. Murphy's study of the values expressed at A.A. meetings is one landmark here, and the method has been carried forward informally not only in the dissertations of Taylor and Johnson and Smith and O'Reilly, but in the studies of Denzin and Rudy and Rodin . . . not to mention the too often overlooked work of George Vaillant.<sup>27</sup>

### ***Conclusion:***

Accuracy . . . Objectivity . . . Respect: these must guide not only how we approach the topic of our research, but how we approach each other as fellow-researchers into a subject that transcends not only any one of us but, more importantly, any one discipline. The most recent history of research on Alcoholics Anonymous reveals a fault-line not between religion and science – whatever those terms may signify – but between the differing approaches of quantitative and qualitative methodologies . . . between those who believe that truth is best found by maintaining *distance from* the object of study,

and those who think truth is best approached by *immersion in* the subject of interest.

On one side, quantifiers and those who fund research reasonably and responsibly request that the realities we claim to study be in some way operationalizable: let's be able to demonstrate that what we study is real, that we are giving, and getting, our money's worth. Those on the other side insist that to study only those aspects of some realities that *are* operationalizable is like undertaking to study non-human life-forms and then restricting the scope of investigation to four-footed fur-bearers: convenient as such a research-design may be, the sample will not be representative of the population.

How might we bridge this gap, so that we can – truly – learn from each other? Any solution must begin, I suspect, with acceptance that quantitative and qualitative research, the preferences for distancing and for immersion, are in a very real way two different *cultures*. As in most such cases, although real efforts may be made (as well as lip service given) to tolerance and mutual respect, there always seems to lurk the not-too-well-hidden conviction that one's own culture is best, that one's own methodology is “number one.” The pattern, then, will almost certainly continue of operationalizing quantitative researchers decrying the fuzzy and unreplicable nature of qualitative studies, while qualitative researchers challenge whether what is being so precisely measured has any importance, as they gleefully point out the assumptions implicit in the supposedly objective quantitative studies.<sup>28</sup>

Two cultures, then; and on the assumption that this reality will resurface so long as differently-inclined researchers investigate Alcoholics Anonymous, I think the most apt conclusion to our examination of the historical context of research on A.A. is to frame this theme in historical experience made contemporary by recent film. Reviewing the motion picture *Black Robe*, one critic praised its avoidance of “easy romanticism” in portraying the clash of cultures. “Usually today,” he noted, pointing implicitly at Costner's *Dances With Wolves*, “one culture does get romanticized and the other trashed.” But in *Black Robe*:

There is a massive, unvarnished dignity, flawed and vulnerable, in both the Native American leader and the French priest. The tragedy is that, for all their nobility and integrity, they inhabit utterly divergent worlds. What is home for one man is chaos for the other. What is beautiful for one is ugly for the other. What is heaven for one is devastation for the other.<sup>29</sup>

The story of past research on such topics does not conclusively demonstrate that such is also our fate, but that possibility remains real. Can we hope for more than that future historians will be as generous in viewing the equivalent of these two groups among us? I think we can, if the research inspired by, as well as the research reported in, this volume can become itself a contribution to healing . . . to the making whole of the very diverse efforts of very diverse researchers, by encouraging the commitment of all of us to accuracy, objectivity, and – especially – respect.

## NOTES

1. Mark Keller, “The Oddities of Alcoholics,” *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol* 33: 1147-1148 (1972); a strong echo may be found in Alan C. Ogborne and Frederick B. Glaser, “Characteristics of Affiliates of Alcoholics Anonymous: A Review of the Literature,” *Journal of Studies on Alcohol* 42(7): 670-671 (1981). Charles Bishop, Jr. and Bill Pittman, *The Annotated Bibliography of Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939-1989* (Wheeling, WV: The Bishop of Books, 1989), list 218 scholarly journal articles, 267 chapters about AA in books, and 93 theses and dissertations on the subject.

2. Robert F. Bales, “Types of social structure as factors in ‘cures’ for alcohol addiction,” *Applied Anthropology* 1:1 (1941); Walter L. Voegtlin and Frederick Lemere, “The Treatment of Alcohol Addiction: A Review of the Literature,” *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol* 2: 717-803 (1941); Selden D. Bacon, “Sociology and the Problems of Alcohol: Foundations for a Sociologic Study of Drinking Behavior,” *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol* 5: 402-445 (1944); Dwight Anderson, “The Process of Recovery from Alcoholism,” *Federal Probation* 8(4): 14-19 (1944); Robert F. Bales, “The Therapeutic Role of Alcoholics Anonymous as Seen by a Sociologist,” *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol* 5: 267-278 (1944).

3. J. M. Brandsma, Maultsby, M. C., Welsh, R. J. *Outpatient Treatment of Alcoholism. A Review and Comparative Study*. Baltimore, MD: University Park Press, 1990; K. S. Ditman, G. C. Crawford, E. W. Forgy, H. Moskowitz and C. MacAndrew, “A Controlled Experiment on the use of court probation for drunk arrests.” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 124 (1967): 160-163.

4. Even Emrick, in a very uneven paragraph, says that the A.A. members’ lives “remain alcohol-focused.” Chad D. Emrick, “Overview,” in Marc Galanter, ed. *Recent Developments in Alcoholism*, vol. 7: Treatment Research (New York: Plenum Press, 1989), p. 7; more balanced treatment may be found in Emrick, “Alcoholics Anonymous: Membership Characteristics and Effectiveness as Treatment,” *in eodem*, pp. 37-53. The reference in the text is to Alan C. Ogborne, “Some Limitations of Alcoholics Anonymous,” *in eodem*, p. 57; *cf. Alcoholics Anonymous* (New York: A.A.W.S., 1975 [1939]), p. 62.

For a recent clear and correct understanding, see Hazel Cameron Johnson, *Alcoholics Anonymous in the 1980s: Variations on a Theme*, Ph.D. dissertation in

sociology, University of California at Los Angeles, 1987, p. 277: “In A.A. parlance, to be dry is to be not drinking; to be sober is to be not drinking and to be working on changing ‘character defects’ and ‘making amends’ to people who have been harmed. ‘Sobriety’ implies much more than not drinking; it involves a new way of life which would not include 13th stepping or using the A.A. meetings for dubious types of personal gain.”

5. Johnson, as her title suggests, directly addresses the relevance of this point to recent research. At the beginning of her conclusion, she notes concerning her review of previous research: “These social scientists, by ascribing homogeneity to members and groups, were able to justify making generalizations about members, groups, and the social movement with small samples. Many of them then proceeded to examine the most vocal and visible groups in their local areas. I [say] that, although these groups may represent a valid statement about *some* members and groups, they did not speak adequately for the wide range of types found in Alcoholics Anonymous.”

6. On the increasing numbers arriving at Alcoholics Anonymous by way of treatment programs, see “Comments on A.A.’s Triennial Surveys,” which “is an analysis of the 1989 survey plus a review of comparable previous surveys from 1977 forward,” available from Alcoholics Anonymous World Services. The most detailed treatment of A.A.’s variety, although limited to but one area of the United States (southern California), may be found in Johnson, *Alcoholics Anonymous in the 1980s: Variations on a Theme*. See also Annette R. Smith, *Alcoholics Anonymous: A Social World Perspective*, dissertation, University of California at San Diego, 1991, p. 129: “It is often assumed by outsiders that there is a single pathway to AA success, and that members follow that path in similar cookie-cutter fashion. But as revealed here, there are variations in members’ patterns of integration into the social world of AA and in their conversion experiences.”

7. Private correspondence to the author (San Diego, CA), 26 December 1991.

8. On the “kind of subjects” chosen for studies of Alcoholics Anonymous, note the importance of the point raised by Smith, *Alcoholics Anonymous: A Social World Perspective*. Noting that some (but too few) researchers insist on a full year of sobriety before using someone as an “A.A. subject,” Smith observes (p. 72): “Based on some of the data in this research which suggests that many members do not experience full integration for two or more years, it may be questionable that one year is an adequate measure of successful affiliation. . . . It is estimated that

as much as two years may be required for some alcoholics to fully recover neurologically.”

The observation that “*all* generalizations about Alcoholics Anonymous need careful qualification” of course includes that one -- although it is closer to tautology than to truth to say that “All members of Alcoholics Anonymous have a desire to stop drinking.”

9. On “secularization,” see Oliver Tschannen, “The Secularization Paradigm: A Systematization,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 30(4): 395-415 (1991); Wilson’s letters offer many expressions of the point here . . . and the reasoning behind it:

But as for the A.A. therapy itself, that could be practiced in any fashion that the group wished to practice it, and the same went for every individual. We took the position that A.A. was not the final word on treatment; that it might be only the first word. For us, it became perfectly safe to tell people they could experiment with our therapy in any way they liked.

And on another occasion:

In the early days of A.A. I spent a lot of time trying to get people to agree with me, to practice A.A. principles as I did, and so forth. For so long as I did this . . . A.A. grew very slowly.

10. Harrison Trice and William J. Staudenmeier, “A Sociocultural History of Alcoholics Anonymous,” in Galanter (ed.), *Recent Developments*, vol. 7, p. 32. The prevalence of the reaction noted here is verified by stories and interpretations offered by Frank M., current A.A. archivist.

It merits note that even today, although perhaps not on the level of scholarship represented here, there are individuals seriously studying A.A. according to the ancient split between its New York and Akron manifestations. One Texan, reports regularly how his investigations of the readings and the backgrounds of the earliest New York A.A.s proves (to his satisfaction, if not to mine) that Alcoholics Anonymous originated in the Theosophy of Madame Helena Blavatsky, shaped by aspects of Rosicrucianism. And sometimes the same mail brings me pages from a Californian who, immersed in the study of the books read by Dr. Bob Smith and other Oxford Group-adhering early A.A. members, demonstrates (again to his

satisfaction more than to mine), that every idea in Alcoholics Anonymous derives directly from the King James version of the Bible.

11. Robert McFarlane, *A Stillness in the Pines: The Ecology of the Red-Cockaded Woodpecker*, as quoted and cited in *The New York Times Book Review*, “Noted With Pleasure,” 5 January 1992.

12. Mary Catherine Taylor, *Alcoholics Anonymous: How It Works -- Recovery Processes in a Self-Help Group*, University of California at San Francisco, 1977 (University Microfilms #79-13241); Christine Helen Vourakis, *The Process of Recovery for Women in Alcoholics Anonymous: Seeking Groups “Like Me”*, University of California at San Francisco, 1989; Hazel Cameron Johnson, *Alcoholics Anonymous in the 1980s: Variations of a Theme*, and Annette R. Smith, *Alcoholics Anonymous: A Social World Perspective*, have already been fully cited.

13. Richard H. Seiden, “An Experimental Test of the Assumption that Members of Alcoholics Anonymous are Representative Alcoholics,” master’s thesis, Denver University, 1955; the research was reported more widely in R.H. Seiden, “The Use of Alcoholics Anonymous Members in Research on Alcoholism,” *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol* 21: 506-509 (1960); one recent citation is Alan C. Ogborne and Frederick B. Glaser, “Characteristics of Affiliates of Alcoholics Anonymous,” *Journal of Studies on Alcohol* 42(7): 661-675 (1984); the terms “infantilism,” “authoritarianism” and “religiosity” appear in Ogborne, “Some Limitations of Alcoholics Anonymous,” pp. 55, 58, and *passim*.

14. Robert Kenneth Jones, “Sectarian Characteristics of Alcoholics Anonymous,” *Sociology* (Oxford), 4: 181-195 (1970). Jones informs, for example, that “One of the A.A. symbols . . . is an empty pint beer glass which is placed on the speaker’s table.” On the specific topic of “sect,” although Jones mentions “Niebuhr” (with no indication of whether Reinhold or H. Richard), not Niebuhr nor Weber nor Troeltsch are cited; Jones’s bibliographical citations on the topic of “sect” are to two books by Bryan R. Wilson, both of which are manifestly oriented to the British context. A more American-oriented treatment of the same question may be found in Robert C. Fuller, *Alternative Medicine and American Religious Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), see especially pp. 77ff. and 123 for the criticism, 132ff. for the perspective.

15. Charles Aharan, “A.A. and Other Treatment Programs: Problems in Cooperation,” *Addictions* (Toronto), 17: 25-32 (1970). The direct quotation in the text here is from the CAAAL abstract: in the article itself, Aharan wrote that “in

some [A.A.] groups, if a person wants to be recognized as a member in good standing, he does not speak about his fear of people, his inability to work . . . the program, the fact that he often behaves badly, or that he is unhappy and depressed -- even if all these things are true.” This article is adapted from a talk Aharan presented at the 35th Anniversary International Convention of Alcoholics Anonymous. For a recent citation, Ogborne, “Some Limitations of Alcoholics Anonymous,” p. 57. As to the questions raised in the text, all of these points, I am informed, were noted in the discussion after Aharhan’s original presentation of his paper.

16. Joseph Boscarino, “Factors Related to ‘Stable’ and ‘Unstable’ Affiliation with Alcoholics Anonymous,” *International Journal of Addictions* 15(6): 839-848 (1980), italics Boscarino’s; Keith Humphreys *et al.*, “Factors Predicting Attendance at Self-Help Groups After Substance Abuse Treatment: Preliminary Findings,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 59(4) 591-593 (1991); B.E. Mavis and B.E. Stofflemayr, “Paraprofessionals, Staff Recovery Status, and Client Satisfaction in Alcohol Treatment,” Paper presented at the 97th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (1989).

17. The reference here is to Ogborne and Glaser, “Characteristics of Affiliates of Alcoholics Anonymous,” 663-664, reporting the research of Dorothee F. Mindlin, “Attitudes Toward Alcoholism and Toward Self; Differences Between Three Alcoholic Groups,” *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol* 25: 136-141 (1964); Selden D. Bacon, “A Sociologist Looks at A.A.,” *Minnesota Welfare* 10 (10), 35-44 (1957); Mel Tremper, “Dependency in Alcoholics; A Sociological View,” *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol* 33, 186-190 (1972); Smith, *Alcoholics Anonymous: A Social World Perspective*, also offers sophisticated awareness of “which comes first” questions.

18. The dangers of bias, of course, run in two directions; and the fact that I have chosen to focus on one should not be taken to mean that I ignore the other -- see Note #10, above. Past research on Alcoholics Anonymous and “the spiritual” alerts to the dangers of both opposed biases. On the one hand there is scorn of “the spiritual,” evident disbelief in any such reality. Even if the scorn is muted, assumptions that “the spiritual” is something else, “nothing but” a psychological deficiency or mental aberration or whatever -- such assumptions clearly impede honest research. But as destructive, from the other direction, is the tendency of some committed to “the spiritual” to smuggle into the questions asked or the

interpretations generated particular theological assumptions. Theology, thought on spirituality, has its own story: unawareness of or failure to advert to that whole story also undermines the value of research on “Alcoholics Anonymous and ‘the spiritual.’”

Taylor, p. 6, offers an example of the kind of sensitivity to context, and the kind of valuable but still unresearched questions, that respect can generate. Commenting on criticisms of A.A.’s “ideological quality and rigidity,” Taylor acknowledged the truth of the observation, but suggested that the criticism missed an important aspect of that phenomenon: “A.A. protects its members [from manipulation by pathological or irresponsible members] by providing a fairly rigid ideological structure which limits the goals of the program . . . and by specifying very precisely how recovery is to be achieved, thus limiting and focusing the influence members may have on vulnerable newcomers and one another.” Thus, A.A.’s ideological quality and rigidity “serve a very vital function, and it is doubtful if A.A. could survive, or at any rate be as helpful and safe for its members, without these qualities.” The very professionals who most criticize A.A.’s rigidity, she suggests, would be the most appalled were this protection lacking.

19. Trice and Staudenmeier, “A Sociocultural History of Alcoholics Anonymous,” p. 17, opine that after calling Dr. Silkworth, “*Fortunately* . . . [Wilson] was assured that he was not mad . . .” (emphasis added).

20. Aharan treated this directly in his “AA and Other Treatment Programs: Problems in Cooperation.” Among more recent studies, see Linda Farris Kurtz, “Ideological Differences Between Professionals and A.A. Members,” *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly* 1: 73-86 (1984), and “Cooperation and Rivalry Between Helping Professionals and Members of A.A.,” *Health and Social Work*, 10: 104-112 (1985).

21. John F. Lofland and Robert A. Lejeune, “Initial Interaction of Newcomers in Alcoholics Anonymous: A Field Experiment in Class Symbols and Socialization,” which appeared in *Qualitative Methodology: Firsthand Involvement with the Social World*, ed. William J. Filstead (Chicago: Markham, 1970), pp. 107-118, after originally appearing in *Social Problems*, 8: 102-111 (1960). Responding was Fred Davis, “Comment on ‘Initial Interaction of Newcomers in Alcoholics Anonymous,’” in *Qualitative Methodology: Firsthand Involvement with the Social World*, pp. 271-274.

22. There is no time here to trace the history of criticism of A.A., which began with the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Diseases* review of the A.A. Big Book through Francis Chambers and Arthur Cain. The reviews of A.A.'s Big Book that appeared in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* and the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Diseases* were far from laudatory; the latter in fact was downright snide. The JAMA and JNMD reviews are both reprinted in Kurtz, *Not-God*, p. 92; Francis T. Chambers, "Analysis and Comparison of Three Treatment Measures for Alcoholism: Antabuse, the Alcoholics Anonymous Approach, and Psychotherapy," *British Journal of Addiction* 50: 29-41 (1953); Arthur H. Cain, *The Cured Alcoholic: New Concepts in Alcoholism Treatment and Research* (New York: John Day, 1964), based somewhat on Arthur H. Cain, *Philosophical Psychology of the Socially Estranged Alcoholic*, Columbia University Dissertation, 1960. Bill Wilson's reaction when some members became irate at Cain's publishing his criticisms more widely in *Harper's Magazine* and *The Saturday Evening Post* may be of interest. In a letter to a member who complained about Cain, Bill wrote:

Probably the Cain article kept some people away from A.A. Maybe some will stay sick longer, and maybe a few will die because of it.

But so far as we who are in the fold are concerned, I think it is a rather good experience. . . . the practice of absorbing stuff like that in good humor should be of value.

Despite its petulant and biased nature, the piece did contain some half-truths. It certainly applied to some A.A.'s at some places at some times! Therefore it should help us take heed of these natural tendencies.

[Wilson (New York) to Betty R., 11 February 1963.]

23. The final quotation is Alasdair MacIntyre's, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 76; a more extended discussion of this point may be found in Stanton L. Jones, "A Religious Critique of Behavior Therapy," in William R. Miller and John E. Martin (eds.), *Behavior Therapy and Religion: Integrating Spiritual and Behavioral Approaches to Change* (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE, 1988), pp.139-170, via whom the quotation of Nietzsche is borrowed.

24. On the futility – and frustration – of the demand to “prove” love, see several of the essays collected in Leslie H. Farber, *Lying, Despair, Jealousy, Envy, Sex, Suicide, Drugs, and the Good Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), especially “Will and Anxiety,” “Our Kindly Family Physician, Chief Crazy Horse,” and “My Wife, The Naked Movie Star,” pp. 13-34, 106-119, 146-162.

25. The recent research of affiliation has been helped by rediscovery of Harrison Trice, “A Study of the Process of Affiliation with Alcoholics Anonymous,” *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 18: 39-54 (1957); among the more accessible recent studies are David R. Rudy, *Becoming Alcoholic: Alcoholics Anonymous and the Reality of Alcoholism* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986, and Norman K. Denzin, *The Recovering Alcoholic* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1987).

In earliest A.A., the reading of specified books and the practice of sponsorship were seen as especially useful in triggering this capacity.

The use of psychedelic chemicals has often resurfaced in the history of research into “capacity for the spiritual”; see, for example, Charles Savage, “LSD, Alcoholism, and Transcendence,” *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 135: 429-435 (1962); Kenneth E. Godfrey, “LSD Therapy,” in Ronald J. Catanzaro (ed.), *Alcoholism: The Total Treatment Approach* (Springfield, IL: C.C. Thomas, 1968), pp. 237-253; B.J. Albaugh and P.O. Anderson, “Peyote and the Treatment of Alcoholism Among American Indians,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 131: 1247-1250 (1974). Wilson’s experiments are treated both in Ernest Kurtz, *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous* (Center City, MN: Hazelden, 1979), pp. 136-137, and in even more detail in A.A.’s own *Pass It On: The Story of Bill Wilson and How the A.A. Message Reached the World* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc. 1984), pp. 369ff.

“Sober intoxication” is treated, *passim*, in both Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), and E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951).

26. John Clancy, “The Use of Intellectual Processes in Group Psychotherapy with Alcoholics,” *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol* 23: 432-441 (1962); see some follow-up in David R. Rudy, *Becoming Alcoholic: Alcoholics Anonymous and the Reality of Alcoholism*, and Norman K. Denzin, *Treating Alcoholism: An Alcoholics Anonymous Approach* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1987); Several studies on A.A. sponsorship are reported by Emrick,

“Alcoholics Anonymous: Membership Characteristics,” p. 46; for more on the topic, see Joseph H. Fichter, “Survey on NCCA Membership,” *NCCA Blue Book* 30: 11-16 (1978), and Fichter, *The Rehabilitation of Clergy Alcoholics* (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1982).

The in-process work on A.A.’s early bibliotherapy is by Dick B., *Dr. Bob’s Library*, to be published in 1992 by The Bishop of Books, Wheeling, WV.

Two 1959 articles on sponsorship, one respectful and the other less so from its psychoanalytic perspective, still helpfully define this turf: Herbert S. Ripley and Joan K. Jackson, “Therapeutic Factors in Alcoholics Anonymous,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 116: 44-50 (1959), and Hendrik Lindt, “The ‘Rescue Fantasy’ in Group Treatment of Alcoholics,” *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy* 9: 43-52 (1959).

On the wider but importantly related topic of what is classically termed “spiritual direction,” see Kenneth Leech, *Soul Friend: The Practice of Christian Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977), and especially Edward C. Sellner, *Mentoring: The Ministry of Spiritual Kinship* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1990).

27. Mary Martha Murphy, “Values Stressed by Two Social Class Levels at Meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous,” *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol* 14: 576-585 (1953); George E. Vaillant, *The Natural History of Alcoholism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983). Also informal, but useful for its cross-cultural perspective, is Joseph Kessel, *The Road Back: A Report on Alcoholics Anonymous* (New York: Knopf, 1962), translation of *Avec les Alcooliques Anonymes* (Paris: Librairie Gallinard, 1960). Explicit but limited is Miriam B. Rodin, “Getting on the Program: A Biocultural Analysis of Alcoholics Anonymous,” in Linda A. Bennett and Genevieve M. Ames (eds.) *The American Experience with Alcohol: Contrasting Cultural Perspectives* (New York: Plenum Press, 1985), pp. 41-58; see also the dissertation by Edmund Bernard O’Reilly, *Toward Rhetorical Immunity: Narratives of Alcoholism and Recovery*, University of Pennsylvania, 1988.

28. My “two cultures,” I hope needless to say, are closer to C.P. Snow’s than to the more recent James Davison Hunter’s.

29. Martin Marty, *Context* 24(3): 5, quoting John Kavanaugh, S.J., in the *St. Louis Review*, no further citation.