

## Community experience and personal accomplishment in Alcoholics Anonymous: a phenomenological research<sup>1</sup>

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We aim to understand how the subjects achieve themselves in Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) live community experience in the context and how this experience connects to personal formation and accomplishment. We carry out interviews with four participants of A.A., whose data were analyzed phenomenologically. We learned that the encounter with the other enables reassurance of the life and the alcoholic condition, personal growth and accomplishment; the communitarian companionship is marked by solidarity and friendship relationship, building the context of the A.A., which supports the recovery process. We conclude that the personal accomplishment, the achievement and maintenance of sobriety are favored by personal training of community ties in the A.A. and by line between formal principles and personal values.

Descriptors: Alcoholics Anonymous; Alcoholism; Interpersonal Relationships.

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## Experiência comunitária e realização pessoal em Alcoólicos Anônimos: uma pesquisa fenomenológica

Objetivamos compreender como os sujeitos que se autorrealizam em Alcoólicos Anônimos (A.A.) vivenciam a experiência comunitária nesse contexto e como essa experiência se associa à realização e formação pessoal. Realizamos entrevistas com quatro participantes de A.A., cujos dados foram analisados fenomenologicamente. Aprendemos que o encontro com o outro possibilita a ressignificação da vida e da condição de alcoolista, crescimento pessoal e autorrealização; a convivência comunitária é marcada por relações de amizade, solidariedade, construção do contexto de A.A. que é sustento para o processo de recuperação. Concluímos que a realização pessoal, a conquista e a manutenção da sobriedade são favorecidas pela formação pessoal de vínculos comunitários em A.A. e pela sintonia entre princípios formais e valores pessoais.

**Descritores:** Alcoólicos Anônimos; Alcoolismo; Relações Interpessoais.

## Experiencia comunitaria y autorrealización en Alcohólicos Anónimos: un estudio fenomenológico

Nuestro objetivo es entender cómo los sujetos que experimentan autorrealización en Alcohólicos Anónimos (A.A.) experimentan la experiencia comunitaria en este contexto y la forma en que la experiencia se asocia con el autorrealización y la formación personal. Hemos llevado a cabo entrevistas con cuatro participantes de A.A. cuyos datos fueron analizados fenomenológicamente. Aprendemos que el encuentro con el otro permite el replanteamiento de la vida y la condición de los alcohólicos, el crecimiento personal y la autorrealización; la relación comunitaria está marcada por las relaciones de amistad, la solidaridad, la construcción del contexto de A.A. que es mantener para el proceso de recuperación. Llegamos a la conclusión de que la autorrealización, el logro y el mantenimiento de la sobriedad son favorecidos por la formación personal de los lazos comunitarios en A.A. y la línea entre los principios formales y los valores personales.

**Descriptores:** Alcohólicos Anónimos; Alcoholismo; Relaciones Interpersonales.

### Introduction

The proposal of the AA values the sharing of experiences between its members in support of a common goal: sobriety<sup>(1)</sup>: "Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who share their

experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking: to become a member of AA. There are no dues or fees; we are self-supporting through our own contributions. A.A.

is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy, neither endorses nor opposes any causes. Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety.”<sup>(2)</sup>.

Studies<sup>(3-5)</sup> punctuate the presence of intragroup elements in the AA that stimulate the development of singularity in the member. However, another portion of research studies consider that there is no room for subjectivity in the AA, since the basic script, for the account of life stories in meetings, favors the emergence of a homogeneous speech instead of singularity<sup>(6-7)</sup>.

It is in view of this polarized field of understandings on the AA that we are interested in understanding the intragroup dynamics that allows persons to address their own difficulties, becoming a singularity in the process of sobriety. We aimed to capture a type of intersubjective relationship characteristic of the community, which favors the constitution of the person in his or her singularity<sup>(8)</sup>, so that self-realization can happen.

To this end, we used the concepts of personal fulfillment and community.

The subjects in that time are realized by positioning themselves toward the realization of their structure – their personhood<sup>(9-10)</sup> –, although experiencing difficulties in this process. Persons need to be aware in relation to themselves, considering the self in relation to the world, to their own point of reference from which they can be guided, and thus realized. “Self-realization occurs insofar as the self refreshes the totality of its properly human structure. And, to realize the person in his entirety, the act needs to correspond to a demand that grows from his center”<sup>(11)</sup>. The dynamics of realization is increased when persons actively participate in the world of relationships that made them, building and contributing to the world. In this process, a satisfying experience can emerge, experiencing a taste for acting in a manner corresponding to the personal searches in reality<sup>(12-17)</sup>. Personal formation consists of persons becoming themselves, “organizing what they are assuming and *structure, form* themselves, turning themselves into a form”<sup>(18)</sup>, performing the personhood, developing their potential and their own characteristics, placing themselves in the world with a personal way of being<sup>(12,19)</sup>.

Entering the subject of community, according to Stein<sup>(10)</sup>, communities can be fleeting, lasting a few hours, for example, in social gatherings, or lasting, as in associations. However, what defines

a group considered as a community is the way how the persons who are part of it experience the group and interact with each other. The subject of the community experience is the “we”, which signals the existence of a belonging, being the structural element of community experiences and the factor of constitution of the community, which is enabled when the members experience the core of common sense, in this way generating the unity of the persons in the community<sup>(12)</sup>. It is solidarity, considering when assuming position of positive character and attitude of availability of a human being in front of the other, which supports the community. It is the opening and reciprocal action requesting a common responsibility which forms and strengthens the life in common.

In addition, in contact with the other, it is possible the awakening of something that was numb or the development of new traits in personality. On the other hand, Stein<sup>(12)</sup> highlights on the possibility of a pseudoformation when considering alienation, when those traits seized from another person do not correspond to the self, i.e., do not allow subjects to be themselves. Not only the other can be provocation to self-knowledge and development of the characteristics of the self, but also the contact with cultural baggage and community values favor the inner growth of the member, if the seizure of the cultural elements is in line with the personal core. The important factor of community life is precisely it being the support for personal life. In the same way in which there is the formation of community relationships and community culture by the subjects, what is built is used for the support and process of becoming oneself. The community consists of a certain type of intersubjective tie which has “the force of the constitution of the person”<sup>(8)</sup>.

In this article, we aim to understand how the subjects that are self-realized in the AA experience a community experience in this context and how that experience is associated with personal fulfillment and formation.

## Methodology

We carried out this qualitative research at two moments in 2013: first we performed the participant observation in three AA groups and at the General Service Office (GSO) of the AA in Belo Horizonte, State of Minas Gerais, Brazil, and, in a second

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\* Both the participant observation and the interviews were conducted by the author of this article.

moment, interviews with the subjects, that occurred in the GSO. We used participant observation considering the insertion in the field so that we could reap the aspects involved in the dynamics of the AA. In addition, the knowledge of the proposal of the AA favored the establishment of dialogs with the members.

Considering that we aimed to seize the invariant elements of experience of realization in the AA, we proposed the selection of members for interview that followed the following criteria: to be persons realized in the AA with different times of participation in this context and presence of diversity as to gender. Operationally, we used a mixed method of selection of subjects for interviews. We intentionally chose the subjects Lilita and Aguinaldo, because from the field work (AA groups) we identified that they were within the criteria set out earlier, because they have a longer participation in the AA and a personal speech about the AA, expressing a vivifying effect of the participation in this context on themselves, which could indicate experience of realization as defined by Stein and Giussani. In addition, Suzana and Domênico were indicated by a key informant identified in the field work in the General Service Office of the AA in Belo Horizonte from the criteria: persons who they considered realized in the AA, with participation for a short time in the groups, being one male and the other female.

At the beginning of the interviews, we adopted the following question: I would like you to tell me significant moments in the AA. Throughout the interviews, we asked other questions, in order to further develop important aspects for the research. We chose to analyze the four interviews as we recognized personal fulfillment in them and because this specific number of subjects was sufficient to achieve the objectives of this qualitative research. After the selection of interviews, we carried out the transcription and textualization of the recordings.

The analysis of the data from the interviews was based on the phenomenological method<sup>(20)</sup> as it considers the reports as an expression of the experience and enters the subjectivity and the world-of-life<sup>(21)</sup>. Therefore, we propose a comprehensive approach of the experiences of the members through the connections of meanings, seeking the invariant elements (general meaning) of the phenomenon of the dynamics that exists between community experience and personal fulfillment.

First, we carried out successive readings of the material seeking to grasp the personal development

of each subject and, after this course, to understand the data in terms of the experience of our interest, considering how the persons are realized in their experience and how they relate to requests and proposals of socio-cultural context to which they adhere. We selected the most meaningful and representative excerpts of each moment for further analysis based on the phenomenological method as proposed by the steps of van der Leeuw<sup>(20,22)</sup>:

- 1) naming of the set of experiences: to separate and combine the sets of experiences, making them organized and, thus, intelligible. We used expressions contained in the reports of the respondents themselves;
- 2) methodical insertion in life: to become aware of how the phenomenon studied resonates with the researcher. Recognizing that the research is a field of provocation for the researcher, it allows the evident placement of the real interest for the research process and resumption of criteria so that this investigation can meet its goals in a qualified way;
- 3) *epoché*: suspension of personal judgments so that the essence of the phenomenon can emerge;
- 4) elucidation of the experiences and enlightenment of the connections of meanings: establishment of categories that highlight existing connections. Clarifying the experiences and clarifying their connections of meaning, we can reach a typical ideal connection or experience;
- 5) understanding of the connections of meaning: revelation of the various experiences collected into information full of meaning;
- 6) continuous correction: confrontation of understandings with the data collected and other materials. Resuming the information seized throughout the field research, we could rectify the understandings reached. Moreover, we resorted to dialog with peers in the academic discussion space and supervision with the advisor to assist in this correction;
- 7) reconstruction of the experience lived by the subject: the purpose of this step is to bear witness to the phenomenon, that is, allow the access of third parties to the understanding reached.

We carried out this type of analysis in each interview. After all analyses, we apprehended the structural and essential elements of all of the phenomenon under study, that is, the elements common to all the experiences communicated to us.

Next, we will present the results achieved with the analysis of the experiences. The excerpts of the interviews illustrate a much broader analysis contemplated by the master's research.

## Results and discussion

In the center, community: the ressignification of life and donation of the self

Each of the subjects has described experiences on the meeting with others in the group, from which they could resign their own life to the point of recognizing a path for personal change. Suzana, 2 years in the AA and 48 years of age, expressed how the first day in the AA was significant:

*Look, the best moment for me was when I joined it. So, I went to a couple meetings that I attended and joined the third time. The best moment for me was the day I heard a woman out front, you know? When sharing. It was like she was talking about ... She was telling my life, you know? (Suzana)*

The impact experienced when listening to the statement generated recognition of the self in the experience of the participant. What was specifically communicated by a woman moved her to aim the look at herself. What elements similar to her experience helped her to consider this as an important moment in her experience in the AA? What she recognized as similar to her life that moved her?

*There was this one that looked like she was ... even her house looks like mine. (...). And she was telling that she climbed the stairs on all fours. Sometimes that happened to me. I drank, drank, drank at the first floor and when I went to sleep I had to go up on all fours. (...) So, even this [emphasis] that she told matched me, you know? It was this moment – you know? – when I turned around and said "I'm an alcoholic" this is over. From then on I embraced it as much as I could. (Suzana)*

The sharing corresponded so much to her, it made so much sense for her to witness the testimony of another woman that, in addition to having admitted her own limit, she could affirm with clarity her self-care movement: *I embraced it as much as I could*. The other being a provocative presence contributed to the perception and acceptance of the fragility of the self.

For Lilita, 16 years of AA and 50 years of age, being valued by the fellow members of the AA at the beginning of her participation was decisive to resign her own life:

*When it is time to leave, the meeting ended, the members went with me to the bus stop: I thought it was beautiful! (...). And there, we stood there chatting, chatting. And I kept thinking, "Why have they come with me?" And then, I understood that that's companionship, protection. It wasn't just me, they also did it with other members too, men and women. And this gives a, a... You know that thing like rediscovering life? Saying "Oh, I have value, someone cares about me." Without a word, doing it... But it's very, very beautiful. (Lilita)*

It was from the appreciation of the other toward Lilita that she realized her own *value*, who even went on to *rediscover the life* she had in herself. The seizure

of that sense of action of the *members* caused in her an experience of beauty that realized Lilita: *it is very, very beautiful*.

For Domênico as well, 2 years of AA and 58 years of age, the initial meeting with the participants of the AA contained a special meaning:

*On the first day, I saw that I was finding a path of hope. It was the first word that I thought the day I joined. Why hope? Because if I got there totally destroyed... I already thought my life could even end too fast ... in that process that I was in. Then, I found support, care, protection... a shoulder to cry on. In other words, I began to glimpse a new life. With words... Through words simply. Through a look... through a welcom... a hug! Through a hug... I learned that hugging is good ... that sincerely hugging is fantastic! (Domênico)*

The other with his gaze, appreciating him in a way that is free, honest, provoked a reunion with himself, with his own ability to open, express affection towards others and be realized with this act: a community dynamics in itself.

Aguinaldo, 20 years of AA and 69 years of age, found a possibility to glimpse a new life at his first time at the AA:

*So, there in the AA they told me: "You aren't, you didn't ask to be sick, no. This is a disease!" "Oh, and it's a fatal disease! If you don't stop drinking now, you're going to die! (...) Or from crazyness." And we, then, wake up, you know? We have a great psychic impact in our life and we say: "wait, there's something wrong in my life that I need to fix." (Aguinaldo)*

At the same time he acknowledged himself in his limits, he was also seen in a way that he did not realize: the other bet on the possibility of Aguinaldo ending his alcoholism. From the perception of himself, of his own condition of alcoholic, his own suffering and the opportunity to change, Aguinaldo in his entirety was mobilized, even so as to reflect on how he was taking care of his own life.

The free, genuine, interested positioning of the other towards the subjects, mobilized in them a warning in relation to their own alcoholic condition and a value for life envisioning a horizon of renewed meaning of personal capacities to act in the world, to take care and realize themselves; this dynamism is very representative of community life<sup>(12)</sup>. Therefore, going back to the meeting with the other that helped them to look at themselves, trusting on the possibility of personal growth, was significant.

Stein<sup>(17)</sup>, when elaborating the concept of empathy, seizes that persons hold on themselves the possibility of misunderstanding their characteristics and capabilities. The experience of empathy is regarded as a correction of mistakes, as she describes: "It is possible that the other can 'judge me better' than

myself and give me greater clarity about myself. (...). In this way, empathy and internal perception work hand in hand to give myself to myself." In this sense, finding the other is the possibility of persons finding a point of novelty in themselves that refers to something that is truly from the self. The perception of the other helps the development of self-awareness in its wholeness and uniqueness: this a process characteristic of community experience.

Going in the same direction, Giussani<sup>(23)</sup> states that personhood is not reached by a reasoning from which the self turns to itself in a self-reflexive closure. It is only through an encounter with a live human reality that the self can discover itself and glimpse the possibility of change. From the discovery of oneself, persons become aware of their own limits, resources, potential, and ultimately, of all that make them. In this way, the self can engage existentially in favor of self-realization.

The ressignification of life itself including everything that makes it is provided by the presence of someone who points a horizon of life, of possibilities. Thus, a company being a mobilizing presence invites persons to follow the directions of their own experience, resume their genuine opening, both for themselves and for the world, and wait for something that matches them. It is this company representative of the community coexistence, experienced by the subjects of the research, which allow a conscience and a discovery of the self<sup>(12,19,23)</sup>.

The realizing experience of the self of the subjects at the beginning of participation in the AA or the first contact with a participant of the group and also the community life in the group were important factors for them to keep the link with the other members. From the integration into the group, they donated themselves in an opening to the other in an act of solidarity.

For Lilita, the experience of the welcoming allowed the discovery of how it was important for her to donate herself:

*They did it to me, they took me in. So, I feel a pleasure in doing it to the other, and the other wants to do it to the other. (...). The simple fact that I know that you have a problem, that you suffer with it, that same way that I did, I want you to be well. It is so, it is so beautiful that, you know! It's inexplicable! I can't explain it. Because we can't find words to define it, you know? (...). And it's nice to know that we have contributed a little. (Lilita)*

She acknowledged that she was able to put herself in the world taking care of herself and collaborating with the other. We can see here a properly community dynamics of the care with the affirmation of the other and contribution with the personal process of others.

Domênico revealed how much he took care of himself and helped the other at the meeting:

*Because our recovery, it is only functional when talking to each other, at the meetings. Why is it functional? Because we (emphasis) began to understand. We learn to take care of ourselves with what the other tells us. And the other is going to learn to take care of himself with what I tell him. That is, (...) I take what has been good for him. And when he has something that is not... that is not as good ... I have the opportunity to show (...) through suggestion that he can change that situation. He can change that situation. I am writing a new life. (Domênico)*

The attending of the meetings was not an automatic gesture, but it was full of affection and meaning that helped him be himself more; here we show an experiment of self-realization that marked his experience in the AA:

*I feel pleasure from turning up to the group, before the meeting. Hugging everyone there! And there are some that I call guru, who are chronologically a little older than me. I even kiss foreheads. See that, a guy who didn't know any of this! I mean, is this not living happily? I know that today I can be ... the Domênico that I never was. (Domênico)*

For Suzana, the meetings were a live possibility to establish community relationships beyond the AA group that realized her, causing satisfaction:

*But then, something else that is very good, you know? (...) The friendship that (...) you have inside you can have out here too. Only drinking is not present anymore! You can dance, go to the movies. You can invite a friend to go to a restaurant... You can continue doing everything! Only drinking is not present. Something that you will have with people who are part of your living out here, it is not going to happen in there. But the friendship is much nicer! (...) Man (emphasis), it's a friendship like this...: it is a bond that grows so big! (Suzana)*

In Aguinaldo's experience, how did he bond to the other?

*It's like I'm telling you, in my illness, you needed to see the outpouring of affection, love, and friendship they gave me. I mean, it is that gratitude that is in the heart of each one. "No, Aguinaldo's sick, we need to visit him; we need to send a message to him, you know?" (...) So, they are people who I have a great gratitude in my heart, you know? And gratitude in the heart is love. Gratitude is love; is it or not? (said laughing). It's love that remains. (Aguinaldo)*

It is clear that the help was mutual; the donation and friendship were experienced reciprocally; what was built there were genuine relationships of love, filled with care and gratitude; a community life marked by solidarity, recognition of the other and openness at the same time, in a reciprocal process.

Given the formulation that the subjects reported, we seized a centrality of the relationship with the other

in the constitution of the self-realization experience in relation to the community context of the AA. The participation in the AA carried a vital meaning for them when they could live with the other members, either during the group meeting or in an external context. This community coexistence marked the way they live the AA. It is in that reciprocal relationship that the subjects of this research lived a mutual confirmation in humanity and uniqueness, the process of experience in community<sup>(12)</sup>. Moreover, what was built with the shared action of donation to the other was a strengthening of community ties that were the structure in the personal search process to be oneself more.

It is worth noting, that, by living a process of personal growth, the subjects tell us the personal troubles experienced in the context of the AA. However, each one of them positioned themselves in order to seize a new meaning and state what was important to them. Suzana, by living the disappointment with the AA, could elaborate her own tension and malaise, resuming what was significant in the group so that she would go back to attending it; Lilita, by realizing her own manipulation in the group that hurt her, she took a stand to control this trend; Domênico, in view of the tension experienced in the group and his own exploding reaction with the other, became aware of the error, resuming what corresponded to him: the respect to the other; Aguinaldo, in view of the difficulties at the beginning of the constitution of the group and his own shock because of the suicide of a fellow member, rescued the value of his own life and the life of the group, noting that he needed to have a happy ending, as well as telling us the difficulty experienced in maintaining the structure of the group context given the suggestion of members that did not dedicated themselves to achieve knowledge of the principles of the AA. It stands out the how freely they expressed themselves to us, researchers, about the difficulties and problems that they have lived, communicating how AA and themselves were not reduced to the limits; hence the tranquility to show, without denying weaknesses, and becoming aware of the greater horizon of life to which they belonged.

Instead of addressing their own pain, be it falling into alcohol or drugs, or ignoring the provocation that it raises, each one seized in their own difficulty an opportunity to review their own actions in the AA group in order to seek those that favored personal growth and community structure.

## Conclusion

Despite the limitations of this study regarding the selection of persons who identified themselves with the AA, thus contributing to the seizure of results favorable to the group, we can make some conclusions. From the experiences of the subjects, there is possibility to apprehend nuclear elements present in the community experience of those members that realized themselves in the socio-cultural context of the AA, such as:

The inter-human meeting considering the actual community relationship, both at the time prior to participation in the AA and in the group environment, marked by the welcoming of a member, promotes re-signification of the meaning of life and the condition of the alcoholic person. The experience of appreciation of members and the recognition that they receive from the other, considered as an example of personal change, can mobilize an experience of realization of the self by glimpsing a path of hope and resumption of the searches for matches in reality. The alcoholic condition can be experienced as useful occasion to the care, recognizing the limitation, but not reducing the self to it;

The reciprocal opening, during the sharing of testimonies, considered as a community factor, provides learning experiences and personal growth. During the exchange of experience, as a proposal of the AA, the member can live an experience of self-realization and affirmation of personal power, even if he experiences disappointments, frustrations, difficulties and hardships along the way. The disappointment experienced, rather than being seized as an end free of meaning, can be the occasion to give meaning to the pain and the information that it has;

The cultivation of relationships of friendship and solidarity is a fundamental point of the community experience. The proposal of the AA, which cherishes the coexistence in the meeting, is configured as the occasion for the formation of community ties, supported by affection, help and experience of freedom and personal growth. Facing a time of suffering, the act of helping, relieving the pain of the other, showing him new ways of self-care, seeking his well-being, are powerful self-realizing actions in addition to being a caring for the other. In both dynamics, marked by the donation of the subject to the other, the relationship with the other emerges as central when considering the personal formation of ties and the community context, which are the support for the very process of being oneself and the achievement and maintenance of sobriety.

Genuine community ties, which empower personal formation, strengthen not only the self but also the reality in which the self is inserted, the cultural proposal of the AA, the social world that receives a joint action considered as a novelty point amid the individualistic tendencies of the contemporary culture.

From the data in our research, relating to persons who have identified themselves and got involved with the AA, we can discuss the results of some studies: the homogeneous speech performed by the member by following the basic script of sharing of experiences hinders the manifestation of uniqueness, and the group is only a substitute for alcohol dependence for the member who is subordinated to the AA, resulting in alienation rather than personal autonomy. Given this debate, we reaffirm the urgent need to look at the fruitful possibility of a proper community experience of the member of the AA linked to an experience of uniqueness and personal fulfillment. The consistence between personal values and the principles of formal proposal enables the personal experience of the suggestions of the AA rather than alienation. We do not ignore the existence of processes of alienation of the self; after all, that possibility is present in every institutional context, including the AA. However, the community proposal, be it in the AA, or in any social reality, by including a community dimension, can become a powerful call so that persons can become themselves more, so that the self can connect with the core of its being, opening up to the life that it has and that surrounds it.

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