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**AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF THE COMMUNICATION PRACTICES OF A  
RECOVERING ALCOHOLIC DURING THE FIRST MONTH OF SOBRIETY**

Lianna Erickson (Speech Communication)

*Daniel Cronn-Mills, Faculty Mentor (Speech Communication)*

I obtained IRB permission to observe a 33-year old female while she attended Alcoholics Anonymous during her first month of sobriety. For the duration of a month, I took field notes, interviewed, and participated in activities with the subject. I utilized theories from George Mead (Symbolic Interactionism), Walter Fisher (Narrative Paradigm), Clifford Geertz and Michael Pacanowsky (Cultural approach to organizations) to understand the communication practices. With these theories, I illuminate the use of storytelling, metaphors and rituals utilized by the subject and the organization.

This qualitative research project focuses on the verbal and non-verbal communication practices of a recovering alcoholic during the first month of sobriety. Using an ethnographic research method and analyzing the data by means of interpretive and symbolic interactionism, it explains how the organization, 'Alcoholics Anonymous'(A.A.), helped a 33-year-old woman face her alcoholism and find the resources to get sober and stay sober. The results of this research show that a variety of verbal practices are displayed by using *stories* and *metaphors*. Non-verbal communication practices are used in the *rituals* that the organization, 'Alcoholics Anonymous', exercises and also in what the organization teaches the recovering alcoholic to use in their every day life. In the application of stories, metaphors, and rituals the organization and subject are able to communicate in exclusive, yet unique, ways that only they can truly understand. This research is an attempt to appreciate and comprehend the first month of sobriety and how communication is a survival mechanism that helps the alcoholic to stay sober.

A newcomer uses stories, metaphors, and rituals to communicate with other recovering alcoholics during the first month of sobriety. "Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who have recovered from a seemingly hopeless condition of the mind, body and spirit" (Wilson, Smith, 1976; Wilson, 1955; Rapping, 1997). This organization has offered a successful approach to recovery from alcoholism. The entire organization revolves around spirituality and the changes that are necessary for a fuller understanding of how Alcoholics Anonymous works. The twelve steps that A.A. uses are an outline of a rhetorical process, which moves the alcoholic from drinking to sobriety by means of rhetoric of predisposition, of empowerment, and of transformation. Even though there is no cure for the disease of alcoholism, there is a new way of persuading the members to interpret the world, their lives, and their affliction in sacred terms (Swora, 2004; Zemore, 2004; Kaskutas, Turk, Bond, Weisner, 2003).

Many scholars and physicians have questioned whether or not this disease is self-induced. A study by Judith Rosta (2004) explains the opinions of two physicians from Denmark and Germany that discuss the cultural differences of how alcoholism is looked at in their country. In Denmark, alcoholism is described as a lifestyle disease, and in Germany a preliminary disease. Even though both physicians had different opinions in this study overall, it was determined that the alcoholics were responsible for their disease and also their sobriety. Since the alcoholic is responsible for their own recovery, Tucker (2004) suggests that alcoholics have the belief that they themselves can solve their own problems and that their drinking was sometimes not serious enough to seek help.

In a professional treatment setting, A.A., or on their own, Tucker explains that the help-seeking factors did not vary by drinking status. The implications for increasing help-seeking among problem drinkers are not relevant to how much the alcoholic drank,

but to how much the alcoholic failed at keeping sober (Steffen, 1997; Wallin, Gripenberg, Andreasson, 2002). It was also found in a qualitative pilot study that explored attributes of successful recovery among 13 alcoholics with six or more years of sobriety, that half of the group maintained their sobriety without help from a support group. The other half utilized the help of supportive people, accepted help from a Higher Power, had a strong desire to get well, strove to be honest with themselves, and remembered the negative consequences of their past alcohol abuse. Both groups agreed that spiritual attributes are the most important for a successful recovery (Kubicek, Morrison, Morgan, 2002). The negative consequences are one of the most primary factors in helping an alcoholic stay sober. The remembrance of the hang-over, trouble with the law, losing family, friends, and employment are apparent in their drinking. These memories of such incidents can help the alcoholic revolt from alcohol and all its ramifications (Curie, 2004; Rumpf, Bischof, Hapke, Meyer, John, 2000). If the alcoholic cannot remember the horrible past left behind, then possible relapse can be just around the corner.

Recognizing the problem is the first step in getting sober and furthermore admitting you're an alcoholic. When one wants to get sober and take action, there is always the risk of being triggered, severe craving and of course, relapses (Agostinelli, Floyd, Grube, Woodall, Miller, 2004; McConnochie, Ross, Helm, Wallace, 2004). An objective study was done that examined the risk of relapse, triggers of relapse, and the effects of successfully sustaining remission on the drinking behavior and function in problem drinkers early in their lives. This 10-year study compared problem drinkers that started early in life compared to later in life. The study found out that there are long-term costs associated with earlier drinking problems, even when remission is maintained. Both current drinking behavior and drinking history are worth considering when making recommendations regarding older adults' alcohol consumption (Schutte, Nichols, Brennan, Moos, 2003). As well as the negative long term effects of starting to drink at an early age, the alcoholic has positive long term effects that are needed to help the individual stay sober. These positive long term effects consist of helping others and playing a productive role in society. Critics point to 12-step groups as being a positive influence in the mainstream society. The members of Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous are participants that view community work as an opportunity to give back to society. Giving back to society is what is taught in the organizations. It is said that the more one receives, the more one is expected to give back that has been so freely given to them. Alcoholics and addicts can do just that by becoming involved in their community (Kurtz, Fisher, 2003; Bond, Kaskutas, Weisner, 2003; Levy, Miller, Mallonee, Specer, Romano, Fisher, Smith, 2003; Rosecrans, 1994; Policing, Zemore, 2004).

Being an alcoholic, whether age 12 or age 50, has its hardships. These hardships are exactly what holds the alcoholics together and helps one another to stay sober. Alcoholics Anonymous uses stories and metaphors to relate to one another and achieve a common bond. An article by Ilkka Arminen (2004), explores the therapeutic uses of story telling in the meetings of A.A. The meetings are organized around a series of lengthy personal monologues. Overall, a story is a procedure to display the speaker's analysis and understanding of personal experiences. These stories are the method that

members use to display alignment and identification with previous speakers. Further, they are not only a procedure to engage in reciprocal revelations of personal problems, but also a means to value their experiences (Steffen, 1997). Metaphors are used within the organization and help the members understand their disease on a simpler term. The famous metaphor in the organization is about a great liner ship that refers to the alcoholics as the passengers and when the ship crashes the passengers rely on each other to make it through (Wilson, Smith, 1976). Communication by means of using stories and metaphors has an impact on the alcoholic's sobriety; but so does the actual day-to-day verbal communication. Alcohol impairs the speed and accuracy of word recognition and categorization, but alcohol's effects on the brain during verbal cognitive processing are not adequately understood. A study from the *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research* journal in March of 2004 claims that the effects of alcohol intoxication on prelexical, semantic, and mnemonic aspects of verbal processing are affected by moderately low doses of alcohol. So, it doesn't matter if the alcoholic has two drinks or twenty, the verbal communication is affected no matter what the intake level. When there is that much difference in how an alcoholic acts and speaks when intoxicated, the outcome of the communication practices when sober would be significantly apparent. (Ksenija, 2004).

### Communication with the Alcoholic and the Organization

How does a person in recovery communicate with other recovering alcoholics and the group as a whole during the first month of sobriety? If the verbal communication is so highly affected when drunk, then how is an alcoholic supposed to communicate when sober? The hypothesis that I am proposing is that the alcoholic is taught how to communicate within the organization of Alcoholics Anonymous. This communication takes different forms and avenues that the alcoholic does not even know about or comprehend, that a psychic change has taken place in the alcoholic's mind and body and they are communicating differently than they ever have before. Without recognition, it becomes normal for the alcoholic. As was mentioned in the previous pages, in an article by Gabrielle Swora (2004), she refers to A.A. as an "outline of a rhetorical process, which moves the alcoholic from drinking to sobriety by means of rhetoric of predisposition, of empowerment, and of transformation." Through all these changes of becoming sober, the alcoholic struggles, faces fears, makes amends, finds a Higher Power, and helps others. These are examples of the twelve steps of the organization. In these twelve steps, not only is a foundation built in the conversion of the person as a whole, but the behaviors, actions, thoughts, feelings, and more importantly how they communicate, are changed as well. One of the main traditions of how Alcoholics Anonymous helps this transformation take place is to tell a story.

### Method

George Herbert Mead was a professor in Philosophy at the University of Chicago. Mead thought the true test of any theory is whether it is useful in solving complex problems. Mead died in 1934, but fortunately his students and colleagues set forth his wisdom and expertise into the published book *Mind, Self, and Society*. Mead's

chief disciple, Herbert Blumer from the University of California-Berkeley came up with the term, “symbolic interactionism” after Mead’s wonderful theories and hard-earned knowledge. Herbert Blumer explained that there are “three core principles that make up the theory of symbolic interactionism: thought, language, and meaning” (Griffin, 2003). These sources “lead to conclusion that concern the creation of a person’s self and socialization into a larger community” (Griffin, 2003). Walter Fisher, a professor of communication at the University of Southern California, comments that, “all forms of communication that appeal to our reason is best viewed as stories shaped by history, culture, and character” (Griffin, 2003). Fisher invented the theory of “narrative paradigm.” Fisher is convinced that humans are “narrative beings who experience and comprehend life as a series of ongoing narratives, as conflicts, characters, beginnings, middles and ends” (Fisher, 1987). The role of story telling is an identity reconstruction in the organization Alcoholics Anonymous. “Central to the recovery of self is learning how to become a storyteller about one’s own life, before and after A.A. membership. The self is recovered in and through the stories the members learn to tell” (Arminen, 2004).

An ethnographic study was performed using participant observation of a subject: a 33-year old female who was in her first month of sobriety. The subject was sought out in the organization of Alcoholics Anonymous and permission granted to monitor her first month and the communication styles she uses and learns while trying to maintain her sobriety. Along with the participant observation, field notes, interviews, and basic undertakings of the subject, this method was used to prove that recovering alcoholics use stories, metaphors, and rituals as verbal and non-verbal communication practices. The first verbal communication practice that will be analyzed is the storytelling with the subject.

### Stories

Stories are a major part of the subject getting sober and staying sober during her first month of attending Alcoholics Anonymous. While observing the subject, I noticed that she would engage in telling her story to other alcoholics during the A.A. meetings. This, in turn, would inspire other members to tell their personal stories and create the common bond that too few understand in the alcoholism field. The subject would attend a meeting every day and share with the group her feelings, thoughts, and fears about getting sober. Her thoughts and feelings seemed to change depending on the day and the time of day. I noted that, at the beginning of the month, the subject would interact only once every three days. Eventually throughout the second week, the subject verbally communicated by telling the members how she got to Alcoholics Anonymous. She informed the group that this was not her first time trying to get sober. This was her third time in the program and she had never followed through with any of the suggestions to work the twelve steps. After suffering from alcohol-poisoning and almost dying, the subject decided that it was time to give A.A. a try once again. Each time that her story was told, I noticed and wrote about the non-verbal signs that she displayed. After talking, the subject seemed more content and relaxed, as opposed to shaking her leg and taking a sip of coffee every 2 minutes. Each time the subject shared a little bit about herself, she was welcomed with reciprocal stories from other members that have gone through the

same type of scenarios. This is part of the foundation of what makes Alcoholics Anonymous work and prosper.

### Metaphors

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz and Professor Michael Pacanowsky look at the cultural approach to organizations. Geertz discusses that cultures are seen as ‘webs.’ “In order to travel across the strands toward the center of the web, an outsider must discover the common interpretations that hold the web together.” “Culture is shared meaning, shared understanding, and shared sense making” (Griffin, 2003). It is then that we look at metaphors as a means to connect to the web and how shared meaning and understanding are prevalent in the organization of Alcoholics Anonymous. When the subject first came to the meetings of A.A., she did not understand the events that take place. In an interview with her during her second day of sobriety, she informed me that, “Even though I haven’t been here in awhile, a lot of this stuff doesn’t make sense” (Personal Communication, 2004). It wasn’t until the second week that she and I started to comprehend the communication practice of using metaphors. Metaphors are used to help the newcomer understand that they are not alone in this battle with alcohol. The organization uses slogans such as: live and let live, easy does it, let go and let God, one day at a time and keep it simple. These slogans, as well as their own famous metaphor for the entire organization, originate from their text book called, *Alcoholics Anonymous* or otherwise known as ‘The Big Book’. It is as follows:

*We are like the passengers of a great liner the moment after rescue from shipwreck when camaraderie, joyousness and democracy pervade the vessel from steerage to Captain's table. Unlike the feelings of the ship's passengers, however, our joy in escape from disaster does not subside as we go our individual ways. The feeling of having shared in a common peril is one element in the powerful cement which binds us. But that in itself would never have held us together as we are now joined (Wilson, Smith, 1976).*

In this metaphor, the organization is trying to convey that no matter where anyone person comes from, the understanding and companionship will be felt immediately of becoming a member. The subject reacted with this understanding when she would disclose herself verbally to the members after the meetings. She had to find a person that would be willing to take her through the steps. That person is called a “sponsor” (Wilson, 1955). While participating in the meetings with her new sponsor, I learned that it was an alcoholic talking to another alcoholic sharing experience, strength, and hope that the subject’s eyes really began to open to the program and working the twelve steps. This sponsorship relationship was working, and it correlates to the theory of the shared meaning and shared understanding that the organization meets.

### Rituals

Performing ethnography gives a “thick description” of what the culture and organization of Alcoholics Anonymous is all about (Griffin, 2003). In this thick

description, the non-verbal communication practice of nonverbal-rites and rituals provides helpful access to the unique shared meanings within the subject and the organization. These rituals consists of holding hands before and after the meetings, making a circle during the prayer time before and after the meetings, and hugging each other before, after and during the A.A. meetings. These are the three most prominent non-verbal rituals that I observed while participating with the subject in Alcoholics Anonymous. Before the meeting starts the group forms a circle, holds hand and recites a prayer. After the meeting the same circle is formed, while they hold hands and another type of prayer is said. This circle represents the unity within the group and the togetherness that they are trying to achieve in working the twelve steps and learning the tools to stay sober. A circle is a symbol of a “series or process that finishes at its starting point or continuously repeats itself; a cycle” and also a “group of people sharing an interest, activity, or achievement” (Webster, 2003). With this definition in mind, the subject is part of the process that in the beginning learns how to get sober and also, continuing the tools on an everyday basis to stay sober, one day at a time. The subject is sharing in an achievement and also a life-long journey that will ultimately improve her life and help her learn about herself. The third ritual that the subject performed is giving and receiving a physical, close, affectionate embrace: a hug. The hug has many symbols and the one that was pointed out to me by the subject’s comments was that, she felt comfortable and relaxed when another member gave her a hug. She also told me in an interview that, “I haven’t been hugged in so long...it feels nice to be welcomed back into A.A., even though I have been gone for so long” (Personal Communication, 2004). Pacanowsky and Geertz agree that some rituals are seen as “texts” and they articulate multiple aspects of cultural life. “These rituals are nearly sacred, and any attempt to change them meets with strong resistance” (Griffin, 2003).

### Results

The results of this research project would not be possible if it wasn’t for the subject’s participation, the theories of interpretive symbolic interactionism, narrative paradigm, the analysis of culture in organizations, and the ethnography that I personally performed. In these theories I discussed the relationship with symbolic interactionism and the “three core principles of thought, language, and meaning” (Griffin, 2003). These three principles that George Herbert Mead and Hubert Blumer defined helped me analyze the thought process of the subject and what was going on in her head for this first month of sobriety, the language she used in telling her own personal story, the metaphors that she used in relating to the other members of the organization and finally the meaning of the rituals that the subject participated in while attending meetings and getting sober. Mead tells us that symbolic interactionism is not just a means for intelligent expression; it is also the way we learn to interpret the world” (Griffin, 2003). It was clear at the end of the month that the subject was learning how to communicate through stories, metaphors and rituals, but also how to interpret her world differently then she ever had before. That’s precisely what the organization is impacting on these struggling alcoholics. As explained earlier, “even though there is no cure of alcoholism the disease, there is a new way of persuading the members to interpret the world, their lives and their affliction in sacred terms” (Swora, 2004; Zemore, 2004; Kaskutas, Turk, Bond, Weisner, 2003).

Walter Fisher's theory of narrative paradigm was helpful to understand why the stories that were told by the subject and other members of the organization are a series of "ongoing narratives, as conflicts, characters, beginnings, middles and ends" (Fisher, 1987). Fisher's theory helped me understand that the subject and these members of A.A. are really "narrative beings who experience and comprehend each other" (Fisher, 1987). The stories and the sober experiences that each member encounters increases the common bond which makes the organization work, and helps the subject get sober. These experiences, whether going out for coffee, doing service work, reading literature, or having a party at someone's house are the resources for the members to relate to one another and depend on each other during this difficult time of their lives. The subject commented on the desperation she felt and the need to change her life and "do something different" (Personal Communication, 2004).

My favorite theory in assisting this research was the "cultural approach to organizations." In this theory, Geertz and Pacanowsky put it in the simplest and most eloquent terms. They both discussed that "in order to travel across the strands toward the center of the web, an outsider must discover the common interpretations that hold the web together (Griffin, 2003). That is exclusively what this research is all about. In analyzing the verbal and non-verbal communication practices of a 33-year old female in the organization of Alcoholics Anonymous during her first month of sobriety, helped me to recognize and appreciate this organization and find the common interpretations that hold the organization together. In learning about the ways of communication, I had to first ask myself, how does this subject and these other members relate to one another? How do they have that common bond that keeps them life-long friends? Alcoholics Anonymous is its very own culture, and in this culture a "fellowship exists among us that no other non-alcoholic can understand" (Wilson, Smith, 1976). Which brings me to the last method of research, the ethnography. I choose ethnography because I believed that it would put me in the heart of the organization and in the heart of what the alcoholic was going through. Being that no non-alcoholic can fully understand the alcoholic, the only way that I would even get close, is to investigate, and observe as much as I could. I attended A.A. meetings five days a week during the month, participated in meetings with the subject and her sponsor once a week and I took a total of ten interviews with the subject in order to constantly be in concurrence with her disposition. I also participated nine times in going out for coffee at local restaurants with the subject and other members after the meetings. My field notes were approximately fifty-two pages long, including the interviews.

During this entire month with the subject, I learned and observed many interesting practices that makes communication a huge part of the recovery process. This research project has opened my eyes to the unconditional support and connection that recovering alcoholics have for one another. When dealing with such a deadly, "cunning, baffling and powerful" disease, whatever works to save the lives of the still suffering alcoholic is worth the effort (Wilson, Smith, 1976). The effort that I observed within the subject and Alcoholics Anonymous was in the form of stories, metaphors, and rituals.

### Further Research

The research found in this particular report is unfortunately only the tip of the iceberg for the disease of alcoholism. Many studies have been done on the organization of Alcoholics Anonymous, but few have been done on the communication practices. Further research is needed in learning about each alcoholic and how they communicate in other environments. It would be interesting to research the communication practices of the service aspect of the organization, as well as how do recovering alcoholics communicate with family members, old drinking buddies, spouses, and children. Communication is a broad topic and so is the topic of alcoholism. These two combined can open the world's eyes to the ever-changing worlds of the recovering alcoholic and society. As communication theorists Mead and Blumer said best, "The most human and humanizing activity that people can engage in -- talking to each other" (Griffin, 2003).

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### Author Biography

Growing up in a small town in northern Minnesota, I got a Nursing Assistant's Certificate after high school. Working in the Nursing field for about 6 years, I decided to broaden my horizons and try something different. I attended Rochester Community and Technical College to finish my Associates degree. With help from an advisor, and several aptitude tests, I decided that Communication had always been an important factor in my life. From participating in Competition Speech as a high school student, to

communicating with my patients, I loved the aspect of how communication affects everyone's life. In becoming an effective communicator will only help a person become successful in whatever occupation they are in.

After receiving my AA degree, I moved to Mankato, Minnesota and received my BA in Speech Communication from Minnesota State University, Mankato in May of 2005. I am currently a student at Boise State University, Idaho pursuing my Masters in Communication Studies with an emphasis in Interpersonal Communication. My long term goals are to become a professor in Communication Studies and receive my Doctorate at the University of Colorado, Boulder. My hopes are to increase my knowledge in the field of Communication and continue to learn about interpersonal relationships and conflict management. I still love to work with the elderly and mentally disabled individuals on a part time basis while attending school. I look forward to the challenges that I will have to face while becoming a professor and furthering my research in Communication.

### **Faculty Mentor Biography**

Daniel Cronn-Mills, Ph.D., received his MA in 1989 from Mankato State University and his Ph.D. in 1995 from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He is professor and department chair of Speech Communications at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Dr. Cronn-Mills has advised more than 41 undergraduate publications and conference presentations on the local, state, regional, and national levels.