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Positive Psychology in Alcoholics Anonymous and the 12 Steps: Adolescent Recovery in Relation to Humility

Stephen G. Post
Stony Brook University

Byron R. Johnson
Baylor University

Matthew T. Lee
University of Akron

Maria E. Pagano
*CWRU Department of Psychiatry,
Division of Child Psychiatry*

The next step for Positive Psychology is translational research. How do we apply the character strengths and virtues that define Positive Psychology as tools for flourishing in specific communities of need? We have been investigating such strengths in the context of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) for over a decade. Our “Helping Others Live Sober”

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project (www.helpingotherslivesober.org), is based at Case Western Reserve University under the direction of PI Maria E. Pagano, PhD. Subjects are recruited from New Directions (ND), the largest residential treatment facility in Northeast Ohio for substance dependent adolescents. Approximately 80% of ND clients are court-referred for residential treatment. The average length of stay is 2.2 months. As an adjunct resource, ND provides a van service that allows clients to attend up to 4 local AA meetings a week in the local community. These meetings are well attended by young adult and adult alcoholics, and one local meeting attended is listed as a Young People in AA meeting. Some meetings are also held on site. These adolescents, with an average age of 16.2 years, are not mandated to attend AA meetings, but they all do because it is a practice and clear expectation of ND. The adolescents all have some criminal history that brought them to the court system

and all are in high school. We are able to study both recovery from alcoholism and substance abuse, and recidivism in relation to a variety of strengths. After their 10 week stay, subjects return to their homes and are followed up one year later.

We investigated this AA youth population with a focus on strengths included in *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* as developed by the positive psychologists Christopher Peterson and Martin E. P. Seligman (2004). We investigated strengths classified as Gratitude, Spirituality, Self-Regulation, Humility, Kindness, and Persistence. This brief report focuses especially on Humility as a promising research topic in addiction treatment. We have previously shown that Kindness (service to others) helps the helper stay sober (Pagano et al., 2004), quit smoking (Delos-Reyes, et al., 2013), and overcome depression (Pagano et al., 2009). Helping others

also contributes to greater Humility and combined with increased Spirituality helps the helper stay out of legal trouble (Lee et al., 2015). We have found that Spirituality correlates with Kindness based on our “Service to Others in Sobriety” questionnaire, a valid and reliable self-report of helping in the 12-Step context (Pagano et al., 2009; Pagano et al., 2013). Increased spiritual experience, measured by the widely used Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale (Underwood & Teresi, 2002), is associated with lower rate of relapse, increased service to others, and reduced narcissism after 2 months of treatment with the 12-Steps as an adjunct therapy (Lee et al., 2014). More recent research with adolescents found that service to others in a 12-Step context predicts reduced relapse and delinquency recidivism, as well as greater character development (as measured by humility and leadership) in the 6 months post-treatment; spiritual experience enhances the effect of service on recidivism (Lee et al., 2015).

Humility in Positive Psychology and AA

Because humility is a new composite focus of our research. The authors of the chapter entitled “Humility and Modesty” in *Character Strengths and Virtues* begin their discussion with reference to AA. They identify some of humility’s key features as “an accurate” sense of one’s abilities and achievement, a readiness to acknowledge one’s errors and imperfections, openness to new ideas, keeping a low focus on the self, and affirming the value of others and how they contribute to our world. This composite derives from an emphasis on accuracy in self-assessment: “We believe that humility involves a non-defensive willingness to see oneself, including strengths and limitations” (Peterson & Seligman, 2005, p. 463). These authors add that humility does not involve self-disparagement or a “contemptuous attitude toward the self,” but rather it is self-enhancing (p. 464). They assert a narcissistic attitude as the opposite of humility.

In general terms, AA understands humility as a mean between two vices, in

this case, vanity or self-inflation and a lowliness that forsakes one’s true value. From the 12-Step theological perspective, humility as a virtue is truthful about the place of the self in the triad of self, and neighbor, and a Higher Power. Of the two essential texts of AA, it is in *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (1952 original) that we find a development of humility, a term explicitly used in Step Seven, “Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.” The chapter on Step Seven begins, “Because this Step so specifically concerns itself with humility, we should pause here to consider what humility is and what the practice of it can mean to us” (1952, p. 70). The chapter continues: “Indeed, the attainment of greater humility is the foundation principle of each of AA’s Twelve Steps. For without some degree of humility no alcoholic can stay sober at all” (p. 70).

There was an exaggeration of humility resonant with humiliation in the intense self-effacement of Bill W. as he ran at full throttle from his extreme self-absorption. We find this hyperbole in passages from Bill W. that Ernest Kurtz focuses on in his classic work, *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous*. At various points, Bill W. used this expression, **deflation at depth** (Kurtz, pp. 20-21). What exactly Bill W. means can be debated, but the term **deflation at depth** contrasts with a superficial deflation—that is, with a deflation of self only in word or as a social strategy for reputational gain that is unlikely to lead to a rightly sized and authentic new self.

Four Phases of Humility-as-Process in the 12 Steps

We see four phases or modulations of humility in the Twelve Steps as follows:

One: Steps 1-3 are about admitting that you are powerless and need a Higher Power’s help, that you cannot succeed on your own. You have failed on your own limited strength, and you have been arrogant and prideful in thinking otherwise. We call this the **humility of honestly admitted powerlessness**. It is *closer to humiliation than to humil-*

ity, yet it is a necessary first step of reduced self-inflation in the process of self-transformation.

Two: Steps 4-7 are about the **humility of truthful inner accuracy and transparency** with regard to what psychiatrists call narcissism, philosophers call solipsism, and theologians call “sin” or “self-inflation.” Much of this process occurs with the help of a sponsor, which makes it a confidential dyadic process rather than a merely interior one or a wider communal one. Nevertheless, in any AA testimony before the entire group as usually occurs at the outset of meetings, it is very likely that admission of moral and spiritual turpitude will to a significant degree be included.

Three: Steps 8-10 are about the **humility of contrition, making apologies and amends**. Genuine apology requires humility. Humility makes contrition possible. *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* states, “To get completely away from our aversion to the idea of being humble, to gain a vision of humility as the avenue to true freedom of the human spirit, to be willing to work for humility as something to be desired for itself, takes most of us a long, long time” (p. 73). Humility is not something alcoholics are “beaten into,” but something “we *must* have” (p. 75).

Four: Steps 11-12 are about the **humility of living a rightly ordered and transformed new life**. One must live humbly under a Higher Power, however defined, and lean outward from self to serve the neighbor by carrying the message to them.

We know that spirituality and serving others contribute to positive outcomes for addicted youth (improved recovery, lowered depression rates, less involvement with the legal system). Our focus will shift now to the contribution that contrition, apology, and making amends (what AA refers to as “inner house cleaning”) make to outcomes. This is an especially understudied area. We are just beginning to understand the interplay between Kindness, Humility, and Spirituality.

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