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Foucault Concept Communication:  
An Examination of Alcoholics Anonymous

By  
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“I’m no prophet. My job is making windows where there were once walls”

- Michel Foucault

### **Abstract**

Alcoholics Anonymous is a community of people who strive to work through and find a solution to their problems with alcohol. While previous research on the 12-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous has covered a wide range of topics, there is a gap that exists in the discourse community. This gap can be best summed up as a lack of comprehensive and exhaustive discourse analysis to examine the 12-step program AA. The discourse analysis completed in this document aims to examine AA through the lens of how language use in multiple texts provided by Alcoholics Anonymous function or serve as mechanisms to members of the fellowship. Michel Foucault and his poststructuralist work explicate the concepts that most clearly reflect the mechanisms and functions of the language within the discourse of AA. This thesis uses discourse analysis to examine pieces of AA text in their entirety to draw connection between the concepts that Foucault sees as communicative of mechanisms and function in language and the language that Alcoholics Anonymous uses to help their members recover.

**Keywords:** *Foucault, Alcoholics Anonymous, Language, Power, Discourse Analysis.*

## **Foucault Concept Communication: An Examination of Alcoholics Anonymous**

### **Introduction**

Alcoholism, as the *Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous* (2001) defines it is a “disease”, consisting of a “mental obsession” from which the mind cannot recover or ignore, combined with the “body’s physical craving” for alcohol, which can never be satisfied no matter how much alcohol is consumed (p. xxviii). While this definition seems extreme, there are cases documented where alcoholics prove over and over again, this is the rule and not the exception for those who were truly alcoholic (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001; Gellman, 1964; Wilcox, 1998). Alcoholism is the 2nd most prevalent drug problem in the world, which affects nearly one tenth of the adult population (Wilcox, 1998). One of the only solutions available to those with an alcohol problem is Alcoholics Anonymous (Gellman, 1964; Wilcox, 1998).

Alcoholics Anonymous is a program of recovery intended to facilitate the development of a lifestyle without alcohol, for those who believe they are suffering from alcoholism (Gellman, 1964; Wilcox, 1998). Members of AA attend meetings to receive support for their problems with alcohol (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001). As of 2006 an estimated two million sober members participate in Alcoholics Anonymous meetings (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001). AA’s lack of a cure for alcoholism generates a perception by non-members, that the recovery program is less valuable than other recovery methods who claim a cure or permanent solution (Wilcox, 1998). There has also been a long-standing debate by both social scientists and psychologist, about the effectiveness of the AA process at relieving alcoholism (Swora, 2004; Wilcox, 1998). While the program’s overall effectiveness and value is debated by scholars (Swora, 2004; Wilcox, 1998), there is something important happening through the language used by the AA program and the

reform, which it generates (Gellman, 1964).

Gellman (1964) is one of the first scholars to note language use in Alcoholics Anonymous as a catalyst for an alcoholic's journey of transformation. Through the use of his examination of AA, this paper aims to further show why the language of AA is important. Initially, striving to show the language in AA is important to the participants of AA through a deeper understanding of how language cultivates power and knowledge, while generating the transformative beings which members become through they work they do within the AA program. More broadly, this research aims to show the importance of the communicated language to those who support AA members or participants (mental health professionals, social workers, family members) as a way to facilitate a greater understanding of the recovery process through language, in hopes of helping them to be better advocates for recovery. In order to represent this language importance it is necessary to examine the texts of AA in depth and fully, through the analysis of the AA discourse.

A discourse as traditionally described is a group of texts or spoken works, which provide a pre-determined language for identifying a specific topic, group, or culture (Givens, 2008; Schutt, 2001; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). However, the discourse of AA is not just about the language or texts which identifies them, but how the discourse as a whole helps to reform or change members from the once alcoholic into new members of society (Gellman, 1964; Greenfield, & Tonigan, 2013; Rimke, 2010; Trice & Roman, 1970; Yeung, 2007).

Paul-Michel Foucault (known as Michel Foucault) is a late 20th-Century French scholar whose work spanned multiple disciplines and utilized techniques from psychology, politics, anthropology, sociology, and archaeology (Gutting, 2005). His work presents a collection of

books and essays that study in essence, how meaning and knowledge is constructed, but not in an absolute sense, but more so how we as humans come to know what we know and how they use it (Gutting, 2005). Foucault is most notably attracted to studying subjugated or repressed groups, such as those in asylums and prisons because their captivity and restraint is reflected by power structures in the language that is used to identify them and construct greater meaning (Macey, 1993). While he has been labeled many things including a structuralist, historian, culturist, and philosopher, Foucault's primary aim was to search out and explore how humans function in the social world (Foucault, 1988). Based on Foucault's desire to explore how humans function, with specific emphasis on his ideas on discourse, language, and the relationship to the constructs of power and knowledge, his work can be used to highlight how language functions within Alcoholics Anonymous as a discourse and further show the importance AA's language holds for creating reformed individuals. It can also be said, based on Foucault's desire to examine subjugated groups and AA as a group being composed of what could be called social deviants, he would have been interested in examining this group himself.

Overall this paper aims to draw connections between the concepts Michel Foucault asserts about the functions of language and the actual language Alcoholics Anonymous uses in order to help those who suffer from alcoholism. This includes an examination of AA, as it was historically formed and how it serves those with alcoholism through its religious background and structure. Then an explication (based on the researchers interpretation) of Foucault's work, along with how well this has been reflected in the work of scholars who have made attempts at drawing connections between Foucault's work of 12-step groups. Finally, an exhaustive discourse analysis of AA texts (books, pamphlets, workbooks) is completed in order to express the importance of the AA language, through the lens of Foucault's concepts.

### **Alcoholics Anonymous**

Research around Alcoholics Anonymous is not new. Within 10 years of the 12-step based recovery programs creation, there were many researchers interested in doing studies of all kinds (Kurtz, 1999). You can type the words “alcoholics anonymous” into Google scholar and receive almost 50,000 results in less than 5 seconds. The research topics range from ethnographies which examine AA as a culture (Witmer, 1997), explanations of how AA members utilize spirituality (Kaskutas, Bond, & Weisner, 2003; Zemore, 2007), how storytelling creates a sense of inclusion to help members solve their problems with alcohol (Cain, 1991; Swora, 2004; Weegmann, 2010) how forms of member deviance are handled (Hoffmann, 2006), and how the relabeling of identities transpire (Trice & Roman, 1970). If we add the word “power” to the search, amidst the results which populate, there are those trying to determine if AA has the power to resolve members’ trouble with drinking at all (Morgenstern, Labouvie, Mccrady, Kahler, & Frey, 1997; Vaillant, 2005) and those who examine AA more closely as a series of mechanism which holds the power to transform the once alcoholic into something more, something better, a person reformed (Kassel, & Wagner, 1993; Kelly, Magill, & Stout, 2009).

While the named body of research above is nowhere near exhaustive, it does provide a glimpse into the depth of topics which research on Alcoholics Anonymous has covered. For this papers purpose, the examination of AA is more closely linked to the research that explores AA as a mechanism that holds some form of power to generate transformation. More specifically this paper focuses on previous research which examines the language of AA and other 12-step programs as a discourse or series of texts which generate change within their participants.



## Definitions

The language used in AA can be confusing, the following terms aide in the understanding of the content of this paper and AA as a whole. *An AA or AA's* refer to the members of Alcoholics Anonymous either in a single or group order (Gellman, 1964; Wilcox, 1998).

*Recovery or to recover* refers to the stopping use of alcohol, coupled with attending meetings (Wilcox, 1998). *Sobriety* is similar to recovery in stopping the use of alcohol. However, sobriety incorporates transforming into a new person with behaviors and attitudes different from the previous alcoholic self, specifically through the work done in AA (Gellman, 1964; Wilcox, 1998). *Experience, strength, hope*, is the structure of storytelling AA members follow when in meetings. Members share their past lives (with alcohol) and their new lives in sobriety with the group using this format (Gellman, 1964; Humphreys, 2000; Swora, 2004; Wilcox, 1998).

*A spiritual awakening* is seen as a mental or personality change in which the mind is altered and the alcoholics' outlook and feelings change dramatically (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001). *A higher power, power greater than one's self and God*, are all terms which refer to the need of faith in and reliance upon some kind of being outside of the individual AA member (Gellman, 1964; Humphreys, 2000; Swora, 2004; Wilcox, 1998). While this does not have to be the traditional sense of God, since it is an individual conception, it is something each AA member must have (Gellman, 1964). This set of terms is only a glimpse into the discourse language of AA, but shall be useful in further explaining the language and functions of AA later.

## History of AA

Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who have lost the ability to control their drinking (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001). Alcoholics Anonymous in no way states it is able to cure alcoholism, but rather transforms the alcoholic into a more acceptable member of society through the “12 steps” and other practices of the AA program (Gellman, 1964; Valverde, 1998; Yeung; 2007). In the book *AA comes of Age* (1957) AA is said to be “...more than a set of principles; it is a society of recovered alcoholics in action.” (p.139). With this in mind, the basic text of Alcoholics Anonymous, “The Big Book,” proposes this new way of life as, “a design for living that really works” based on spiritual principles and the actions members must take in order to recover and maintain sobriety (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001, p. 28).

Two men, through a chance meeting on May 10, 1935 in Akron, Ohio, found they were both unable to shake their troubles with alcohol and created the program of AA and its practices (*AA comes of age*, 1957; Gellman, 1964; Wilcox, 1998). Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith, after being introduced by a doctor who claimed they both suffer from alcoholism, shared their experience, strength, and hope with one another in attempts to help resolve their problem with alcohol (Gellman, 1964). After the experience of sharing their similarities, difficulties, and triumphs through their alcoholic stories, they felt relief (*AA comes of age*, 1957; Gellman, 1964). Both men soon came to realize if this sense of relief through storytelling could work for them, it should be able to work for others who were suffering (*AA comes of age*, 1957; Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001; Gellman, 1964; Swora, 2004; Weegmann, 2010). Dr. Bob Smith took his last drink on June 10<sup>th</sup>, 1935 and this became what is known as Founder’s day, and the real beginning of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA.org; Kurtz, 1988)

AA could only maintain three to ten participating members for a period of almost a year (AA comes of age; 1957). Once Bill and Bob were able to develop a relationship with a series of doctors, lawyers, and other professionals who had become familiar with the program, potential AA's were being recommended to the solution Bill and Bob had to offer consistently (AA comes of age; 1957; Gellman, 1964; Kurtz, 1988; Wilcox, 1998). This provided the program many new members at first, but not all stayed sober (AA comes of age; 1957; Gellman, 1964; Wilcox, 1998). As time went on and attention grew about the nature of the program, people became aware of the through a group of newspaper articles which ran in New York (AA comes of age; 1957; Gellman, 1964). While public attraction is not something the AA program hinged upon, the articles attracted a more diverse membership to the program, since the membership consisted of mostly white men at the time (AA comes of age; 1957; Gellman, 1964). However, it is this type of publicity that would serve as a lesson later and change part of the AA programs purpose forever (Gellman, 1964).

### **Spiritual Nature**

Through a 'spiritual awakening' of his own, AA co-founder Bill Wilson was able to discover that some kind spiritual sickness is part of what ailed alcoholics and must be addressed in the recovery work of AA, if an alcoholic was to be successful in their recovery (Gellman, 1964; Kurtz, 1988; Valverde & White-Mair, 1999). Bill understood spirituality in a way, which did not mean church-going or religious upbringing, as this might deter some people from their recovery program, but he knew faith existed in all people and it could be prodded and utilized to help them recover (Gellman, 1964; Kurtz, 1988).

Bill joined the Protestant religious based Oxford Group, which gave way to the spiritual foundation AA would need to help its' future members (AA comes of Age, 1957; Kurtz, 1988). The Oxford Group seemed out to save the world and treated sin as form of disease (Gellman, 1964; What is the Oxford group, 1933). The group saw sin as anything that stood between an individual and God, also making it clear sin is present in all people (What is the Oxford group, 1933). At the root of this barrier from god lied selfishness and self-centeredness, a sickness that through the work the Oxford Group required, could be healed (What is the Oxford group, 1933). Bill Wilson did not desire to save the world or even all people, but more so wanted to help those who suffered specifically from alcoholism, but he understood the importance of learning the Oxford Group's spiritual practices and placing reliance on something outside self to transform and be relieved of his alcoholism (Gellman, 1964).

It was in late 1937 when Bill discovered flaws within the Oxford Group through publicity seeking to attract elite and prestigious members and the exclusive nature of electing who could and could not participate in the Oxford groups to be "saved" (Gellman, 1964; AA comes of Age, 1957). With this discovery, Bill made his exit from the Oxford Group and focused solely on how to rectify these issues within Alcoholics anonymous, while maintaining the spiritual principles he thought would help save lives (Gellman, 1964; AA comes of Age, 1957). From Bill's experience with publicity and exclusion motives of the Oxford group, the Twelve Traditions of AA were born (AA comes of Age, 1957). These traditions included a stance on publicity and the maintenance of personal anonymity, and the inclusion of all who wanted to participate and achieve sobriety (12x12, 1991; AA comes of Age, 1957). From the Oxford Group Bill and Bob took principals spiritual but not traditionally religious in nature to develop the Twelve Steps of AA. The principles were built on the foundation of self-examination, acknowledgment of

character flaws, to make right harms done to others, and working with others (Gellman, 1964; AA comes of Age, 1957). The twelve step and traditions would be the beginning of the discourse and structure of the AA program which would change members from the once alcoholic self to a member of AA and society.

### **Program Structure**

As noted in the Alcoholics Anonymous Preamble, the AA primary purpose is “to stay sober and to achieve sobriety” (AA Preamble, 1958, para. 2). Sobriety is maintained through going to meetings, doing the steps as outlined in the AA texts provided, by working with others, and being of service (AA.org; Gellman, 1964; Wilcox, 1998; Yeung, 2007). Each meeting might vary slightly in terms of time, and location, but all meetings are based on the same rules as provided in the steps and traditions, to keep things consistent for members (AA.org; Wilcox, 1998).

There are two main books used in assisting AA members with their recovery. The *Big Book* (2001) and the *Twelve steps and Twelve Traditions* (1991) known as 12 x 12. Through these books the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous can be broken down into three areas of necessary action. Steps one, two and three are based on the foundation of developing a program of a spiritual nature and working on taking action through a relationship with a power greater than the self (God) (12x12, 1991). This includes honesty admitting to being an alcoholic or having a problem with alcohol and that life has become uncontrollable (12x12, 1991). This leads to a surrender of the fact that as an alcoholic, they can never drink again and only a power greater than self can restore them from the chaos alcohol created in their lives (12x12, 1991). Through these initial 3 steps each AA member is able to surrender to the fact that alcohol did not

work for them in their lives, but there is something they can do about. Through the basis of a spiritual practice these three steps build into AA's that they can rely on a power greater than themselves to recover from their alcoholism and face the internal examination, which comes in the next set of steps they are asked to complete.

Steps four through nine require action around an accurate appraisal or self-evaluation, sharing that evaluation with another person, and taking action to right the wrongs from the past (12x12, 1991). Step four begins with asking AA members to take a good look in the mirror sort-of-speak, and to write down all the things which have upset them over the course of their life (12x12, 1991; Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001). This is furthered when each member is asked to also address their part in each situation that they have been upset about (12x12, 1991; Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001). Once they have examined these aspects of their previous alcoholic self, they are asked to share this inventory with another member of AA or a trusted friend in step five. Once this admission is complete members make a list of their defects side by side with the attributes that are counter to any negative aspects of their personality (12x12, 1991). They are then asked to bring these negative personality defects, to their own personal conception of God or a higher power and ask for them to remove the flaws in which created their past negative behaviors (12x12, 1991). It is said this must be done so the alcoholic can recover and better be of service to others (12x12, 1991). Finally, members make a list of those they had harmed, usually those from the list made during the 4<sup>th</sup> step (Gellman, 1964), and make an attempt to right the wrongs which they have done to those in their lives (12x12, 1991; Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001). These six steps are meant to turn the focus of the alcoholic inward, allowing for honest acceptance of their actions from the past and a means by which to repair the damage done, by making amends to the harmed party (Gellman, 1964). Through this process of internal

examination the alcoholic is now ready to face outward, and begin the final steps of their transformation by creating a relationship with God, working with others, and being of service.

Steps ten, eleven, and twelve are designed around taking action to remain connected to God, and by being of service to others, in and outside the AA program (12x12, 1991). Step 10 requests each AA member at the end of their day to take an inventory of the credits and debits which they performed that day (12x12, 1991). Credits are seen as the things which an AA did well, and debits are character defects which arose or situations which the AA member should have addressed differently (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001). This step is not intended to make a member feel negatively, but more a way of measuring progress after the previous work done in step seven where members ask their high power to remove their defects (Gellman, 1964). Step 11, is the daily implementation of a meditation practice where AA members sit quietly and ask their higher power for direction rather than to be the director (Gellman, 1964). Step 12 is the continued practice of the AA programs principals, not just in AA meetings but also in all other aspects of the alcoholics' life (12x12, 1991; Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001). Step 12 also asserts the practice of working with others, and sharing their experience strength and hope with other alcoholics is vital in order to maintain personal sobriety but also continue the legacy of AA and its work (12x12, 1991; Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001; Gellman, 1964). The aim of the last three steps is to maintain on a daily basis a connection to a power greater than one's self, through spirituality, and the lifelong process of taking personal inventory of one's behavior and immediately attending to any negative situations which they might have played a role in (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001). All the steps are further cemented as a foundation of working step twelve which is where one alcoholic helps another through the process of working their steps (12x12, 1991).

Alcoholics Anonymous is a program of spiritual principals with a long-standing history of reform of members through the pre and prescripts provided through the steps and AA texts. Based on the prescriptive and proscriptive language used, it can be asserted that the language and discourse of AA as a whole is essential to the transformation of each AA member. Through a deeper examination of the AA discourse, the importance of the specific AA language used and its functions, as related to Foucault's concepts is revealed.



## Foucault

‘...it is not power but the subject which is the general theme of my research’

- Michel Foucault (1982, p. 778)

Michel Foucault is one of the most well know French poststructuralist theorist.

Poststructuralism is a discourse generated during the 1960s, which examined the instability of meanings and theories or systems which claimed to have universal validity or truth (Sarup, 1993). In essence, poststructuralists sought to show how meaning and knowledge are socially constructed, should not be seen as absolute, and to think about or determine how as humans we know what we know (Sarup, 1993). In *The Archeology of Knowledge* by Foucault (1972) we see exemplary examples of his poststructuralist work. Foucault speaks to the idea of a statement alone not being able to create the meaning we interpret by the words being used. Instead, the statements of a language or discourse create a system of rules that create what is considered meaningful (Foucault, & Sheridan, 1972). He also speaks to the notion of truth and its production being associated with what is considered powerful and meaningful, to further explore how truth emerges from the language or discourse of a time period or discourse (Foucault, & Sheridan, 1972).

Another relevant introduction to Foucault is through his concept of the *dispositif* or apparatus, which he explicates in an interview taken in 1977 and as noted in the book *Power/Knowledge* (1980):

“...firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures,

scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions...The apparatus itself is the system of relations established between these elements. Secondly, what I am trying to identify in this apparatus is precisely the nature of the connection existing between these heterogeneous elements...In short, between these elements, whether discursive or non-discursive, there is a sort of interplay of shifts of position and modifications of function which can also vary very widely. Thirdly ... (the apparatus) has as its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an urgent need. The apparatus thus has a dominant strategic function.” (p.194-195)

The apparatus essentially breaks down how systems of relationships between diversified truths, statements, actions, practices, etc. create discourses and how discourses have functions to serve strategic purposes within the social body being explored in the present moment. Foucault applies the concept of an apparatus and power examination to many social bodies of discourse such as language, sexuality, prisons, self-identity, and politics. In this thesis we will be viewing the 12-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous as an apparatus and applying Foucault’s specific concepts to the discourse of this specific social body.

Foucault is known for having “thick” definitions of concepts, often making it difficult to get through his work. As these definitions and concepts are made clear, pay close attention to how they are linked since his explanations of how each of these concepts fit and work together are necessary in order to understand not only his work, but the complex nature of how the language of Alcoholics Anonymous functions and continues to help people.

When Foucault speaks about the *subject*, there are two implicated meanings. First, the subject who is acted upon through control and/ or dependence and second, the subject created by

their own identity through consciousness or self-knowledge (Foucault, 1982; Foucault, 2010). Most often this definition is used when referring to a single person, but also has been applied to small and large groups who choose to act in the same way (Foucault, 1982). In relation to the subject Foucault (1997) also speaks about the *techniques of the self* which are the internal procedures in which the subject uses to determine who they are, maintain who they are, or transform who they are, through acquiring of self-knowledge. This acquisition of self-knowledge can be therapeutic and seen as a way to purge or heal the self and the subjects' soul (Foucault, 1997; Foucault, 2010). This process can also be a struggle of internal learning and deciding which forms of knowledge within the subject are more dominant and those which need to be kept or discarded (Foucault, 1997)

*Religion* is important to consider when thinking about the subject since it is a direct relationship a subject has with governing and self-examination, and is usually seen as a practice within the structure of a formal religion or church (Foucault, 2010; Foucault & Carrette, 1999). We see religion tied to examples of confession in the Catholic Church in Foucault's work since priests and churches govern the action of self-examination and the purging of sins, which occur in conjunction with the practice confession (Foucault, 2010; Foucault & Carrette, 1999). Often the terms of religion and spirituality are seen as related, but Foucault clarifies *spirituality* is different from religion, and is described as the methods a subject uses to transform him or herself, in order to gain access to the truth through the relationship between a spiritual practice and the intellectual methods which they possess (Foucault & Carrette, 1999).

*Truth* as mentioned initially, is related to an event or period of time that takes place in history and can be pinpointed. It is something physical which happens, and is produced by

various social constructs, including language, discourse, and continued practice of certain acts (Foucault, 1982). This is in contrast to the idea of truth being something already in existence and is simply waiting to be discovered, for truth exists in everything. Truth as explained here is directly related to *thought* which is described as ‘The play of true and false ... (which) constitutes the human being as a knowing subject... and established the relation with oneself and with others’ (Foucault, 1997, p. 200).

Foucault provides a historical examination of language as a source of knowledge and asserts *archeology* is the idea of language being active thought, not just the expression of the thoughts a subject possesses and expresses to others (Foucault, 1972). Foucault takes the concept or further by including the relation to power through rules or constraints which human thought is structured by (Foucault, 1972). In short, thoughts are systems constructed as a result of rules existing in the language we use. However, Foucault notes thought should be constructed and interpreted in the overarching context of the language and also consider the moment in time (considering the entire context) we are speaking about rather than just the words that are spoken and the meaning we derive from them (our singular point of view) (Foucault, 1972).

Building on the assertions Foucault makes in regard to language and truth generating knowledge, we begin to see how interconnected and interdependent knowledge and power are in social contexts. Foucault furthers this relational exploration with his interest in the prison system. In the text, *Discipline and punish: The birth of the Prison*, Foucault (1977) seeks to analyze punishment in its social context, and the power of discipline and how it suffices as a means of producing compliant subjects. He explains *discipline* as something ingrained in people, without their will or consent and it is a mechanism of power since discipline regulates the physical

behavior of individuals in a specific *apparatus* or social body (Foucault, 1977). In order for discipline to occur, a number of factors are taken into consideration, including, the regulation of physical space, restriction or structure of time, and people's physical behavior functions (Foucault, 1977). There are three primary techniques of control associated with discipline: observation, normalizing, and examination or assessments (Foucault, 1977; Valverde & White-Mair, 1999). These techniques imply control over people and power can be achieved merely by observing them, documenting or examining them, and by creating a system of norms by which they must abide. The practices of observation, creation of norms, and written documentation limit behaviors by making them more thoroughly known or obvious.

*Punishment* is a complex social function of discipline, which at one point utilized public viewings of torture as a mechanism of power, indicating disobedience would have consequences (Foucault, 1977). This was seen as a way for the public to observe the practice of punishment but it also generated the rules of norms that were necessary for discipline to occur within those who were not being punished. Through these practices we can see both punishment and discipline were able to create a sense of knowledge and power through both public punishment and the use of observation.

It is in the text *Power/knowledge* (Foucault, 1980) where a more in depth and precise knowledge enables a more pervasive sense of power and control of what people do. Power, is an important concept to define, because as Foucault makes clear, it is not a thing but rather a relationship between participants and apparatuses which they take part in (Foucault, 1980). It is not simply repressive but it is productive, and is exercised throughout the social body as whole (Foucault, 1980). Power has the ability to operate at the most micro levels of social relations and

is looming under the surface at every level (Foucault, 1980). The exercise of power is strategic and war-like, and seen as an 'economy', one which is continuous, efficient, and woven through the entire social body being examined (Foucault, 1980, p.119). Foucault continues to demonstrate the connection to power by making the argument, power and knowledge are so interconnected, there cannot be an examination of one without the other and they do not exist separately (Foucault, 1980).

A critical feature of Foucault's view on power is a premise of the mechanisms of power and how they produce different types of knowledge to gather information on people's activities and existence (Foucault, 1980). Knowledge gathered in this way further reinforces exercises of power, not just in the prison systems he examined, but the same concepts are applicable within other social bodies (Foucault, 1980, p. 211-216). This thesis adapts concepts related to discourse, power, knowledge, and spirituality, and examines their application to the current social body and texts of Alcoholics Anonymous.

We see by the publication dates, Foucault's work came roughly 40 years after the beginning of AA's 12-step program, but his concepts and ideals have already been applied to other AA based 12-step groups such as Co-Dependents Anonymous (Irvine, 1995; Gemin, 1997; Rice, 1992; Rimke, 2000). The scholarly work that applies Foucault's work to 12-step groups spends much of its time examining how power and knowledge are constructed within the program (Irvine, 1995; Rice, 1992; Rimke, 2000). While previous scholars' utilize Foucauldian concepts in relative closeness to his aims when making an application to AA, none have done so through an exhaustive discourse analysis of the language used in AA texts. This type of exhaustive examination is necessary for understanding the importance of the mechanisms and

functions of the language AA uses to promote change in their members and an appropriate application of Foucault's concepts.

### **Discourse Community**

There are two distinct discourse communities utilized by this work. Initially, it is scholars who focus their research AA specifically, which leads into the discourse community of Foucault's work and his application to 12 step groups. The question of whether concepts as defined by Foucault are communicated as functions in the language of AA has yet to be answered in its entirety by either discourse community. However, there are a few scholars who investigate Foucault's ideas of power and social control within 12-step programs, including AA.

The consensus about Alcoholics Anonymous within the literature examined is that the program is seen as being an ultimate authority and method for recovering alcoholics to change their lives (Gellman, 1964; Tournier, 1979; Wilton, & DeVerteuil, 2006; Witmer, 1997; Yeung, 2007). Where other programs have failed, AA has succeeded in helping alcoholics do the about face and change their lives {Gellman, 1964; Tournier, 1979}.

While there is a certain level of acknowledgement for the good AA does, there is one author who addresses how this monopoly on alcohol treatment might hinder those who are unable to be successful in AA (Tournier, 1979). Tournier's conflicting viewpoints of successes and failures of the AA program leads him to discuss how social control and limited philosophy viewpoints leave lots of alcoholics untreated through the work of AA (1979). His research addresses some key issues about the ideas of boundaries, identification, and limitations of inclusion, which are seen as a hindrance to the AA program (Tournier, 1979). However, other authors such as Gellman (1964), express these hindrances are addressed through the 12 traditions that were created for AA groups to function under, and rather than hinder members, provide them structure for change and the ability to be reformed.



Yeung (2007) and Wilton & DeVerteuil (2006), focus on aspects of how Foucault and his concepts are present in AA, while Rimke (2000) examines self help literature as an overreaching discourse. Wilton & DeVerteuil (2006) share many similar ideas with Yeung (2007), but Yeung takes her work further by clearly applying Foucault's idea of power to AA. Yeung (2007), offers the following explanation, "AA's methods of confessions through steps 4, 5, 10, and 11, self-care through daily meditation and meetings, and the increase of self-knowledge and awareness through meditation and prayer and the steps reflect the early pastoral models of appropriate conduct within an organized structure and being self-governing" (p.63-64).

Yeung (2007) includes a careful explanation of how subjects of power and agency are present in the AA program and explores how Foucault's ideas function in the program of AA. Individual agency and its relation to power enable participants to not only be governed by the constructs of the program but to be better self-governed based on these constructs (Wilton & DeVerteuil, 2006; Yeung, 2007). Similarly, Rimke (2000) asserts self-help literature is a vehicle for discipline and transformation as explained by Foucault, in both senses of the individual's self-improvement choice and desire to do well and also in how those choices are created through the voluntary social modeling an individual receives through self-help language and meetings.

Any self-help road map can be seen a form of control or boundary based on the "suggestion" of achieving what other have only by doing what we have done (Rimke, 2000). While it has been said there are no clear do's and don't to the AA program (Tournier, 1979; Wilton, & DeVerteuil, 2006) there is a particular understanding of why and then what action must be done in order to stop drinking or when a problem arises for the alcoholic AA participant (Wilton, & DeVerteuil, 2006; Yeung, 2007). The AA program explains clearly one must never

drink again because alcoholics of our kind will never be able to drink like other men (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001; Yeung, 2007). Due to the way AA develops and delivers the programs beliefs about individual problems with alcohol, this leads to a specific interpretation of the alcohol problem each member is suffering from and the solutions presented by the AA program (Gellman, 1964; Wilton, & DeVerteuil, 2006; Yeung, 2007).

AA principals such as the 12 steps and traditions can be seen as a form of power relations, in the fact they are used to exert power over member conduct and forms of knowledge as explained by Foucault (Yeung, 2007). Both Yeung (2007) and Wilton & DeVerteuil (2006) employs Foucault's "technologies of the self" to compare AA's practices to how members recover and transform themselves. There is a specific level of social control at work with technologies of the self, which cannot be ignored when you examine the AA program (Wilton & DeVerteuil, 2006).

Both of these discourse communities encompass a wide array of topics and research fields, from philosophy to communications to literature. However, each author has the common thread of AA as an organization or an application of Foucault's work to a 12 step based recovery program. While this work does not specifically look at the ideas represented by each author's work, the work of compiled on AA as an apparatus and how Foucault has already been applied to 12-step work are import to drawing further connections between the functions of AA's discourse and how Foucault's concepts can be interpreted as a basis for these functions.

A text is anything from which people can interpret and derive meaning, be it a book, movie, series of articles, or media ads (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 1999). The process of traditional textual analysis on a particular body of texts is used to examine the specific language used for understanding within the document or text being analyzed (Frey, et al., 1999). This form of analysis is has been used in the discourse community being expanded on in this work, and focuses on examining a small sample of the texts to determine the explicit meaning which is conveyed within them (Frey, et al., 1999; Given, 2008). Using this social science based method the underlying power relations are left unnoticed (Given, 2008).

### **Social Science VS Exhaustive Research Methods**

While a social science approach has been used in other scholar's application of Foucault to AA (Rimke, 2010; Valverde, & White-Mair, 1999; Yeung, 2007), this approach is reliant on a selective or "representative" number of text samples being examined. This method fails to fully address the key claim in Foucault's work, which is the notion of all texts and language used, create the social body that subjects exist within. Foucault explains discourse and language must be examined in the entire context, rather than just making a few specific selections for review (Foucault, & Sheridan, 1972). Meaning, one can only understand the entire relationship between language and its functions by examining the entire set of texts being used.

For this reason this work employs the use of Discourse Analysis. Discourse analysis allows for the examination of inferences and patterns of language which influence the behavior and thinking of subjects (Given, 2008). Patterns may be outright or known, but could also be conveyed in a subtler way (Frey, et al., 1999; Given, 2008). Allowing for the fact that words

themselves not only have a literal meaning, but also a more powerful underlying meaning and potential functions within the discourse that were not previously apparent (Given, 2008).

Based on a lack of scholarly work on how Foucault's concepts are applicable to the exhaustive population of AA texts, this discourse analysis is a necessary starting place in order to further this conversation and is a logical starting place because it investigates a single interpretation of a discourse of texts, before any further investigation or research is embarked upon.

### **Discourse Analysis**

Discourse, in the most general way, is the study of language expressed in written or verbal language and how it is used in a particular society (Given, 2008). Discourse analysis (DA) is best explained as, a set of ways researchers use for examining how language plays a role in the social construction of meaning and the world around us (Given, 2008). Discourse analysis is applied in research in two ways, through looking at specific language use and its relationship to the overall context of the language being examined and through description and counting of specific words or themes used throughout a language (Given, 2008).

### **Foucault's interpretation of Discourse**

Foucault expressed discourse in a different way than other scholars, and as mentioned above is essential to this projects work. Foucault explains in his book *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) discourses may appear to be uniform and organic occurrences in the world, but discourses have actually been established, maintained, and circulated, by people through the fact that, knowledge is created and circulated through language and the exchange which occurs

within a discourse. This indicates, all meaning is constructed through language and the discourse that occurs because of the language. The knowledge, which occurs, based on the discourse is an interpretation, something considered unstable, contingent, and constituted by Foucault (Foucault, 1969). This is important to relate to the concept of power, since the function of language and the knowledge which is created in a discourse is based on the power which the language achieves through legitimacy and being seen as truth or acceptable by some and not others.

### **Methods**

Discourse analysis is employed, in order to focus on the relationships and underlying meaning expressed implicitly through the language seen in the discourse of Alcoholics Anonymous, and based on the assertions of Michel Foucault. In essence, it is used to identify power structures inherent in the text, and how this power driven language constructs the larger social apparatus of those using the examined language (Frey, et al., 1999; Given, 2008).

Coding is an important part of the discourse analysis process. Coding is the process where a researcher identifies language cues, phrases, key words, or repetitive themes and classifies using grouping or labeling (Given, 2008). These initial groups are usually determined through line by line note taking, such as memoing, which is then further separated into a smaller number of connected relationships or patterns (Given, 2008). Memoing is used so a researcher writes down key inferences and interpretations of the overall context and specific language being used as it is being read (Given, 2008). This is done to help determine key words, repetitive themes or rules, and underlying meanings which are present in the language during the analysis (Given, 2008). Since coding allows for connections to be made, it was essential to examine the

relationships between the language used in AA's discourse and the underlying and explicit interpretations of that language in connection with Foucault's concepts.

The discourse analysis was completed using 18 written sources available from AA.org, including books, pamphlets, and workbooks. These sources were noted as provided and kept most often by practicing members of Alcoholics Anonymous or AA groups as whole, according to AA.org. Therefore they were seen as an appropriate basis for the examination of Foucault's concepts. Each source was read in its entirety, in attempts to provide an accurate appraisal of the overall context of AA's discourse and the applied interpretation of Foucault's concepts.

As each source was read memoing notes were being taken. The main themes and frequently observed phrases or words were compiled and concept maps were developed. Concepts maps were used to draw further connection between the patterns in AA's language and the Foucauldian concepts of power, knowledge, discourse, spirituality, truth, and the subject.

Concept mapping provides a guide to the classification, and interpretation of the relationships among a large or wide set of key concepts (Given, 2008). Most concept mapping appears to be done in relation to interviews and the specific language used by multiple people – however it is very useful when looking at a very large body of texts (Given, 2008). This method gives a physical view of what is being found and how each of the themes or concepts is related to one another through an image. This map or image is essential when examining underlying information and when attempting to summarize the complex relationships among concepts. Concept mapping was used after the 2<sup>nd</sup> review of all memoing notes to further develop categories, themes, and patterns within the AA discourse.

### **Considerations**

Two notes to make about this project, which pertain to the methods of analysis and texts being used. First, all texts used have been labeled as “AA approved literature.” This is due to the fact that there are many other writers and publishing companies which produce 12-step or recovery based literature. All AA approved literature bears the words “This is A.A. General Service Conference-approved literature” within the material (AA.org). Text taken from Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous will only be sourced from the first 164 pages, as all subsequent text consists of personal stories as written by AA members.

For the methods of analysis for the project, due to the time allotted to complete the research, a completely exhaustive research of AA’s texts was not possible. For this reason the most heavily used texts (according to AA.org) were examined and 40% of available resources were selected for examination. Despite the examination still being partially selective, each source was read in its entirety to gain a broader and more in depth context of the language which is used within AA.

### **Slogans as Knowledge**

AA's slogans or sayings have only been looked at by one set of researchers, Valverde and White-Mair (1999). In this case study they examine a selected set of previously done interview studies, to determine how the slogans of AA, identified in previous research, could be considered practices or repetitious actions which were performed by program members. Within their analysis Valverde and White-Mair (1999) utilize the concept of discipline practices as defined by Foucault. While the authors use these concepts to show how AA may reject these concepts in the traditional sense and in fact they argue AA uses the reverse them, they utilize them within close proximity to the intended concept definitions as I have interpreted them.

As Valverde and White-Mair (1999) explain, AA members are not utilizing the disciplinary act of observation as a form of punishment, or something which is meant to control. AA's utilize this practice in order to judge their own habits, behaviors, and overall progress, as compared to others (Valverde & White-Mair, 1999). However, what Valverde and White-Mair (1999) fail to address is how power and knowledge are interrelated, and by accumulating more knowledge there is in a sense an exertion of control, whether acknowledged or not. Based on my interpretation of the Foucauldian concept of knowledge, we can see how observation of self, compared to others can be used as a tool to acquire knowledge or a set of rules which guides thinking. In this way we can see the concept of knowledge as defined by Foucault in the following slogans.

On page 9 of the AA pamphlet "Many paths to spirituality" (2014), the slogan "working the program" is quoted in reference to how members adhere to performing the practice of the 12 steps as outline in AA's texts. This idea of working the program is furthered in the Big book



(2001) where the slogan “program of action” is given on page 42 and is used to explain the work which must be done in order to recover from alcoholism as whole, not just in reference to the 12 steps, but including service work and aspects of the program. These types of active slogans are also noted twice in the text “AA comes of age” (1957) on pages 139 and 232 through the slogan of “carrying the message”. This slogan refers to the stories and information which is shared between more experienced members of the program, with those who are new (Zemore, 2007). This is done so newer members can learn the norms and practices of the program.

These three slogans for multiple AA texts utilize activity as a rule for members’ thoughts, and knowledge is the key Foucauldian concept communicated here. These slogans indicate a pattern that when members have thoughts in regard to their AA program, their thoughts are drawn to the how they are taking action within the program through sharing their experience or working their own 12 steps.

Another way in which we can see Foucault's concept of knowledge communicated is through the communication of how God and spirituality are referred to through slogans in the AA text the 12x12 (1991). On page 93 we find the slogan “Not my will, but thine, be done” conveying to each AA member to not think of their own will for their lives but to ask god for direction and to direct thinking to be of service to others rather than that of being self-centered. We see the theme of spirituality conveyed again through the slogan “came to believe” on page 130, indicating members of the program have had a spiritual awakening and have turned their lives and their will over the care of god, as a function of their recovery. Both of these slogans utilize the Foucauldian concept of knowledge to shape the thinking of members around how God and spirituality play roles in their lives and function within their recovery.

These slogans represent the function of thinking being shaped and guided through the systems constructed in the language which AA's texts use. While these are only a few examples of how the concept of knowledge is present in the AA texts, the theme of slogans as knowledge was seen throughout the exhaustive analysis of the texts which were reviewed. These examples clearly represent the mechanism of knowledge in the discourse of AA and how it functions within members.

### **Transformation through the Practice of Spirituality**

Foucault explains *spirituality* as the methods which a subject uses to transform themselves in some way (Foucault & Carrette, 1999). Rimke (2008) notes in her work, 12-step based programs are based on the desire to want to improve, to facilitate some kind of personal growth or self-change within participants. We can associate the context of this personal change, to the concept of spirituality achieved through transformation as Foucault has defined. To help further her argument of how transformation is related to Foucault's work, Rimke (2008) associates this transformative change with the Foucauldian concept of 'government', which includes the strategic mechanisms that attempt to determine the behaviors of individuals. This argument indicates that as people change they are changing in the ways which they are guided or conducted (Rimke, 2008).

These transformative changes are made with the assistance of some kind of authoritarian text or expert knowledge (Rimke, 2008) and can only be realized once there is an admittance and surrender to a divine power (Zemore, 2007). In the context of the work within this paper, this authoritarian source would be the texts which AA provides to their members and the divine power would be God. We can see the connection between this and Foucault's concepts through the following text segments.

In a segment from the pamphlet "Young people in AA" (2007) a member recounts their experience with their spiritual experience and self-transformation through a realization that everything happens in the right time in God's world, nothing is a mistake, and through the 12 steps and a power greater than self they have not had to have a drink for 19 years and have been changed (p.10). Similarly, another AA member recants their experience with spirituality on page

11 of “Many paths to spirituality” (2014) by explaining that when a person has a spiritual awakening they are further able to do things which they could not do before on their own, they will be granted a new way of thinking and in a very real sense they have been “transformed”.

Both of these segments of text communicate how a power greater than one’s self can facilitate the transformation which is necessary to achieve sobriety in AA and spirituality as conceptualized by Foucault. We also find spirituality communicated as described by Foucault through transformation in the 12 steps of AA and how they are verbalized.

In the reading “How it works” as written in the Big Book (2001) on pages 58-59 the steps of AA conceptualize the initial necessity for a power greater than self and how this will bring about change within the AA member, as well as how long term maintenance of this practice will benefit members as a whole. Step two states “Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity” (p.59). This step provides the need for a higher power (God) and the transformative power of restoration from the madness which the alcoholic experienced while drinking. In step seven members “Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character” and step 8 “Humbly asked him to remove our shortcomings” (p.59). Through the performance of these two steps, the AA member is transformed from the flawed individual they once were into a more reformed citizen (Big Book, 2001; Zemore, 2007). Finally in step 12, we see “Having has a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps...” indicating that once members perform and complete the steps of AA they are no longer the same person they were when embarking on their journey.

Through the excerpts of text above, we can see how the transformation through spirituality as Foucault described is communicated in the written language of Alcoholics

Anonymous. From this we can interpret how the practice of spirituality as laid out in the Big Book of AA and the 12 steps leads AA members to the spirituality which Foucault defines as transformative actions. Through the testimonial examples of members of the program through published pamphlets and documents, we can also see this practice actually exists for members and the transformations actually do take place.

As a note, while Rimke (2008) utilizes another 12-step program outside of AA for her research, both programs are based on the original work the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous did. It is for this reason I believe Rimke's (2008) arguments can be applied due to the similarities in the frameworks of both programs.

### **Limitations and Furthering the Discourse**

In order to increase the relevancy of this research, the limitations of this document should be identified and potential solutions proposed. First, the analysis of the AA texts examined here is subjective and based on the author's interpretation of Foucault's concepts and their use within AA. Such a method could make replication of results difficult.

Second, the documents and texts selected, while prominently used and cited for use in the recovery of AA's members (as noted by AA.org and other authors), these texts may not be fully representative of the language which is used in AA or by their membership body. Further investigation of the language used in meetings and social interactions between AA members would be necessary to further support the stated claims of how language is important and used in the discourse of AA. Interviews would also further these claims; clarifying if members perceive the language in the same way as the researcher.

Third, the analyzed texts were all created and/or edited by the same source, the Alcoholics Anonymous World Services and General Service Office. Meaning there may be consistent language use only in these texts because their creation is overseen by a single entity. Also indicating there could be less apparent Foucauldian concept communication within the overall language, than what is reported in these findings. In future examinations this possible bias could be helped through the inclusion of multiple writings from other sources or authors which are not AA approved literature but are used by AA members (such as those produced by melody Beattie and Hazelden readings).

Finally, this paper and AA's relevance to Foucault could be furthered by an examination of how the subject as explained by Foucault, is present in the historical language of discourses but has all but disappeared from modern language as a whole. This cross examination could provide further insight into how Foucault used historical texts to examine the subject and also illuminate further how AA and Foucault are applicable to one another.

## Conclusions

The examination of AA's texts provided in this document reveal a few possible connections between Foucault's concepts and the discourse of the 12-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous. Through the discourse of AA using exhaustive discourse analysis on selected texts, through the examples of excerpts provided, and the themes discovered, a few relationships are clear. Initially there appears to be an underlying relationship between knowledge as defined by Foucault and the function it appears to create when framing the thoughts and knowledge AA members have around both action and spirituality. Then as more relationships between knowledge and thought were drawn, a relationship emerged between Foucault's concept of spirituality and the language that AA discourse uses to communicate the practices and functions of transformation within its membership body.

Through the first round of reading and memoing of the AA discourse texts, knowledge appeared to function as a mechanism to set a frame or set of rules which allowed members to generate specific thoughts about how they individually and collectively would take action in the AA program. This function was communicated through the continued patterns throughout the discourse of slogans and sentences using the words "action", "work or working" and verbs such as "carrying". These particular words were seen throughout pamphlets, books, and fliers which were provided to AA members and groups as part of their recovery work.

After further concept mapping, a theme around spirituality became clear in two ways. Initially, spirituality is related to how members take action in recovery through the practices the slogans of AA's discourse encourage members to take. These slogan contained words such as "be done" and "came to", indicating there must be action taken around the spiritual practice the



slogan is trying to encourage. The spiritual slogans can also be seen as a construct of knowledge since they may shape how members generate thoughts around spirituality, through the specific language of the slogans.

Second, a connection became apparent between the functions of spirituality as defined by both AA and Foucault, by the transformation of self through specific practices. In both pamphlets and books available to AA member's personal accounts of self-transformation through spiritual practice are illuminated. These accounts generated a theme around the language used to communicate about the authoritative power that is necessary for transformation according to Foucault. Language in the discourse such as "god's world", "restored to sanity", and "power greater than one's self" all indicate the function of an authoritative mechanism in the transformation from their once alcoholic selves to a reformed citizen. Another theme occurred through the presence of words and phrases such as "humbly asked", "prayed", "worked" which indicated the continued spiritual practice is necessary, in order for transformation to be maintained and continued.

Overall throughout the discourse of AA, Foucault's concepts of knowledge, spirituality, and truth were present. Through the themes found using the methods of discourse analysis we can infer there is a connection that indicates how these concepts and the language of AA's texts, serve important functions to those who participate in AA's program. While there is no strong correlation, with further research there is possibility for this to be proven.

While not all of the concepts of Foucault's work were present in AA's discourse, this analysis is only a beginning of how Foucault's concepts could be applied to Alcoholics Anonymous. As noted in the limitations section, increases in the number of texts reviewed, the

types of qualitative methods used in conjunction with textual or content analysis, and the expansion to including other recovery based author's works, could be made in order to provide a more complete research study and further the results which were presented here. The further inclusion of how AA members utilize and perceive the language discovered in this analysis of the discourse would also benefit this research body, by further investigating with the potential to support, the stated claims of how language is important and used in the discourse of AA.

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