

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS: THE UNSEEN CULT

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Today cults proliferate our society. But, what makes a cult? The term cult refers to a group with a given belief system, to a specific way of recruiting its members, and to the way it exerts control over the lives of its adherents. Cult members frequently manifest behavior where autonomy is abdicated to the point of robot-like behavior. Members of a cult can be identified by "their...willingness to give up personal freedom and live under unusual and often severely limiting restriction" (Stoner and Parke,1977:xi).

Although the term cult is a pejorative in our society, this may be an overreaction to the word. A cult can, after all, be identified by two variables: (1) its ideology; and (2) its methodology. Both of these variables are brought under scrutiny when a person joins a cult. But, not all cults have a malignant ideology, and cult recruitment and conversion does not entail the use of either magic or force. It must be remembered that today's principal religion - Christianity - originated as a cult. It is certain that many Roman families would have welcomed a deprogrammer to save their son or daughter from following a path that enveloped their child, removed him\her from the family, and led him\her into a life they could neither fathom nor condone. It is hard for us today to understand how one could fear a family member joining this cult. In other words, all cults may share a methodology, but they do not share a theology. The spectrum of cult theology ranges from Jonestown to the catacombs of Rome.

The focus of this study is to examine how Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) works; that is, to examine how it helps millions achieve and maintain sobriety. AA has many attributes of a cult (Canin, 1967:46-54). The ideology or direction that AA provides its members is not our concern. There is, however, little extant research on the methodology of AA, and that is the object of this study. We wish to explain how AA works, and thereby also explain why it does not work for some. It is our contention that AA is a cult, inasmuch as it uses essentially the same methodology as most of the known cults, and to a degree at least, its members bear the same stigmata as any other cult member.

HOW DO CULTS WORK?

There is agreement in the literature that cults use some or all the techniques identified as thought reform, or "brain washing" (Lifton,1961;Stoner and Parke,1977;Dwyer,1978;Schwartz and Kaslow,1979;Zee,1980). Behavioral scientists and "deprogrammers"

agree that cults brain wash their adherents. But, one must ask to what does brain washing really refer? Lifton's early work on thought reform has become the salient work in understanding the process of brain washing (Lifton,1961). He identified eight brain-washing techniques used by the captors of military prisoners.

Lifton's eight techniques included: (1) Milieu control, where control is established over the person's environment. Usually, this refers to the individual's communication with both outsiders and members within the cult group. Careful control is exercised so that the individual is put into situations where the reality that he\she experiences can be defined by other cult members. The purpose of this control is to keep the content of the group's ideology as the dominant reality.

(2) Mystical manipulation, Lifton's second technique, involves the personal, social manipulation of the individual. Above all else the neophyte is asked to trust the group. Members of the group explain to the initiate that they have developed a way to achieve life's "higher purpose." The group has identified and incorporated a special law, a new truth along with a special rule, which is the foundation of their ideology, and hence the basis of the new way of life. By the same token, any thought or question which challenges the goals or methods of the group is defined as coming from a lower or malignant purpose, or that the initiate is exhibiting a stubborn strain which means that he\she does not yet fully accept the group's way. To increase the possibility of achieving trust in the group, the individual is encouraged to participate actively in the conversion of oneself (Cohen,1955:136-137). "The conversion to the cult is complete when the individual himself sets out to proselytize others" (Schwartz and Kaslow,1979:19). Also included in the idea of social control, mystical manipulation introduces the use of ritual. Ritual works to reduce an individual's focus of attention, and increases the person's susceptibility to emotions. Rituals act as "an avenue to the merging of the self with the cult and the cult ethic. This can create an 'orgiastic' sense of oneness of the most intense sort with fellow confessors and a dissolving into the cult or movement" (Dwyer, 1978:125).

(3) Lifton's third technique refers to the demand for purity. The world is divided into a moral dichotomy of good and evil. Good is defined as those thoughts, feelings, and actions which are consistent with the ideology of the group; and evil is defined as every other kind of thought or behavior. Since no one can achieve this level of purity, a feeling of shame and guilt is engendered (Lifton,1961:424).

(4) Lifton's fourth technique, the cult of confession, is perhaps one of the most psychologically powerful. As a concomitant to the search for purity, there is an imperative demand to make a confession of one's shortcomings. Sins are defined by the cult's ideology. The function of publicly confessing one's sins maximizes the vulnerability of the self. Three mechanisms come into play with public confession: (a) a device is created to maintain focus on personal imperfections, thus augmenting feelings of guilt; (b) a means is devised to surrender the self to the group in a dramatic fashion; and (c) a method is generated by which knowledge of one's sins demands forgiveness. "I ...practice the profession of penitent

to be able to end up as a judge...the more I accuse myself, the more I have a right to judge you" (Camus,1956:120).

(5) Lifton's fifth variable, the sacred science, refers to the aura of fundamental ideological purity. If one holds the tenets of the "true" faith, then it becomes blasphemous to question that faith. One does not question God (Lifton,1961:427-428).

(6) Lifton's sixth concept refers to a mechanism by which one's rational thinking is short-circuited. Loading the language is Lifton's term for replacing normal vocabulary with cliches and jargonistic phraseology based on tenets of the group's ideology. The use of in-group language allows one to redefine reality and restructure it based on the ideologically new principles. The relationship between language and reality has been pointed to by the symbolic interactionists (Blumer,1962). The acquisition of a new language helps solidify the person's sense of oneness with the group, and prevents critical thinking about the tenets of the new faith.

(7) The seventh mechanism used by Lifton refers to the reinterpretation of an individual so that his\her past conforms with his\her present identity. Lifton calls this "doctrine over person," by which he means that the behavior of the person's entire history is reexamined to show that he\she always was the kind of person that he\she is now revealed to be. Using the group's jargonistic language, it becomes easy to cast all previous life experience into the fulfilment of the ideology's mythic prophecies. This form of retrospective interpretation of an individual's life means that the individual is reconstituted. "The former identity, at best, receives the accent of mere appearance...the former identity stands as accidental; the new identity is the 'basic reality.' What he is now is what, "after all," he was all along" (Garfinkel,1956:421-422).

(8) Setting the boundaries of the in-group vis-a-vis the rest of the world is constructed by Lifton's eight concept, the dispensing of existence. Those who "have the truth" are clearly marked out from those who do not. Outsiders are nonpersons, who are described by jargonistic epithets, while insiders are described by another vocabulary highlighting their more saintly qualities.

While Lifton's delineation of these eight techniques of brain washing are used in religious cults, two more techniques must be added. Religious cults also use: (1) love-bombing, and (2) the substitution of a "good family" for the family of origin.

Love-bombing refers to the apparent unconditional acceptance of the individual. The person is accepted, and he\she is not given any privacy or time to be alone. Never again will he\she experience loneliness, but never again will he\she have time to reflect or engage in critical thinking (Deutsch,1980;Schwartz and Kaslow,1979).

The second cult technique - substitution of a "good family" - provides direction and meaning for the person's life (Stoner and Parke, 1977:85-99; Schwartz and Kaslow, 1979). He\she is thrust into a situation where he\she does not have to question the merit of any of his\her actions; his\her behavior has meaning for his\her new family, and therefore for him\her. The new family provides acceptance and understanding for his\her behavior. The neophyte is

repeatedly told, "Only we can love you, and understand you. We are like you, and know what your life is really like. This is the only place you really belong." The convert's family of origin is denigrated into a position of little value, or even negative value. His\her old frame of reference is steadily eroded, and the cult is substituted as the new family.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

In order to understand the world of AA, it is necessary to see the world through the eyes of the participants. Only in this way can one know what is really going on, and how the events are interpreted by the people involved. Therefore, both investigators attended AA meetings over a period of several months. In addition, one of the investigators actively assumed the identity of an alcoholic. That is, she admitted to members of an AA gathering that she was ostensibly an alcoholic in need of help. She then chose a "sponsor" and began to attend both official meetings and informal social gatherings. In order to clarify these on-site observations, a research panel was established. This panel, composed of five long-term AA members, met weekly and shared their knowledge with the researchers answering questions regarding the meaning of events that were puzzling.

Data for the study were gathered in the following ways. During the AA meeting both investigators made notes while the interaction was going on. These notes acted as spurs for the investigator's memories to help them reconstruct the interactions of the meeting they had just attended. Immediately, following the meeting both investigators went to their car and using their notes and a tape recorder recorded the contents of the meeting using as many quotes as they could recall. Each investigator not only saved as much detail as possible this way, but also jogged the memory of the other. If there was no consensus on what had transpired about a particular event or interaction, the material was eliminated. We recognize that these notes, which provided the data for the study, are not a full transcription of the meetings. It would have been impossible to tape the entire meeting both for technical reasons, and research protocol demands. It would have been very difficult to provide a sound recording system that could pick up comments from 60 to 300 people in a room; and it would have been obtrusive which would have negated the ability of the investigators to conduct a study by participant observation. The next day these taped field notes were transcribed. This three-step method of gathering data, of course, allows for error. Error can come into the picture by several routes: incomplete recording of all interactions at the meeting; selective perception on the part of the investigators; and errors in memory or incomplete recall on the part of the investigators. The degree to which these sources of error may have influenced the findings is unfortunately impossible to determine. On the other hand, a complete transcription of the panel discussions was made at the time of each session by one of the two

investigators, while the other one raised questions and facilitated the interaction of panel members.

The typed protocols from all of these data sources consisted of some 170 pages. In order to analyze these data, coding categories based on Lufton's work and the other cult techniques were established. Then each statement or group of statements was examined to determine if they dealt with any of the codable categories. Coding reliability was checked using a Pearsonian correlation coefficient. Reliability was established at .89. The unit of analysis was one sentence or series of sentences as long as they referred to the same thought or incident. The data consisted of some 299 separate and quantifiable statements. Each statement was coded to fit one of the ten categories.

One other problem concerning the representativeness of our data must be mentioned. The question focuses on whether our data provide a reliable, representative sample of all the interactions taking place at the meetings, or are they limited to a few verbal individuals. We know that the statements gathered on any one evening were made by different people, but we cannot be sure that the same people didn't talk again at subsequent meetings. However, our data were gathered at five different meeting locations, which were not attended by all of the same people. Therefore, it is unlikely that our data represent only a small sample of the AA interactants. Yet, it is possible that our work is based primarily on the more verbal, or assertive AA members. This does not present a major limitation since the primary purpose of this study is not to test an hypothesis, but to conduct an exploratory investigation designed to generate further research questions.

HOW DOES AA WORK?

In order to provide a context for the data analysis which will follow, the authors now provide a synthesis of what occurs at AA meetings. What follows is an abstraction of many typical meetings, highlighting those characteristics which are common.

The place where a meeting is held is usually not designated with a placard. The participants know the address and time of the meeting place. Upon arrival, one finds people milling around, and greeting each other by their first names. Strangers are usually recognized and approached by one of the members who says, "Hi, I'm Jane, is this your first time here?" The stranger may then introduce himself\herself as he\she wishes. The newcomer is frequently encouraged to have coffee, introduced to others, and generally made to feel at home. Rows of chairs are arranged so that they face a podium at the front of the room. People hold chairs by placing keys on them while they mingle with their friends and greet strangers. Before the meeting begins, the leader usually selects two people who will participate by reading the Twelve Steps and the Twelve Traditions (Anonymous, 1978).

The leader begins the meeting by introducing himself\herself by his\her first name (sometimes both names) and identifying himself\herself as an alcoholic. He\she then asks the audience,

"are there any other alcoholics here?" Whereupon members of the group usually raise their hands signifying their alcoholism. The leader asks if there are any people who are attending for the first time. They are asked to identify themselves with their first names. Many do so, and immediately they add that they are alcoholics too. Then a type of roll call is called. The leader asks, "are there any people here with less than 30 days (sobriety)?" Applause follows anyone who raises his\her hand at this point. The litany of inquiry goes on until one hits 30 years or more of sobriety. By the end of this period every member in the group has had a chance to identify himself\herself as an alcoholic, and indicate how successful he\she has been in staying sober.

The meeting then turns to the business at hand by having the "Twelve Steps" and then the "Twelve Traditions" read aloud. The meeting leader spends the next ten minutes "qualifying." Qualifying refers to the speaker giving a brief autobiography stressing his\her alcoholism, and his\her recovery. The speaker, or speakers, are then introduced, or the topic for the evening's discussion is presented. An intermission is called in the middle of the meeting, and more coffee and food are consumed. This is also the opportunity for peer counselling to take place, or for arrangements to be made for after the meeting gatherings. The meeting resumes, with the presentation of a birthday cake given to those who are celebrating their anniversary of their sobriety. At the end of the meeting, the leader reminds people that each chapter of AA is self-supporting, and an offering is taken. The secretary at this time also makes any pertinent announcements about regional AA activities, and makes arrangements for upcoming meetings. The basket is passed, a sales pitch is made to sell the written pamphlets and the "Big Book." Then a previously selected participant asks the group to stand, hold each other's hands, and lead the membership into a recitation of the Lord's Prayer. Affixed to the Lord's Prayer is an AA ending: "Keep coming back; it works."

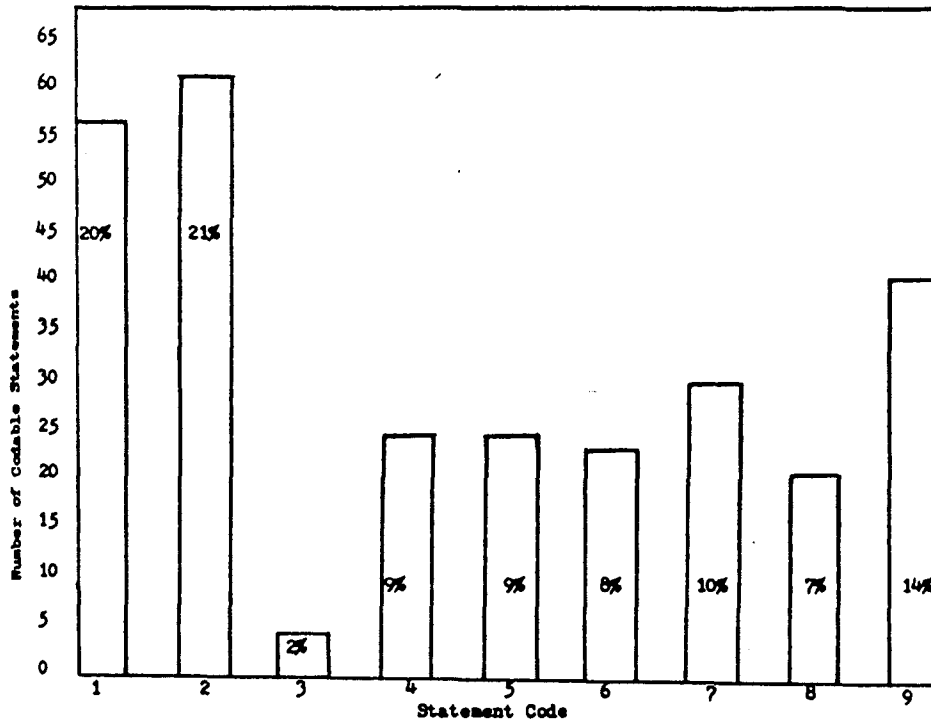
Some of the people stay to clean up and remove the chairs; others participate in more peer counselling and socializing.

AA Techniques

On the basis of the content analysis of the codable statements, we found that each of the nine categories was represented. The distribution of the statements is uneven as can be seen in the table.

CODABLE STATEMENTS BY CATEGORY

N=299



CODING CATEGORIES

1. Milieu Control
2. Mystical Manipulation
3. Purity
4. Confession
5. Sacred Science
6. Loading the Language
7. Doctrine Over Person
8. Dispensing of Existence
9. Love Bombing / Family Substitution

The table indicates that the two most frequently used categories are milieu control and mystical manipulation. The least popular demand for purity. Two categories - love bombing and family substitution - are collapsed since love-bombing was used as a mechanism by which family substitution could be effected. The cult members must convince the person that they love him\her better than their own family, and the neophyte's own family cannot accept him\her as we (the cult members) can. Distribution throughout the remaining categories appears to be fairly even, thus supporting our

contention that all methods of brain washing are used.

Examples for each category and illustrative statements taken from the data are listed below.

1. **Milieu control**, or with whom one should interact: "Don't have any emotional entanglements (outside of AA) your first year."

"My first sponsor told me to change my job, move, told me that I should choose someone from the group to be my husband at the end of the first year (of sobriety)."

"During the whole dinner, whenever I would leave the table (at the restaurant), my sponsor would follow me. It was as if she was worried about me, or that she was convinced that I would leave even though she had driven me to the restaurant in her car."

2. **Mystical manipulation** refers to the use of ritual and trust: "I was in the same room with 3,100 sober alcoholics, all holding hands and saying the Lord's Prayer. It was an extremely spiritual experience."

"When I was very down, I called Jane (my sponsor) and it didn't matter if Jane's answering service took the message, and Jane never called back, or if I got in touch with Jane immediately. The only thing that's important is just knowing that Jane is there. That's the only thing that matters to me."

"When the introduction was over, the leader asked, 'Would all those with 30 days sobriety, stand up and identify themselves.' This act met with applause."

3. **Demand for purity**, or interpreting behavior to be in keeping with the tenets of AA: "...due to the pain of not following the steps, I came to the point where I do it (follow the steps) now...Step 7 works."

"You may not want to give it (control) to anyone - that is a character defect thinking that you are that special."

"About the inventory, that's where rigorous honesty comes in. I wasn't, it was self-deception, it takes honesty, guts. Then you grow."

4. **Cult of confession**, or the public admission of one's sins: "I modeled for porno photos to get money for booze."

"Sometimes some people have to write a second inventory on sex alone."

"I knew I was a drunk. I was selfish, I was self-centred, and self-destructive. I appeared to be indifferent, I was hard, not tough."

"I tried to stab people, shoot at people, hit them with a pan. But I felt closure after the violence."

5. **Sacred science**, or absolute truth can be found in the theology of AA: "...read the Big Book on the chapter on the agnostics, then go into your bathroom and get down on your knees and pray."

"I skipped from Step 1 to Step 11. (see footnote 2.) I was dry for six years, and then I had an emotional problem, and fell off. After three years I came back. I was in such pain, I figured I had better work all the steps this time."

"I've been following the steps, and the promises about what would happen are true."

6. **Loading the language**, or use of in-group language which helps shape extant reality: "I'm a grateful alcoholic."

"He's taking a geographic."

"When I first came, I didn't understand the vocabulary. I didn't understand you at all, but I know that you had something going."

"She also addressed me as her baby. She said that when she told her AA friends about me, she told them that she had a baby, but then she was only a baby herself."

"I received my "TRY GOD" pendant, when I had my first month birthday."

7. Doctrine over person, or retrospective interpretation: "In working the steps, I find that I'm remembering little things from my past that I had forgotten that all have to do with how I became the person I was."

"They (nonalcoholics) still want to be my friends now, but no - I don't fit. I'm not comfortable with them anymore."

"I was a hooker. At the end of my first year on the program, I had financial problems. I realized I like myself now, and can't go back to the 'life' again. I've talked to the other girls who tried to go back and hook without alcohol and drugs. They ended up drinking."

8. Dispensing existence, or the identification of the alcoholic as separate from others: "There is no such thing as a drunk that doesn't know exactly how much and the cost of booze he purchased."

"It would seem to some that we are selfish. If I had a family, for example, and they wanted Mommy home all the time, it just couldn't be. I have an obligation to go to meetings."

"People not in AA are 'Normy's.' They think AA members are hard and cruel, because we laugh at other's pain."

9. Love-bombing and family substitution, which are the means of making the AA group the most salient social fact for the individual: "One of the incredible things about AA is the fact that you will be loved unconditionally; that no matter what you have done it is O.K."

"You should not let your husband push your buttons...only we understand you."

"I met some of her (sponsor's) friends. I was so nervous while I was talking to them that I had involuntarily crushed my Coke can. My sponsor then said that I didn't need to be afraid. They would love me till I could love myself, and that here in AA I was loved, just the way I was."

"I told my sponsor that I was upset about my sister's moving away. She told me that she and others would take my sister's place. You have to cut off from your family and turn them over to God."

"In order to illustrate more fully the way in which reality is reconstituted by the group interactional process, the following vignettes are offered. One cold evening when one of the authors arrived at an AA meeting early, she sought the comfort of the fireplace that was burning in the meeting room. She was huddled by the fire shivering when an AA member approached her, and asked, "How long is it since you had your last drink? I know the shaking gets pretty bad at the beginning." The investigator responded by saying that she was chilled. This response was denied and more

advice was offered about how to control physical discomforts during the early phases of detoxification.

On another occasion, the undercover investigator wanted to clarify her position vis-a-vis the AA group, and told her sponsor that she was not a bona fide alcoholic but was engaged in a research project on alcoholism. The confession was rejected. The sponsor retorted, "I know that this isn't true. Only a true alcoholic could have gone through what you've just gone through." She was referring to the ostensible discomforts of alcoholic withdrawal supposedly experienced by the investigator, and to the social discomforts that she had discussed with her sponsor about attending meetings. The sponsor assured her, "you may be doing research, but obviously your interest in this area is because you and your colleague are really alcoholics." In both of these examples, it should be noted, the reality of AA was superimposed on the on-going interaction.

DISCUSSION

On the basis of this study, the authors contend that AA uses all the methods of brain washing, which are also the methods used by cults. It is also, however, an integral part of cult literature that not all people are equally susceptible to the workings of thought-reform techniques employed by cults (Lifton, 1961). The cult offers to meet the needs of some alcoholics. However, some try AA and fail, and others cannot bring themselves to try it at all. Trice and Roman (1970) found that those who join AA after being hospitalized have significantly different personality features than those who do not join AA. "The successful affiliates were more guilt prone, sensitive to responsibility, more serious, and introspective...the affiliates possessed a greater degree of measured ego strength, affiliative needs, and group dependency" (Trice and Roman, 1970:547). The cult offers these alcoholics that which they need: understanding, absolute rules by which to live, and escape from loneliness and social isolation. But for others AA fails, and this failure may be made more acute because AA is today recognized as the most successful tool for coping with alcoholism. Psychiatrists, psychologists, and other mental health professionals usually send their patients with a drinking problem to AA to dry out while they work on the intra-psychic components of their pathology. "Frequently (writes one psychiatrist) disillusioned men and women appeal to me: "Doctor, I've tried AA over and over and I still can't stay sober. There must be something else dreadfully wrong with me!" (Cain, 1967:46-54).

It is possible that the kind of alcoholic which AA can help is limited to a given psychological type; probably one who can accept the intimacy that AA demands, and one who is willing to lose his individual identity for the identity offered by the group. Apparently AA recognizes this limitation for they stipulate that: "Those who do not recover (from alcoholism) are people who cannot or will not completely give themselves to this simple program, usually men and women who are constitutionally incapable of being

honest with themselves" (Anonymous, 1976:58). Despite this psychological disclaimer, AA argues that alcoholism is a physical disease. By disease they refer to "an organic, glandular metabolic dietary (disease) - anything but mental" (Cain, 1967:53). Yet the very nature of AA's own disclaimer indicates that there are some people who cannot psychologically accept their help. Perhaps other interventions would be beneficial for those people whose ego integration is strong enough so that they cannot join a cult, or whose ego is damaged to the point that they cannot accept the peer control of AA. Further research focusing along the lines of AA's failure is clearly indicated. Research tracing the differential impact of other treatment modalities ranging from intensive psychotherapy to the popular behavioral operant conditioning programs seems warranted.

NOTES

1. A version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Western Social Science Association in Albuquerque, April, 1983. Gratitude is expressed to Father Jon Olson for his help and encouragement.
2. The Twelve Steps that are read at each meeting are:
 1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol - that our lives had become unmanageable.
 2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
 3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understand Him.
 4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
 5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
 6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
 7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
 8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
 9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

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Alcoholics Anonymous publishes several books, reports, pamphlets, and other media, including a periodical known as the AA Grapevine.[114] Two books are used primarily: Alcoholics Anonymous (the "Big Book") and Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, the latter explaining AA's fundamental principles in depth. The full text of each of these two books is available on the AA website at no charge. Alcoholics Anonymous: the story of how many thousands of men and women have recovered from alcoholism (multiple PDFs) (4th ed.). 2011. ISBN 1-893007-16-2. 575 pages.Â "Alcoholics Anonymous: the unseen cult" (PDF). California Sociologist. Los Angeles: California State University.