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SPEAKING SOBER: PROGRAM LANGUAGE AS A MECHANISM FOR COMMUNITY CREATION IN ALCOHLICS ANONYMOUS

by

TALYA WOLF

A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2018
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Talya Wolf

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Speaking Sober: Program Language as a Mechanism for Community Creation in Alcoholics Anonymous

by

Talya Wolf

Advisor: Barbara Katz Rothman

Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) is a fellowship of more than two million members in 180 countries worldwide who are joined by their common desire to achieve and maintain sobriety. A.A. is comprised of small, self-sustaining groups of individuals who meet, typically weekly or biweekly, to share their successes and struggles and to provide support to their fellow alcoholics. There are no dues or requirements for membership other than the wish to stop drinking. The organization is not evangelical; it does not recruit, but rather welcomes those who wish to participate. The open nature of this program attracts individuals of all ages, ethnic backgrounds, and socioeconomic positions. Furthermore, the A.A. literature makes clear that strong community ties within the program are necessary for the success of each and all participants. In the context of the diversity of participants, the mandate for strong interpersonal relationships seems one that could be difficult to achieve. However, over three months of ethnographic investigation, during which I regularly attended AA meetings, I found a sense of fellowship to be prevalent within the program. This observation was supported by a series of interviews with members. Through this fieldwork, I encountered a unique rhetoric employed by A.A. members. The goal of this study is to illustrate some of the mechanisms by which the common language of A.A. contributes to the community ties between participants in
the program. Herein, I suggest that shared language allows for easy communication, expresses a shared identity, and facilitates humorous interactions between members, thereby contributing to the community ethos of the fellowship.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work could not have been done without the guidance of Dr. Barbara Katz Rothman, to whom I am extremely grateful. Thanks are due to Dr. Katz Rothman for her incredible patience, insightful edits, and generosity of time. I also express my gratitude to Dr. Tamara Mose, who fueled the inception of this work, to my family for their support throughout the process, to my husband, Josiah Cavanaugh, for his continual encouragement and love, and especially to my grandmother, Rita Heiferman. Without her support, phone calls, loving letters, and words of wisdom, this thesis, and my graduate studies in general, would not have been possible. Thanks, Grammy!

I am also indebted to the many members of Alcoholics Anonymous who shared their stories with me. This work could not have been done without you and I very much hope that I have done your stories justice.
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Introduction

We are average Americans. All sections of this country and many of its occupations are represented, as well as many political, economic, social, and religious backgrounds. We are people who normally would not mix. But there exists among us a fellowship, a friendliness, and an understanding which is indescribably wonderful. We are like the passengers of a great liner the moment after rescue from shipwreck when camaraderie, joyousness and democracy pervade the vessel. … The feeling of having shared in a common peril is one element in the powerful cement which binds us. But that in itself would never have held us together as we are now joined (Alcoholics Anonymous 2008: 19).

This quotation comes from Alcoholics Anonymous, affectionately called the Big Book, which serves as the backbone of the practices of Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) (Alcoholics Anonymous 2008). While this passage initially appeared in the first printing of Alcoholics Anonymous in 1939, my research reveals that this camaraderie between “people who would not normally mix” remains a fundamental feature of the organization nearly eighty years later. My field notes from one meeting read:

The 37-person group is comprised of men and women of varying ages, ethnicities, and (seemingly) socioeconomic backgrounds. It is a near even split of White and Black attendees, group members with caramel skin and Spanish-sounding accents that I assume to be Latinx, and two Asian Americans. There are women in their mid-forties who carry expensive designer purses, men in jeans and work boots that look as if they’ve walked off a construction site, a woman who appears to be in her 70’s with a deep blue pixie cut and
suspiciously smooth skin, and several younger looking women who I would be unsurprised to run into at a music venue in Williamsburg.¹ [Field note, March 29, 2017]

Despite the superficial differences of the members in attendance, the community ethos present in the room could not have been more evident, as shares continually included messages of gratitude, support, and love.

The importance of unity is made abundantly clear in the texts of A.A. In his book As Bill Sees It, A.A. founder Bill Wilson writes:

The unity of A.A. is the most cherished quality our Society has. Our lives, the lives of all to come, depend squarely upon it. Without unity, the heart of A.A. would cease to beat; our world arteries would no longer carry the life-giving grace of God” (Wilson 2000: 125).

Other appeals for unity from the foundational texts of the fellowship include: “Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends on A.A. unity” (Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions 2011:129); “The remarkable unity of A.A. is one of the greatest assets that our Society has” (Alcoholics Anonymous 2008: xix); “Realization dawns on each member that he is but a small part of a great whole; that no personal sacrifice is too great for preservation of the Fellowship…. It becomes plain that the group must survive or the individual will not” (Wilson 2000: 9); “The conviction grew that A.A.’s had to hang together or die separately. We had to unify our Fellowship or pass off the scene” (Alcoholics Anonymous 2008: xix). These quotations are only a sampling of the calls for community ties present in the texts of A.A.

Throughout my interviews with members of A.A., participants repeatedly attested to the

¹ Williamsburg is a neighborhood in Brooklyn, NY known for its community of aspiring artists and plethora of DIY music venues.
truth of these quotations. Each time they did so, I asked them for insights into how this sense of unity is achieved. Over and over again, I got nearly the same response:

The thing about A.A. is that there’s a “singleness of purpose,” is what people call it, which is to stay sober and to help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety. That is the exact verbiage. [Interview, December 09, 2017]

You know, I think that this primary purpose thing, that we literally have one reason that we’ve gotten together and that is to not drink, is a big leveler. It means that nothing else matters. And it’s life or death. Not in a hyperbolic way. [Interview, December 16, 2017]

Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics stay sober. [Interview, December 18, 2017]

I think a really important aspect of the community is that our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics achieve sobriety…. That’s really what it’s all about. So, whether I like you or not, whether we like each other, if you need help, and if you’re a newcomer especially, if you’re anyone who needs help, I’m going to put all my opinions to the side because this is my purpose. [Interview, January 14, 2018]

No one is more important than another person, whether you work for GSR\(^2\) and you work below the group level, or you’re making coffee, it doesn’t matter. We’re all just as integral to the program and the traditions make that very clear. The traditions are basically saying,

\(^2\) General Service Representative
we have no views on outside issues, we’re fully self-supporting, we’re all the same—we’re all on equal playing ground here, all we need to do is want to stop drinking. And it brings us all down to a neutral level where, whatever your opinions are, whatever your thoughts are, this is our primary purpose. [Interview, January 14, 2018]

It is striking—to the point of being a little bit eerie—how closely the language of these answers mirrors each other. However, this language is not coincidental. It is sourced directly from The Preamble (Appendix A), which is read at the start of most A.A. meetings (Alcoholics Anonymous 2017). These participants’ responses do much more than acknowledge the prioritization of the maintenance of sobriety in A.A.: they reveal the frequent enactment of a deeply ingrained, specialized rhetoric within the community that is rooted in the program texts. Herein, I present the findings of an ethnographic study that explores the role of this shared language in A.A. I identify pathways by which the codified language of A.A. facilitates the creation of interpersonal relationships and contributes to establishment of the community ethos prevalent within the Society.

A Brief History of A.A.

Alcoholics Anonymous is a mutual self-help group aimed at helping members achieve and maintain sobriety. It was first established in 1935 in Akron, Ohio as the result the meeting of co-founders Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith (who thereafter became known in A.A. as Bill W. and Dr. Bob), who helped each other on the path to sobriety through the development of concrete steps and, equally importantly, through the sharing of their stories with each other, their mutual support, and their camaraderie (Alcoholics Anonymous 2008). The first group formed in Akron as Bill W. and Dr. Bob met and began working with other alcoholics in groups that promoted equality, tolerance, and support. By 1939, three groups existed: one in Akron, one in New York City, and one in
Cleveland, Ohio. In the first four years of A.A.’s existence, these three founding groups helped 100 alcoholics achieve sobriety (Alcoholics Anonymous 2008). At that time, the first edition of Alcoholics Anonymous, which serves as the core text of the program, was published. The book outlines the twelve steps that are recommended to achieve sobriety (Appendix B) as well as examples of how to use the steps and testimonies of members who have used and benefitted from the practices outlined in the book. The first edition of the book, printed in 1939, sold 300,000 copies. The book is now in its fourth edition. (Alcoholics Anonymous 2008). As of 2008, in the fourth edition’s twenty-first printing, nearly 30 million copies of the book have been printed. In 2012, the Library of Congress named Alcoholics Anonymous one of the 88 “Books That Shaped America.” (http://www.A.A.org/press-releases/en_US/press-releases/A.A.s-big-book-alcoholics-anonymous-named-by-library-of-congress-as-one-of-the-books-that-shaped-america). The Big Book lists no author, though other texts identify that it was written by Bill W. with input from the society’s various members (Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions 2011; Wilson, Bill 2000).

The Twelve Steps are mirrored by the Twelve Traditions (Appendix C). As a pair, these are often referred to as “the Twelve and Twelve” within the A.A. community. The Twelve Steps outline a personal guide for achieving sobriety, while the Twelve Traditions outline the principles of A.A. as an institution. The traditions make clear that A.A. is not, and should never be, a formal organization. Rather, it is a network, often referred to by members and in the Big Book as a program, Society, Fellowship, or Alliance, which has no merit structure or hierarchy (Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions 2011). Organizations have developed as hubs that distribute literature and organize conferences of groups, but each individual group is self-sustaining and egalitarian in structure. Arguably, the most important support organization that has developed is Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., which distributes information, helps participants find meeting locations, hosts a yearly conference for members, and maintains an emergency hotline. The
organization, however, does not host a group meeting, nor does it attempt to influence the operations of individual groups. Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc. was formerly known as The A.A. Grapevine, Inc., and is responsible for the publication of the Big Book and *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (http://www.A.A.org/pages/en_US/A.A.-literature).

**Literature Review**

There is great scholarly interest in Alcoholics Anonymous across a variety of fields. The medical community, psychologists, and behavioral scientists have long been interested in the program (Kelly 2016; Tiebout 1954; Bateson 1971; Beckman 1980; Brundage 1985, Humphreys 2004). Theologians and psychologists alike have expended a great deal of effort examining the role of spirituality in the program (Thatcher 2011; Tonigan 2007; Kelly 2016; Kurtz & Ketcham 1992), and sociologists, psychiatrists, and other medical professionals have conducted numerous outcome studies in attempts to better understand the effectiveness of A.A. (Emrick et al. 1993; Tonigan, Toscova, & Miller 1996; Vaillant 1995; Vailant & Milofsky 1983; Ditman 1967; Brandsma, Maultby & Welsh 1980; Walsh et al 1991; Humphreys & Moos 1996; Kaskutas 2009; Jang 2014; Emrick 1989; Kownacki and Shadish 1999; Krentzman et al. 2010; Allen 2000). For the sake of my work, however, this literature review will focus on research in the social sciences that explores the relational aspects of the program and includes examination of language use in the community. I turn my attention to an area of research that is particularly relevant to my work: the role of language in identity formation. Currently, this is one of the most robust bodies of work that considers the role of language in A.A. and is a particularly useful springboard for my own studies.

**Language in Identity Formation**

Identification is the most important thing, which is to say that the biggest emphasis is on
what you have in common with people. And that is how we kind of maintain this equality and the shared sense of identity. [Interview, December 09, 2017]

As this A.A. member explains, members’ abilities to create and maintain a shared identity within the program are essential to fostering a sense of equality in the rooms. In examining Alcoholics Anonymous as a community, social scientists have explored the process of identity renegotiation that members of the program undergo as they assimilate into the society (Humphreys 1993; Rudy 1986). Directly to this point, James Hedges writes that “identity is the process and product of [A.A.]” (2008: iv). Diane Witmer expresses a similar sentiment when she writes, “As A.A. members accept themselves and each other, they create and are recreated by an organizational culture of sobriety” (1997:325).

In an exploration of identification within empathic communities, pastor and ethnographer Sonia Waters recognizes that involvement with A.A. allows one of her interview participants to completely reconstruct her identity. She writes that “This new identity… allow[s] for a sense of meaning, agency, and dignity to emerge from what was experienced in the moment as senselessness, helplessness, and despair” (Waters 2015:774). As engagement in A.A. allows alcoholics to renegotiate their identities, members are able to find comfort in the community and renewed hope through constructing meaning where none previously existed. An additional positive outcome of this identification is greater success in the program and sustained sobriety through the empowerment that communal identification provides (Young 2011; Swora 2004).

Scholars note that the relational aspects of the community and the specific language used are essential to this process of identification (Hall 2008; Jones 2014; Rassumen and Capaldi 1990; Thatcher 2007). Referring to the Big Book, linguist Alice Carey Jones writes, “The text provides community members with ways of conceiving that enable them to form new identities” (2014:11).
She explains:

Through repetition of pieces of the text that are reproduced in A.A. talk, the process of assimilation requires building a new vocabulary. The new vocabulary not only provides members with the actual words to describe their experience, but, perhaps most importantly, these words give A.A.s new ways of conceptualizing their experience (2014:10).

By reconstructing their understanding of past experiences through use of the language and ideologies of A.A., recovering alcoholics are able to mentally situate themselves as members of the A.A. community.


Because members are declaring themselves as alcoholic in the context of A.A., they are not solely articulating a problematic relationship to alcohol, but rather are reclaiming their identities as members of a profound fellowship. Sean O’Halloran (2008) notes that locating themselves in A.A. discourse allows members to develop a means through which to view themselves in a new light and to change their perceptions of how they are viewed by others.

While these studies provide important examples of the use of language in A.A., they largely consider what Humphreys refers to as “intrapersonal variables” (2004:121). In this work, I turn my attention to the role that language plays in interpersonal relations to better understand the ways that language helps create fellowship within the program. Herein, I draw from a range of disciplines including linguistics, communication psychology, psychiatry, community organizing, psychoanalysis, and narrative studies, and build upon previous work by adding a uniquely sociological perspective. Through this lens, I consider concrete pathways by which the rhetoric of A.A. facilitates interactions and connections between members of the program.
Methods

When I began this project, I set out to explore the role of spirituality in Alcohoholics Anonymous (A.A.). The program, about which I knew little more than what I had absorbed from popular culture, intrigued me as a point of intersection where individuals with a variety of beliefs were discussing their spiritual experiences and connecting on a deep level.\(^3\) I hoped, by attending meetings, to better understand how people with different conceptions of ‘Higher Powers’ related to each other and how their different spiritual understandings affected their interactions. But, as I began my field work, ethnography did what it does best: it surprised me. As the editors of *The Urban Ethnography Reader* so sagely write, “surprises are the essence of ethnography, in which research is sometimes indebted to serendipity and the discovery of valuable things that had not been originally sought” (Duneier, Kasinitz, & Murphy 2014: 3). And so it was with my research.

After my first meeting in a dingy, yellow basement room papered with slogans and sayings, I found myself distracted from my curiosities regarding the spiritual aspects of the program. I had spent an hour in which nearly forty individuals of varying age, race, gender, and socioeconomic status had listened to each other closely, responded earnestly, and ubiquitously treated each other with respect. Instead of “I” and “my,” people described the meetings and situations they were facing with the pronouns “our,” “us,” and “we.” Though a seemingly subtle linguistic nuance, this language pattern was jarring: It was like entering another world; one in which communal experience was put before individual need. The principles of A.A. somehow enabled individual members to transcend social hierarchy, if only for that hour, to function as a fellowship of equals.

\(^3\) In A.A., spiritual enlightenment is regarded as essential to successful sobriety, but the nature of each member’s spiritual understanding is open to their unique interpretation.
And it did so with a language all its own. Over the next several months, I attended meetings, conducted participant observations, and interviewed members in an effort to better understand how language fosters a sense of community within A.A.

*Ethnography*

The aim of ethnographic investigation is “to describe a system of relationships, to show how things hang together in a web of mutual influence or support or interdependence or what have you, to describe the connections between the specifics the ethnographer knows by virtue of having been there” (Becker 1996:56). I could not create a more apt description of my goals, as, in my case, I sought to understand not only how things hang together in a web of mutual influence, but how people do so.

By virtue of its structured meetings, A.A. proved to be an ideal setting in which to conduct participant observation research, and I was in a perfect location to do so. As one interview participant told me, New York City is considered a mecca of Alcoholics Anonymous:

People talk a lot about how amazing New York A.A. is. I would have a tendency to believe that. People say that great drinking cities are great A.A. cities. Apparently, London is great. LA’s great. You know, there’s shit tons of alcoholics. And you really need a super strong A.A. to counteract the other culture. [Interview, December 09, 2017]

The strength of the A.A. culture in New York is manifested in the form of hundreds of meetings across the city weekly and active participation by thousands of New Yorkers. The availability of open meetings allowed me to enter the world of A.A. in its ‘natural setting.’ Through meeting attendance, I was able to observe the organization’s authentic activities rather than creating a staged or orchestrated research environment. By viewing and participating in the inner workings of
A.A. as they naturally occur, I believe I have gleaned insight into how language contributes to community ethos in the program. I have worked to thoughtfully and meaningfully present those findings in this work.

*Description of Fieldwork Sites and Research Participants*

I conducted my research in two discrete periods. First, between the months of February and April, 2017, I attended A.A. meetings weekly, where I carried out participant observation research. Later, between December 2017 and January 2018, I conducted in-depth interviews with A.A. members. All of my research was conducted in New York City. The meetings I attended were located in a neighborhood of the city that boasts a diverse population—ethnically, racially, and socioeconomically—while interviews were conducted across the boroughs in locations selected by the participants.

Over the course of this study, I attended twelve meetings, all of them designated ‘open,’ at which alcoholics and non-alcoholics alike are welcome. Of these meetings, two were women’s-only meetings, while the rest were open to all. Though I didn’t attend the same meeting every week, I attended each at least twice, and by the end of three months in the field, many faces had become familiar.

Most often, I attended single-speaker meetings. The basic format of a single-speaker meeting consists of a 20-minute share by a member of A.A. followed by four-minute responses by various members of the group. The initial speaker, who volunteers for the role, chooses a theme to highlight. He or she shapes his share around this theme, which serves as the common thread of the meeting. Themes I heard spoken to included change, resistance, growth, and unmanageability. The

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4 “Share” is the term used in A.A. to describe a speaker’s presentation of their story as well as the subsequent responses offered by members of the group.
speaker’s share usually includes a history of his alcohol use, his road to recovery, and his current successes and struggles. After the speaker’s story, other members of the group respond in four-minute shares. Groups have different methods of choosing who responds to the speaker’s share: some go round-robin around the room (individuals are allowed to pass if they prefer not to speak), some are selected by a show of hands, and some groups use a mixture of the two.

In addition to single-speaker meetings, I also attended topic discussion meetings, in which members propose four topics to prompt the next hour of conversation. Members respond—again either round robin or by a show of hands—in four-minute intervals, using the agreed upon topics to guide their shares.

I did not audio or video record any of the meetings or the conversations I had before or after meetings, nor—for the most part—did I take notes during the meetings. On occasion, I used my phone to write down sayings or phrases that were unfamiliar to me while the meeting was in progress. I never used a notebook or computer to note anything during a meeting, and I wrote up my field notes away from meeting spaces.

In the second phase of my research, I conducted six in-depth interviews, each of which lasted between 60 and 75 minutes. I was connected to my first participant through a mutual friend. After our interview, she offered to ask members of her home groups if they’d be willing to speak with me as well. My interview participants were all recruited through this connection. Five of the interview participants were women, though one identified as female but “in many ways non-binary,” and one was male. All of them were White and had steady sources of income and housing. Two women identified as queer; the others identified as heterosexual. Participants were between the ages of 26 and 37 and had varying times of sobriety. On the low end was a woman who was

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5 A home group is one of the groups that an individual attends weekly and at which he or she has a consistent service commitment.
approaching nine months of sobriety, and on the high end was a woman who was celebrating eleven and a half years sober. The relative homogeneity of this sample is a weakness of this research. In further studies, I would seek to diversify my sample with participants of different races, ethnicities, ages, socioeconomic situations, and lengths of sobriety. An additional weakness comes from the fact that all of these interviewees are part of the same network of sobriety. While all of them attend multiple groups and thus have a variety of meeting experiences, they also have many common experiences, which cannot provide a holistic view of the program. It does, however, offer insight into the state of the program in this area of New York City, and many of the participants have moved or traveled during their sobriety and commented on their experiences in A.A. meetings across the country and internationally. Their experiences in different areas of the country and world are especially important to lending insight into how the findings presented in this paper may apply to the program beyond the scope of New York City.

A short note about my relationship to my interview participants: I am a White, heterosexual woman in my mid-twenties and identify as socially and politically liberal. I have a community of queer friends and come from a middle-class background. These characteristics are similar to many of my interview participants and minimized my sources of “otherness.” Put colloquially, each of my participants was someone I could imagine being friends with outside of this work. This undoubtedly contributed to the ease of conversation and establishment of trust; our interview questions were frequently punctuated by laughter and people did not hesitate to be vulnerable in front of me. Interviewing a cohort of individuals with which I have less in common may introduce greater challenges in forming authentic, honest relationships. This is something I must be sensitive to as I continue this work and broaden my sample.

6 A.A. groups have “anniversary parties” to celebrate significant lengths of sobriety.
Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Participants were invited to choose interview locations. Of the six interviews, only one was conducted in a private setting. The rest were done over coffee or tea at cafes around the city.

For the sake of anonymity, all names of participants have been changed, as have names and identifying features of individuals that were referred to during interviews. Pseudonyms chosen are consistent with the ethnicity and gender of the participants. Some descriptors have been intentionally omitted so that no individuals, meeting spaces, or groups are named or described with enough detail to be identified.

The Texts

In addition to my participant observation and interviews, primary and secondary literature on Alcoholics Anonymous have been invaluable (and in many cases, essential) components of this work. I could not have conducted this study without close readings of the seminal texts Alcoholics Anonymous and Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. These texts serve as foundational elements of the A.A. program and are the context in which most participants are first exposed to the vernacular of A.A. By immersing myself in these books, I came to understand the origins of A.A. language and the context in which it was initially employed.

Additionally, I am indebted to the many ethnographers who have come before me who have contributed to the body of scholarly work about A.A. Though much of the ethnographic work I encountered did not assess the language used by members, the testimonies recorded and observations made were data that could be reanalyzed through the lens of my research questions. These data complimented my own fieldwork to provide an even richer understanding of A.A. activities and experiences.
My Role

It is essential to acknowledge my outsider status in this study. I do not suffer\(^7\) from alcoholism, nor do I have a history of substance abuse in my family. I held no personal or professional connection to A.A. before undertaking this research. My outsider status had many concrete limitations to my work. Not being a member of the program, I only attended ‘open’ meetings.\(^8\) I could not work the steps, have or be a sponsor, and—most importantly—cannot know how it truly feels to be an alcoholic or an active member of the program. Though I did my best to make thorough observations and understand my interview participants’ meanings as best I could, this was done without personal experience with the program as a means of recovery. As such, I can only offer an etic perspective on the subject (Harris, Headland & Pike 1990; Naaeke, Kurylo, Grabowski, Linton, & Radford 2011). My point of view is inevitably different from those who ‘work’ the program and must be received with this in mind.

In meetings, my outsider status allowed for limited participation. For example, share time is reserved for recovering alcoholics who feel they need to speak to sustain their sobriety, and non-members are discouraged from speaking. However, there are various moments in the meeting during which the entire group responds. These served as low-stakes, unobtrusive ways to involve myself in the meeting process. When newcomers or members who were celebrating an anniversary identified themselves at the start of the meeting, I would join in the applause. When people introduced themselves before their shares, I would join in greeting them, and would thank them at

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\(^7\) Here, I use the word suffer to denote a definition of alcoholism consistent with how it is understood in A.A. Alcoholics Anonymous makes clear that, rather than a temporary condition, alcoholism is a disease to which there is no cure (Alcoholics Anonymous 2008: xxviii).

\(^8\) True to its Traditions, A.A. does not have anyone who monitors or vets its attendees. As such, there is no part of a meeting in which you must identify yourself as an alcoholic or ‘not in the program,’ as the lingo dictates. The decision not to attend closed meetings was entirely my own and made out of respect for the program and its participants.
the close of their share along with the rest of the group. At the end of the meeting, I would take the hands of the people next to me as we all recited the Serenity Prayer together (Appendix D). These were especially easy ways to be an active participant. I found it much more challenging to engage in interactions that were not built into the structure of the meeting.

Initially, I would arrive just as the meeting was starting so I could avoid having to make small talk before it began. However, as I became more comfortable with the program, I started arriving five or ten minutes early and staying ten or twenty minutes after the meeting closed to speak casually with people. Before the meetings, the talk was generally light chit chat. I shook hands with people I didn’t know, asked them about their day, commented on the weather. However, the mood changed significantly after the meeting: the meetings were vulnerable places in which individuals shared deeply personal experiences and struggles. Afterwards, interactions were more substantial. At this time, I frequently shared my gratitude for individuals’ willingness to share their stories, and many times spoke of ways in which I identified with them. Reciprocating their vulnerability in this way allowed me to feel less like a voyeur and seemed a way to gain individuals’ compassion and trust.

When I started this research, I generally avoided mentioning my work. I would share that I wasn’t in the program, but didn’t elaborate. Most often I was not pushed on the subject, though when people did ask, I responded that I was a student and at the meeting as part of my schoolwork. (It is common for nursing, social work, and psychology students to attend A.A. meetings in the course of their studies, and many of the long-time members of A.A. are familiar with students being present.) As my comfort with meetings and my project grew, I more readily brought up my academic interest in A.A. as the catalyst for my attendance at meetings. I was often humbled by people’s responses: while I expected to be met with skepticism, most people were warm and welcoming. A few even exchanged phone numbers with me and offered to speak to me about A.A.
if I had any questions. Several expressed the hope that they’d see me again. I am exceedingly grateful for the hospitality I was shown and the welcoming spirit of Alcoholics Anonymous.
Findings

When the hour is up, we make our way into a circle that hugs the perimeter of the room. Scuffles and clangs fill the air as black metal folding chairs are pushed out of the way. We all clasp hands. “What did we say in rehab?” Bruce—the meeting chair—thinks aloud. “Right,” he says, addressing the group now, “We hold hands to remember that we can do together what we can’t do alone. Something like that.” Then Frank kicks off the serenity prayer with “Who woke us up today?!” He says it like he’s starting some sort of chant or pump up cheer before a football game. In unison, the group answers, “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.” We shake our clasped hands and say, “Keep coming back. It works if you work it, so work it, you’re worth it...”

When I attended the meeting at which the above vignette occurred in early April 2017, I could only uncertainly recite the Serenity Prayer, had never heard the saying Bruce shared from his rehab experience, and couldn’t even pretend to join in the closing chant, it was done so quickly. Entering the world of A.A. as a complete outsider, I was confronted with slogans and language with which I was unfamiliar and had no context for understanding.

At another meeting, which I had attended a few weeks earlier, I took the following field note:

A term I heard several times was “character defect.” It seems to be a coded word, and I wonder if it appears in the Big Book or Twelve and Twelve, or if it’s something that A.A. culture has developed outside of this. [Field note, March 15, 2017]
This thought, which was jotted down as an aside, marked the beginning of my curiosity about the use of language in Alcoholics Anonymous. I quickly learned that “character defects” is indeed a phrase that shows up everywhere in A.A.: It is in Steps 6 and 7, used throughout the Big Book, and commonly employed at meetings to describe frustrations with personal growth and change.

During my time attending A.A. meetings and through many conversations with participants, I began to acquire the language and culture of A.A., and to communicate in the vernacular of the community. Noting the centrality of communication in the enactment of A.A., Diane Witmer writes, “Colloquy between members at both the individual and groups levels continues to be a cornerstone of Alcoholics Anonymous” (1997: 324). As such, understanding the fellowship’s rhetoric is essential to fully participating in the program.

In practice, this is a daunting task. As one of my interview participants said of her attendance at her first few meetings, “I really did feel like it was a different language. I didn’t know what anyone was talking about.” Similarly, a speaker at a meeting shared, “They were using all these acronyms and sayings and I didn’t understand a word of it. They could have been speaking Japanese.” I myself, upon entering the world of A.A., had the very same experience. Alcoholics Anonymous truly is a society with a language all its own (Denzin, 1987).

Back to the Source

Alcoholics Anonymous is an organization that has grown almost exclusively out of oral tradition. Because of the lack of hierarchy or formalization of the community, no one is now—or has ever been—in charge. When the founders of A.A. died, they did not “pass the torch,” so to speak; there was no training for the next leaders, no Last Will and Testament of A.A. While they were alive, the founders published a handful of texts, the most notable of which are Alcoholics Anonymous (affectionately called the ‘Big Book’) and Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions (more
commonly referred to as the ‘Twelve and Twelve’). These texts have been fundamental building blocks in the development of A.A. language (Denzin 1995; Denzin 2009). Over the last eight decades, tradition has held these books as essential to effectively working the program and they have been read by members across the globe. In this way, so many decades after the authors of the books passed on, their words continue to shape the society of A.A.

Before narrowing my focus to examine the language of A.A. literature, it is important to note their structure, as they provide examples for A.A.s to share their own stories. Both books present guidelines for how to live and work the program alongside current and past participants’ testaments of their experiences. They strategically parallel the steps and traditions of the program with examples of how these tools are enacted in the lives of members. In this way, the literature sets a precedent for weaving the steps and traditions into the narratives of A.A. members. It directly encourages them to draw upon the language of A.A. as a tool for sharing their stories (Humphreys 2004).

Throughout my interviews, participants affirmed the vital role that the texts play in keeping the culture of A.A. alive. One participant told me, “the literature is what unifies us, in a way.” One way it does this is by providing a common set of terminologies with which members can discuss their experiences. As I attended meetings, I noticed that language with specific meaning in the context of A.A. was employed in nearly every share. As with “character defects,” most of this language is sourced directly from one of the books. A member of the program explained:

Most of the buzz words are somewhere from the literature. So, character defects are from the seventh step. “Humbly asked him to remove all defects of character” is the seventh step. So that’s where that’s from. And unmanageability is from the first step. “We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol, that our lives had become unmanageable.” So they’re buzz words related to the steps. But it’s not just in the steps. It’s also from the book. Someone at
the meeting today referenced the “bedevilments,” and I know what page he’s talking about. And who fucking says bedevilments? So he says that as he’s talking and I don’t know that everyone has this experience, because I’m quite in the book and I’m like “gay for A.A.—” I’m really into it. So he mentions that and I’m like, oh I know the whole context of what he’s referencing. [Interview, December 16, 2017]

As this member explains, the texts are important for more than just introducing terminology; they also create a rich context through which to understand it. In this way, the books both provide and define much of the language of A.A. Because scholars have noted that “[h]ow a concept is thought of in one discourse community could be quite different than how it is understood in another,” this contextualization is an essential function of the texts with regard to language usage in A.A. (Jones, Alice C. 2014:4; Humphreys, K. 2000).

Additionally, using book-sourced language plays an important part in keeping the society of A.A. consistent. A participant explained:

The literature is a really, really important factor in maintaining continuity between different places, because it’s unchanging. And they’re really, even though, for example, the Big Book, which is our primary text and was the first one, they have four different editions of it, and in the forwards they’re really explicit about what they have changed and what they have not changed, and it’s essentially nothing. They’ve changed nothing. [Interview, December 16, 2017]

As John Swales identifies, discourse communities can rely on texts as much as they do on speech, which allows the language to transcend time and space (1987). Jones affirms, “[This is] especially true of A.A. members’ discourse because A.A. is world wide and all of its members, regardless of
location, work from the same seminal texts” (2014: 7). Because the language of the literature has been preserved since the first publication of the Big Book in 1939, members across generations and regions can rely on it as a tool for communication.

This was illustrated in a meeting I attended at which an out-of-towner quoted the Big Book directly in his share:

Steven was visiting New York City from Washington state with his wife. He expressed, in a Midwestern twang, his excitement at finding that Manhattan—unlike “the sticks” where he lives—hosts A.A. meetings all over the city at all hours of the day. He had found this meeting time and location on his phone and had wandered in just as the meeting started. As he went on with his share, he recited a quotation from the Big Book. At this, members of the group nodded along in recognition and affirmation.

Despite the fact that Steven had never been to this meeting—or even New York City—before, he was able to connect with group members by drawing upon the common literature of the community. It is not unusual to hear the Big Book quoted directly at meetings. Often, it is quoted in the same way in which I have heard the Bible quoted: “As it says on page xxx of the Big Book…” a member would begin. Alice Jones writes that “uses of memorized material from the A.A. text hold pragmatic significance in the context of the A.A. audience members who come to recognize it from the A.A. text after repeated reading and listening exposure to the material and then privilege it as a result of that recognition” (2014:79). Not only did I observe this to be true, but I saw how this privileging of A.A. text excerpts facilitates connection between individuals, as it did for out-of-towner Steven and the other meeting attendees.

In It Together

One overt and simple way that A.A. promotes unity in its texts is through the use of first
person plural pronouns. Instead of *I* or *my*, the Steps, Traditions, and much of the Big Book is written from the viewpoint of *we*, *ours*, and *us*. Some examples include the First Step, which reads, “We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable” (Alcoholics Anonymous 2008:59); the first Tradition, which states, “Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends on A.A. unity” (Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions 2011:129); and the final sentence of The Preamble, which reads, “Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety” (Alcoholics Anonymous 2017). This linguistic pattern grew from the origins of the Big Book and Twelve and Twelve, which were compiled by the 100 or so participants who were members of A.A. at the time of the first printing: It was a means of the founders collectively expressing their experiences. However, presently each of these—the Steps, Traditions, and Preamble—is read aloud at every meeting, still enacting the verbiage “we.” This has transformed what was a proclamation by a group of people into an affirmation and internalization of these principles by current members (Jones 2014).

There is a section of the Big Book that contains what members call the A.A. “promises,” which is read at some meetings as well. The reading of the promises ends with the following call and response, which comes from the book: “Are these extravagant promises?” “We think not” (2008: 84). By enacting communal pronouns and responses such as these, A.A. members initiate a mechanism for habitually thinking in terms of communal ties. Sonia Waters suggests that “Hearing oneself speak also helps reinforce the principles, sayings, and the messages of the A.A. program…. They [A.A. members] also internalize the catchy phrases or A.A. principles that make up the A.A. interpretive structure of storytelling that represent the A.A. community” (2015:774-5). While Waters considers internalization of A.A. rhetoric in the context of storytelling, the point she makes is still applicable when taking a more microscopic view of the language itself. This is supported by the following observation I made in the field:
Bernice, a heavyset Black woman in her mid-sixties with 17 years sober, who introduced herself as a “grateful, blessed Alcoholic,” has been asked to lead the closing prayer. Before guiding us in a moment of silence, she looks around the room with bright eyes and earnestly effuses, “Thank you all for saving my life.” [Field note, March 29, 2017]

Being still new to meetings and the rhetoric of the program, I found Bernice’s address to us “all” jarring: This meeting was the first time I’d met Bernice—from a literal standpoint, I indisputably played no part in saving her life. However, the language Bernice engaged is consistent with the rhetoric of communal action and reaction presented in the texts of A.A. and practices in the meeting rooms, and suggests that the notion has shaped how she views the program and, importantly, her relationship to its members.

The use of plural pronouns is a simple yet meaningful way that A.A. both reveals and reinforces a sense of shared mission and identity in the program. Delving deeper into the texts, shares, and interviews uncovers a much greater and more complex wealth of language that further scaffolds relationships.

* * * *

I meet Sam on a sunny December afternoon in a crowded Brooklyn coffee shop. This particular café roasts its own coffee, which is served in large porcelain mugs for $2.00 a cup, and offers an assortment of pastries, salads, breakfast sandwiches served on baguettes, and the best basil lemonade I’ve ever had. Every inch of the shop is full: its floorplan is strategically laid out to accommodate as many customers as possible, and on this Saturday afternoon, it is packed to the brim. In order to snag two chairs at the bar along the wall, I have to negotiate my way between
small round tables adorned with tasteful bud vases, and dozens of coffee-sipping Brooklnites working on laptops or leaning in towards their table-mates to carry on conversation over the considerable noise that fills shop.

Sam is dressed casually, by what I would call Brooklyn, middle-class standards: she wears jeans, a sweater, boots with a small heel, and simple jewelry. She has a pleasant air about her, and smiles frequently. She sips a grapefruit flavored seltzer and I indulge my daily caffeine fix as she generously tells me her story.

Sam is a White 36-year-old woman who has been in recovery for 11 and a half years. After getting sober in her twenties, she went back to school to become an architect and moved to New York City five years ago to establish her career. Sam tells me of the history of alcoholism in her family and her exposure to A.A. before she herself ever touched a drink: when she was seven years old, her parents divorced over her father’s drinking habits. It was then that he joined A.A. and her mother joined Al-Anon. Sam attests to the complete transformation that she observed in both of her parents as she saw them each go through 12-step programs. The following is an excerpt from our interview in which Sam relates to me her experience with the language and culture of A.A.:

[Talya]: I don’t know how much of the nitty gritty you knew from growing up with knowledge of the 12-step program, but what was the process of getting to know the language and the literature and the rituals?

[Sam]: I probably knew some. When I would struggle with something and talk to my parents about it, I realize in retrospect they were definitely feeding me A.A. principles of like, setting boundaries, and I mean, at this point it’s very common for people to talk about setting boundaries. Like, my mother would quote the Serenity Prayer to me when we were talking, when I would tell her about things I was struggling with in school or something like that. So those principles were already in my head, but the vocabulary, I didn’t know. I
didn’t know which step was which. It’s kind of fun. I feel like it’s a fun secret language in a way. There’s so much fun secret lingo. I enjoyed learning about it and learning the little traditions and rituals, like what you mentioned before. I love all that stuff, so it’s fun.

[T]: Will you say more about that?

[S]: I don’t know, it’s like having a secret club where you get to save lives. It’s fun. And there’s always someone new coming in and you get to explain it again, and who is like… You know, you’ll say something to them like, “You know what, you should just turn it over to your higher power.” And they’re like, “WhoA.A.A.A.a,” and meanwhile, that’s something everyone says all day every day. But they think you’re the fucking Buddha because you said this basic thing to them, and so that’s kind of awesome to get to be that person for someone. And sometimes I’ll be socializing in a non-A.A. environment and I’ll notice words someone else is using. They’ll be like, “Oh I’m feeling really unmanageable about this.” And I’ll be like, “Unmanageable, eh?” Who says unmanageable? Alcoholics. In the first step, powerlessness and unmanageability is all in there. There’s these buzzwords you can hear. Even celebrities will be giving a talk and you’ll hear something and be like, I bet they’re sober. And I’ll google it and it’ll be like, “Yep. They’re sober.” It’s a secret club, man.

* * * * *

In this excerpt, Sam explicitly identifies the distinctive use of language in A.A. While the words that Sam points out, such as unmanageability and powerlessness are not unique to A.A.—they are, of course, established words in the English language—they take on a specific meaning in the context of the program. Sam acknowledges how infrequent it is to hear these spoken by
someone not in the program, as well as the words’ roots in A.A.’s literature and program. Through this grounding in literature and oral tradition, the vocabulary becomes part of a rhetoric of sobriety that allows alcoholics to identify one another and establish their status as insiders. Additionally, when Sam locates the source of these words in A.A. texts, she illustrates the context that these words have in the community—a context which gives them a specificity and import that they don’t hold outside of the framework of A.A. (Jones 2014).

The description of A.A. as a “secret club,” or as another interview participant referred to it, a “secret society,” conveys a sense of community and camaraderie that exists within the fellowship. The “secret language” of A.A. plays an important role in cementing this view of the program. As additional interview excerpts and field notes further illustrate, the words, sayings, and language patterns employed in A.A. are exceptionally influential in facilitating the creation of a cohesive and supportive environment.

**Talking the Talk**

More than anything else we are in the outside world, we are all alcoholics, and in the program that means the same thing. [Interview, December 09, 2017]

The language of Alcoholics Anonymous is so filled with nuance that, as an outsider, it is sometimes difficult to discern when A.A. rhetoric is being employed. For example, in the above quotation, this member labels ‘alcoholic’ as a descriptor with a common meaning within the program. But doesn’t alcoholic always mean the same thing?

So many times during my field work I found myself perplexed by situations like this: I heard terms and words with which I was familiar, only to find that I was interpreting them in a way that was inconsistent with their meaning within the context of A.A. Over the course of my research,
I came to identify two types of A.A. language: one, common English language with particular meaning in the context of the program, and the other, sayings that are specific to A.A. (though many of these have now been adopted by other mutual help groups (Maton & Salem 1995; Humphreys 2000)). Before beginning this work, I had encountered a few common A.A. slogans in popular culture: “One day at a time,” “Keep it simple,” and “Live and let live” were all phrases I had heard before in relation to A.A. Admittedly, I regarded these sayings as trite clichés. I didn’t imagine that they could truly aid in the maintenance of sobriety, and certainly never regarded them as an important part of community creation within the fellowship of A.A.

Included in the first category of A.A. language, common terms with program-specific meaning, are: alcoholic, good sobriety, the rooms, service, and ‘sick and suffering.’ This is only a very small sample of the terminology that is used in A.A. specific context, but these words are ones that came up frequently in my fieldwork. Very often during interviews, members used these phrases without exposition. Because A.A. terminology is so ingrained in their working of the program, they didn’t seem to realize that they were using language that I, as an outsider, might not understand. As Jones writes:

Using idioms, formulaic language, and frequent collocations of a given language lends a strong sense of fluency to a speaker’s diction, whether that language is the native tongue, a non-native language, or a specialized language. Because these phrases are so deeply embedded in the thinking and in the lexicons of the respective discourse communities, their frequency and functions can often be taken for granted by their practiced speakers (2014: 70).

A (non-exhaustive) list of A.A. terminology is presented as an index in *As Bill Sees It* and appears in Appendix E.
I observe this when talking to A.A. member Sara, who is two and a half years sober when we meet. In explaining to me how she balances focusing on her own experience while identifying with others, she tells me, “Generally, you’re supposed to come to the rooms in service, with an attitude of service towards other alcoholics and as maintenance to your sobriety and your program.” This one sentence is so full of A.A. language that it is nearly incomprehensible—at least in its intended meaning—without previous exposure. I was already familiar with some of these expressions thanks to my fieldwork, but service was a term I had struggled to understand throughout my time in the field, as it is used in a variety of contexts. I asked Sara to define it for me:

[Talya]: Something that I have not been able to pin down is a definition of service. I know there are a lot of facets. Will you give me a list of some things that count as service?

[Sara]: It’s really as much a concept as it is a thing that has… You can think of everything as being in service. If you don’t want to do a thing but you’ve committed to doing it you’d be like, “I’m going to this thing to be of service.” Or if you’re dealing with a person who is sick and suffering, which is to say maybe your crazy mom who isn’t an alcoholic, but is awful, or whatever, or mentally ill or something like that, you go in service of the person who is sick and suffering. It’s a different way of conceiving of yourself. You’re present, you’re not doing harm. And then there’s that all the way over to being a general service representative for your group, where you go to larger meetings of representatives from different groups. There’s often a lot of very literal service roles. Making coffee for the group is considered the first, most important service role that a newcomer fulfills…. Sponsoring is a huge aspect of service. You also are considered to be of service to your sponsor. So, by maintaining that relationship, it helps them stay sober. And so that is, in its way, its own service. I wonder if there actually is a definition… I mean, people say, “Service keeps you
sober.” That’s the tag line. Generally, I think it is a way of conceiving of yourself as a person that lives in service, is the ideal standard. When people tell you to go do service that usually means, go to a meeting and pick up some chairs, do service to your group, or call the newcomer. Contribute in some way to A.A., which is a hugely important thing.

[Interview, December 09, 2017]

I find this response remarkable for several reasons. First, I am struck by how difficult it is for Sara to provide a concise definition of service. Though she is a reporter by profession, and makes her living through words, the vastness of the term ‘service’ in A.A. language results in her asking aloud, “I wonder if there actually is a definition.” However, despite the fact that a single definition is hard to pin down, it is clear that, for Sara, the term holds significant practical meaning. Sara references service as an ideology that is enacted in different circumstances, which she lists off with ease: having a sponsor, making coffee for the group, visiting your crazy mother, etc. The fluency with which she uses the term, despite her inability to clearly articulate a succinct definition, is consistent with the notion that building an A.A.-specific vocabulary helps members connect terms and actions as they re-contextualize their experiences (Jones 2014). While the language is often difficult to define in isolation from A.A. practice, it is innately connected to action and outlook, and connects members through their shared understandings. Additionally, Sara illustrates how A.A. terms work their way into A.A. slogans: “‘Service keeps you sober,’ is the tag line.” In understanding the unique language of A.A., program members are able to weave terminology into, and internalize, slogans that are used worldwide.

Slogans are a particularly important part of A.A. culture. While the slogans of A.A. are too numerous to count, the age of the internet has allowed different compilations of them to be accumulated by group members across the world (Pinellas County Intergroup, Inc; Clean and
Sober, Not Dead; Dream Center for Recovery; Minnesota Recovery Page). Many meeting rooms are covered in framed print-outs or handwritten posters of sayings, and it is highly unusual to sit through a meeting without at least one of these maxims being deployed. A small sample of the sayings that I heard in my time in the field include, “I came for my drinking, I stayed for my thinking;” “Take the best and leave the rest;” “Hurt people hurt people;” and “Denial is more than just a river in Egypt, that’s for fucking sure.” The slogans of A.A. are relied upon for motivation, comfort, levity, and community support (Hall 2008).

It was not until I heard the slogans employed in meetings that I began to understand that they are truly useful tools in helping individuals maintain sobriety. Joe, a thin older Black man at a meeting commented in his share, “Meeting makers make it…. The meetings and the slogans are really what get me through.” In that same meeting, Tony, a heavyset Black man in his sixties drew upon a slogan in his share as well: “I’m 30 years sober, but really I’m one day sober. None of that other shit matters. One day. I have to do it one day at a time.” This meeting was the first time that I’d heard members articulate their reliance on the slogans as transformative, and it allowed me to consider them as a serious language of their own, rather than as flippant sayings. In fact, what I perceived to be silly—the short and often pithy construction of these phrases—is actually integral to their functionality: Hall writes that A.A. members note “the importance of the memorability and brevity of these messages as catchphrases they [can] refer to in daily situations when they [are] not at an A.A. meeting” (2008: 173).

I came to recognize the employment of these terms as a form of code-switching: While small talk before meetings and interviews was often casual and without enactment of A.A. language, once meetings and interviews began, program language was frequent. Iliana Reyes notes in her research that code-switching, especially in social situations, is highly content dependent (2004). So, in discussing their A.A. program in meetings and interviews, participants intuitively
turned directly to the language of the fellowship. Because, as Jones writes, “the use of these phrases signals both cultural and linguistic allegiance to said group,” code switching to the rhetoric of A.A. accentuates the ties members feel to the community (2014: 70).

In identifying the language of A.A. as a sociolinguistic code, we see that language affects not only A.A. members’ relationships to themselves, but how it contributes to the relationships between them. Andry Sophocleous writes, “[Code switching] gives speakers access to different roles of ‘voices’ by switching from one code to another in their attempt to express different social identities through each one (Heller 1992; Gardner-Chloros 2009)” (2011:203). By enacting the code of A.A. language, members express their shared social identity. This is exemplified in the quotation presented at the start of this section, in which member Sara declares, “More than anything else we are in the outside world, we are all alcoholics.”

*You Know What I Mean?*

People refer to ‘the rooms’ and it just means meetings, but it also is this notion of these different constituent basements that create a space that is only ours. It’s not a territorial thing. It’s just, *we know the rules that apply here* (emphasis added). [Interview, December 09, 2017]

Understanding the—often unsaid—norms of Alcoholics Anonymous is a critical aspect of participating in the program. Rules like ‘no cross-talk,’ notions of ‘good sobriety’ and ‘working the program,’ and respecting the Traditions of the organization are essential to integrating oneself into the community. This is a tall order to ask of individuals who have no prior knowledge of these norms (Denzin 1995). As Carole Cain writes, “As a cultural system, and *one that no one is born into*, all of the beliefs of A.A. must be learned” (emphasis added) (1991: 215). Sara, introduced
above discussing the notion of service, explains how this learning is facilitated:

There’s kind of this process of enculturation. Sobriety comes with this, at the same time, what people call ‘good sobriety’ is also a process of enculturation. It means going to 90 meetings in 90 days, ideally, having a sponsor, calling—I don’t do this, but a lot of sponsors will tell you to call three people a day. So, there is this habit of exchanging phone numbers and being in constant contact with other alcoholics. So, there is this, it kind of just wraps itself into your identity. You pick up the language just by being around it. And this notion of what an alcoholic is…. [I]t’s like when you enter any kind of community and you learn its norms, but there’s again, because there’s this high contact element of it—there’s a lot of reaching out to the new person, and there’s a lot of calling each other and you’re supposed to go to all these meetings, you get enculturated, you get incorporated as part of other people’s… it’s part of how they think of their own sobriety and your enculturation is secondary, but it’s also is what happens…. People sort of shepherd you across that cultural boundary. [Interview, December 09, 2017]

This ‘process of enculturation,’ as Sara so beautifully puts it, is consistent with Lave and Wenger’s theory of how communities of practice function (Lave & Wenger 1991). It is a process of ‘situated learning,’ which identifies the process of learning through observation and participation (Lave 1991). Alcoholics Anonymous is remarkable in that this process of participation involves existing members taking newcomers under their wing and, by teaching them the language of the culture, actively incorporating them into the community. This process is essential to leveling the playing field of communication between members of different backgrounds. As A.A. member Mike explained it, “When you’re in that room, everybody is the same. I have never experienced that anywhere else” (Hall 2008:75). By learning the shared language of A.A., members can
communicate with each other as equals.

* * * * *

I’m running late. I push my way past people meandering on the sidewalks as I hurry east across Lower Manhattan and worry about the unprofessionalism of my lateness. Thanks to the winter weather, at least I’m not too sweaty. With just moments to spare before our agreed upon meeting time, I arrive, relieved, at the coffee shop. It’s a small, hip shop and very crowded both inside and—inexplicably—outside. I’ve never met Kate before and don’t know what she looks like, but I gaze around hoping to spot someone else peering around for an unfamiliar, but expected, face. My heart is still pumping from my unanticipated early afternoon jog. After a moment of futilely gazing around the crowd, I take a seat on the bench outside the café and give Kate a call. She answers cheerily and tells me that she’s sitting on the bench outside the café. I look around, perplexed. “But I’m sitting on the bench outside the café,” I tell her. After a few minutes confusion, we realize the mix-up: This coffee shop has two locations on the same avenue. We are both at the coffee shop on Lafayette, but I am twelve blocks south of her. For the second time in fifteen minutes, I find myself pushing through people, rushing across Manhattan, and worrying about the unprofessionalism of my lateness. (While looking around for Kate, I learned that the crowd gathered outside the shop is waiting for a limited streetwear release that is happening at a tiny, nondescript store next door to the café. As I rush to café location number two, no one is eager to get out of my way for fear of losing their spot in the scrum.)

When I finally arrive at my destination, I am effusively apologetic and Kate is utterly unfazed. “Don’t worry about it!” she tells me. “I just got off the phone with my husband. I’m always the late one, so I was telling him, ‘I’m waiting for the girl that I’m meeting with. We’re
running late but this time it’s not even my fault!”” She laughs. Kate puts out the cigarette she’s holding and throws it into the garbage can next to us. We go inside to grab coffees, then head across the street to a less-crowded public meeting space to talk.

Kate is a 34-year-old White female. She lives with her husband in the apartment they own. She works in the theater industry and describes her employment as “spotty.” She has very fair skin, wide eyes, jaw-length red hair that is too vibrant to be natural, and wears a green winter coat, jeans, sneakers, and a backpack. At the time of our meeting she has nearly nine months of sobriety. As we talk, Kate speaks eagerly and quickly. She sometimes goes off on tangents, and I can tell when something particularly excites her, because she starts to gesticulate and interrupt herself as another thought pops into her head too quickly for her to finish the first one. I’m instantly endeared by Kate’s openness. During our interview, our talk turns to the language, and particularly the slogans, of A.A.

[Talya]: I’m interested in the rituals and common language and how that has felt at different times in your experience. Like, slogans and things, if they’ve resonated differently at different times, and also how you learned them.

[Kate]: …. As a newcomer, I only understood drunk logs. That was the only language I could understand. I didn’t understand the Serenity Prayer. I didn’t understand “Take it easy,” I thought the “Think” upside down sign was insulting because I was like, “I’m smart, there’s nothing wrong with my thinking,” because I think being smart is one of those things that’s my identity and it’s hard for me to let go and be like, “I don’t know.” But so, you learn just

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10 I note that Kate and her husband own their apartment because this is somewhat unusual of a young couple in New York City. Because of sky-high housing prices, most people, especially in their early thirties, are renters. That the two own their place is indicative of their financial stability.

11 “Drunk log” is the A.A. name for stories members tell about the experiences they had when they were still drinking.
by being around them. You hear things enough that you start to learn them. I used to hate in the end—at some meetings you say the Serenity Prayer and then everyone says “stay,” and at some meetings you say the Serenity Prayer and then you say “it works if you work it blah da di blah blah.” It’s like this chant and I thought it was so ridiculous and stupid. And my friend in my program, we used to say the whole thing but then we’d say, “you break it, you bought it, you push it, you shove it, you whack it, you twist it.” We just thought it was so silly. Because it’s uncomfortable to suddenly be in a community that has this language that you don’t understand. It all feels very—it just feels too simple. Like, “Take it easy,” “A day at a time,” you hear it all and you’re kinda like, it can’t just be that. But then it really is that.

[T]: Do you have a sense of how you began to see the slogans as not silly, as not hokey?

[K]: Some of them I still really hate. Some of it’s exposure therapy. You hear them so many times that you stop having a knee-jerk reaction. Like, oh “One day at a time,” I get it. But “One day at a time” is so helpful. It’s so helpful. It’s just the power of now. It’s just a different way to think about being mindful. I’m trying to think of other—I don’t go to a lot of slogan-y meetings. I go to more like, touchy feely emotion-y meetings. But the slogans are still used. I think what you learn is, it’s common vocabulary. It’s a way to talk about this thing that we’re going through in a way that everyone can understand. [Interview, December 18, 2017]

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Towards the end of this excerpt, when Kate talks about the slogan “One day at a time,” I first thought, during our interview, that she remained ambivalent about it. “Like, ‘One day at a time,’ I get it.” But then she went on to explain just how useful this saying has become to her. Not
only does she state that the slogan is helpful, but she also rephrases and reframes it. “It’s just the power of now. It’s just a different way to think about being mindful.” Here, Kate takes A.A. language and translates it into a dialect that she’s more comfortable with. ‘Mindfulness’ and ‘the power of now,’ are phrases with meaning for Kate. Because they resonate with her, she uses the slogan with this understanding of it. By taking a trite-sounding phrase and digging into the meaning behind it, Kate transforms something she thought of as silly into a practical, useful tool. Personalizing and adapting these slogans, as Kate has done, is an important part of A.A. members creating narratives that feel relevant to them (Jones, 2014).

Despite their importance to her understanding of the slogan, Kate doesn’t often turn to phrases like ‘mindfulness’ or ‘the power of now’ in meetings. These are terms that are rooted in her life outside of A.A. Within the A.A. community, they hold no shared meaning. So, instead, at meetings, she uses the tried and true slogan, “One day at a time.” Returning to this shared phraseology is, as Kate puts it, “a way to talk about this thing that we’re going through in a way that everyone can understand” (emphasis added). As one member of A.A. describes, in the fellowship, “there’s no color, there’s no age” (Hall 2008: 80). Through the common language of slogans, a level playing field is created that transcends superficial differences.

In addition to creating a level playing field, A.A. language acts as an important tool for facilitating conversation. Thanks to A.A.’s specialized rhetoric, members can relate to each other deeply and meaningfully with little exposition. One member explained it this way:

Once you’ve done it for long enough to sort of know the lingo a bit, then you can have this really fast shorthand conversation about an issue. Just this morning, a friend of mine was struggling with something and I was telling him about ways I’ve struggled with my own family, being a mediator between my father and my brother and immediately he was like, “Oh so you’re identifying this way.” It’s so fast because we have all this shared literature
and shared vocabulary, we can blow through issues really fast. [Interview, December 16, 2017]

It is notable that the conversation this participant describes is about identification with family struggles, not alcohol. Still, the language of A.A. allows the two members to have a “fast shorthand” discussion. Terms like unmanageability, identification, and character defects are part of a lexicon that allows participants to discuss challenges across the life spectrum—members are not confined to discussing their alcoholism. As Sonia Waters writes of one of her interview participants, “she could not separate A.A. out of her life in any way at all. She always returned to what she had learned there. She told me that it is not just a program—it is a way of life that connected her to ‘every other thing in the world’” (2015:770). Being able to share aspects of their life beyond their struggles with alcoholism enhances members’ experiences of camaraderie and support. The common language of the society scaffolds these interactions.

Another group member told me about how A.A. has transformed communication within her family:

My sister has been in the program for six years, and then my other sister just celebrated a year, so our whole family dynamic has a lot of A.A. in it, and a lot of program. And when we fight it used to be so much worse and now it’s us deescalating the situation for forty-five minutes and my parents are like, “What is going on?” And so, there’s jokes like, “Oh I’m not trying to take your inventory right now.” [Interview, January 14, 2018]

In this case, A.A. language again facilitates deep and meaningful discussions between A.A. members, though this time within a family framework. As in the previous illustration, the issues being discussed are not about alcoholism specifically, but are common family disputes. The
participant who described this situation is 26 years old and a year and a half sober. This example shows how use of A.A. language can improve relationships that have existed for decades before A.A. rhetoric became a shared dialect of the individuals. It allows for ‘de-escalation’ of conflict, faster resolution, and sustained positive relationships.

**Humor**

It is easy to think of Alcoholics Anonymous as a solemn community. In the field, I heard people talk about their suicidal ideations, their suicide attempts, and the utter certainty they have that without A.A., they’d be dead. It is not unusual for members to cry during shares or for intensely vulnerable scenes to be shared between strangers. But for all this, so many moments of A.A. meetings are—simply put—fun. An interview participant explained to me how important this balance is to her:

> The whole program for me is gravity, levity, gravity, levity. Roots, wings. I’m so grounded in it but it’s also given me so much light. And I never would have wanted to do this if I hadn’t met with my sponsor and she hadn’t made me laugh so hard and she wasn’t so funny. I mean, who knows? Maybe I would have gone out if she hadn’t made me laugh so hard. But that’s why I had this—the seed was planted where I was like, this can be fun.

[Interview, January 14, 2018]

At a meeting I attended, the speaker, who had twenty years sober, expressed a similar sentiment. She noted that she spent the first months of her involvement very skeptical about the program. It wasn’t until she realized the joy with which other A.A.s experienced the world that she turned a corner and began to invest herself in the program. “These people are happy,” she shared, “They’re laughing. I wasn’t laughing. Maybe they knew something I didn’t.”
As the two women above attest to, humor is an important factor in attracting and keeping members in the program. In his work, Keith Humphreys suggests that humor provides a means for A.A. members to overcome and own their past experiences (2000). Influenced by Denzin’s ideas, Humphreys writes of the power gained by reclaiming such incidents as moments that have been transcended, and as such, can be reflected upon through a comedic lens (Humphreys 2000; Denzin 1987). He includes the following field conversation with an A.A. member as evidence of the import of humor in the society of A.A.:

It replaces the conviviality of the bars, where we used to be able to get together and tell stories and laugh. When we laugh at a meeting it builds that feeling of esprit de corps we had in bars, so we don’t feel like we are just a bunch of somber drunks who are trying to stay sober. [50-year-old woman, field conversation, 1/17/92] (Humphreys 2000:504).

As field notes, conversations, and literature convey, humor plays an important role in fostering a feeling of camaraderie between members of A.A. I argue that A.A. specific language creates a mechanism by which much of this humor is enacted: a great deal of it relies upon the texts and sayings of the society, and is only possible through an intimate knowledge of the language of A.A. One of my interview participants, Chris, articulates many of the ways that humor manifests in A.A. and how the language of the community facilitates this.

* * * * *

I meet Chris in his Brooklyn Heights apartment where he lives with two female roommates. When I get to his place, I ring the bell, and look up as someone sticks his head out the window and shouts from several floors above “You can’t hear it, but I’m buzzing you in! Happens all the time!”
He laughs as he retracts his head from the open window. The apartment is bright and sunny, thanks to a giant window in the living room, and the common areas are well-kept, though there is a sizable pile of shoes near the door including men’s boots and sneakers as well as women’s flats and heels. When Chris enters his room to grab some A.A. literature he wants to show me, I get a peek at an explosion of clothes, shoes, and odds and ends covering his bedroom floor. The apartment has granite countertops and wood floors throughout, though when we situate ourselves on the L-shaped couch to talk, I notice it is riddled with holes and fraying fabric. It seems the furniture has been cobbled together by the inhabitants, resulting in a mismatch of chairs, a corduroy ottoman, and a chipping TV stand in the corner, which is overflowing with video games. The overall effect is a homey space that reflects the young professionals who live there.

Chris is a 28-year old, White male with two years sober. He has a laid-back air about him and laughs easily. When we meet, Chris is clad in a flannel shirt, light washed jeans with rips in the knees, and no shoes or socks. His brown hair is thinning at the top, but his face is boyish and bright. As we talk, it becomes apparent just how much Chris enjoys A.A. When Chris brings up ‘inside jokes,’ I ask him to elaborate.

[Chris]: We’ll joke about character defects in a way that other people can’t. It would sound almost mean if you take them out of A.A. context. And we’re honest about our own sick thinking in a way. We’ll just be honest about like, “Well I wanted everything to be my way and nobody else’s. You know.” “Oh yeah, I know. Hahaha.” No one else would ever admit that. It sounds so evil. We have a catch phrase, “Rigorous honesty in all of our affairs.” That’s a quote from the Big Book, and it’s something I’ll throw in my friends’ faces in a jovial way all the time. Like, they’re doing something mildly naughty and I’ll be like, “Rigorous honesty in all your affairs, buddy,” and stuff like that. Actually, a girl I was seeing, I would say that sometimes and she would start throwing it back in my face. It was really funny.
[Talya]: Was she in A.A.?

[C]: No, not at all.

[T]: So how do people who aren’t in the program, who don’t have the context, respond to that?

[C]: Right. Poorly. [We both laugh.] You gotta be careful not to make A.A. jokes around non-A.A. people, because they’re cutting things, like rigorous honesty in all your affairs. And people are like, “Well fuck you, it’s just a dollar I found on the street.”

* * * *

In this exchange, Chris clearly explains the role that A.A. language plays in facilitating humor between members of the group. Through the dialect of meetings and literature, A.A. members learn phrases and terms that have specific meaning in the context of the program. This common grounding allows them to relate through use of these terms in a way that may be meaningless, or, as Chris points out, even hurtful to people who aren’t familiar with the rhetoric of the program.

Chris tells me about the texts as a source of jokes as well:

There’s one section we refer to in the Big Book as ‘the promises.’ And I think we all use the promises to encourage new people to take the steps. “Fear of economic security will leave us, we will intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle us, we will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves, you’ll get laid all the time.” Pretty sure that one’s in there [laughs]. That’s an A.A. joke. We do that one all the time. We’ll misquote the Big Book and give a page number. I don’t know if the women do the ‘get laid’ one. The guys do [laughs].
This joke reveals a comprehensive familiarity with the contents of the Big Book. Jokes of this type are very much ‘inside jokes,’ as they are deeply dependent upon Big Book knowledge and language. Lave and Wenger have identified inside jokes as a component of communities of practice—they are an authentic and spontaneous means of creating ties to a community (1991). By manipulating the literature to crack jokes, members of the program create a strain of comedy that is specific to A.A. Such an exclusive brand of humor adds to the experience of insider status and the community ethos of the group.

I observed an interchange at a meeting that drew on similar principles to facilitate a humorous interaction between two A.A. members:

Frank is a 52-year old White man. He was recently released from prison and has eight months sober. He used an A.A. slogan to explain, “I’m a hardcore alcoholic, so I need a hardcore program.” Following Frank’s share, Gerry, a Black man in his 60’s with 27 years sober, responded, “You said you’re a hardcore drunk and you need a hardcore program. I feel you, man. I like to say… how do I say it? Oh yeah… I’m not just hardcore. I’m hard to the core.” At this, members throughout the room shared a hearty laugh. [Field note, April 26, 2017]

Because members in the room were familiar with the saying Frank deployed, Gerry’s play on the saying resonated as a coy turn of phrase. Despite being in very different places in their sobriety—Frank with eight months sober and Gerry with 27 years—and being of different ages and races, the saying provided a common language upon which they could build a rapport. This vignette provides a window into how the language of A.A. can be provide a springboard for casual, comedic interactions between members of the group.
Conclusions

Over the past eight decades, Alcoholics Anonymous has grown from a handful of participants to a vast, international network that has helped more than two million members achieve and maintain sobriety (Alcoholics Anonymous 2008). Since its beginning, the organization has recognized and promoted the necessity of interpersonal relationships as a means of getting and staying sober. The founders noted that “practical experience shows that nothing will so much insure immunity from drinking as intensive work with other alcoholics” (Alcoholics Anonymous 2008: 16). Since this declaration was first published in 1939, scholars of A.A. have supported the claim (Witmer 1997; Waters 2015; Kelly 2016; Miller, Forcehimes, and Zweben 2011). It has been shown that involvement in the relational aspects of A.A., including reaching out to newcomers, having and being a sponsor, and working the first four steps are positively correlated to sobriety (Miller, Forcehimes, and Zweben 2011). Kelly notes that “those with lower addiction severity, on average, ten[d] to benefit from A.A. almost entirely through social mechanisms” (2016: 4). One member explains of her experience attending A.A. meetings while traveling:

I find it continually a marvel when I go places, because there’s a culture of needing to connect, everybody talks to you after the meeting, and that sense of us all being alcoholics applies everywhere. [Interview, December 09, 2017]

Given the centrality of relationships to individual recovery in A.A. and the survival of the organization, understanding how these relationships are supported is a valuable inquiry. This study investigates one such mechanism: the shared language of A.A.

Since its inception, A.A. has created and preserved a nuanced rhetoric that is unique to the organization. Terms and sayings have been codified as language of the program and have been
passed down through generations of members. Because the organization is sustained by oral histories and traditions, effective communication about and within the group has been, and remains, essential to its survival. This is recognized in the Twelfth Step of the program, which instructs members to “carry the message” to other alcoholics. To this point, founder Bill Wilson wrote, “A.A. is more than a set of principles; it is a society of alcoholics in action. We must carry the message, else we ourselves can wither and those who haven’t been given the truth may die” (Wilson 2000: 13). According to Diane Witmer,

> Such activities as dyadic sharing, speaking at meetings, telephone conversations, and group discussion are considered central to recovery. Thus, the AA organizational evolution illustrates the centrality of communication in the process of organizing, as well as in the creation and recreation of organizational culture” (1997:324).

The group’s specialized language is integral to facilitating communication between members and giving them the tools to carry the message of A.A.

While the language of A.A. has been studied before now, it has been primarily from the point of view of how A.A. rhetoric contributes to personal transformation of individual members (Hall 2008; Jones 2014; Rassumen and Capaldi 1990; Thatcher 2007). Here, I’ve shifted the focus to how the shared language contributes to relationships between members. Considering the linguistic culture of the program through a sociological lens provides insight into how A.A. successfully scaffolds relationships between individuals who “normally would not mix” (Alcoholics Anonymous 2008: 19). This study delves into several pathways by which the language of A.A. facilitates this, including creating a level playing field for communication, allowing members to recognize each other as insiders of an exclusive club, and providing a springboard for
humorous interactions and camaraderie.

In the process of conducting this work, I myself became practiced in the language of A.A. and, by doing so, experienced the significance of A.A.’s shared language firsthand. I conducted my fieldwork in two parts: first through participant observation at open A.A. meetings, and second through in-depth interviews with members. By attending meetings for several months before conducting interviews, I was familiar with much of the rhetoric of A.A. by the time I sat down to speak with members individually. At the start of my first interview I asked about the practice of 90 meetings in 90 days, but used the A.A. shorthand “90 in 90.” My interview participant responded, “Wow, how many meetings have you been to? You seem to really know the lingo.” By enacting the language of the community, I demonstrated my commitment to understanding the organization and mitigated my sense of otherness in the interaction.

Only through understanding and employing the rhetoric of the program was I able to conduct interviews with the depth that I did. In one interview, a member of the program told me, “bad behavior can take me out.” At the time of the interview, I wasn’t conscious of how much A.A. language I or my participant was using. However, in looking back at the transcript, I recognized how entrenched this simple sentence is in the specialized language of the group. Rereading this, I marveled at the complexity of what the sentence conveys. I could define “bad behavior” as not doing maintenance steps and as being dry rather than sober (coded terms which I also understood) and “take me out” as relapsing and not returning to the program for a considerable period of time. By knowing what these terms mean in the context of A.A. I was able to ask deep questions about why this was, rather than what it meant. By learning to talk A.A., I was able to talk about A.A. in meaningful ways.

Beyond its function within the community, the rhetoric of A.A. is exemplary of the great power of linguistic phenomena in social contexts in general and is, as such, worthy of further study.
After all, “linguistic and social phenomena should not be considered as unrelated, but as two dimensions whose interaction contributes to our understanding of culture” (Sophocleous 2011: 203). By viewing the language of A.A. as “a force of action” (Jones 2014: 5), we see implications for how language can act as a mechanism by which to sustain communities of change across demographics.
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Appendix A

The Preamble\textsuperscript{12}

Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. There are no dues or fees for A.A. membership; we are self-supporting through our own contributions. A.A. is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy, neither endorses nor opposes any causes. Our primary purpose is to stay sober and to help other alcoholics achieve sobriety.

Appendix B

The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous

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 understood 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 ask 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 whenever 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.

\(^{13}\) Alcoholics Anonymous 2008
Appendix C

The Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous

1. Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity.

2. For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.

3. The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking.

4. Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole.

5. Each group has but one primary purpose—to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.

6. An A.A. group ought never endorse, finance or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.

7. Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.

8. Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional, but our service centers may employ special workers.

9. A.A., as such, ought never to be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.

10. Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never to be drawn into public controversy.

11. Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and films.

12. Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

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14 Twelve and Twelve 2011
Appendix D

The Serenity Prayer\textsuperscript{15}

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.

\textsuperscript{15} Twelve and Twelve 2011
Appendix E

List of Terms from Discussion and Reading Guide\(^\text{16}\)

A: acceptance, admission, alibis, aloneness, ambition, amends, anger, anonymity, anxiety, arrogance, attraction
C: character defects, complacency, compulsion, controversy, cooperation, courage
D: dependence, depression, disease, dishonesty, dry bender, dry drunk
E: envy, excuses
F: faith, family relationships, fear, financial problems, forgiveness, freedom, friendship, frustration
G: gratitude, growth, guilt
H: happiness, hatred, Higher Power, honesty, humility
I: identification, illness, inadequacy, inferiority, intolerance, inventory
L: love
M: meditation, membership
N: newcomers
O: obsession, oldtimers, open-mindedness
P: pain, perfectionism, personalities and Principles, Personality Change, Peace of mind, Prejudice, pride, privacy, procrastination, progress, public information
R: rationalization, religion, remorse, resentment, responsibility, revenge
S: sanity, self-indulgence, selfishness, self-justification, self-pity, self-reliance, self-righteousness, self-satisfaction, serenity, service, sex, shortcomings, slips, spiritual awakening or experience, spiritual living, sponsorship, success, surrender
T: temptation, tolerance, trouble, trust, twelfth-stepping, twenty-four-hour living
U: unity
W: will, willingness, worry

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\(^\text{16}\) Wilson 2000: v-x.