BECOMING ALCOHOLIC

Alcoholics Anonymous and the Reality of Alcoholism

DAVID R. RUDY

Foreword by
Norman K. Denzin

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SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY PRESS
CARBONDALE AND EDWARDSVILLE

Printed in the United States of America
Edited by Yvonne D. Mattson
Designed by Frank Williams
Production supervised by Kathleen Giencke

89 3

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Rudy, David R.
Becoming alcoholic.

Bibliography: p.
Includes index.
1. Alcoholics—Middle Atlantic States—Case studies.
2. Alcoholics Anonymous—Case Studies. I. Title.
HV5297.M55R83 1986 362.2'9286 85-11750
ISBN 0-8093-1244-1
ISBN 0-8093-1245-X (pbk.)

FOR THE
MEMBERS OF
MIDEASTERN CITY
A.A.

FOREWORD

DAVID R. RUDY'S *Becoming Alcoholic* addresses a major social issue in our society: that form of conduct called alcoholism, which touches the lives of one out of seven Americans on a daily basis. Rudy examines the process by which individuals who are seen by others as having problems with alcohol come to define themselves as "alcoholics." Through treatment agencies, through the meetings and literature of Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.), and through interactions with significant others and with persons who call themselves alcholics, the problem drinker gradually takes on an alcoholic identity. Rudy shows how that identity derives from the ideological system of A.A., particularly from A.A.'s conception of alcoholism as a disease. This conception received its strongest formulation in E. M. Jellinek's phase model, developed in the 1940s and 1950s and subsequently adopted by most physicians and treatment agencies, by sociologists and psychologists studying the problem, and by American society in general. Thus, the disease model was refined within the scientific and everyday worlds of discourse that most directly affect the problem drinker.

Emphasizing that the chemical ethyl alcohol will not by itself create an alcoholic, Rudy focuses on the process of alcoholic self-definition, how an individual becomes an alcoholic within the interpretive practices of our society. From this interactionist perspective, Rudy redefines alcoholism as a characterization attached to drinkers when others question their drinking behavior and when drinkers lack the power or desire to negotiate another explanation of that behavior. This cultural and interpretive view of alcoholism illuminates the phenomenon in a new way, for it stresses how society and its interactants shape the behaviors of problem drinkers. In particular, A.A. produces a new kind of interactant who, while learning how to call him- or herself alcoholic, also learns a new ideological and interpretive system regarding self, society, alcohol, and alcoholism. As Gregory Bateson has suggested, A.A. teaches a new epistemology and a new ontology, a new theory of being in the world.

By examining the processual, subjective, and situational features involved in becoming an alcoholic, Rudy joins a long and distinguished research tradition. Often associated with the Chicago School, this research method focuses on the individual's definition of his or her situation. Rudy's process model suggests that an individual may follow one of four paths or careers in becoming an alcoholic. This typology, which includes pure, convinced, converted, and tangential alcoholics, suggests that the label "alcoholic," as it is generally understood, is more readily attached to some individuals than to others. Rudy's typology also elaborates and deepens previous explanations that scholars such as Maxwell, Trice, Leach and Norris have offered concerning the process of affiliation with A.A.

Rudy's investigation thus contributes on four fronts. First, he takes us into the processes that influence the way an individual comes to accept an alcoholic characterization. Second, he analyzes A.A. as an interactional site within which this definition process occurs. Third, he reinterprets the meaning of alcoholism from the standpoint of the sociological approach to deviance, deviants, and social control agents. Fourth, he adds an important document to the qualitative research tradition associated with the symbolic interactionists. His use of open-ended interviews, participant observation, and limited case or life histories has permitted him to write a sensitive but probing analysis of the alcoholic experience.

It is apparent that our postcapitalist society is struggling with new

interpretations of the terms "alcoholism," "drug addiction," and "chemical dependency." A new arm of the health care industry has arisen to process addicts and alcoholics. Treatment centers for alcoholics, once uncommon, now produce "recovering alcoholics" at a rapid rate. Some of these individuals turn up in A.A.; some gravitate to other worlds of recovery and interaction; some disappear altogether from the treatment field. Narcotics Anonymous has recently appeared, for many persons labeled alcoholics are also labeled drug addicts or chemical dependents—a new type of recovering deviant. Those who choose to follow Rudy's work will have to probe the historical, social, and institutional developments that continue to affect the meanings of these terms. How these meanings are structured and lived into existence will remain an area of intensive inquiry.

David Rudy's study takes its place in the small group of investigations aimed at a humanistic understanding of the lived experiences of those persons who have come to be called "alcoholic." His work is a required point of departure for all future research in this area. For this he is to be commended.

NORMAN K. DENZIN

PREFACE

ONE OF THE MOST anxiety-producing and yet most exciting aspects of doing field research is the uncertainty of direction. Rather than beginning a study with a specific question, most field research starts with a setting, an arena of social life, and it allows that setting, its participants, and the researcher's perception of these to forge themes, questions, hypotheses, and grounded theories. This study depicts some of my experiences and interpretations during sixteen months of participant observation in Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.). I am not a member of A.A., nor have I ever been. For whatever difference it makes, I am also not an abstainer. I respect A.A. and its members, but I remain as critical and objective as possible in viewing, understanding, and analyzing the fellowship.

This research also reflects the accounts and interpretations of "Mideastern City" A.A. members who shared their "experience, strength, and hope" with me. To protect their anonymity, all names of cities, A.A. groups, and individuals within the text of the book are pseudonyms.

Finally, this book examines the relationship between the social construction of alcoholism by Mideastern City A.A. members and the construction of alcoholism by contemporary alcohologists. Just as Mideastern City A.A. members utilize A.A. ideology and their beliefs about alcoholism in interpreting their social world, so too do I utilize concepts, assumptions, and theoretical perspectives in organizing reality. Initial questions developed in the field reflect some of these underlying influences.

QUESTIONS

This study is organized around general questions. What are the processes involved in becoming an A.A. member and in becoming alcoholic? That is, how do people who approach A.A. come to be socially differentiated or defined by themselves and others as A.A. members and as alcoholics. In other words, how do people who make contact with A.A. become A.A. affiliates? In becoming A.A. members, prospective affiliates experience processes similar to what researchers in the sociology of religion call "conversion." That is, they radically change and reconstruct their identities, world views, and lives. In "becoming alcoholic," some individuals regard themselves as alcoholics before approaching A.A., but many do not identify with alcoholism until after affiliation with A.A. The focus upon "becoming" in this research emphasizes alcoholism as an emergent phenomenon. How A.A. members come to define themselves as alcoholics, how they talk about their alcoholism, and how alcoholic designations organize and give meaning to their lives are all important in "becoming alcoholic." A.A. alcoholics are different from other alcoholics, not because there are more "gamma alcoholics" or "alcohol addicts" in A.A., but because they come to see themselves and to reconstruct their lives by utilizing the views and ideology of A.A.

Becoming alcoholic and the type of alcoholic one becomes has as much to do with the responses of others—treatment agencies, psychiatrists, A.A., and friends—as it does with the drinking activities and life experiences of the persons labeled alcoholic. A.A. alcoholics come to reinterpret and give meaning to their past and current lives by adopting A.A. beliefs and roles. To suggest that, to a significant extent, becoming alcoholic is a subjective experience, a subjective reality, is not to make alcoholism less real than if it is looked at purely

objectively as a disease characterized by blackouts, loss of control, increased tolerance, withdrawal symptoms, or whatever. Indeed, the objective reality around each of us pales when compared to subjective and symbolic realities. Many Mideastern City A.A. members constructed and experienced a reality in which alcohol and drinking became the dominant and exclusive features of their lives.

A second question probes the relationship of A.A. to dominant phase models and definitions of alcoholism in contemporary America. Just as A.A. members "construct" their alcoholism by attaching meanings, definitions, and interpretations to their experiences, so too do alcohologists construct alcoholism.

These initial questions, once formulated in the field, shaped data collection, but other serendipitous findings shaped the study as well. Frequent experiences of hearing and talking with A.A. members who had "slipped" led me to explore the functions of drinking within Mideastern City A.A.; and listening to the same members provide differing explanations of their alcoholism led to an analysis of the functions of disease and personal explanations of alcoholism for A.A. members.

This study differs substantially from other detailed accounts of A.A. members by social scientists (Gellman, 1964; Madsen, 1974; Kurtz, 1979; Robinson, 1979; Maxwell, 1984). *Becoming Alcoholic* has less organizational emphasis than these recent works do. Major attention is directed toward personal accounts—interviews, life-history interviews, and testimonials—to demonstrate how A.A. members engage in "constructing" or "reconstructing" their alcoholism. This work also goes beyond the previously completed studies in that some of the connections between A.A. ideology and alcoholism models and theories are explored. In other words, the reality of alcoholism in A.A. is used as a data source and a springboard to address the reality of alcoholism in contemporary America. Alcoholism is more a social and political accomplishment than a scientific accomplishment (Schneider, 1978). As in other qualitative research (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975), scientific studies and other relevant literature are integrated into those chapters where they relate closely to the argument.

ORGANIZATION

Throughout the first six chapters, my emphasis is directed toward ethnographic views of members' lives and experiences. This ap-

proach starts in chapter 1 with an organizational description of A.A. and moves to a discussion of the affiliation process with A.A. in chapter 2. Although there is some regional diversity between A.A. groups, I believe that Mideastern City A.A. is fairly typical of the fellowship in other urban areas. Other researchers' accounts of A.A. groups from New York to California, while different in style and emphasis, essentially describe processes similar to those described in this book. After an organizational analysis of A.A. and a discussion of the affiliation process, chapter 3 presents and analyzes members' accounts of their alcoholism. This analysis is continued in chapter 4 with the development of a typology of A.A. alcoholic careers. Chapter 5 describes slipping (drinking) within A.A. and its functions in relation to individual sobriety and group solidarity.

The final three chapters go well beyond the confines of the organization in exploring the relationship between the reality of alcoholism in A.A. and its reality in contemporary America. Chapter 6 examines the influence of A.A. ideology upon Jellinek's phase model of alcoholism. Chapter 7 discusses how alcoholism can be defined as an objective phenomenon as well as a label attached to a wide range of drinking behaviors and drinking problems. The chapter culminates with an interactionist definition of alcoholism drawn from labeling theory. Finally, chapter 8 uses A.A. slogans to organize much of the contemporary sociological literature on alcoholism and drinking problems.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

During the long time that I have worked on this book, many friends and colleagues have helped me. Helpful during the early stages of the research were Bob Bogdan and Jerry Jacobs, who taught me and encouraged me to do participant observation; Bill Pooler, who loved to read and criticize my field notes; and particularly Hal Mizruchi, who always challenged me to put everything within a theoretical context. Other friends, particularly Bill Hall, Tom Leitko, Rich Switzer, and George Zito, have listened, questioned, and argued over the years, and despite my stubbornness, they are responsible for modifying and refocusing some of my thinking. Larry Greil made a similar contribution and also helped recast chapter 2; he is that chapter's coauthor. Special debt is also acknowledged to Gene Obidinski, who encouraged my sociological imagination in the first place.

More recently, other official and unofficial reviewers and critics deserve acknowledgment. Kai Erikson provided valuable comments for my discussion of drinking and its functions in Alcoholics Anon-

ymous. Norman Denzin, Harry Trice, and Paul Roman constructively criticized some of my earlier journal work and this manuscript in its entirety. I have incorporated some of their suggestions and comments but have stubbornly resisted others—perhaps mistakenly. Leonard Blumberg and David Pittman, supporters and friends of mine in the Drinking and Drugs Division of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, have in less direct but very important ways engaged and affected my thinking and deserve acknowledgment.

Kenney Withers, director of Southern Illinois University Press, deserves special acknowledgment for the encouragement, support, and faith that he was able to communicate through numerous letters and phone conversations. Thanks also to Carolyn Hamilton, whose word-processing skills and humor have made writing and revising more enjoyable. My main debt of gratitude is to the members of Mideastern City A.A. who have shared themselves and their lives with me and who have affected this book and my views on many things. I also wish to acknowledge the understanding and support that my family, particularly my parents, Rose and Jim, and my children, Maura and Michael, have given me. Lastly and most importantly, Mary, my wife, has been my most important critic and friend, and she is responsible for making my life and work worthwhile.

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CONTENTS

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PERSPECTIVES ON ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

FROM THE THEORETICAL stance of symbolic interactionism, actors construct and respond to their worlds based on the meanings they develop with others through interactional processes. Different actors may construct and respond to the same phenomenon differently, and the same actors may change or use multiple meanings of the same phenomenon. Accordingly, there are multiple definitions of reality or multiple definitions of a situation. I came to know Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) from the perspective of a participant observer. However, I also came to know A.A. through empathizing with A.A. members and by reading A.A.'s literature as well as the social science literature on A.A. In this chapter, A.A. will be primarily discussed from the perspective of my experiences and that of A.A. literature.[1] My overall experience of coming to know A.A. might be called a data collection strategy, but somehow something is lost from that point of view (see Appendix A for a more typical and detailed statement of this study's methods). Participant observation allows the researcher to share in the life of the respon-

dents and to see, feel, and appreciate the situations they encounter and the decisions they make (Becker, 1958; Bogdan and Taylor, 1975). The participant observer lacks the power as well as the desire to manipulate the setting. Rather, he or she tries to understand the setting from the actors' points of view without "going native" (Gold, 1958).

FIRST DAYS IN THE FIELD

Mideastern City A.A. staffs a service center where information and literature can be obtained and where persons can seek help twenty-four hours a day. I was cordially welcomed at the center and was given the names and locations of several meetings. The secretary in the center suggested that the weekly meeting of the middle group would be a good place to find out about A.A. in Mideastern City because it was well attended and because it drew many A.A. members from other groups. The first evening I went down to the middle group, I was scared. I arrived twenty minutes early and sat in my car, trying to convince myself that I wanted to spend a lot of time getting to know people who perhaps did not want to know me. Questions raced through my mind. How many people would be there? What if they would not talk to me? What if they asked me to leave? Would I know anybody there? What questions would they ask of me? Reluctantly, I left the car and headed for the modern church building in downtown Mideastern City.

Inside the glass doors were three separate hallways and a downward staircase. At the bottom of the stairs, a middle-aged male in casual clothes said that the A.A. meeting was upstairs tonight. When I entered the room upstairs, I was greeted by several hello's and smiles. Chairs were set up, and I noticed the friendly sound of a large perking coffee pot. Taking my coffee, I sat down close to a couple of guys who introduced themselves as Bill and Bob. At that moment, a woman walked over and asked me to read the Twelve Traditions at the beginning of the meeting. I hesitated and said, "My name is Dave, and I'm a sociologist interested in finding out about A.A. Am I allowed to read the traditions?" The woman, Beth, said, "I'm glad you are here and hope that you enjoy the meeting. I'll ask Bob to read the traditions." Bob and Bill made small talk with me about the university, the weather, and sports. As I spent more and more time in the field, I gained more and more acceptance and more confidence in myself, particularly in terms of coming to experience

an organization from the participants' perspectives. Also, with time in the field, discussions gradually moved from the weather to advice and pleas for help, to personal problems, and to discussions about A.A.'s philosophy, literature, and success. In short, I moved from a tolerated intruder, an outsider, to a near-member. This transformation is significant because it allows the field researcher to share similar processes and experiences with members themselves.

Unlike other researchers (Lofland and Lejune, 1960), I did not try to pass as an alcoholic. Generally, disguised observation is unethical and it also lacks some of the advantages of adopting the "outsider" role (Trice, 1970). However, despite frequent statements defining myself as a researcher and denials of being "alcoholic," a minority of Mideastern City A.A. members came to view me as an "alcoholic" or at least "a latent alcoholic." This view, I think was a result of my heavy involvement in the field, along with the feeling by some members that I understood them. A.A. members believe that only an alcoholic can understand another alcoholic. A few members even questioned me about my drinking practices. The basic point of this is that I not only participated and observed the processes in which individuals came to regard themselves as alcoholic, but I also experienced some of these processes myself.

After that first day in the field, I spent sixteen months in and around A.A. groups in Mideastern City. Participant observation was conducted within a variety of A.A. settings, including the A.A. service center, open houses, open and closed meetings at various sites, and the homes and apartments of A.A. members. Each of these settings will be described later. Additionally, more in-depth data were collected from life-history interviews with a small number of A.A. members. Observation began during May of 1973 and ended during August of 1974.[2] The most frequently attended location was the weekly open meeting of the middle group. The middle group is the oldest group in Mideastern City and also one of the largest. Attendance ranges from twenty to sixty individuals each week. One distinct advantage of the middle group as far as data are concerned is the fact that it serves as a meeting place for members of many of the other groups in the area. As one member put it, "You can always go down to the middle group and find people you know from other groups just hanging around."

The role that I most emphasized within the field setting was that of a researcher interested in finding out about A.A. and about alco-