“TAKE WHAT YOU WANT AND LEAVE THE REST”: ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS AND FEMALE EMPOWERMENT

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“Take What You Want and Leave the Rest”: Alcoholics Anonymous and Female
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For my mother, who traversed and scoured every inch of the underworld to unearth her daughter. Still, we rise.
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

“Take What You Want and Leave the Rest”: Alcoholics Anonymous and Female Empowerment
by
Lindsay M. Bond
Master of Arts in Women’s Studies
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The literature that affirms the value of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) for women is scarce. Feminist critics have largely argued AA is oppressive, male-dominated, and places women in yet another patriarchal institution. Yet one-third of AA’s membership is comprised of women. Despite the feminist criticisms, women find healing, recovery, and empowerment within AA. Previous scholarship has almost entirely failed to account for the heuristic knowledge of women in AA and to value and honor their lived experience. Through in-depth interviews with ten diverse women, this qualitative study seeks to bring academic discourse around AA into conversation with the voices and experiences of women in AA. The goal of this study is not to refute prior feminist criticisms, but to question how women in AA navigate and negotiate the contradictions found within a male-dominated and male-centered program. I do not argue women in AA attempt to claim the title of feminist, but I do claim their recovery experiences are empowering and a generative site of feminist theory. Employing the use of grounded theory, the study found three themes. The first theme is AA as a program of paradox, whereby women navigate the paradoxical language of AA to generate healing. They dis-empower the self in order to empower it. The second theme is AA as a program of malleability in which women adapt and reappropriate the androcentric language to aid in their recovery. The final theme is community among women in AA. They employ various strategies, such as the creation of women-only spaces, to form female relations and bonds in order to foster healing and empowerment.
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I would also like to acknowledge the guidance and input from Dr. Irene Lara and Dr. Mark Wheeler. Their investment of time and interest in this project is greatly appreciated.

I thank each woman that shared her intimate story with me. I honor each one of you and your experience. I am inspired by your truth and fearlessness and acknowledge those suffering in and out of these rooms.

I thank the fellowship of women in my life for their tireless commitment and belief in me. You provided me with a safe and loving space as I navigated this project.

I again thank my mother and her complete dedication. You are my partner-in-crime. I look forward to the many more hours of deep conversation and writing. Your faith anchored and inspired me. Your light allowed mine to shine through.

Finally, this thesis would never have come to fruition without the enduring love, hope, and sacrifice from my partner-for-life. Jim, you gave all of yourself to this project and to me. Your belief in me never faltered. I thank you and I love you.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

According to the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA, 2011) membership survey, 35 percent of membership is now comprised of women. “AA 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” (AA, 1947). It is a twelve-step program for recovery from alcoholism that is popular within the U.S. and around the world. It is voluntary, non-secular, and has been used as a model for other recovery programs. Despite its success, feminist critics find AA dogmatic and male-dominant in nature. They argue that while AA self-identifies as an inclusive program of spirituality, it actually operates within a Christian-based framework. Moreover, feminists are troubled by the “Twelve Steps emphasis on powerlessness as liberating” (Berenson, 1991, p. 68; Johnson, 1989; Kasl, 1990; Kirkpatrick, 1986; Rapping, 1996; Walters, 1995). I am not convinced by these analyses because it assumes people uncritically accept texts/discourses. As both a feminist and member of AA, I am cognizant of the contradictions that exist within the program, especially for women. Asking women to become powerless in a patriarchal society may be understood as anti-feminist, except for the fact that many women find recovery within this contradiction without a negation of the self.

When I first arrived at the doors of AA I grappled with my feminist sensibilities juxtaposed with the language of relinquishing my power. As a woman academically trained in feminist theory, coupled with my non-profit experience working towards the empowerment of women, I fought the program because I could not relinquish what I perceived to be a contradictory binary of power through disempowerment. In addition, I struggled with the androcentric text and male-dominated program. And yet, in spite of my feminist concerns, I found sobriety in AA. Still, my initial concerns with the program as a contradiction remained. This led me to question if other women also struggled in a similar manner and how they traversed these sites of contradiction. In response to this dilemma I began to listen to women in the program more keenly, keeping a mental record of their
personal stories, as well as the deep level of honesty, transparency, and trust women felt at women-only meetings.

For many of them (myself included), the space created room for women to share their stories. Feminist theologian Carol Christ (1995) argues, “If women’s stories are not told, the depth of women’s souls will not be known” (p. 1). The absence of women’s narratives points to missed opportunities of taking into consideration women’s experience, which then give birth to knowledge in the personal and collective realm. States Christ (1995), “[t]he presence of other women who have had similar experiences makes it possible for women to say things they have never said before, to think thoughts they would have suppressed” (p. 7). There is a reorientation that takes place when women see themselves in the stories of other women. Pioneer feminist theologian Nellie Morton’s essential maxim states, when women “hear each other into speech” generative possibilities take root in the lives of women; in the case of women in AA, lives that might have ended in the grip of alcoholism find transformation and life (Christ, 1995, p.7).

The fact that one-third of AA’s membership is comprised of women, coupled with the academic critique, clearly represent the importance and need for further research into the lives of women in AA. This thesis further analyzes the critiques and debates surrounding AA through in-depth interviews with a diverse group of women in an effort to determine if, and in what ways, women strategically navigate the terrain of the program. My driving question is how are women within AA negotiating and navigating these contradictions? The three hypotheses grounding my research consider the possible ways women are challenging and reappropriating the text/discourse as it applies to, first, AA as a program of paradox. Specifically, I am interested in how women navigate the discourse of powerlessness in order to find empowerment in their lives. Given societies cultural influence on women to relinquish power and decision making to men and others, what is the psychic shift that occurs in order to maintain and even cultivate selfhood? Second, AA as a program of malleability. Here I examine women of AA as they confront the androcentric language of the program. What are the modes of interpretation and practice that enable women to defect in place as they discern what to follow and what to discard? And finally, the community of women formed within AA. What are the ties that bind women together as sisters-in-recovery, able to formulate community in what otherwise might be considered disparate personalities? These questions,
which formed my hypotheses, are based on my personal experience within AA and which
gave rise to this research project.

Within my own social location as a feminist and member of AA, I empathize with
feminist concerns and critiques surrounding AA, specifically in the language of
powerlessness as expressed in Step One. However, I do not find feminist concerns
completely sound in their arguments. These statements essentialize AA by presenting the
program within a vacuum. My interactions with alcoholic women find them powerful,
opinionated, and thoughtful. In my work with an all-female, long-term, 12-Step based
treatment facility, as well as intense involvement with my fellows in AA, I consistently find
women sharing a perspective around powerlessness that differs from feminist scholars. It
seems, quite paradoxically, when women admit powerlessness, they begin to find power in
their lives.

My research focuses on how women, both individually and as a collective
community, engage and interact with AA as a discourse and text. The feminist critiques are
valid, yet these studies disregard the heuristic knowledge of women in AA. There is a
difference between the experience of being in AA versus an analysis of the text and program.
I suspect that while they may not be using the feminist language and theories I am, they are
using feminism within their daily life.

People engage with discourses in meaningful ways based on their embodiment and
positionality. For example, by using a hermeneutics of suspicion¹ women in AA distinguish
between being powerless before a higher power and powerless in front of men. My research
moves one step beyond uncritical acceptance of discourse analysis as applied to particular
populations in order to understand the ways in which people engage with various narratives
of healing and empowerment. My research has revealed how a personal self-concept frames
an individual’s approach to discourse. Why has a feminist discourse assumed women’s
marginality within AA? What is it about a discourse that renders it monolithic when applied

¹ First theorized by French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, I will use a hermeneutics of suspicion as a process of
interpretation borrowed from liberation and feminist theology to denote the need to recognize that certain forms
and conclusions in biblical interpretations, and in this thesis, AA’s The Big Book, may be serving to reinforce
forms of dominance, oppression, and agendas of power. Thus one should be suspicious of received
interpretation. As such, a hermeneutics of suspicion aims to empower women to become subjects of
interpretation, engaging in the critical construction of meaning.
to particular populations, in the case of AA, women lacking subjectivity and agency in their healing process? What appears to be absent is the inclusion of a cultural phenomenology, which takes into consideration the experience people have as individuals and within community.

Because prior scholarship has almost completely failed to examine women in AA as empowered, thoughtful, and opinionated, this study has the potential to make a significant contribution to the small body of extant research on AA, as well as situate it within broader work on addiction and treatment. As an insider (member of AA) and a feminist, I believe the way AA operates in the lives of alcoholic women may not only bridge the gap between theory and experience, but also create new theories and discourses concerning alternative spaces of healing and empowerment. It is imperative to question the possible misconceptions held by feminists (and others) of AA. The theory on alcoholism affecting women is not only scarce, but often does not correspond to the actual experiences of female alcoholics. I hypothesize behind many women’s AA experiences and recovery processes there may be a feminist voice, an actual narrative: a truth that is rarely heard within feminism.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Drawing upon historians and primary sources by AA authors, as well as my own experience as a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, this chapter provides the reader with an overview of AA and the existing debates about AA. In this chapter, information about the history, program, and structure of AA is interwoven with both the mainstream and feminist critiques, to reveal the tensions within this Twelve Step program. The critiques of AA are numerous and varied but this review centers on four areas of debate: (1) Is the program religious or spiritual in nature?; (2) Are the program’s practices and twelve steps doctrinal or suggestive-only in nature?; (3) Is the program exclusive or inclusive in nature?; and, (4) Is the language of powerlessness, found in Step One, harmful or redemptive?

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

“Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) defines itself as a voluntary organization that offers a program of recovery from alcoholism based on its Twelve Steps. The Twelve Steps are suggested practices that enable an alcoholic to resist the compulsion to drink and to build a better way of life, based on a spiritual awakening that results from working the Twelve Steps” (Sanders, 2009, p. 7). AA is also a highly contested organization, surrounded by various debates. Both mainstream and feminist discourse argues AA is an exclusive, doctrinal program based on religion, finding the language of powerlessness as inhibiting and harmful, rather than healing and redemptive.

History

The origins of Alcoholics Anonymous can be traced to the Oxford Group, a Christian movement popular in the United States and Europe in the early 20th century. Members of the Oxford Group, comprised of men only, practiced a formula of self-improvement by performing self-inventory, admitting wrongs, making amends, using prayer and meditation, and carrying the message to others. In the early 1930s, a rich Rhode Islander, Rowland H., visited the noted Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung for help with his alcoholism. Jung regarded
him as medically hopeless, believing only a spiritual experience could offer relief. Jung directed Rowland to the Oxford Group (AA, 2013).

According to Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous, by Ernest Kurtz (1991), “within the Oxford Group, Rowland had found the conversion experience that released him for the time being from his compulsion to drink” (p. 9). Rowland later introduced fellow Vermonter Edwin (Ebby) T. to the group, and the two men along with several others were finally able to keep from drinking by practicing the Oxford Group principles. Ebby sought out his old friend Bill Wilson (now known as Bill W.), who would later become the founder of AA, to carry the message of hope. This message explained a few principles of the Oxford Group: its non-denominational nature; the importance of taking stock of oneself; confessing one’s defects, and the willingness to make restitution; and that one could choose one’s own concept of “God” (Kurtz, 1991, p. 17).

Bill W., extremely successful on Wall Street, found his promising career ruined by continuous and chronic alcoholism. Wilson (1957) writes, in Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age: A Brief History of A.A., “My depression deepened unbearably and finally it seemed to me as though I were at the very bottom of the pit” (p. 63). Now, approaching 39 years of age, he believed his problem to be hopeless, progressive, and irreversible. He had sought medical treatment at Towns Hospital in Manhattan, but continued drinking. Bill was, at first, unconvinced by Ebby’s story of transformation and the claims of the Oxford Group, but in December 1934, after again landing in Towns Hospital for treatment, Bill underwent a powerful spiritual experience unlike any he had ever known. “My thoughts began to race as I envisioned a chain reaction among alcoholics, one carrying the message and these principles to the next. More than I could ever want anything else, I now knew that I wanted to work with other alcoholics” (Wilson, 1957, p. 64). Depression and despair were lifted, feeling free and at peace, he stopped drinking, dedicating his life to bring that freedom and peace to other alcoholics.

Bill W. went on to leave the Oxford Group yet their teachings influenced the structure of Alcoholics Anonymous and many of the ideas that formed the foundation of AA’s suggested Twelve Step program. In Getter Better: Inside Alcoholics Anonymous, Nan Robertson (1988) wrote,
In the mid-1930s, it was the Oxford meetings that gave the little group of alcoholics in Akron a philosophical home and a spiritual focus. The core of the Oxford program, adapted by A.A., included unconditional surrender of the human will of God; taking a personal moral inventory; confessing (“sharing”) before other members; making amends to people whom a member had harmed, and working with others who needed help, willingly and without thought of financial reward (p. 45).

Wilson (1957) himself stated, “The Oxford Groupers had clearly shown us what to do. And, just as importantly, we had also learned from them what not to do as far as alcoholics were concerned” (p. 74). Some of the Oxford principles that did not resonate with Bill W., or other alcoholics, were the group’s insistence on “absolutes” and a resounding faith in a Christian God. Despite the Oxford Group’s insistence that they were non-denominational, their practice and words proved otherwise (Kurtz, 1991, p.45).

The beginning of AA dates from a meeting in 1935 when Bill W. met another alcoholic, Dr. Robert Smith (now known as Dr. Bob), on a business trip in Akron, Ohio. Together they founded what is now known as Alcoholics Anonymous. In 1939, Bill W. and Dr. Bob wrote a book titled Alcoholics Anonymous, commonly referred to as the “Big Book” by members of AA. This book is the foundational text for AA on how to stay sober, and it is from the title of this book that the group received its name. AA has grown dramatically since its inception in 1939. As of January 1, 2012, service material from the AA website estimates worldwide membership at 2,133,842 people. The United States and Canada provide the bulk of the membership with 1,290,716 and 93,983 people respectively. Since 1939, the AA publishing company, Alcoholics Anonymous World Services (AAWS), has printed and sold around 30 million copies of the Big Book (AA, 2013).

AA made the decision to be its own publisher, putting out all its own books and pamphlets and its own magazine, the A.A. Grapevine. The A.A. Grapevine was first published in June of 1944. Each year the publishing company distributes seven million copies of more than 40 pamphlets and almost a million and a half copies of six books and two booklets (Robertson, 1988, p. 87). The second edition of the Big Book was released in 1955, the third in 1976, and the fourth in 2001. The first 164 pages that detail the program remain largely intact, with only minor statistical updates and edits. The remaining pages contain personal stories updated with every edition to reflect changing AA membership,
resulting in the removal of earlier stories. Published in 2003 *Experience, Strength, and Hope* is a compilation of all stories removed from the Big Book.

**Program of AA**

First appearing in the *A.A. Grapevine* in 1947, Bill W. stated,

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 help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety (AA, 1947).

This is the AA preamble and typically read at the beginning meetings “to remind members and inform what A.A. is and is not” (Robertson, 1988, p. 85). AA has no human authority and has never been divided by a major controversial issue. This is to serve AA’s single purpose: “to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers” (Wilson, 1957, p. 107). This is the crux of Alcoholics Anonymous, serving to reinforce the three main principles of AA: recovery, unity, and service. The Big Book, which includes the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of A.A. in Table 1, serve as guides to fulfilling this mission.

The Twelve Steps are the heart of personal recovery in AA. In simplest form, the AA program operates when a recovered alcoholic passes along the story of his or her own problem drinking, describes the sobriety he or she has found in AA, and invites the newcomer to join the informal Fellowship. A newcomer is an individual still drinking or within their first 30 days of sobriety. Newcomers are suggested to keep an open mind, to attend meetings at which recovered alcoholics describe their personal experiences in achieving sobriety, and to read AA literature describing and interpreting the AA program. Besides the Big Book, the other foundational text within AA, published in June of 1953, is the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, known by members as the “Twelve and Twelve.” This text outlines each step and tradition in greater detail, offering members further information and suggestions on how to achieve and maintain sobriety. However, these are suggestions that continue throughout a person’s sobriety, whether a member has two days, two years, or 22 years.
Table 1. Twelve Steps of Alcoholic 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 (sic). |
| 4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves. |
| 5. Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs. |
| 6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character. |
| 7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings. |
| 8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all. |
| 9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others. |
| 10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it. |
| 11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out. |
| 12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs (AA, 2001, p. 59-60). |

The Oxford Group and its evangelical roots may have influenced Bill W., but Alcoholics Anonymous argues it is not technically religious, nor does it officially advocate for a religious-based solution. Bill W. emphasized in his writings and teachings “that Alcoholics Anonymous was a layman’s group. He felt that no one should have to believe in any particular religious faith or dogma; that each member was entitled to a personal interpretation of the words ‘God as we understand Him’” (Robertson, 1988, p. 124). AA represents itself as a spiritual program that offers members a non-dogmatic, suggestive-only solution to alcoholism by repeating, throughout the Big Book, that a higher power is a power greater than yourself of your own understanding. As Robertson (1988) argued, “A.A. is not a religious cult. It is not an evangelical movement. Some members are religious, and some are agnostics or atheists. Many members choose to believe that their ‘higher power’ is their A.A. group” (p. 85). Members of A.A. decide for themselves what constitutes their higher power, be it God, a grain of sand, or the fellowship of AA.
Nevertheless, the claim that AA is a spiritual, rather than religious, program is up for debate. Both mainstream and feminist critics argue AA is a rigid, Christian-based program. For example, Kurtz and Robertson give credence to AA’s spiritual nature, yet they also recognize this spirituality has been shaped by religion. Kurtz (1991) pointed out in his history of AA that the program has embodied the fundamentalist, evangelical side of American Christianity based on its Oxford Group roots (p. 179-182, p. 189-191), while Robertson (1988) described the founders of AA as “Anglo-Saxon Protestant, middle class to the core, and political and economic conservatives” (p. 35). In Alcoholics Anonymous: Cult or Cure, Charles Bufe (1998) claimed AA’s central doctrines are virtually unchanged from the Oxford Group principles and inherited the Oxford Group’s belief that the only way to solve human problems is through complete submission to God’s will (p. 57). Feminist scholar Freeman (1989), in “Twelve Steps Anonymous” claimed even in its most progressive forms, AA tends to be modeled after Christianity (p. 20).

A second debate about AA is that its Twelve Steps are suggestive only, yet this is another highly debated claim. In Bill W.’s own words, “But here we must remember that A.A.’s Steps are suggestions only. A belief in them as they stand is not at all a requirement for membership among us. This liberty has made A.A. available to thousands who never would have tried at all had we insisted on the Twelve Steps just as written” (Wilson, 1957, p. 81). Bill W. argued this liberty prevented AA from becoming a frozen set of dogmatic principles. Robertson further added nobody invites you to join AA. Newcomers are not recruited or aggressively told they have a problem. Members of AA wait until they are asked for help because they believe only the individual can determine if they are alcoholic and need or want the program of AA. You are a member if you say you are because the only requirement is a desire to stop drinking.

Traditional criticisms state the Twelve Steps further indicate the dogmatic nature of AA. Despite AA’s verbiage as a suggestive-only program, critics claim there is only one, right way to “work” the Steps and members are brainwashed to believe recovery is impossible without following the Steps (Bufe, 1998; Peele & Brodsky, 1991). Feminist thinkers argue the language of the Twelve Steps is patriarchal, oppressive, male-dominated, and dogmatic. These criticisms rest on claims that AA is a hierarchical institution, with steps formulated by white, middle-class men, dedicated to maintaining male authority, placing
A third debate about AA is exclusivity. In the course of working the Twelve Steps, Alcoholics Anonymous evolved a set of principles to live and work together and relate themselves as a fellowship to the world around them. For Bill W., the Twelve Traditions “represent the distilled experience of our past, and we rely on them to carry us in unity through the challenges and dangers which the future may bring” (Wilson, 1957, p. 79). While the Twelve Steps speak to personal recovery, the Twelve Traditions in Table 2 speak to the unity of AA, providing principles for AA as a whole to survive and function effectively (AA, 2001, p. xix).

Table 2. Twelve Traditions of Alcoholic Anonymous

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<td>1.</td>
<td>Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity.</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>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.</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking.</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Each group has but one primary purpose—to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>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.</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional, but our service centers may employ special workers.</td>
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<td>9.</td>
<td>A.A., as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy.</td>
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<td>11.</td>
<td>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.</td>
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<td>12.</td>
<td>Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities (AA, 2001, p. 562).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Twelve Traditions seem to indicate lack of a hierarchical structure within AA. “In Twelve Step programs, there are no experts or supervisors or financial backers to exercise authority over program members. Each member is viewed as a potential contributor to the support and recovery of all other members” (Covington, 1994, p. 4). Bill Wilson (1957) wrote, “The Traditions guarantee the equality of all members and the independence of all groups. They show how we may best relate ourselves to each other and to the world outside” (p. 96). The Twelve Traditions guide AA as a whole to ensure its unity and primary purpose for each member: to stay sober and help another alcoholic achieve sobriety. The Twelve Traditions are to group survival and harmony what AA’s Twelve Steps are to each member’s sobriety and peace of mind (Wilson, 1957, p. 96).

Yet the lack of hierarchy in AA is debatable, as is the idea of an inclusive community where all people feel valued and safe. It is important to note that in the early days AA was not for everyone. One of the initial titles for the Big Book was One Hundred Men (Berenson, 1991, p. 67). It wasn’t until 1939, four years after the inception of AA that Marty Mann became the first female member. Race and sexual orientation were not factors taken into account and scarce research exists today on the experience of women of color (Sanders, 2009, p. 13) or non-heterosexual women or men. Two main areas within AA that highlight this debate are meetings and sponsorship.

MEETINGS

In addition to using the Steps and Traditions as guides to living a life free from addiction, members of AA regularly attend meetings to maintain sobriety. With the exception of following the Twelve Traditions, there are no rules governing the structure of meetings.

For example, in its original ‘long form,’ Tradition Four declares: ‘Any two or three gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an A.A. group, provided that as a group they have no other affiliation.’ This means that these two or three alcoholics could try for sobriety in any way they liked. They could disagree with any or all of A.A.’s principles and still call themselves an A.A. group (Wilson, 1957, p. 105)

The meetings of AA are numerous and varied in nature. For example, there are women-only and men-only meetings, LGBT meetings, open² and closed³ meetings, speaker⁴

² AA meetings that are open to everyone. You do not need to identify as an alcoholic.
meetings, open discussion meetings, and meetings centered on specific AA literature such as portions of the “Big Book” or the “Twelve and Twelve.”\(^5\) All of these meetings are listed in a directory one can access via the web or a pamphlet, detailing the type of meeting, and time and address, based on your geographic location. Also, there are meetings not listed in the pamphlet that members create on their own in order to aid their recovery. Oftentimes, these are smaller meetings held at a member’s home where all participants feel extremely close to one another. This enables each member to verbalize feelings they may not feel comfortable sharing at larger meetings.

The goal of such an assorted array of meetings is to support each member of AA in their recovery. This contradicts the critic of AA as a “one-size fits” all program. Members of AA are diverse and have different needs, thus not all meetings will fit their path to recovery. Members of AA attend a variety of meetings until they find the ones that work for them. Meetings offer fellowship and community, crucial factors in achieving sobriety. The Big Book states,

> We are people who normally would not mix. But there exists among us a fellowship, a friendliness, and an understanding which is indescribably wonderful…the tremendous fact for every one of us is that we have discovered a common solution. We have a way out on which we can absolutely agree, and upon which we can join in brotherly and harmonious action (AA, 2001, p. 17).

Although members of AA are varied, they attempt to unite under the common cause of staying sober and helping another alcoholic achieve sobriety.

Despite the numerous and varied meetings AA offers, not all feel welcome or safe. E. Summerson Carr, in *Scripting Addiction: The Politics of Therapeutic Talk and American Society*, argued sexual abuse is a primary reason women feel AA is unsafe. Summerson’s longitudinal ethnographic study focuses on Fresh Beginnings, a treatment program for homeless women, where AA has been formally incorporated into the treatment regimen. Through interviews with clients and counselors Summerson found the sentiment “that AA does not welcome female participants and is insensitive to the specific ‘issues’ of women

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\(^3\) Each participant must identify as an alcoholic. This identification is what separates open and closed meetings of AA.

\(^4\) One alcoholic shares their story followed by a Q&A session.

\(^5\) Diverse and varied meetings are found only in large cities.
alcoholics” (Carr, 2011, p. 203). One counselor argued AA is both for men, with more of them in attendance, and by men, founded by middle-class, white males, leaving women feeling inhibited from sharing on their personal issues, particularly related to sexual abuse. “Clients began to insist that AA was started and run by men, not welcoming of women, and therefore an ‘unsafe’ place for women to ‘open up,’ especially about sex” (Carr, 2011, p. 204). However, other counselors deemed AA the best solution in conjunction with treatment and clients were simply mirroring “the script” set forth by a small minority of counselors in an effort to not attend required meetings. Summerson argued it is difficult to know whether the clients truly felt unsafe or were repeating what they heard from counselors.

**SPONSORSHIP**

Another main aspect within AA is that of sponsorship. A sponsor is a member of AA that guides the newcomer through the Twelve Steps and the program of AA. They are “a mentor within AA whose role it is to encourage sobriety and help less experienced attendees abide by program principles” (Carr, 2011, p. 202). Like the AA program, a sponsor should make suggestions only on how to achieve sobriety by sharing their own story and how they have stayed sober. It is asked that members of AA, or those considering the program, remain honest, willing, and open-minded.

Although not bound by law, the relationship between a sponsor and his/her “sponsee” is often considered to be quite sacred. Everything shared is meant to be confidential and anonymous, yet this is not always the case. Members of AA can change their sponsor whenever they see fit, as another person may be better suited to guide them through the program. Often a member of AA will have the same sponsor throughout their sobriety. The sponsor/sponsee relationship holds great importance within AA because it speaks to the program’s commitment to its three main principles of recovery, unity, and service.

A.A.’s Twelfth Step, carrying the message, is the basic service that our fellowship gives; it is our principal aim and the main reason for our existence. A.A. is more than a set of principles; it is a society of recovered alcoholics in action. We must carry A.A.’s message; otherwise we ourselves may fall into decay and those who have not yet been given the truth may die (Wilson, 1957, p. 139).

Service comes in a variety of forms and is considered a highly important aspect of any AA member’s program, be it greeting members at the door of a meeting, sponsoring, or explaining the program to someone who thinks they may have a problem.
However, not all find sponsorship agreeable. Freeman (1989) asserted Twelve Step programs “foster hierarchy and dependency in a way which is in opposition to feminist concerns, chiefly through the sponsor[ship] aspect of the programs” (p. 20). Her argument is women in AA, and other Twelve Step programs, are encouraged to become dependent, rather than independent and empowered, by relying on someone else to “teach” them the “right” way to work the Steps. Unterberger (1989), in “Twelve Steps for Women Alcoholics”, also believed AA implicitly tells members to become dependent. They both advocate the need for female alcoholics’ independence and argue the current model of dependency within A.A. is hierarchical and places members into top-down power dichotomies. Unterberger’s (1989) feminist revision of dependency relies on mutuality and claims “an interconnected framework is more essential to the AA recovery process than the alcoholic’s independent spirituality” (p. 1151).

A final source of contention is on the Twelve Steps’ emphasis upon powerlessness as liberating (Sanders, 2009). Feminists are troubled by this concept and beg the question, “can women embrace a belief in their powerlessness, as they’re taught to in twelve-step programs, and still recover from their female socialization?” (Bepko, 1991, p. 2). This is a key concept discussed more fully in chapter three of this thesis. The concern for many feminists is that admitting powerlessness appears to be one more instance of female oppression. It seems like a step backwards to acknowledge powerlessness over addiction because women have been conditioned to feel powerless, submissive, obedient, and self-sacrificing in other areas of life (Bepko 1991; Covington 1994; Johnson 1989; Kasl 1990; Walters 1995).

In 1975, Dr. Jean Kirkpatrick founded Women for Sobriety (WFS) and its Thirteen Statements as an alternative to AA and its Twelve Steps. There is a significant difference between the first step of each program: AA’s, “We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable,” contrasted with WFS’s, “I have a drinking problem that once had me. I now take charge of my life and my disease. I accept the responsibility” (Women for Sobriety, 2011). Kirkpatrick believed AA did not address the underlying lack of self-esteem in female alcoholics, the social stigma attached to alcoholic women, or the shame and guilt surrounding them (Sanders, 2009, p. 3).
The roots of these feminist criticisms lies in the belief that men and women experience addiction differently, and argue that AA uses a “one-size fits” all model that cannot work for everyone. For Forth-Finegan (1991), stigma remains a very serious issue for women who are alcoholic or addicted in this society…other authors identify shame as a critical issue for the woman alcoholic, and the shame is reported to be connected to a perception of having failed at the gender expectations of being female (p. 28-9).

Drinking is viewed as a male rite-of-passage, yet for women, drinking is viewed as unattractive, immoral, slovenly, or promiscuous. For feminist critics, AA, and other Twelve Step treatment programs, do not address the specific needs of addicted women. Rather, they argue treatment programs are modeled on research based on men and their needs, but women alcoholics require different approaches in treatment. These approaches must include treatment of shame, guilt, and other coexisting problems such as mental disorders, eating disorders, or sexual abuse (Forth-Finegan, 1991, p. 35).

The literature affirming the value of AA for women is scarce, but does exist. Dr. Stephanie Covington is a clinician, lecturer, organizational consultant, and workshop leader. Although she considers AA masculine in nature, she claimed, in *A Women’s Way Through the Twelve Steps* (Covington, 1994), the program and the Twelve Steps offer women spaces of healing and empowerment. According to Covington, the Big Book of *Alcoholics Anonymous* that was written in 1939 by and for men, does not render it useless for women. Nevertheless, she acknowledges the Big Book and the program of AA may not completely meet our needs or match our values as women. Her hope is that this book will provide new, more accessible perspectives on recovery from addiction, one focusing on the needs and concerns of women. Covington (1994) argued women could take from the program what works for them and leave the rest, creating their own spaces within the program. She employs narratives in conjunction with text from the Big Book to reveal how women manipulate and navigate the masculine language of AA. While her book is scholarly in nature, it is intended for those in and out of the academy.

In *Women in Alcoholics Anonymous: Recovery and Empowerment*, sociologist Dr. Jolene M. Sanders combined personal narratives with quantitative data. She revealed how women adapt and interact with the masculine culture of AA in order to find empowerment, offering new and feminist views of the Steps for women (Sanders, 2009, p. 12). She
examined empowerment within AA through two theoretical lenses. First she used liberal feminism to provide her framework for understanding and defining empowerment. Second, she used phenomenological feminism to analyze and interpret the experiences of the women in her study. This is a “high” level scholarly book written for an academic audience.

**IMPACT ON SOCIETY**

Alcoholics Anonymous has greatly influenced society through the media, law, medicine, judicial system, and, above all, the systems of recovery and treatment for addiction. Although AA may not be explicitly named, many T.V. shows, movies, and the news in general tout a Twelve Step ideology for those suffering from alcoholism (Bufe, 1998, p.106). Much of the medical industry views AA favorably and an effective treatment for addiction. In the legal and medical profession, as well as others, professional diversion programs are in place for those suffering from addiction. Between 1973 and 1980 the number of Employee Assistance Programs (EPAs) leaped from 500 to 4400. Edgar Nace (1993), in his article “Inpatient Treatment,” argued this is due to the passage of the Comprehensive Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism Prevention, Treatment and Rehabilitation Act of 1970, also known as the Hughes Act (p.430). In the judicial system, it is quite common for the courts to mandate attendance at AA meetings or participation in a Twelve Step treatment program to those convicted of alcohol-related crimes.

**AFFILIATED PROGRAMS**

Traditional critics share feminists’ concern around AA’s language of powerlessness. These critics do not engage with the power dynamics surrounding gender, but rest on the claim that addiction is not something beyond one’s control, much like Kirkpatrick’s program *Women for Sobriety* (Bufe, 1998; Peele & Brodsky, 1991). As an alternative to AA, Peele offered the “Life Process Program.” Peele viewed the language of powerlessness as a weakness and argues it is unhelpful to an alcoholic or addict. “Instead of focusing on the person’s failures and weaknesses, the Life Process Program draws on those strengths and personal resources the addict retains” (Peele & Brodsky, 1991, p. 161). The argument made by critics is AA turns the addict into a helpless victim that cannot take responsibility for their addiction or their life.
Stanton Peele and Archie Brodsky (1991), in *The Truth About Addiction and Recovery*, argued not only are more people quitting alcoholism and addiction on their own than through treatment centers or programs like AA, but evidence indicates people fighting an addiction are better off attempting it without the help of typical treatment programs. Both traditional and feminist critics claim much of this evidence lays in the sobriety of the many thousands of members of nontraditional programs such as, Moderation Management, S.M.A.R.T. Recovery, Rational Recovery, Women for Sobriety, and Secular Organizations for Sobriety. The argument is these programs are better for those suffering from addiction. However, while they are not affiliated with AA, they are based off the AA model. This is a contradiction left unresolved by critics of AA.

The numerous and varied Twelve Step programs we see today clearly show AA’s greatest impact is on the treatment of addiction. Though not comprehensive, here is a list of groups using a Twelve Step framework: Adult Children of Alcoholics, Al-Anon, Gamblers Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Sexaholics Anonymous, and Workaholics Anonymous. There are over 30 different groups found on the Internet using a Twelve Step based model of recovery for addiction. These groups use the guiding principles for recovery originally developed by Alcoholics Anonymous.

Both traditional and feminist discourse find fault with AA. The criticisms argue AA is a religious, doctrinal program that is exclusive in nature. They also find the language of powerlessness within the twelve steps harmful for those suffering from addiction. These criticisms were juxtaposed with language from AA and other scholars to highlight these contentions as areas for debate. While these disputes are not definitively answered in this chapter, they lay the framework for this project.
CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODS

In this chapter, I present the theoretical framework of my thesis and the methods used to conduct it.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The purpose of this research is to investigate how women in AA negotiate and navigate contradictions within the program. To answer these inquiries more critically, my approach is interdisciplinary and draws from oral history, feminist theology and feminist theory. Leavy (2007) argued:

Oral history is generally employed by feminists as a way of bridging the personal biography of women with the social context in which that biography is written. Oral history explicitly allows for the politicizing of individual experience and thus has a deep connection with the project of feminism (p. 155).

I argue the academy offers little space for the narratives of feminist alcoholics and the empowerment they find within the walls of Alcoholics Anonymous. Accordingly, oral histories and personal narratives serve as a healing of the “splits”: the split between Western feminist meta-narratives versus community wellness. There are particular tropes about AA within feminism that challenge powerlessness as redemptive for women. In addition, if a text is deemed androcentric in substance, it is rendered useless for women. Finally, any male-dominated space is considered hierarchical and therefore oppressive to the well-being of women. However, women find healing and sobriety in spite of these feminist critiques.

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6 Feminist theologies offer a variety of theological perspectives developed to focus on the experiences, needs, and concerns of women. According to feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, “The critical principle of feminist theology is the promotion of the full humanity of women. Whatever denies, diminishes, or distorts the full humanity of women is, therefore, appraised as not redemptive. Theologically speaking, whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine or an authentic relation to the divine, or to reflect the authentic nature of things, or to be the message or work of an authentic redeemer or a community of redemption.” See Sexism and God-Talk, Rosemary Radford Ruether (1983, p. 18-19).
Through interviews, I hoped to bridge the gap between theory and experience. What is lacking in the meta-narratives is the lived experience and voice of women in AA. Their voices serve as the bridge that informs and expands feminist theory.

I entered this endeavor as a translator of received narratives or interviews from the women within AA: not imposing an existing theory onto their responses. As a generative site of theory, their narratives and experiences create and develop into concepts of the world, constituting elements of a theory as a site overlooked. To elicit this information I generated my interview questions around Leavy’s (2007) analysis “by accessing subjugated voices and experiences feminist researchers are often trying to make connections between individual biographies and the larger cultural and institutional contexts that serve as the backdrop for those experiences” (p. 159). The goal of this research is to bring academic discourse around AA into conversation with the voices and experiences of women in AA. Thus the interviews I conducted are at the center of this project.

The validity criteria to replicate and generalize the research results are inconsistent with the goals of this research. I did not attempt to produce outcomes that could be replicated in future studies conducted by other researchers or generalized to the larger population of women in AA. My intent is to generate more questions and possible areas for exploration in future research projects with more participants.

**My Social Location as the Researcher**

As a feminist alcoholic woman, my interest lies in the crossroad of theory found in the academy and the lived experience of women in AA. My social location as a queer, feminist, woman of color in recovery provided me with better access to participants and knowledge of AA. However, as an “insider”, it was imperative to employ self-reflexivity and draw on my ambivalence regarding the seemingly contradictory space of women in AA by “continued self-awareness of constructing knowledge and of the influences of [the researcher’s] beliefs, backgrounds and feelings in the process of researching” (Naples, 2003, p. 42). I kept the women interviewed, and their narratives, at the center of my research. I did not know the answers to the questions asked and was careful to not insert my own opinions or beliefs onto the women in this project. My level of objectivity, given my own experience with AA, had the potential to influence some of my findings. However, I attempted to limit
any bias as much as possible. For example, the fact that I do not find the Big Book a useful tool in my own recovery, yet respected the women who found value and insight from this primary text, speaks to my desire for objectivity.

My “insider” status allowed for more access and insight as I believe the participants felt more at ease with another female alcoholic. I deconstructed my level of comfort with the women interviewed in my field notes. Anne Opie (2007), in “Qualitative Research, Appropriation of the ‘Other’ and Empowerment,” writes of interviews:

> Although at one point they are liberatory because they open to inspection what has been previously hidden, they are also restrictive in the sense that they can appropriate the data to the researcher’s interests, so that other significant experiential elements which challenge or partially disrupt that interpretation may also be silenced (p. 362).

Prior to delving into the interview, some of the women and I spoke briefly of my project as they read the consent form. Since I am so passionate about my topic, I not only worry I spoke too much, but may have skewed my data. If I tell an interviewee specifics about what I think may be happening, they may tailor their answers to my topic. For example, the consent form states the title of my thesis and the purpose of the study, which is to analyze if AA offers women forms of healing and empowerment. I argue these are loaded terms and women interviewed may have answered the questions in an effort to show how AA was empowering. I tried to be careful when discussing this project with interviewees in order to gain the most authentic oral narratives.

**Subject Characteristics and Selection Criteria**

I limited my sample to ten women with a minimum of three years of sobriety, who have gone through all the Twelve Steps with a sponsor, regularly attend a women’s only meeting, and attend a home meeting7, whether it is their women’s meeting or a mixed meeting. I was intentional in my sample for a variety of reasons. The parameters of length of sobriety, finishing the Twelve Steps, and attending a home meeting speak to a commitment and knowledge of AA. Secondly, I wanted participants that had sponsors and attended

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7 A home meeting is a meeting an alcoholic attends every week. It occurs at the same place and same time every week.
women-only meetings because I hypothesized these were areas women found healing and empowerment within a male-dominated program. Lastly, I disseminated information about the study by passing out a handout to women after AA meetings (Appendix A). The women had left the meeting and were outside of the AA location. I also used “snowball sampling.” For example, after interviewing one woman, I asked her if she had anyone in mind that would be willing to participate in my research. I used these recruitment methods in order to yield as many possible participants as I could in an effort to have a diverse sample. The sample in Table 3 was selected from different neighborhoods across San Diego from various age ranges, sexual orientations, and ethnic/racial groups. I was deliberate in the selection of participants in order to have as diverse a sample as possible.8

The sample size was determined to be large enough to yield a diversity of backgrounds and experiences, and small enough to be manageable for a thesis.

INTERVIEWS

In the present project, I conducted in-person interviews with a local sample of ten self-identified alcoholic women who participate in the program of Alcoholics Anonymous. The interviews were conducted at a location of their choice, which included their home, my home, and a public or AA site. The interview questions were open-ended, but centered on three ways I hypothesized women in AA recover from addiction, find sources of healing, and become empowered (Appendix B). The three areas I specifically researched, through the analysis of my interviews, are: AA as a program of paradox, AA as a program of malleability, and the community of women formed within AA.

I designed my interview questions around these three hypotheses. There is one main question for each hypothesis and follow-up questions, as needed. I first hypothesized AA may be a program of paradox where women could navigate the paradoxical language of the Twelve Steps to accommodate their own healing and find empowerment. I was particularly interested in how women in AA felt about the language of powerlessness found in step one. Step one of AA states “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had

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8 Because AA is a program of anonymity, I did not use the real names of participants. These are pseudonyms.
Table 3. Participant Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Socioeconomic Status</th>
<th>Years of Sobriety</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
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<td>Asian &amp; Indian</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Middle</td>
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<td>Straight</td>
<td>Middle</td>
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<td>Straight</td>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>4.5</td>
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<td>Lower</td>
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<tr>
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<td>White</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Upper</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>Lesbian</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>Lower</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristin</td>
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<td>Queer</td>
<td>Middle</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

become unmanageable” (AA, 2001, p. 59). The main interview question for this hypothesis was “Does saying you are powerless over alcohol make you feel powerless as woman? Why or why not?”

A second reason I hypothesized AA may be empowering for women is due to its malleability, allowing each member to read and work the steps in a way that offers freedom and liberation. The Big Book of AA is a description of how others have stayed sober and states “our book is meant to be suggestive only” (AA, 2001, p. 164). Although the language of the Big Book is masculinist. I hypothesized this malleability may allow for various female interpretations. I was interested in how women viewed the language of the Big Book and my
main interview question for this hypothesis was “Do you find any language in the Big Book sexist? How does this make you feel and what do you do about it?”

A final reason I hypothesized AA may be empowering is the formation of community among women. Although AA is male-dominated and male-focused perhaps an open and safe(r) space is created that can allow women to verbalize feelings through relations with other women. My main interview question was “What is the role of female fellowship/women’s community in your life? Why is this important for you?” However, I did not want to assume that all women experience female community in the same way. This is why I had an intentionally diverse sample and asked participants “Are there any ways you have ever felt different from other women in recovery?”

**ANALYSIS**

Each of the ten interviews was transcribed, word for word, in its entirety, including my own questions and responses. I also transcribed pauses, laughs, “ums,” tears, and sighs, yet did not use these as part of my interpretation and are areas for further research. Following transcription, the interviews were analyzed and coded based on grounded theory methodology described by Judith A. Holton (2007):

> There are two types of coding in a classic grounded theory study: *substantive coding*, which includes both open and selective coding procedures, and *theoretical coding*. In substantive coding, the researcher works with the data directly, fracturing and analyzing it, initially through *open coding* for the emergence of a core category and related concepts and then subsequently through *theoretical sampling* and *selective coding* of data to theoretically saturate the core and related concepts. *Theoretical saturation* is achieved through *constant comparison* of incidents (indicators) in the data to elicit the properties and dimensions of each category (code) (p. 265).

Using this method, I compared interview data to identify common themes related to my research questions. I began to postulate relationships between categories identified in this process, and test these theoretical propositions against further interview data. This is known as “constant comparison” and required ongoing analysis of interviews throughout data collection rather than once data collection is complete. Finally, I identified three primary issues or “core categories” (open coding) and used them to analyze the entire data set. These three categories were powerlessness, malleability, and community.
I then developed three subthemes (axial coding) for each core category and identified connections between participants’ insights (selective coding) (Creswell, 2007). The three subthemes for the core category “powerlessness” are paradox, empowerment, surrender and spirituality. The three subthemes for the core category “malleability” are understanding context, hermeneutics of suspicion, and religiosity. The three subthemes for the core category “community” are women-only meetings, sponsorship, and community despite difference.

I used an analogous process to analyze any notes I took during the research process, which include my reflections on my participation in this project and its possible effects. In my discussion of the research results, I drew on quotes from the interviews as well as my own notes to illustrate common themes. Stories often seem to function in narrative research as forms of politics, broadcasting voices excluded from or neglected with dominant political structures and processes, such as women’s experiences.

Oral histories and narratives offer feminism enriched, detailed accounts of the world and the women who navigate it. “There is ongoing discourse on what constitutes ‘feminist’ research, but one of its central objectives has been to dethrone the positivistic pursuit of objective ‘truth’ by advocating a broader array of research methods, especially those capable of elucidating social processes” (Leavy, 2007, p. 157). They give voice to previously silenced spaces and affirm the lived experiences often rendered invisible.
CHAPTER 4

PARADOX OF POWERLESSNESS

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This chapter examines the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) directive for people in recovery to admit powerlessness in order to heal from alcoholism. Passages from the Big Book and interviews with women in AA are used to explore this instruction. Feminist criticisms troubled by the concept of relinquishing power for concern it replicates women’s societal gendered oppression are also discussed. Tensions exist between the academic critique and the high membership of women in AA; if AA is an oppressive space, why is one third of the membership female? The tensions gave rise to the research question examining how women in AA feel about the language of powerlessness. For this study I interviewed ten diverse women and asked, “Does saying you are powerless over alcohol make you feel powerless as a woman? Why or why not?” The interviewees addressed the paradox of powerlessness, empowerment, surrender, and spirituality.

Historically the feminist critique of AA did not address the complexity of the program, yet feminism is not monolithic. As such I will be drawing on feminist theorists, including those within the field of feminist theology, to analyze the experience of women in AA more critically. The aim of this chapter is not to discredit previous feminist concerns, but to analyze how women in AA navigate a program created by, and for men, in order to find healing and recovery.

FEMINIST CRITIQUES OF POWERLESSNESS

The first step of AA states, “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable” (AA, 2001, p. 59). From the AA perspective, it is only when an alcoholic admits that she is powerless over her drinking (emphasis mine) can she begin to take action to regain control over her life. The language of Step One concerns certain feminists. They view it as inhibiting and harmful, rather than healing and redemptive. In fact, this critique originated with a former female member of AA.
In 1975, Dr. Jean Kirkpatrick founded *Women for Sobriety* (WFS) and its Thirteen Statements 9 as an alternative to AA and its Twelve Steps. There is a marked difference between AA’s step one and WFS’s first statement: “I have a drinking problem that once had me. *I now take charge of my life and my disease. I accept the responsibility*” (Women for Sobriety, 2011). Two decades later, Kirkpatrick reiterated her position in an interview published by Hafner (1992) in *Nice Girls Don’t Drink: Stories of Recovery*: “In A.A. you turn yourself over, and as women have been forced to turn themselves over to their fathers, husbands, to everyone, I think this is just the last straw. I think what our program tries to do is to give women some empowerment. We need to have control of our lives; we need to have control of ourselves” (p. 161). Other feminists echoed Kirkpatrick’s anxieties.

Johnson (1989), in *Wildfire: Igniting the she/volution*, argued that AA “is simply another male institution…dedicated to maintaining men’s oppressive and destructive value structure and hierarchy” (p. 131). She claimed that AA reproduced women’s lack of agency in U.S. culture through its emphasis on self-abasement and lack of power. Kasl (1990), in *The Twelve-Step Controversy* equated AA’s higher power with an all-powerful male God women must surrender to, and claimed the organization of AA mirrors women’s second-class treatment in society. In addition, Kasl argued the language of AA is harmful because “many women abuse chemicals…because they feel powerless in their lives” (p. 30). Previously stated, these feminist critiques of AA find women suppressed within yet another patriarchal institution.

Yet Covington (1994), in *A Women’s Way through the Twelve Steps* contradicted the previous authors’ ideas for when she admitted her powerlessness over alcohol she found a sense of relief and reassurance. After that she made sense of the difficulties in her life (p.10). Sanders (2009), in *Women in Alcoholics Anonymous: Recovery and Empowerment* added to this argument when her research revealed women found empowerment, both collective and individual, through the AA program. However, both scholars acknowledged the validity of previous critiques of AA. There is truth and value in the AA criticisms. AA is a male-

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9 In *Women for Sobriety*, the program is comprised of thirteen Statements and not Steps as in AA.
dominated program and women live in an androcentric society, therefore it is understandable why the language of powerlessness causes such anxiety.

**PARADOX**

By doing that, by admitting I was powerless over a substance, somehow, what’s the word, not ironically, but like opposite, by admitting I was powerless, somehow I finally had the ability to stop being victimized by it, stop being at its mercy. So in every way I feel that I am stronger. It’s like I’m more powerful.

-Cindy

As Cindy’s remark demonstrates, she actually gained strength by giving voice to powerlessness. For many women, lack of power or control causes anxiety and discomfort. Yet is it only with the admittance of it and recognition that they cannot overpower their addiction, that addiction is beyond their *power to control*, can they exert *power over* their addiction and life (Covington, 1994, p.10-11). Rather than view powerlessness as self-abasement, as some feminist critics have argued, the women I interviewed redefined and reinterpreted it as agency. Their narratives reveal the directive to admit powerlessness over alcohol is not equivalent to powerlessness in other realms of their lives. This is the paradox of powerlessness. I define AA as a program of paradox, whereby women in recovery are navigating the paradoxical language of the Twelve Steps to accommodate their own healing.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2013) defines paradox as “a statement or proposition that, despite sound reasoning from acceptable premises, leads to a conclusion that seems senseless, logically unacceptable, or self-contradictory.” I introduce this term and use this definition because it best describes how the women in my sample answered my question about the language found in Step One of AA. This theme ran throughout the interviews, with over half of the women making reference to a false proposition. Out of this sample, only one woman used the specific term. The other women used terms or phrases like ironic, opposite, freedom, becoming powerful, or having a sense of control by admitting powerlessness. Sarah said:

But for me I gain hope that I don’t have to worry about it anymore. It actually gives me hope that I’m powerless because before I was fighting it, and like trying to get that power back and trying to have some sort of control, but by saying I’m powerless and giving up full control of that I’ve been able to get my power back as an individual, if that makes sense (personal communication, January 5, 2013).
This sentiment is echoed by Susan who stated, “It’s really paradoxical. I don’t exactly know why it makes sense, but it does. I feel very empowered as a human being and a lot freer than I have at other times in my life when I was a slave to the things I really had no control over” (personal communication, January 8, 2013).

David Berenson (1991), author of “Powerlessness – Liberating or Enslaving? Responding to the Feminist Critique of the Twelve Steps”, discussed this paradoxical gain in power and complexity of transformation through the process of release or letting go. Berenson (1991) argued:

A phenomenon I have observed clinically is that when people start taking decisive action to change problems to which they have become chronically resigned…experience[e] of the acute feeling of powerlessness paradoxically often leads to a longer-term empowerment and effectiveness in actively correcting power imbalances (p. 79).

The dis-empowered self, letting go of the illusion of control redefines the empowered self. It appears contrary for women to have this reaction, yet Covington concurs. She states, “It may seem contradictory to claim our power when we’ve just admitted our powerlessness, but actually we are made more powerful by this admission. By admitting our powerlessness over our addiction, we are freeing ourselves to turn our attention to areas where we do have control” (Covington, 1994, p. 12).

The concept of dis-empowering the self in order to empower it originates in feminist theology with kenosis. Kenosis is the voluntary act of emptying one’s self spiritually to generate healing. You lose your life in order to save it. Sarah Coakley (2002), in Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender, noted self-emptying does not equal negative loss, rather a loss that results in addition (p. 13). Coakley identified the need to rethink the binary of power and submission. She redefined the terms and viewed this “lack” in a positive light. This emptying is not asking for submission to the world or other abusive powers, it is a redefining of power and powerlessness. One interviewee, Vanesse, shared, “Saying that I’m powerless over alcohol does not make me feel like I’m powerless as a woman. Actually being able to give up that power, has empowered me, not just over alcohol, but in other areas of my life” (personal communication, December 19, 2012). Harriet added,

When I was on alcohol I was powerless because I couldn’t do anything but drink. I didn’t go out, I didn’t have friends, I just drank. So powerlessness means that I have freedom. I can do what I want, I can go where I want. I have friends today, I go out to different places today, I speak at graduations today. Today I am an AOD
[Alcohol and Other Drugs] counselor because I am powerless (personal communication, January 8, 2013).

By acknowledging her lack of power over alcohol, she gained freedom to achieve goals and create a new life. A feminist critique has argued that to admit powerlessness is at the cost of freedom, yet the women I interviewed are saying the exact opposite, aligning with Berenson and Coakley’s theories of paradoxical power.

**EMPOWERMENT**

No, it doesn’t make me feel powerless as a woman. Actually, finally understanding that I was powerless over alcohol made me feel more powerful or more grounded. When I stopped struggling against the alcohol, just finally realizing that this was something I could not control, it opened up other areas. Once I got sober and accepted the powerlessness, I found areas where I was effective and valuable because the alcohol was out of the way. I think I got more power.

-Pamela

As Pamela’s narrative shows, empowerment results from admitting a lack of control. The self-determination women gained emerged as its own theme. Covington (1994) defined empowerment as finding and using an inner power (p. 12). Sanders (2009) used multiple definitions of empowerment including self-development, improved self-esteem, self-respect, confidence, and enriched relationships. I use these definitions because they best define how the women I interviewed expressed empowerment.

For Sarah, the process didn’t end at the first step. “By continuing the steps…I can get my power back. It’s not like I’m defeated and I’m not going to do anything about it. I can do things now to get my power back” (personal communication, January 5, 2013). For her, going through all twelve steps gives her the opportunity to gain self-knowledge and feel empowered.

The women agree that to know you are powerless means you have the ability to take back control of your life, make different choices, find an identity, improve relationships, and set boundaries. Cindy asserted, “I feel more powerful somehow…somehow I am a choice now in my life where I don’t feel like I was a choice before. And I think that’s a pretty good definition of power” (personal communication, January 14, 2013). She feels able to make choices and determine the course of her own life. This sense of control as power came up for Vanesse as well. “I have found that once I have fully admitted that I have no control, it brings
me to a sense that I’m taking responsibility where I gain some type of control and that’s powerful” (personal communication, December 19, 2012).

**Defining Power**

These narratives force us to examine and question what constitutes power? When men work Step One they need only think about alcohol. When women work Step One, they navigate between lack of power over alcohol and their lack of power within a patriarchal society. I argue there are two different notions of power that co-exist simultaneously. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2013) offers the first definition of power as “the ability to do something or act in a particular way, especially as a faculty or quality.” The traditional, negative way power- when taken to excess - can be characterized by *Oxford’s* second definition: “the capacity or ability to direct or influence the behavior of others or the course of events.” Borrowing from Berenson (1991), the first definition is “an intrinsic ability or state of being, *power-to*” (p.72), or *power-with*, and the second “an extrinsic action or state of doing, *power-over*” (p. 72). However, power is not universally negative. Theorist Michel Foucault (1977), in *Discipline & Punishment: The Birth of the Prison*, argued “*We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms* [italics mine]: it ‘excludes’, it ‘represses’, it ‘censors’, it ‘abstracts’, it ‘masks’, it ‘conceals’. In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (p. 194).

For example, the women in my sample follow the path laid out by Coakley with regard to a stance of powerlessness through self-emptying as a positive tool towards recovery.

In AA my interviewees gained power through an “organization” or “institution” (AA), which has been critiqued as a source of negative power over women. This causes us to rethink and redefine our notions of power. Rather than thinking of AA as power *over*, it is power *with/to*, a drastically different relationship. As Susan said, “I just feel so much clearer knowing that which I have control over and that which I don’t which really brings a lot of freedom” (personal communication, January 8, 2013). Another respondent, Monica, asserted, “I’m not done discovering who I am and who I can become. That’s what powerlessness gives you…freedom and choices” (personal communication, January 14, 2013). For Monica, this “loss” paradoxically gave her ability to find herself, grow, and pursue the things she wants to do with her life.
Power is not always a top down hierarchy, as these women reveal. Coakley (2002) anticipated this conundrum when she wrote, “Must it necessarily involve intentionality, imply resistance, suppress freedom, or assume a ‘hierarchy’? (p. xv). They are not objects, but rather subjects within AA. For Foucault (1978), in *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, the subject is always a site of conflicting forms of subjectivity and language ascribed to our bodies. Thus bodies, in this case the interviewees, become sites of resistance.

Power and knowledge, and the relationship between them, must be redefined in order to access new ways of de(re)constructing identity, subjectivity, agency, and discourse. As Linda insisted, knowledge is power. “I consciously know that there is something [alcohol] if I touch it, it will totally destroy me. And so knowing that is powerful. Therefore it gives me more power to not touch it” (personal communication, December 23, 2012). Linda also experienced agency through her identity as a woman in recovery. “But I don’t feel any less powerful knowing that I’m an alcoholic. It empowers me because I have an identity. I know what my faults are and I consciously know where I stand. Yes, I’m an alcoholic woman and yes, I’m powerless over alcohol, but I know who I am and that is power”.

It can be the practice of marginalized people to use their defining category and re-work and re-assemble it to operate change, resistance and voice. For example, at one time the term “queer” was negative, but it has since been reclaimed by some members of the LGBT communities. This has redefined the homophobic word positively. Foucault (1978) defined this as reverse discourse. It reverses the meanings found in Eurocentric history and re-fixes or re-claims those meanings (p. 101). Foucault (1978) wrote, “The question I would like to pose is not, Why are we repressed? but rather, Why do we say, with so much passion and so much resentment against our most recent past, against our present, and against ourselves, that we are repressed?” (p. 8). This is a clear and ingenious way of exposing the instability of power. Once the body was written as homosexual, it was constructed as aberrant through medical discourse. Yet this discourse and vocabulary became a site of a resistance movement towards resignifying homosexuality.

The women I interviewed used this strategy. They redefined and reclaimed the term “powerlessness.” Rather than find repression, they found power in a multitude of ways. Kristin realized empowerment largely in relationships. For so long, her relationships were dysfunctional and based on her fear of being alone. She believed that if someone was
interested in her, she had to do everything they said. Since developing self-acceptance, Kristin knows that she no longer has to live this way. She gained self-worth and the power to set boundaries.

I wasn’t afraid to say no anymore. I’ve drawn the line in the sand at what my boundaries are and I stick to them. This is a personal redemption for me. While the program teaches us that it’s not all about us, it also teaches us when it is. And this time, it is all about me. I have to stand up for what I believe in because if I don’t, I’m compromising myself and my self-worth, and that’s something I could drink over (personal communication, December 26, 2012).

Her experience exemplifies Lois McNay’s (1992) claim, in Foucault & Feminism, that “Individuals are no longer conceived as docile bodies in the grip of an inexorable disciplinary power, but as self-determining agents who are capable of challenging and resisting the structures of domination in modern society” (p. 4).

This recognition does not take away from the very real hierarchies of power. Women find control and strength in a paradoxical way in AA, yet this does not negate other forms of oppressive powerlessness. “While the experience of powerlessness may be liberating for some women in some respects, it does nothing to address the very real social, political, and economic power inequalities that exist. Focusing on their private growth may distract many women, and men, from questioning and changing oppressive power arrangements based upon gender” (Berenson, 1991, p. 78).

Powerlessness is often interpreted as negative, and rightly so. Feminist critiques of AA and Step One rightfully note that lack of agency and succumbing to the will of another are not feminist characteristics. Lucy asserted, “I come from a woman-centered space and that’s what I want to see in the world, but that’s not the world we live in” (personal communication, January 8, 2013). Pamela concurred,

The women whose sobriety I admire have used the steps to unpeel the layers of patriarchy and expectation and institutional anti-feminist things built into society about women and guilt and shame and sex and motherhood. Society places expectations on women and I find that the steps are helping women unpeel their resentment against the institutions and the social contracts that force them into a box so that alcohol was the only way they could deal (personal communication, December 19, 2012).

Admitting powerlessness is not trouble free for women, as feminist critiques have shown. As discussed earlier, AA is a male-dominated and male-focused space. Yet women intervene and transform an environment not created for them. Sanders (2006), in “Women
and the Twelve Steps of Alcohol Anonymous: A Gendered Narrative”, argued, “women in AA actively define the nature of their recovery experience in gender-specific and self-empowering ways. Hence, women’s recovery in AA represents not a threat to feminist empowerment, but a particular and particularly powerful contemporary form of women’s empowerment” (p. 1). These women describe themselves as active agents, not passive victims of patriarchy; they identify as empowered subjects via paradoxical power gained through a program created by and for men.

**SURRENDER, SPIRITUALITY, AND ONE’S HIGHER POWER**

Before I got into recovery I thought surrendering meant I had to give up my will, that I didn’t have any choices and I considered surrendering as losing. But through recovery, I have found that surrendering means winning. I’m on the winning side instead of the losing side.

- Harriet

As Harriet’s account illustrates, surrendering can be positive, and equated with winning. Although members in AA are counseled to surrender to a power greater than themselves, this was not a theme I expected to find in relation to powerlessness, yet every woman interviewed used this term. Germaine to AA and the Twelve Steps is the acknowledgment that AA is a spiritual program where sobriety is contingent upon some type of spiritual awakening; the alcoholic experiences an epiphany of the presence of a god-type figure, or Higher Power which leads to a posture of surrender and dependence upon a force outside the self. Just exactly what that spiritual experience is remains ambiguous, although appendix II of AA does state, “awareness of a Power greater than ourselves is the essence of spiritual experience” (AA, 2001, p. 562). Sobriety and healing are not a matter of self-will, but recognition that absent some form of Higher Power, the alcoholic cannot find lasting sobriety.

Surrender, as ordinarily defined, is inadequate versus how it is conceived within AA. In *The Free Dictionary* (2013), surrender is “willful acceptance and yielding to a dominating force and their will,” or “to relinquish possession or control to another because of demand or compulsion.” Additionally, submission as a synonym for surrender is defined as “submission stresses the subordination of the side that has yielded.” The loss of agency in these definitions exemplifies feminist critiques of AA that question the program’s language and
ideology. One definition serves as an alternative to the others, “To give up in favor of another.” This situates the alcoholic in a place of relinquishment, yes, but also requires a new direction—the realization another path is necessary. In terms of AA that path is a power greater than you.

The second step of AA states, “Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity” (AA, 2001, p. 59). Women in my sample surrendered to the fact that they were powerless over alcohol and reinterpreted surrender as a positive response because it gave them greater agency. Paradoxically, by the self-determined act of surrender to a power greater than themselves, they discovered multiple manifestations of empowerment. As Lucy argued, “By admitting that you’re powerless over alcohol you’re surrendering to the fact that you have to go to something else with power and that something else is a higher power for me. The irony of that is by admitting that I’m powerless it actually gives me power through the higher power” (personal communication, January 8, 2013). Vanesse echoed this and said, “I love the word surrender and the language of that because I believe that once I surrendered to a power higher than myself I gained the power that I don’t have within myself to stay sober. If I can surrender to a higher power, then I can have a different type of thinking and a different way of living” (personal communication, December 19, 2012).

In contrast to a stance of surrender to a Higher Power, Women for Sobriety (WFS) place emphasis upon the self as instrumental in achieving sobriety through positive cognitive thinking. Statement five of WFS reads, “I am what I think,” mirroring French philosopher Rene Descartes’ maxim “Cogito ergo sum” or “I think, therefore I am.” In both cases, it is the person and not a spiritual relationship that situates subjectivity and agency. WFS believes that surrender is an unnecessary dependence. Dissatisfied with AA, Dr. Jean Kirkpatrick began to study the metaphysical writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson which informed her reliance on positive thinking. She “began to see that by changing her thoughts she could change herself” (Women for Sobriety, 2011). The emphasis on self-discovery through cognitive strategies of positive thinking work to disable negative thought patterns. Empowerment does not come about through surrender, but instead through changing the way one thinks. “We create our own world. No one else does. We are responsible for ourselves
and our choices. . . . We have the power of changing our way of thinking. We live in the atmosphere created by our mind and our thoughts” (Women for Sobriety, 2011).

Kirkpatrick’s and other feminist critiques of AA are skeptical of a spiritual program they believe reflects androcentric practices of traditional Christian religion. They argue AA tenets subjugate women through complementarity of gender roles, especially with its emphasis on submission and obedience to men (Kirkpatrick 1986; Rapping 1996; Walters 1995). Walters (1995), in “The Codependent Cinderella who loves too much…fights back” contrasted the recovery movement with the women’s movement and argued, “one movement encourages individuals to surrender to a spiritual higher power, while the other encourages people to join together to challenge and restructure power arrangements in the larger society” (p. 55). The critique is women lose agency through AA’s emphasis on surrender. Yet interviewee Lucy disagreed, “Because of the program, I’ve learned how to be powerful through my higher power. I don’t feel like saying I am powerless over alcohol and surrendering to a higher power extends to being powerless as a woman” (personal communication, January 8, 2013). Vannesse asserted, “I gain power because I know I have no power over alcohol. So to give up the power, to surrender to a higher power, doesn’t make me less powerful. It makes me more empowered because it brings me to a sense that I’m taking responsibility where I gain some type of control” (personal communication, December 19, 2012). These narratives stand in sharp contrast to feminist concerns.

In addition, seven of the ten women interviewed clearly asserted that their higher power was not a male god. Cindy stated, “Surrender should be a real problem for me but it’s not. I do have a problem surrendering to people’s will, but when it comes to the universe, what I consider my higher power, I’m totally down for it” (personal communication, January 14, 2013). In AA, Cindy is able to create her own version of a higher power. She also dismissed the fear that women in AA submit to male authority. Pamela’s viewpoint was similar:

I have a problem with surrendering. The hair on the back of my head goes up. But in a way I do surrender and when I think about that, I think about joining a great life force. I’m not surrendering to a specific being or idea, but what I call the force for good in the universe. If I try to align myself with what is good, then that is a form of surrendering and it seems that all of the little tacky bothersome things in life kinda fall way. It’s a Buddhist kind of look at it (personal communication, December 19, 2012).
The women I interviewed ask deep questions and carefully and methodically probe and navigate what their spirituality is and how it relates to their sobriety.

Interestingly, three of the women I interviewed understood their higher power to be a male God, yet this did not render them powerless as women. It was their choice. My interview sample reveals AA to be a non-dogmatic program of spirituality, where each woman decides for herself what her higher power is. It is important to note again that all ten women found power once they surrendered to their version of a higher power, lessening the understandable feminist concern (Bepko 1991; Kasl 1990; Walters 1995) that AA’s higher power, and the language of surrender, causes oppression and obedience.

Although paradox and empowerment have been discussed in previous sections, these themes overlap with how the women in my sample described surrender. For Coakley, kenosis also entailed a power-in-vulnerability, a paradox where surrender and vulnerability and personal empowerment came together. As she said, “Empowerment occurs most unimpededly in the context of a special form of human vulnerability” (Coakley, 2002, p. 32). Coakley’s comparison between empowerment and vulnerability is affirmed by Kurtz and Ketcham (1992), in The Spirituality of Imperfection. They identify a place where failure and imperfection become the building blocks for a spirituality of powerlessness and surrender - different, yet the same (Kurtz & Ketcham, 1992, p. 111). If vulnerability can be envisioned as the glue that binds powerlessness and surrender together, or a fusion and bleeding in of the two, then room is created for a nonconventional spirituality.

This elicits the question: what form should this human vulnerability take? For the female interviewees their answers varied. Linda said, “When I say I surrender I’m not giving up, I’m getting rid of a burden. I feel better because it’s not all on me. I can give it away. I can give it to God and let God take care of things. It opens me so I don’t always have to be the tough one. Things feel better and things get better” (personal communication, December 23, 2012). Kristin thought similarly:

By surrendering to a higher power you put your faith and trust in the hands of somebody else and you don’t have to think about it. You do the footwork but surrendering all the other stuff is honestly so empowering. To completely surrender is what gives you the power to be able to get what you need and what you want. You get your peace of mind and that enables you to be a part of society and a part of the fellowship of AA. You get to be a friend, a daughter, a sister, a
sponsor, a student, and an employee (personal communication, December 26, 2012).

Their personal definitions of surrender caused them to gain power and have a better life. There is a difference between the general notion of vulnerability and the one used in kenosis, which I argue these women in AA employ.

Understandably, surrender, vulnerability, and dependency are consistently viewed negatively, yet as Coakley and others argue, there must be freedom to redefine and navigate terms that historically, and currently, render women impotent. Other feminists, like Berenson and Coakley, embrace the notions of paradoxical self-determination gained through powerlessness and surrender.

Women in AA gain strength and power from their dependence on a higher power because they have de-colonized language by reappropriating traditional, patriarchal concepts and terms. As one respondent, Cindy, demonstrated:

I have a respect or a love of this non-human power. It’s the earth revolving, it’s the seasons coming around again, it’s the seeds sprouting and growing…It’s just nature and that’s something I love and something I am a part of so not surrendering to it, fighting against it is the core of human insanity (personal communication, January 14, 2013).

In this way Cindy utilizes a “special form of vulnerability [that] is not an invitation to be battered; nor is its silence a silencing. If anything, it builds one in the courage to give prophetic voice” (Coakley, 2002, p. 35). In keeping with this, Monica’s thoughts were, “Surrendering has given me the power of acceptance and to not be so hard on myself. I can look at who I was then and that’s not me anymore. Back then I was so insane. I love surrendering to a higher power. It frees me. It really frees me to discover myself” (personal communication, January 14, 2013). For Cindy and Monica, surrendering is not a loss or seen as negative. They see it as love, freedom, and personal growth. Not only do these women redefine the term surrender, they redefine dependency as agency.

**Fluidity of Naming God**

Sanders conducted a survey around the third step that focused on the issues of surrender and spirituality. The third step in AA reads, “Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him [sic]” (AA, 2001, p. 59). Sanders (2009) found “that women do not easily, simply, and unequivocally give up the use of their
will power and turn their lives over to God” (p. 76). The women in her study were not passive actors, blindly surrendering to something that makes decisions for them. The women in my study conveyed the same sentiments as those in Sanders’ survey. Pamela stated:

To me, surrendering is more of an awareness. It’s becoming aware that I belong to something greater and if I align myself with that I am much more peaceful and things open up. When surrendering my will and my life over to the care of the God as I understand Him, if I were to rephrase that, it would be that I quiet myself and I join the force for good that is all around the planet. It’s like getting reconnected. I call it grace (personal communication, December 19, 2012).

The assumed “maleness” of a Higher Power/God was noted by Unterberger (1989) in “Twelve Steps for Women Alcoholics”. She claimed “A.A.’s Twelve Steps insinuate a hierarchal, domination-submission model of the individual’s relationship to God. God is always referred to as male, and God’s activities are described in stereotypically masculine terms” (p. 1150). Yet Sanders’ (2009) survey around step three revealed women in AA:

Have not been told to turn their wills and lives over to a specific God, as defined by a specific religion or …a particular religious culture… [T]hey… plot the characteristics of their own personal conceptions of God… The belief in God does not have to be absolute, complete, or all-inclusive (p. 76-77).

Berenson (1991) agreed in the fluidity of naming God. “AA refers to this presence as a Power greater than ourselves, Higher Power, spirituality, or God. It can equally be called Higher Self, higher consciousness, or the sacred” (p. 77).

Additionally Sanders (2009) argued, “The experience of many of these women indicates that, even when a woman has begun to believe in power greater than oneself, she does this cautiously, with a clear intent to understand her higher power and to turn her will over in contexts that she believes will help her” (p. 77). Monica affirmed, “It took me awhile to get to that surrendering thing and it came in teeny bits. The only thing I knew was existing. It’s a hard place to be. To not feel. But once I surrendered I had so much freedom and could learn to start living for change” (personal communication, January 14, 2013). Sarah insisted:

Surrendering changed my life. I believe in God, so I allow God to dictate how my life is going be so it takes the selfishness out of it. It makes me a more productive part of society. I can help people now. I can have a family, I can have relationships…like those are all things that I couldn't have when I was using but I can now have. So for me I have control of my life again through God (personal communication, January 5, 2013).
Vanesse asserted:

I think that it's a good thing that we come as individuals and as women to the program and surrender ourselves, surrender our power, surrender to the fact that we can't control our lives anymore. Out of that so many opportunities are opened up to us. For me, it's an amazing aspect to be able to surrender and admit the powerlessness and allow something higher than myself to be able to move in my life. The doors will open up to greater possibilities. Possibilities you will never imagine (personal communication, December 19, 2012).

Feminist researchers, like Rapping (1996), in *The Culture of Recovery: Making Sense of the Self-Help Culture*, critique the surrender to a higher power because they have not understood the agency attached to surrender, but rather view it as blind submission. Despite the legitimate concerns of some feminist scholars, the experiences of the women in Sanders’ survey, and the women I interviewed, highlight the challenges and rewards associated with surrender, spirituality, and one’s higher power. They “demonstrate[d] that they defined the direction, pace, and extent of the spiritual or psychological processes connected with the Third Step” (Sanders, 2009, p. 78). As Linda indicated:

I didn't even have a higher power when I got here. I didn't even know what that meant. Now I have a whole a spiritual system that I work at. I think everybody is unique and different. That's why we have so many different religions because God speaks to people in all different ways and whatever uplifts a person, gives them a soul, a sense of grounding and love and acceptance is important to me. I don't have to be ashamed of anything in front of my God and I think everybody needs to find that for themselves, sober or drunk because without that we turn into monsters. Not directed towards others necessarily, but towards ourselves (personal communication, December 23, 2012).

“In short…the women in this survey have begun to surrender to win” (Sanders, 2009, p. 80). The women I interviewed show their vulnerability and surrender to spirituality are not acts of self-abnegation, where they denounce their own needs in favor of the interests of the others. Instead, it is contemplative self-effacement versus self-destruction and self-repression. This special self-emptying allows the self’s transformation and expansion into a productive and life-altering spirituality.
CHAPTER 5

PROGRAM OF MALLEABILITY

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This chapter focuses on the extent to which AA and its Twelve Steps are “suggestive only” toward the path of recovery. The Big Book of AA is a description of how others have stayed sober and states “our book is meant to be suggestive only” (AA, 2001, p. 164). I argue this stance allows for a reading of the program and text as malleable. The discussion here will again use passages from the Big Book and interviews with women in AA, in conjunction with feminist critiques concerned with the androcentric and dogmatic language of AA and its Twelve Steps. To feminist critics, AA simply duplicates a male power structure of ridged hierarchy that privileges the male alcoholic. The tension between these criticisms, coupled with the fact many women stay sober in AA, gave rise to research questions that examine how women in AA viewed and navigated the terrain of exclusive language.

My main interview questions that lay the foundation of this chapter were “Do you find any language in the Big Book sexist? How does this make you feel and what do you do about it?” While I am interested in how women view the general language of AA, I was also particularly interested in how women viewed a specific chapter within the Big Book. My main interview questions were “How do you feel about the chapter ‘To Wives?’ How do you feel about it knowing a man wrote it? What do you do about it?” The interviewees addressed understanding context, hermeneutics of suspicion, and religiosity. My findings lead me to argue another reason AA may not be as oppressive as some feminists critics fear is due to its malleability, allowing each member to read the Big Book and work the Twelve Steps in a way that offers healing and recovery. These findings, as with Chapter Three, draw on various feminist scholars to more judiciously examine the experience of women in AA. In particular, I appeal to the insights of Stephanie Covington and her book *A Woman’s Way Through the Twelve Steps*. She used years of therapeutic work with female alcoholics and the parallels between her findings and mine empirically strengthen my arguments.
Feminist Critiques of AA’s Big Book and Twelve Steps

Although AA defines itself as a program of suggestion, feminist critics argue the Big Book and its Twelve Steps are dictatorial and authoritarian, created and centered on male needs. Freeman (1989), in “Twelve Steps Anonymous”, asserted women in AA are taught the correct way to interpret the Steps and AA is not “structured to enable their members to cope without them” (p. 20). Unterberger (1989), in “Twelve Steps for Women Alcoholics”, argued AA’s Twelve Steps not only use androcentric language, but also place women in a domination/submission binary. She claimed AA sends the message to find recovery women must submit before a male authority. Kasl (1990), in The Twelve Step Controversy, added to these arguments and stated,

Women who question ‘the program,’ as it’s often called, have been shamed, called resistant and threatened with abandonment. They have been trained to believe that male models of nearly anything are better than whatever they might create for themselves...The steps were formulated by a white, middle-class male in the 1930s; not surprisingly, they work to break down an overinflated ego and put reliance on an all-powerful male God. But most women suffer from the lack of a healthy, aware ego, and need to strengthen their sense of self by affirming their own inner wisdom (p. 30).

As stated in the literature review, these criticisms rest on claims that AA is a hierarchical institution, with steps formulated by white, middle-class men, dedicated to maintaining male authority, placing reliance on an all-powerful male God, and threatening abandonment to women who question the AA program.

One of the largest problems facing women in AA is the Big Book. The text, written in 1939, is on its fourth edition yet nothing substantial has changed. Covington (1994), in A Woman’s Way through the Twelve Steps, wrote, “It is important to recognize that the Steps were written by men for men’s needs in recovery at a time when women had few resources and little social, political, or economic power” (p. 2). However, she also argued that although the language of AA can be viewed as exclusive and sexist, women can “reinterpret the language to support [their] recovery” (Covington, 1994, p. 5). For example, Covington’s own book is intended to make the Steps more inclusive and accessible to women, and to speak more directly to the ways women experience addiction and recovery.

Sanders (2009), in Women in Alcoholics Anonymous: Recovery and Empowerment, added to this argument and drew on Melody Beattie. Sanders (2009) claimed Beattie, in The

The feminist critiques are legitimate, yet a more critical examination reveals AA to be a program of malleability. The purpose of this chapter is not to refute these feminist claims, but to ask, how do women navigate through a masculinist program/text to find recovery and healing? It seems women in AA are able to create space within the program for a flexible interpretation of the Big Book and Twelve Steps to accommodate their own needs. I am not entirely clear why there is so much room for interpretation given there are 57 sentences within the Big Book that contain the verb “must,” but there is something about the way the program is experienced that prevents it from being doctrinaire. It may be the structure (e.g. Twelve Traditions) that allows for this malleability.

In AA, there is no central office or authority. There are no experts, supervisors, or financial backers. Each meeting of AA is autonomous and does not accept outside money. AA literature explicitly states, “Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions. Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional, but our service centers may employ special workers. A.A., as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve” (AA, 2001, p. 562). For example, if members attend a meeting they do not like, they are free to start their own meeting that aids their recovery. “Any two or three alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an A.A. group, provided that, as a group, they have no other affiliation” (AA, 2001, p. 563). From my personal experience in AA, these might be some of the reasons. While scholarship on AA has addressed how women modify the program, it has not addressed exactly why the program allows for such modification. This is an area for further research.

CHAPTER “TO WIVES”

Bill Wilson wrote many of the chapters in the Big Book, including “To Wives.” Initially Wilson invited Anne Smith, Dr. Bob's wife, to write the chapter, but she declined. His wife Lois wanted to write the chapter, and his refusal to allow her to compose the chapter
left her angry and hurt. Wilson’s reasons remain unclear on this decision. The chapter holds the wife responsible for her alcoholic husband's emotional stability once he has quit drinking.

“To Wives” is a cringe-worthy and strikingly derogatory read. If the AA program and its steps are anything like chapter eight of the Big Book it begs the question of why any woman chooses to follow the AA principles. “To Wives,” states, “Sometimes we sensed dimly that we were dealing with sick men. Had we fully understood the nature of the alcoholic illness, we might have behaved differently” (AA, 2001, p. 107). This is a quite intriguing statement considering this chapter was not written by a wife of an alcoholic, but by the alcoholic husband. Wilson writes from a position of female subjectivity in the male voice. This certainly makes clear why some feminists, and rightfully so, are troubled by the language of AA and find it patriarchal in nature.

Further advice from chapter eight remind wives “try not to condemn your alcoholic husband no matter what he says or does. He is just another very sick, unreasonable person. Treat him, when you can, as though he had pneumonia. When he angers you, remember that he is very ill” (AA, 2001, p. 107). Other helpful tips include:

The first principle of success is that you should never be angry. Patience and good temper are most necessary. Our next thought is that you should never tell him what to do about his drinking. If he gets the idea that you are a nag or killjoy, your chance of accomplishing anything useful may be zero. He will use that as an excuse to drink more. This may lead to lonely evenings for you. He may seek someone else to console him – not always another man (AA, 2001, p. 108).

As a woman, your role becomes absolute voiceless submission in order for your husband to get well. If he continues drinking, and you do not follow what appear to be rules, it will be your fault. Previously discussed, the Big Book is on its fourth edition, yet the only major changes made are to the personal stories, updated to reflect changing membership. “To Wives” appears in every edition with a footnote that states, “Written in 1939, when there were few women in A.A., this chapter assumes that the alcoholic in the home is likely to be

10 In 1951, Lois W., wife of Bill W., co-founder of AA, and Anne B. founded Al-Anon. Al-Anon is a fellowship of relatives and friends of alcoholics who share their experience, strength, and hope in order to solve their common problems. The first World Service Office was opened in New York to provide services to eighty-seven groups located in the United States, Canada, Australia, South Africa, and Ireland (Al-Anon, 2013).
the husband. But many of the suggestions given here may be adapted to help the person who lives with a woman alcoholic” (AA, 2001, p. 104). Despite this footnote, “To Wives” arguably erases female alcoholics and their experiences, and simultaneously situates women within patriarchal language, which gives credence to feminist concerns. While this is the most extreme example, it is not the only chapter in the Big Book that diminishes the female alcoholic. Other such chapters include “The Family Afterward” and “To Employers.” Yet by critically analyzing the complexity of AA, we find various ways women understand and manipulate the program and text in order to generate healing and empowerment.

**HERMENEUTICS OF SUSPICION**

I feel the format of the Steps and the way the Big Book was written leave room for interpretation. People interpret things differently and their perceptions are always different. So with any textbook, that’s the way I view the Big Book, it’s kind of open to how you perceive it and how you apply the principles of it.

-Lucy

As Lucy’s remark shows, she interprets the text of the Big Book to fit her own needs and principles for recovery. While these women may not be using the language I am, they use feminism within their daily life and apply a hermeneutics of suspicion to the Big Book text. Hermeneutics is the process of interpretation, thus a hermeneutics of suspicion interrogates the dominant, meta-narrative of a text put forth by those in authority or control of the text. I introduce this term because it best describes how the women in my sample answered my questions. All ten women spoke to (re)interpreting and (re)appropriating the language of the Big Book. They did not use these specific words, but used terms or phrases like adapt, change, reverse, cross out, ignore, take with a grain of salt, and roll my eyes. Like Susan explained, “The way I adapt ‘To the Wives’ is I think about what the intentions of the authors were and then I can think of that chapter as to the husband, same-sexed partner, or to the families of the one who is the recovering alcoholic” (personal communication, January 8, 2013). For Monica, she simply ignores the chapter “To Wives.” As she explained, “I’m not a wife. I’m the alcoholic. I take what I want and leave the rest.”

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11The concept of “text” has been extended beyond written documents to include, for example, speech, performances, works of art, and even events.

12“Take what you want and leave the rest” is one among many AA slogans used to strengthen core beliefs.
message” (personal communication, January 14, 2013). These women carefully analyze the Big Book and make clear decisions on how the text applies to them. The feminist critiques that the Big Book is sexist, patriarchal, and created by, and for, men are correct. However, the distinctive insight is how these women in AA, although not formally informed by, use feminist principles, such as subversion, reappropriation, and reinterpretation, to find meaning within a male-centered program and text.

Covington (1994) argued, “Rather than rewrite the Steps in a way that attempts to fit all women, we can instead work with the original Steps – paying close attention to the spirit and meaning – and reinterpret the language to support our own recovery” (p. 5).

As Cindy explained:

When I first got the book, I was like no way can I read this shit. It’s just these ridiculous, square, clueless old dead white men and what could they possibly know about me? And the language is all of that, but the message is so transformational that it transcends the language. The solution is all pretty much the same but I think you need to look deeper to find it. I think the core message can work for everyone. Even with all the caveats, I still see myself in the book. The language is a surface thing (personal communication, January 14, 2013).

Monica concurred, “I just try and read it and see what it’s trying to tell me versus thinking about who the message is coming from or whose story it is, or what the ‘hes’ are about” (personal communication, January 14, 2013). While Monica never thought about the Big Book as sexist, both she and Cindy argue there is a core message that transcends the language. “There have been many efforts to rewrite the Steps from a woman’s point of view, but often a rewritten version of the Steps moves too far away from the original spirit of the program…it is important to acknowledge the many ways in which the spirit of these programs meets the needs and concerns of women” (Covington, 1994, p. 4).

By employing a hermeneutics of suspicion, an alternative process of interpretation may create new meaning and analysis of patriarchal texts. Gonzalez (2007), in Created in God’s Image: An Introduction to Feminist Theological Anthropology, argued:

My approach to scripture is informed by Sandra M. Schneider’s dialogical theory of interpretation in which the interaction between the text and the reader creates meaning. The text, thus, does not have one right meaning; it is instead a linguistic structure that is susceptible of a number of valid readings by different readers or
the same reader at different times. Meaning is not found in the text but in the interaction between text and reader (p. 2).

For example, Susan spoke of disagreements in sections of the Big Book, “It tells us to pull ourselves up sharply. When I got to that sentence, I just crossed it out. I need to be loved, not pulled up sharply” (personal communication, January 8, 2013). She will skip other sections entirely, like the chapter “To Wives” or rewrite them in a way that works for her. There are places in the Big Book that write about taking inventory, whether it be the Fourth Step, the Tenth Step, or other miscellaneous areas tell us to only look at our part and not pay attention to other’s faults. This does not rest well with Susan. “That might be good advice for men, but I was raised to blame myself for everything. Everything that was wrong with the world was my fault. What I need is a more equitable way of accountability. Not everything is my fault and I needed to learn how to hold others accountable for their actions.” Covington (1994) argued, “As women, we are conditioned to find fault with ourselves. We easily take blame for problems, especially to save a relationship or please someone else” (p. 63). Despite the valid feminist critique about the patriarchal language of the Big Book, Susan has been able to hold herself, and others, accountable in an equitable way by reworking and rewriting the language.

Through a critical dialectical mode of interpretation, Susan privileges her experience as an engaged protagonist against the shadow of a male model of culpability. Berenson (1991) emphasized this point and claimed:

Kasl’s criticism of the Twelve Steps movement seems quite relevant on this point. AA’s initial members were argumentative, self-willed men who needed to accept limitations upon their behavior and then subsequently make amends for the damage they had caused. It does not make sense to ask women who have been overly submissive to follow the exact same steps. In actual practice women who are working the steps are making some unofficial changes (p. 80).

As Sarah demonstrated, “For me, the Big Book works and I use it as a tool. I change the He’s to I’s so it can relate to me. I also attend women’s only meetings to feel the power of what the book can do for you with women in particular” (personal communication, January 5, 2013). Similarly Pamela asserted, “I find that the best recovery is not in the book, but in the steps with a good sponsor and in the women’s meetings. When I hear women that drank the way I did and talk about how they were when they came in and how they are now, that is empowering to me” (personal communication, December 19, 2012). While Sarah uses the
Big Book and Pamela does not, both women interpret and use the Steps and women-only meetings to navigate a male-dominated program. The Big Book and its Twelve Steps are guides to live a life free of addiction. While written in patriarchal language, women in AA interpret the language to fit their needs for healing and empowerment lessening the feminist concern on the dogmatic, male-orientated nature of the Big Book and its Twelve Steps. As Sanders (2009) claims, “[some] feminist analysts, therapists, psychologists, and educators integrate feminist principles into their work with women who attend twelve-step recovery programs and recommend that women modify the Twelve Steps to fit their own feminist interpretations” (p, 12).

Blanchard (2002), in “Poets, Lovers, and the Master’s Tools: A Conversation with Audre Lorde” examines Lorde’s infamous quote “For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (p. 255). Blanchard argues once we take the master’s tools and fit them to our own hands, they are no longer the master’s tools. “We’ll realize that those tools didn’t belong to him all by himself. They are our tools too. And they have been all the time. And that is one way we gain agency, by adapting the tools we have rather than by reinventing the wheel” (Blanchard, 2002, p. 257). I argue AA and the Big Book could be considered the master’s tools. They can be exclusionary and are extremely male-dominated. But there are women that rework these tools to fit their own needs. They say different prayers, cross out parts of the text, replace pronouns, or go to women-only meetings. They need the program and the Big Book to stay sober, but they also need to dismantle these tools to stay sober. AA as a program of malleability provides space for women to navigate this terrain on their own terms, be it creating new meetings, crossing out text in the Big Book, or reworking the Steps in order to find recovery.

**UNDERSTANDING CONTEXT**

I put a lot of thought into parts of the Big Book because it is very patriarchal. Men are the breadwinners and the women are the ones that support the alcoholic for example. There’s absolutely no mention of women alcoholics in the first 164 pages. It’s all about the men. I look at it as an historical document.

-Pamela

As Pamela’s comment demonstrates, she finds the language in the Big Book sexist, but navigated this by understanding the context in which it is written. This theme ran throughout the interviews, with eight out of ten women making reference to context.
Pamela, and other women interviewed, contextualized the Big Book by engaging in an epistemological claim about the profound influence of culture and how we come to know. If epistemology is the study of how knowledge is obtained, then a feminist epistemology takes into consideration gender categories by privileging women’s experience. By asserting a feminist epistemology cannot be absolute, an essentialist identity conceived through women’s experience is avoided since “knowing is relative, contextual and complex” (Dyckman, Garvin, & Liebert, 2001, p. 13).

Truth is relevant upon a social context of time and place. It is not the vanguard of time or male privilege but always searching for a prescribed location; in this case, a feminist epistemology that situates the Big Book within its historical context. This search recognizes that while the language is inescapably gendered, it can be placed in the background while foregrounding essential truths. As expressed by Susan, “I think the language is quite pejorative. What I do about that for myself is know that it was written in the ‘30s and know that this was a fellowship created by men for men. I just know things have changed and times have changed despite the language” (personal communication, January 8, 2013). Even if the Big Book has not changed, the time period has which enables her to understand context and read the language differently. “In other words,” argued Covington (1994), “there’s something powerful and healing concealed beneath the archaic wording of the Steps” (p. 5).

Some of the women used the words “honor” and “sacred” to describe how they dealt with the text. For example, Lucy claimed “It is very male-centric but it was written by two men in 1935 so I expect that. I honor the way it was written and I respect the way it was written. I do feel it is sexist, but I don’t feel that it’s a problem for me to comprehend it” (personal communication, January 8, 2013). In a similar vein, Susan asserted, “I really believe in the sacredness of the text so it allows me to set aside those things I think were culturally bound without intending harm to others” (personal communication, January 8, 2013). Here both Lucy and Susan demonstrate a feminist epistemological stance by excavating and foregrounding those tenets they find redemptive. Each controls the boundaries of the text and its meaning.

This ability to recognize the self within what might otherwise be considered an androcentric text is exemplified by Sarah. “Of course the language in the Big Book is sexist. It was written in the ‘30s for men and even though new editions have been made the
language hasn’t changed. But for me, I’m okay with that because, for example, if you’re reading the Bible, they don’t change the language just because the times have changed.” By placing the Big Book within its historical context, Sarah engaged in a feminist epistemological process. The sexist language does not negate the Big Book as a tool for women in recovery. Again, the use of feminist theology provides alternate language and research into many themes found in this chapter.

Although women in AA may not be literally informed by feminist theories or language like feminist theologians, they both partake in a dialogical push-pull between self and text by recognizing presuppositions of an androcentric text. By employing a critical feminist approach to the examination of sacred scripture, feminist theologians destabilize static interpretation of scripture and authority. According to feminist theologian Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, a feminist reading of scripture and dogma must distance itself from Western authoritarian hegemonic understandings of, in her case, sacred scriptures, while developing and conceptualizing both sacred text and dogma from a relational/contextual category by incorporating a post-colonial reading of both. In so doing, radical reconceptualization based on the experience of women redefines and expands which beliefs and practices become normative (Fiorenza, 1998, p. 1). Additionally, Miriam Levering’s definition of what constitutes sacred scripture within a Buddhist text, serves as a catalyst for expansion and destabilizing of authorized, dominant texts. Levering understands scripture (in the case of women in AA, The Big Book) as “a special class of true and powerful words, a class formed by the ways in which these particular words are received by persons and communities in their common life” (Fiorenza, 1998, p. 2).

**Religiosity**

I knew there was a power greater than myself and the power is indescribable. It doesn’t have stories attached to it, it doesn’t have a patriarchal set-up, it doesn’t have Eve bringing sin into the world and tempting man. There’s no gender. It’s just everything...a powerful goodness.

-Pamela

As Pamela’s narrative reveals, she created her own version of a higher power, which speaks to AA as a program of malleability, rather than a doctrinal program. The freedom and malleability women have to craft a unique higher power was analyzed at length in the previous chapter. I reintroduce this theme because of a significant finding in my data.
Women who had a traditional, religious male god as their higher power found the language in the Big Book less sexist than women who defined their higher power as non-religious. These women used terms like nature, non-human power, force for good, and the universe.” An important point here is diversity and flexibility. Women that needed to adapt their higher power were able to do so.

Pamela added to her remarks above, “I have some real pagan nativist ideas like there is goodness in trees. The forces in the earth that create continents and just all of that is magic to me. That’s how I understand a power greater than myself” (personal communication, December 19, 2012). Previously stated, she finds the language in the Big Book so sexist that she does not even use it in her recovery. In keeping with this Cindy spoke of her higher power as nature, the seasons, and the earth revolving. When asked about the language in the Big Book she asserted, “This whole thing was built by men and it’s all ridiculous. It’s just so fucked up. The language in the Big Book is so sexist. When it comes to the wives, I just roll my eyes and think really?!?”

Contrary to Pamela and Cindy, Vanesse stated, “I believe that a higher power is God because of my religious background. I understand that maybe others don’t believe in God or a higher power and they use nature, trees, and even doors as something greater than themselves. However I believe that eventually they will believe in God. I think that’s just how this universe is” (personal communication, December 19, 2012). When asked about the language in the Big Book she affirmed, “I don’t consider it sexist. I think it’s for everybody. I don’t consider it demeaning or sexist even thought it was written by men.” In terms of how she felt about the chapter “To Wives” she added, “It’s nice to know that Bill W. was able to write this. He was able to admit to his wife how their relationship had been affected because of alcohol. For me, it’s nice to know that he could take initiative to admit to his wife what he has done wrong. I find that empowering because you can step out of yourself since Bill W. did by writing to the wives. He was an example.” This is a drastically different sentiment towards the Big Book from Pamela and Cindy.

Linda agreed with Vanesse. Linda attends AA church meetings where your higher power is a religious God. She does not find the Big Book sexist and argued, “the fact that they included women in the book, to talk about their stories, is really huge. Or that they gave women, the wives, credit for keeping things together. Like they brought all these strange
drunk guys home to get them sober and that was hard on the wives but they hung in there.”
Kristin also has a top down male god, but acknowledged the Big Book was sexist. However, she did not care that it was sexist,

It absolutely is sexist, but I don’t care. It was written by men, for men, so it is sexist, but that was just the time period. I’m sure you’ve heard women change all the words, change the his to her, or God to Goddess…really? Okay. I don’t get it and I don’t care. I was taught to read the words in the black print. So that’s what I do and it doesn’t matter what they say. It’s how the book was written (personal communication, December 26, 2012).

The correlation between a women’s religiosity and the level to which she found the Big Book sexist is a significant discovery and an area for further research.
CHAPTER 6

COMMUNITY

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This chapter explores whether, and how, women are able to form community within AA. There is little doubt that AA was initially intended for men; “in fact,” as Berenson (1991) wrote, “one of the titles considered for the AA Big Book, Alcoholics Anonymous, was One Hundred Men. At first women were denied admission to AA because ‘nice’ women did not become drunks” (p. 67). Not until 1939, four years later, did Marty Mann become AA’s first female member. The 2011 AA survey mentioned in the introduction found that men make up 65 percent of membership. The valid critique of AA as a “male-only” club based on male needs, juxtaposed with the fact that only one third of AA membership is comprised of women, gave rise to research questions about how women find recovery within a male-dominated program. I hypothesized one way women found healing was through creation of community with other women. This hypothesis is based on my own experience within AA and interactions with other women in the program. In my own journey of recovery, I found a level of safety and intimacy through my relationships with other women. In AA, I consistently found that other women expressed these same sentiments. My main interview question was “What is the role of female fellowship/women’s community in your life and why is this important?”

As a queer, woman of color in AA, I was also interested in the experience of women from various backgrounds. Sanders (2009) stated, “Some literature criticizes AA as a movement that remains...a largely white, middle-class self-help movement that does not accommodate women or diversity well. This critique has not been well studied, and little information is available on the experience of women of color in AA or of women not of the middle class” (p. 13). There is also a lack of information on women that are not heterosexual. This is why I made it a point to have as diverse a sample as possible with respect to race, orientation, and class and to ask the women in my sample, “Are there any ways you have
ever felt different from other women in recovery?” The interviewees addressed women-only meetings, sponsorship, and the formation of community among diverse women.

As with previous chapters, the Big Book, interviews with women in AA, and feminist critiques on the exclusivity of AA are used, alongside feminist scholars that affirm the value of AA for women and women-only spaces. Through participation in Alcoholics Anonymous, particularly women-only meetings, an open and safe(r) space is created that allows women to verbalize feelings and generate healing. This connection between women-only spaces and healing is exemplified by what Gloria Steinem (1993) refers to as “Psychic Families,” a place or community for women whose objective is the healing and advancement of each other. Steinem, in Revolution From Within, stated, “Psychic families exist for almost every situation and experience, from small groups of women who make a space for themselves outside patriarchy to women who support each other’s abstinence from alcohol or drugs” (p. 178). These women-only spaces, argued Steinem, suggest an additional supportive community beyond the biological family that understands the complexity of emotions and challenges women confront. “Indeed, in some cultures, the community is more important than the family (Steinem, 1993, p. 177). Because of this, my findings lead me to argue a final reason AA is empowering, rather than disempowering, is the formation of community among women.

**Feminist Critiques if Exclusivity of AA**

As previously discussed, in 1975 Dr. Jean Kirkpatrick founded Women for Sobriety as an alternative to AA. Kirkpatrick believed AA did not address the underlying lack of self-esteem in female alcoholics, the social stigma attached to alcoholic women, or the shame and guilt surrounding them (Sanders, 2009, p. 3). Forth-Finegan (1991), in “Sugar and Spice and Everything Nice: Gender Socialization and Women’s Addiction – A Literature Review”, added to this argument and argued, “For treatment to be effective, women alcoholics must be taught to care about themselves, and to become empowered” (p. 36). She offered Women for Sobriety as an alternative for AA is based exclusively on the needs of men, which leaves

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13 Women-only meetings operate like any other meeting of AA, yet only women may participate. They are closed to men.
women with no avenue to recovery and empowerment. Feminist criticisms argue addiction is
gendered, experienced differently by men and women. They argue there is a “one size fits
all” model of AA that does not address the specific needs of women (Bepko, 1991; Forth-

One reason women have different needs than men is sexual trauma. Cited in Sanders,
previous research has shown that many female alcoholics have been physically or sexually
abused in their past (Covington, 1994; Langeland & Hangers, 1998; Wilsnack, Wilsnack, &
Hiller-Sturmhoel, 1994). Forth-Finegan (1991) added, “lifelong sexual shame is a major
factor in recovery” (p. 26). It is particularly important that AA be a safe space. For many
women, part of the specificity of their experience is sexual shame and this shame is felt
differently between men and women. Mason (1991), in “Women and Shame: Kin and
Culture”, argued, “when we examine shame in women’s socialization in a patriarchy with its
concurrent oppression and abuse of women, we can further understand the perpetuation of
shame. This feminist perspective on shame supports the research findings on gender
differences in shame – that women experience greater degrees of shame than do men” (p.
175).

Women in AA that have experienced sexual abuse and trauma need safety in order to
recover. It makes the stakes around safety and community extremely high. This is significant
because of the feminist critique that AA is unsafe for women (Carr, 2011). While women in
Carr’s study felt unsafe in AA meetings and felt AA did not address their specific needs,
there is a problem with her methodology. These women never went to women-only meetings.
In order to address this, I only interviewed women who went to women-only meetings. This
was one of the subject requirements. I was intentional in my sample because I hypothesized
this was a space women found safety. This hypothesis was based on my own experience
within AA. This is not to negate Carr’s (1994) study, but her findings cannot be generalized
to how women experience AA as a whole.

Covington (1994) addressed the validity of previous feminist concerns.

I have found that a number of issues unique to women are overlooked…[like] the
social and cultural factors that affect us as women – both in general as females in
a male-dominated society and specifically as women living through addiction and
recovery. As a result of these omissions, many of us have struggled to stay with a
recovery program that does not completely meet our needs or match our values (p.
1).
However, her solution is not to dismiss AA entirely, but to work within the program and use the values that offer healing and empowerment. One such value is the connection to other women. She argued, “Perhaps most important for women is that recovery takes place not in isolation, but in connection with others in recovery. AA is the model for mutual-help programs…we are supported by others…[and] we learn from each other” (Covington, 1994, p. 4-5).

Sanders (2010), in “Acknowledging Gender in Women-Only Meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous”, added to this argument. She conducted a study and argued, “in spite of AA’s alleged patriarchal culture, this sample of women acknowledges and supports its own gendered space in AA, but does so as a supplement to and not as a substitute for AA in general” (Sanders, 2010, p. 17). My own sample conveyed these sentiments by Covington and Sanders, yet it is important to note this chapter examines the experiences and narratives of women who have stayed in AA. It is beyond the scope of this study to analyze, but women have left AA. I do not know the exact reasons women have left. It may be due to issues of safety and sexual shame and is an area for further research.

Women-Only Meetings

After Mann broke the gender ceiling of AA in 1939, women-only meetings began to emerge throughout the U.S., with the first established in Cleveland, Ohio in 1941, followed by a meeting in Minneapolis in 1942. Between 1945-1947, fourteen women-only groups started in fourteen different cities across the U.S. (Hallberg, 1988). A continuing upsurge in women-only meetings was experienced between the late 1960s and early 1970s. According to Sanders (2009), “since 1968 the General Services Office (GSO) of AA has followed female membership trends and records from the mid-1980s consistently show[ing] that over a third of all AA members are women” (p. 9). Discussed further in this section, it is important to note that not all women have access to women-only meetings. This study only analyzed women that had access, and attended, women-only meetings.

While non-AA alcoholic treatment programs exist, AA continues to be one of the primary places for women to find recovery from alcoholism. This is evidenced by AA’s 2011 membership survey that found 35 percent of AA members are women (AA, 2011). Given these numbers, it is not difficult to conclude that women find lasting recovery and healing
within AA, particularly through women-only meetings. All of the women interviewed clearly identified the importance of these meetings within AA. I have grouped the reasons given by interviewees into three categories: language, safety, and finding a home. The ability for respondents to find meetings that work for them is largely based on the fact that Southern California offers a diverse array of meetings. Geographic location is discussed later in this section.

**SAME LANGUAGE**

I stick to all women’s meetings. I don’t go to any meetings with men. That’s just by choice because I feel more connected with women in recovery. We speak more of the same language.

-Sarah

As Sarah’s remark demonstrates, women-only meetings provide her an avenue to recovery through relation to other women. This belief cut across the demographics of race, orientation, class, and age. Harriet said, “I believe only women can help other women, that only women understand women” (personal communication, January 8, 2013). Similarly Susan affirmed, “I think that men and women go at the world very differently and trying to interact with my husband about a lot of things is like going to the hardware store for milk” (personal communication, January 8, 2013).

The women sampled felt women-only meetings provided them the space in AA to make empowering and helpful connections. Vanesse asserted, “they are important because it’s a place us women can open up and share our intimate problems to other women. We can encourage and empower each other in a safe, loving way. Because only other women can understand women, it’s very important we stick together because it’s safe and empowering” (personal communication, December 19, 2012). Linda stated, “I need to talk to a woman and get their perspective because they know what I feel, they know what I think, they are my sisters. They have the same struggles, they have kids, they are wives, they are lovers. They understand me” (personal communication, December 23, 2012). Pamela agreed and said other women “felt my pain. That acknowledgment that other women were feeling the same thing meant I could forge a connection with them so I wouldn’t feel so alone and used the way I had with men” (personal communication, December 19, 2012).
Respondents explained that the role of women-only meetings was vital to their recovery based on the notion of a language of shared challenges unique to women in sobriety. They argued there was a connection between women that they did not find with men. This connection produced deep and meaningful bonds, which allowed for mutual empathy and empowerment.

**SAFETY**

The role of female fellowship is very important in my life. There’s a saying that women stick with women and men stick with men. It’s strongly important for me to be able to have fellowship with the women in the program because women will save your ass and men will pat it.

- Vanesse

As Vanesse’s comment shows, women-only meetings provide her with a sense of trust and security. Every woman interviewed made reference to safety, indicating the importance of this issue. Pamela argued:

For me, at my age and what I’ve been through, I’m not sure that men have a message that I need. I don’t trust men, I don’t trust men in groups. I’m used to talking real at women’s meetings, about the things that really hurt us like rape, domestic violence, whatever. At a meeting, a woman shared about an abortion and so at the next meeting I felt I could share about mine. Being able to say that in a meeting is huge, that other women, whether they agree with abortion or not, understood a women’s journey is her own journey (personal communication, December 19, 2012).

Harriet agreed, “Women have issues that are unique to women that you can’t talk about in mixed company. You can only talk with other women about violence, rape, abortion, or menopause” (personal communication, January 8, 2013). In a similar vein Sarah said, “I feel more comfortable with the women’s meetings I go to because I don’t have to have a guard,” while Susan asserted, “I gotta (sic) have women. I process out loud so I need a safe place where I can rant until I don’t need to rant anymore.”

Linda argued, “The whole premise is to be able to be truthful and completely honest and I think that only happens at women’s meetings. To be able to confront things without having any guys around means you can totally feel the freedom to express yourself in every way” (personal communication, December 23, 2012). Likewise Cindy affirmed, “When I was in sobriety before, I didn’t go to women’s meetings or find the women. I didn’t bond, but this time I did and it’s the reason why I’m still sober. The safety I feel there, it’s just so much
easier. It’s just about safety” (personal communication, January 14, 2013). Sanders (2010) claimed:

Women-only meetings developed as a response to the uneasiness women felt in male-dominated AA meetings. The culture of the women-only meetings differed from the regular meetings, because women brought with them styles and forms of expression not common among men. For example, in women-only meetings, women tend to express their emotions, including crying, more freely. Moreover, because women tend to feel ‘safer’ in women-only meetings, they disclose more intimate detail of their lives (p. 19).

This need for safety not only predisposes women to gendered spaces, it facilitates open dialogue leading to the disclosure of those telling, intimate details particular to each women’s life. They found safety, belonging, and validation in AA due to women-only meetings. This is a significant find based on the aforementioned discussion about women, sexual abuse, and shame. The essentialism of gendered spaces is discussed later in this section.

**FINDING HOME**

It’s one of the greatest gifts of the fellowship. I have a really solid tribe of women I love and women who love me.

-Susan

As Susan’s comment expresses, women-only meetings provide her with a sense of home. Other women become their “tribe” and surround them with love and truth to recover from alcoholism, generate healing, and find empowerment. Vanesse said, “I have a group of female sisters and it’s very important that I stick close to them because we grow together in a loving caring way. I think it’s important for other females to have that because it is so empowering” (personal communication, December 19, 2012). Kristin agreed, “Women’s meetings are important because that is where the honesty is. Women see right through my shit and they’re always gonna (sic) be there. There’s just something unique about the bonds with women. It’s all about the tribe” (personal communication, December 26, 2012). In a similar vein, Pamela said, “The first meeting I went to when I came back was a women’s meeting. I felt like I had come home” (personal communication, December 19, 2012).

An interesting find is how women interviewed spoke of not trusting other women, or seeing women as competition, until they began going to women-only meetings and experienced love and support. Also of interest is these sentiments were only expressed by white women yet spanned sexual orientation. Cindy, a white, heterosexual woman stated, “I
used to see women as competition. Doing the one over on men was just second nature, but that’s not closeness. Approaching women is like approaching on the same level. I don’t have any advantages. I can’t play and it’s humbling and wonderful” (personal communication, January 14, 2013). Cindy followed this examination into greater depth and stated:

The first time I got sober that’s what I used [sex]. It was a high to be wanted. But that’s not really being embraced. I had a childhood friend who ended up in the program and she kept talking about this group of women of hers that loved her, took her in, built her back up, and accepted her. She just kept talking about all this love she had found from other women. I remember thinking that I have no idea what she is talking about. This time when I came back and found my group of women, I understood. These are the women, those ones she was talking about, that love you back to health (personal communication, January 14, 2013).

Similarly Pamela, a white, bisexual woman asserted:

When I was out there I had no connection with my body. I used sex. Sex was like drinking water. My connection with women outside of sex [italics mine] was always very fearful so I stayed away from women. But now my connection to female fellowship is huge. It’s huge! I used to go to a lot of mixed meetings because I was on display, but it stopped working. Guys share differently, they understand and express recovery differently. It wasn’t until women’s only meetings that I found the recovery I needed (personal communication, December 19, 2012).

Cultural messages about what it means to be a woman strengthen the desire to maintain power over addiction. Historically, the construct of womanhood renders the female addict vulnerable to greater societal criticism, thus hindering recovery. Argued Covington, “being a drunk or an addict is bad enough; being a female drunk or addict is doubly shameful. Women addicts are often stereotyped as promiscuous, slovenly, and immoral” (Covington, 1994, p. 17). Women-only meetings seem to provide a space of mutual support and community for the women interviewed to find healing and empowerment.

The trope of “finding home” for women in recovery signifies a stance of trust in solidarity. Honest transparency in women’s communities gives rise to transformation of female consciousness. Once women are able to confront difficult, and often hidden, gendered socialization strategies such as competitive, defensive behavior towards other women or misplaced heightened sexual embodiment with others, it opens a space for self-evaluation. Fear and mistrust are replaced by empathy and interdependence. With sobriety as the equalizer, women-only meetings are able to function as family by offering mutual support and care.
FROM ESSENTIALISM TO STRATEGIC ESSENTIALISM

Although women-only meetings are tools used to navigate the male-dominated program of AA they are arguably essentialist. They are based on the shared identity of a female alcoholic. Mary Bucholtz (2003), in *Sociolinguistic Nostalgia and the Authentication of Identity*, defined essentialism as:

The position that the attributes and behavior of socially defined groups can be determined and explained by reference to cultural and/or biological characteristics believed to be inherent to the group. As an ideology, essentialism rests on two assumptions: (1) that groups can be clearly delimited; and (2) that groups members are more or less alike (p. 400).

Women-only meetings are based on gender and do not account for race, class, sexual orientation, or any other characteristic that differentiate women. For example, there are no women of color-only meetings or lesbian-only meetings. The category “woman” is not monolithic as bodies are defined, described, and interpreted by various intersecting categories. Crenshaw (1991a), in *Demarginalizing the Intersections of Race and Sex*, coined the term “intersectionality” as a response to the precarious manner Black women were discussed through a “single-axis framework” (p. 58). Intersectionality integrates both race and sex in an analysis of Black women’s lives. One’s identity as a woman and an African American is erased when the single-axis framework is employed (Crenshaw, 1991a). This erasure due to single-axis framework can be applied to any marginalized identity, such as gays and lesbians and women of diverse race other than African American. In *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color*, Crenshaw (1991b) argued “The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup difference” (p. 1242).

This applies to the women-only meetings of AA and my concern with how women felt different from each other in recovery. Women-only meetings arguably ignore differences and can feel exclusive to many women. This is significant as the women in my sample felt different from other women in meetings, particularly around race and sexual orientation. Harriet and Vanesse experienced difference based on race due to the lack of people of color within AA meetings. Harriet, who is of mixed race, said:
I’m originally from New York City and the meetings there are a mixed variety. When I first came to Escondido I did feel left out at meetings because there wasn’t very many people of color and I just didn’t think anybody white could understand somebody of a mixed race and where we were coming from. I soon realized that was false information on my part. By talking to other women in AA, by looking for the similarities and not the differences¹⁴, I came to realize that it doesn’t matter what color, race, creed, religion you are, we all suffer from the same thing (personal communication, January 8, 2013).

Vanesse, who is Pacific Islander and Guamanian, expressed a parallel view:

I would tell the old ladies that I didn’t consider myself a part of because I am a woman of color and I would ask them where are all the other women of color? Like where are all the brown folks? This was in the beginning of my recovery and I was so narrow-minded I only saw what I wanted to see. I just started going to more meetings and the longer I stayed in sobriety, the more my eyes opened up and I saw so many different forms and shapes of people in AA. It’s really about accepting that who I am is enough. That acceptance has helped me to connect with other women no matter what they look like. I might be different. I don’t have to be the same to make that connection. I think we set ourselves into limitation when we start to put ourselves in categories. We are all one human. We take off the skin, the outer self, we are one in AA. I think we do ourselves a disservice when we set limitations on our recovery based on prejudice, racism, and sexism (personal communication, December 19, 2012).

Although these two women initially felt separate based on race, they both immediately followed this with an explanation of why and how this was part of their journey in finding community within AA. Both argue these differences do not curb their capacity to form relations because all women in AA suffer from alcoholism. Differences do not, and should not, limit the ability to forge connections.

Sarah and Pamela expressed how sexual orientation impacted them at women’s only meetings. Sarah asserted, “When it comes to meetings and people talk about their relationships, I would like to be open about my relationship, but sometimes people are close-minded about same-sex partnership. It’s just a feeling I get from certain straight women and I watch what I say in terms of relationships at certain women’s meetings” (personal communication, January 5, 2013). While Sarah still attends women’s meetings, she mainly attends lesbian women’s meetings because that is where she feels the largest sense of comfort. She can share whatever she wants without fear of judgment. It is important to note

¹⁴ “Look for the similarities and not the differences” is a repeated slogan located within AA.
that there are no official lesbian-only meetings in AA. These are unofficial meetings Sarah is able to attend due in large part to her geographic location. As stated, women may have left AA because of an inability to locate a meeting where they find a sense of belonging, security, and safety. Similar to Sarah, Pamela said:

> When I came out as bisexual, for a long time people were shocked by it. Sometimes I feel I need to tone myself down and that I shouldn’t share, but I came out because it was an opportunity to open some eyes. I’m going to keep sharing my story because it helps other women. There is nothing better than women coming up to your after a meeting because something you said resonated with them (personal communication, December 19, 2012).

Although Pamela felt different around her orientation to the point where she almost stopped sharing, she realized her story and identity helps other women. She argued if certain women have a problem with her orientation that is their issue. The larger, and more important, aspect is through Pamela’s sharing she gives and receives support at women-only meetings.

These narratives reveal women-only meetings do not operate under an intersectional framework and may be viewed as essentialist, but I argue it is strategic essentialism. Coined by Gaytri Spivak (1991) in *The Post-Colonial Critic*, strategic essentialism extracts a core element of a group or population with the aim to create solidarity and strengthen their presence in society. Women-only meetings support Spivak’s strategic essentialism by first enacting solidarity through identifying gender specific needs unique to women in AA, followed by transforming shared space between men and women to women only.

In “Irigaray’s Female Symbolic in the Making of Chicana Lesbian Sitios y Lenguas (Sites and Discourses), Emma Pérez (1998) argues “as ‘marginalized others,’ essentializing ourselves within countersites thwarts cultural and political suicide. We must separate into decolonized third world spaces of our own making. Strategic essentialism is practiced resistance against dominant ideologies that silence…” (p. 88). She situates herself and speaks from a Chicana lesbian identity and honors the multiplicity of voices within the Chicana lesbian community. However, she claims there are moments when a marginalized group can, and must, come together with one voice in order to enact change through specific theories and discourses that can emerge from the creative and constructive power in these spaces. Pérez (1998) further argues, “For me, marginalized groups must have separate spaces to inaugurate their discourses…essentializing strategies are survival strategies…these strategies are never the solution, but they are a process for finding and expressing one’s multiple
voices” (p. 92). She outlines the problems with essentialism and acknowledges that even strategic essentialism is not a permanent solution. The larger argument is that strategic essentialism can be a strategy used at a specific moment and time, based on culture, historical, and geographical junctures that can enhance the presence and needs of a marginalized group, whether it is Chicana lesbians or women in AA.

Despite the problems with essentialism, it can be a useful intellectual and social tool. Bucholtz (2003) argued:

> For researchers, essentialist assumptions may facilitate analysis by enabling them to identify a previously undescribed group…for group members, essentialism promotes a shared identity…For both, essentialism is a tool for redressing power imbalances, as when the group under study is seen by the dominant group as illegitimate or trivial, or when a stigmatized group forms an oppositional identity to counter such negative ideologies. Essentialism may therefore be a deliberate move to enable scholarly activity, to forge a political alliance through creation of a common identity, or to otherwise provide a temporarily stable ground for further social action (p. 401).

Bucholtz’s argument of essentialism as a tool for change, while not identical, is certainly evident within women-only spaces in AA. The assertion that the dominant group, in this case the male hierarchy of AA, holds negative ideologies of the lesser or marginalized group (women of AA) is made tacit by the complementarity between the sexes exhibited in AA’s founding. The initial exclusion of women, the chapter “To Wives,” as well as the silence of female subjectivity in the Big Book, fit Bucholtz’s marker of an “undescribed group” that enacts an essentialized shared identity as women. The women in my sample use strategic essentialism as strategy to navigate the male-centered program of AA. This strategy carves out areas, like women-only meetings, to generate healing, empowerment, and recovery.

To that end, women in AA form solidarity around the common identity of female alcoholic in order to generate healing and empowerment, however it is vital to state the lack of literature and research on women of diverse backgrounds in AA. I do not know how many women have left AA because the program did not meet their needs based on their intersecting identities. This study limits itself to women that have stayed and use strategic essentialism to navigate the male-dominated program of AA.

Noteworthy as well is geographic location. Southern California is a large, diverse city that offers a multitude of meetings. Women interviewed are able to attend a variety of meetings until they find the ones that work for them. In addition to the narratives above,
Monica lives in Julian and there are only two meetings. It is a small town and she does not attend these meetings because everyone in town knows one another. She feels there is too much gossip and lack of anonymity. Because of this, she drives to different meetings outside of her town. Not every woman in AA has this privilege and it is important to bear in mind how many women may have left AA because they could not find a meeting where they fit in and formed community.

**Sponsorship**

There is a lineage of women who have walked before me and those who follow me, those who have sponsored me and those who I sponsor. It’s just such a wonderful gift.

-Susan

As Susan’s remark reveals, sponsorship is a vital way she found community. A sponsor is a member of AA that guides another member through the Twelve Steps and the program of AA. It has been defined as the practice of mentorship between one recovering person and another (Carr, 2011, 273). Each woman interviewed has a female sponsor, which is the norm in AA. The interviewees felt only another women could understand them and their struggles in and out of recovery.

A variety of reasons were given for the importance of sponsorship. One is that it helps the sponsor in her own recovery. AA states, “our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics achieve sobriety” (AA, 1947). This element of recovery is also within the Twelfth Step of AA, “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” (AA, 2001, p. 60). Sarah explained, “Sponsoring women is important because it gives us a chance to guide another woman along the journey to recovery by sharing our own experience, strength, and hope. The process not only helps the sponsee, but also the sponsor” (personal communication, January 5, 2013). Lucy agreed, “By sponsoring another woman, you get the opportunity to re-experience the program. By sharing your experience, you learn things you may not have learned the first time around” (personal communication, January 8, 2013). By

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15 It is also the norm in AA for men to have male sponsors.
helping and supporting other women, Sarah and Lucy found new forms of recovery and healing.

Another reason provided for the significance of sponsorship was AA is a program one cannot do alone or in isolation. Harriet asserted, “You can’t do this alone. Life may be going great, but you are going to get hit with a curve ball and if you don’t have support who knows what the outcome is gonna (sic) be. If you have a sponsor, they know everything about you so you know who best to go to when you have a problem” (personal communication, January 8, 2013). Cindy argued, “Isolation is death. If you can’t get connected, you can’t stay sober” (personal communication, January 14, 2013). Pamela affirmed, “It’s a connection and it’s seeing the possibilities. It’s someone to help you through your journey” (personal communication, December 19, 2012). Linda expressed these parallel views, “I need to be able to stay sober with another woman because she understands all of my nuances. It’s the way we stay sober. I need a woman’s perspective and can call my sponsor about anything” (personal communication, December 23, 2012). For the women interviewed, sponsorship is an element of community.

The largest reasons given for the importance of sponsorship are trust and guidance. For the women in my sample, their sponsor is the main person they go to for advice. In some cases, they only trust their sponsor with aspects of their life and share details they would never disclose in women’s only meetings. Susan stated, “I’ve had the same sponsor for nine years and there is a sacredness in our relationship. I don’t trust easily, but I trust her. I trust her intentions and motivation so I tend to take direction from her which is such a gift” (personal communication, January 8, 2013). Monica asserted, “The only true person that really knows me is my sponsor. That lady knows me. She knows shit about me that I wouldn’t share at any meeting” (personal communication, January 14, 2013). In keeping with this, Vanesse said, “We have female sponsors because it’s someone who can help us and guide us. A woman can’t get what a woman needs from a man” (personal communication, December 19, 2012). These accounts are an explicit rejection of relations of dependence on men, especially for heterosexual women. They look to women for spiritual and life guidance, areas often reserved for men. Covington (1994) argued, “The lack of a hierarchal structure in Twelve Step programs is also attractive to women, many of whom have experienced the
abuses of traditional top-down power structures…each member is viewed as a potential contributor to the support and recovery of all other members” (p. 4).

Their narratives stand in sharp contrast to the feminist critique that sponsorship requires women to become dependent, rather than independent and empowered (Freeman 1989; Unterberger 1989). The women interviewed are active agents in seeking out other women to aid them in their recovery. For this particular group of women, sponsorship, rather than a hierarchical model that places women into a top-down power dichotomy, is a model of mutuality operating out of an interconnected framework. In *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham (1992) argue, “Mutuality involves not just ‘give or get,’ nor even ‘give and get.’ In relationships of mutuality we give by getting and get by giving…” (p. 83). The women in my sample view these relationships as sacred and necessary to their recovery and empowerment. It is a reciprocal, mutually benefiting relationship based on trust, intimacy, connection, and hope. Sanders (2009) argued, “the role of sponsorship is important to women and it provides the opportunity for women to connect with each other and…form an intimate relationship with other women…display[ing] how one alcoholic woman can help another alcoholic women to develop the power to overcome her addiction” (p. 113).

However, this cannot be generalized to all women in AA. There are women that navigate AA without a sponsor and many women change sponsors because the relationship no longer worked. For example, within my own sample, Linda addressed problems with prior sponsors.

My sponsor now is so great. My old sponsor badgered me all the time about doing my steps and this is how you have to do your steps. I’ve gone through a lot of sponsors. Everybody is different and has a different approach. I feel like my other sponsors bitched at me all the time and constantly told me I was wrong. But I love the sponsor I have now. Her spiritual walk is akin to mine and she understands my makeup better than my old sponsors ever did (personal communication, December 23, 2012).

Sponsorship may not always be a mutually benefitting relationship for women and is an area for further research.

**Community Despite Difference**

As stated, the scarcity of literature on how women of diverse backgrounds experience AA, alongside feminist critiques AA that is exclusive rather than inclusive in nature led me
to analyze whether or not women in my sample have ever felt different from other women in recovery. While my main focuses were on how race, sexual orientation, and class operated within AA, unexpected variables surfaced. Every woman interviewed expressed a sense of difference from other women in AA based not just on race, orientation, and class, but also beauty, relationship status, addiction to substances other than alcohol, and spirituality, yet this did not impede recovery. Each respondent spoke to the various ways they find their own unique community within AA despite difference. Although race and sexual orientation were discussed under women-only meetings, I further analyze these variables to critically examine other strategies women use to form community despite difference.

It is important to restate that this chapter focuses on women who have stayed in AA. AA is a male-dominated program and women have left because of the exclusivity outlined by the valid feminist critiques. An area for further research is how many women have left AA due to difference of race, sexual orientation, class, and other variables.

**RACE**

Four out of five women of color interviewed made reference to difference based on race, yet all followed their remarks with how they dealt with this and found community in AA. Sarah claimed, “When it comes to race there are types of looks I received at certain meetings. It’s more of a feeling. I did not feel comfortable at these meetings in terms of race. I didn’t have a good experience so I just don’t go back. Race has never been an issue in my current meetings so I stay in the area I feel comfortable in.” Similarly Monica stated:

- There is so much prejudice. With the people in AA who are white, I can tell right off (snaps fingers) who is uncomfortable, like when you are holding hands, just the body expression you know? The way you look at me, the way you sit by, I can tell right away but I just ignore it. I’m comfortable in any meeting because that’s on them. The program is for everyone so those people are not practicing the principles of the program (personal communication, January 14, 2013).

Both Sarah and Monica’s narratives explain dissimilarity around race as a feeling they get based on body language, yet each woman is able to find community within AA. Sarah felt certain meetings were more liberal. These meetings are where she felt most comfortable and received the needed support for her personal recovery. Monica argued AA is for everyone so the outsider is not her, but people who are racist. This is how she forged community within AA.
SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Linda is a lesbian of color and felt neither identity mattered in AA. She argued meetings are diverse and varied and appreciated that she does not know what she may find. She asserted:

In fact, that’s what I dig about it. I can go to a meeting and I never know whose going to be in there. I don’t care. It’s cool. I liken it to a party. Maybe I’ve never met any of these people before and I may feel uncomfortable, but I have two choices. I can alienate myself and sit in a corner or I can have an open mind and talk to people. Then I find I have more things in common with the people than I originally thought I did (personal communication, December 23, 2012).

While Linda felt her race and sexual orientation did not make her different from other women in recovery, the other five non-heterosexual women experienced a sense of separation. Yet as with race, each woman described how she found community within AA. Lucy claimed:

Yes, definitely. A lot of it stems from being gay and feeling like I should be non-gender specific about my sharing. I look different from most women and I don’t typically go to gay meetings so sometimes that comes up a lot for me. But really it’s irrelevant a lot of times to interaction. Once I feel comfortable it’s a non-issue. I make connections with straight women all the time. There are gay meetings where I don’t disclose aspects of me if I don’t have that comfort level or am not connected with the women at the meeting. My sexual orientation doesn’t hinder me from making connections with women because it is about finding a common ground in AA and walking this journey together. As a lesbian female fellowship, gay or straight, is very reassuring to me because that’s where I find my strength and comfort (personal communication, January 8, 2013).

Not only is Lucy able to find commonalities despite difference, she asserted that she felt more comfortable with her orientation within AA than outside of AA. She comes from a women-centered space and argued the outside world did not offer her the same comfort, security, and community of AA. As she explained, “I’m grateful for AA which has allowed me to be the person, the woman, I was always supposed to be. AA has given me strength and comfort in that I’m a strong, powerful, lesbian, sober woman. If it wasn’t for the program and the women in the fellowship, I never would have realized that.”

In a similar vein Monica said:

That’s the one thing I don’t ever discuss in meetings, my relationships….The personal stuff is for me and my sponsor. I discuss my most private things with my sponsor. But I will discuss prejudices around race or lifestyle choice if other people are feeling them. I let them know that’s not the program. That’s why I love
AA because we are made up of all different kinds of people from different backgrounds, different lifestyles, whatever. I feel I’m the same person no matter what meeting I’m at (personal communication, January 14, 2013).

Although she limits her sharing at meetings, she shares everything with her sponsor. This is one way she forms community. In addition, if other members deal with prejudice, she will insert herself and let them know that is not the program of AA. As a lesbian, woman of color, Monica has felt different, but she loves that AA is made up of different people. She asserted she could attend any meeting and be herself. She chooses not to share intimate aspects of her life at meetings because she believes that is meant for her sponsor and not for meetings.

Kristin spoke of difference around sexuality and sexual subcultures.

I’m not comfortable sharing about my lifestyle and the BDSM\textsuperscript{16} community. The closest I come to sharing about it is I will refer to the fact that I live in an alternative world. And I leave it at that. I would never feel comfortable in just a regular women’s of AA sharing that part of me, but that’s ok. One is that there are BDSM and LGBT meetings and I would feel better about sharing there. But also it talks about this in the Big Book. It says you’re supposed to share on a general level and that your sponsor, or other women in your life, are the people you share those details with (personal communication, December 26, 2012).

Like Monica, Kristin will only discuss these private details of her life with her sponsor or other women she trusts. Despite their lack of comfort, they both feel discussion in a meeting should be on a general level and are able to share the intimate aspects of their life with certain women in AA. Their difference does not hinder connections or community with women within AA.

**Other Competing Identities**

Race and sexual orientation were the largest variables women interviewed expressed difference from other women in AA, yet a multitude of other reasons were given. A key finding is dissimilarities respondents articulated did not impede communal relations with women, which parallels the statements of women of color and non-heterosexual orientation. For example, Cindy commented on socioeconomic status, “I’m not comfortable at the ‘handbag’ meeting. All of my purses are hippy handmade purses so I’m really self-conscious

\textsuperscript{16} BDSM is a variety of erotic practices that involve bondage and discipline, with sadomasochism or sadism and masochism.
at that meeting. But there are so many meetings to go to and at the end of the day when we share about this disease we all have, those differences melt away. They’re not important” (personal communication, January 14, 2013). She also conveyed disparity on substance addiction. “At my home group I don’t always feel comfortable talking about drugs I used. It’s hard to not be able to talk about drugs in AA, but the core of our experience is there are so many similarities that it’s way more important than the differences.”

In a similar vein Susan stated:

I often feel different. I’ve had an eating disorder my whole life and not all women get that. You’ve never had to weigh 375 pounds. You never would sell your soul to be thin. You don’t have to battle with sugar the way I have to battle with sugar. My parents didn’t do a good job sending me messages about my worthiness and I never felt good enough. But I think it is the culture in the fellowship of AA that we allow folks to be themselves and I heard that the minute I got here. I find meetings that work for me. Meetings where I feel safe and where there are people who have what I want. I felt like I got home when I got the fellowship and I found something there that I had never found before. If you can’t find a meeting that feels like home to you, it’s probably you. Keep looking (personal communication, January 8, 2013).

Vanesse echoed this sentiment on beauty, “When I first came into AA, I felt I didn’t fit because I wasn’t beautiful. I just didn’t feel that good about myself. Eventually when I started growing and feeling and opening myself up to the women, I felt a part of and beautiful” (personal communication, December 19, 2012). Kristin felt unique because she was single, “I feel different all the time when they talk about their husbands. I’ve never been married and it makes me sad. Everyone I know has a husband or a partner. But I know that my choices led to this and I become more ok with it as I do more work on myself with other women” (personal communication, December 26, 2012). Each woman battled with issues of beauty or self-esteem, yet were able to face these matters through their sense of community and belonging with other women in AA.

Pamela and Linda both addressed difference based on spirituality, but were on opposite ends of the spectrum. Pamela asserted:

There were women who were really offended by my image of my higher power. They felt like I didn’t have respect for the program or a higher power. But I wouldn’t keep quiet about it because it’s not the same for everyone and it’s not Christian for everyone. The religiosity is stronger in some meetings and I don’t like it and it’s hard for me to get past. I just find the meetings that work for me (personal communication, December 19, 2012).
Linda argued:

I go to a church meeting now because my spirituality has changed. I don’t know if I can call the women in my old home meetings my sisters now because they made me feel like I’ve left them because I don’t go to that meeting anymore. Early in recovery it would hurt my feelings, but not anymore. In AA you learn how to deal with life. My spirituality changed and I love being sober so I had to change things around (personal communication, December 23, 2012).

This is a key finding around spirituality, difference, and community. Both women felt separate due to their higher power. For one woman it is because her higher power is not religious and for the second woman it is because her higher power is religious. Despite sentiments of difference, each woman expressed the ability to find community among other women.

SPIRITUALITY OF IMPERFECTION

All ten women interviewed experienced dissimilarities yet acquired community and sense of belonging within AA. What exactly is happening here? Harriet said:

We all suffer from alcoholism and basically it’s all the same reason. It’s all based on fear. Fear of success, fear of failure, fear of acceptance, just so many fears. Most people when you talk to them, they always felt different. They never felt a part of and it was fearful to try and be a part of so it was easier to go off into your own little corner and use alcohol and drugs to come out of your shell. You take away the alcohol and drugs and you’re back to that fearful little child. You have to start taking steps to become active in your job, your community, your AA group. You have to get over your fear of other people, places, and things (personal communication, January 8, 2013).

Harriet’s insight reveals fear as a common thread. AA shifts and changes the paradigms of fear around flaws many women operate under, which enables them to form community. By paradigms I refer to those social constructs of gender mapped on to women that enact what is prescribed as culturally, acceptable behavior. I argue the women interviewed shift these paradigms and create community in two ways. This first is through Kurtz and Ketcham’s (1992) notion of “the spirituality of imperfection based in the lived acceptance of human limitations and powerlessness” (p. 6). This is a component within the AA program: Kurtz and Ketcham named this element. It is the understanding humans are flawed, imperfect, and forge community based on this knowledge. “What recovering alcoholics ‘have’ is not a stake on ultimate wisdom or a lock on virtue, but a way of life that accepts imperfection as imperfection, permitting such spiritual qualities as ‘serenity’ and ‘joy of living’ to coexist
with such earthly realities as ‘defects’ and ‘shortcomings’” (Kurtz & Ketcham, 1992, p. 33-34). Women form community around this paradox, where imperfection is divine. Despite their differences, women in AA are flawed and nurture each other through shared visions, goals, and hopes. Women-only meetings and sponsorship are examples of this need for mutuality that arises from flaws and imperfections. By ourselves we are never enough; we need others to help, guide, and support us, just as we need others in order to help them. To echo Sanders, this is a far cry from the feminist critique that women in AA are stuck in “myopia of self-absorption” (Rapping, 1996, p. 13).

**Spiritual Activism**

Gloria Anzaldúa coined the term “Spiritual Activism,” to define a community where one finds commonality among difference, rather than using difference as the starting point. This concept is mainly theorized in her article “now let us shift…the path of conocimiento…inner work, public acts” (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002). It is not a movement based on hierarchies, power, or ascension. Instead, spiritual activism is a place and a movement where binaries collapse, where we accept and insist on both/and, and where we live in the paradox. As place, spiritual activism first situates the person within a relationship of the self that is both vertical and horizontal; the former as a power greater than oneself, the latter as relationships steeped in love with fellows, community, and the world. Spiritual activism as a movement builds upon the spiritualized person who is now situated within the larger community and challenges a dominant discourse that binds instead of expanding potentiality and interconnection with the world.

Spiritual activism requires recognition of our fears and flaws. Anzaldúa argues, “the knowledge that exposes your fears can also remove them” (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002, p. 553). For example, through women-only meetings, those imperfections, manifested as fears and flaws, can safely be amplified through the power of naming. The one who names demonstrates agency and subjectivity. In the case of identifying fears and flaws, one discovers freedom from that which oppresses and limits the self. What emerges is a new manifestation of the spiritualized person. In *This Bridge Called My Back*, both Cherrie and Anzaldúa (1984) assert, “Our spirituality does not stem from outside ourselves. It emerges when we listen to the ‘small still voice’ within us which can empower us to create actual
change in the world.” (p. 195). Spiritual activism operates as both a “movement” and “place.”

Spiritual activism is the second way I argue women interviewed create community within AA. Their narratives suggest differences lessen once they walk through the doors of AA. The “rooms” of AA provide a space where all are interconnected and divine. Arguably male alcoholics employ spiritual activism within AA, however my sample limited itself to female alcoholics, and is an area for further research.

Leela Fernandes (2003), in *Transforming Feminist Practice: Non-Violence, Social Justice and the Possibilities of a Spiritualized Feminism*, writes, “for all of the vast richness of feminist theory and the often aching attention to specificities of cultural context and difference, there has been a remarkable absence of even the possibility of a divinized conception of the self – the self as spirit” (Fernandes, 2003, p. 36). Addressed in previous chapters, the feminist critiques of AA, while legitimate, have not understood the complexity of the program. Other feminist theorists, like Spivak, Anzaldúa and Fernandes, embrace notions of paradox, fluid spirituality, and essentialism as strategy, which allows for a deeper and more critical analysis of female experiences within AA.

For example, Fernandes argued all have a spiritual essence, but this concept is not universalism or essentialism. Much like Spivak’s “strategic essentialism,” Fernandes engages with “disidentification” as a strategy to form community. As she explains, “The difference between this and older forms of universalism and essentialism is that the practice of disidentification acknowledges that this universal self is simultaneously present within the very real social identities, differences and inequalities which shape our locations, attributes and visions of our lives and worlds” (Fernandes, 2003, p. 37). Disidentification holds the tension between the release of how one identifies the self while at the same time engages in the process of self-transformation. Fernandes does not ask us to forgo identity, but to rework and redefine the self, which parallels with kenosis, introduced in chapter three. To restate, kenosis is the voluntary act of emptying one’s self spiritually to generate healing. Argues Fernandes (2003), “At one level, it rests on a letting go of all attachments to externalized forms of identity as well as to deeper ego-based attachments to power, privilege and control. At another level, disidentification is not simply a negative process of detachment but a positive movement of creating a different form of self” (p. 27). Disidentification as strategy...
for community is exemplified through the women interviewed. It cannot be generalized to all women in AA, and does not take into account women that have left AA based on exclusivity, however this particular sample of women dis-empower the self and spiritually connect with other women in order to form community.

Anzaldúa writes of holistic alliances where conflict can dissolve through reflective dialogue. If we can find commonality among difference, yet honor difference through holistic alliances, than we have a vibration of love powerful enough to render change under a social justice framework. Women in AA enact “spiritual activism” on a daily basis by working and reworking the spiritual program of AA in a manner that fits their mind, body, and spirit. Each woman has her own path, but comes together under the over-arching umbrella of sobriety.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

I began this project from a top-down approach by questioning whether AA is feminist and whether is it possible to maintain a feminist identity within AA? I do not disagree with feminist scholarship that AA is masculine in nature, however women have found recovery and strength within the program. Rather than question the program itself, a reversal of the approach asks, “How do women in AA find recovery and empowerment in a male dominated program?” Through in-depth interviews I found women in AA navigate and negotiate contradictions within the program to generate healing and self-determination in three important and critical ways; namely, by embracing the paradox of the program, interpreting the primary text to fit their needs, and creating a community among women.

The women interviewed paradoxically gained power by admitting powerlessness, found in the language of step one of AA. They also clearly identified a difference between being powerless before a higher power and powerless before men. In addition, the interviewees employed a hermeneutics of suspicion to the Big Book, which allowed each woman to adapt and reappropriate the language to aid in her recovery. This included the flexibility to create various versions of a higher power. Finally, the respondents spoke of creating and sustaining a female community, such as women-only spaces, within a male-dominated program as a strategy for recovery and empowerment. While each woman addressed feelings of difference from other women in AA, this did not hinder her from forming female communal relations and bonds. The only goal within AA is to stay sober and to help another alcoholic achieve sobriety. Female alcoholics are a viable, working, effective community. To this end AA functions as a site of contradiction, or what Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) identifies as a borderland in *Borders/La Frontera*, where things come together that are opposed to one another, giving life to something new and creative.

I do not argue women in AA attempt to claim the title of feminist, but I do claim that their recovery experiences are empowering and a generative site of feminist theory. As such a broad definition of feminist theory describes “a collection of feminist texts with shared
goals, practices, and assumptions” (Jones, 2000, p. 3). Jones (2000), in *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, seeks to broaden the horizon of feminist theory outside the academy by including conversations of women so that feminist theory “is a collection of critical texts, and a conversation—and not as a discrete academic field” (p. 3). The women interviewed in this study do not participate in abstract theorizing yet arrive at the same rubrics initiated by feminist theory through the process of reflection, gender analysis, and a hermeneutics of suspicion. The women in my study are able to navigate through a male-dominated program that absent defined women’s spaces, is inadequate for their sobriety. The forms of oppression that bind women are not always visible, making it difficult to recognize and name. Through women-only meetings, borders are crossed, allowing for analysis of gendered, self-defeating messages and assumptions that negate healing. Additionally, the women in this sample reinterpreted and redefined the terms power and powerlessness in order to find subjectivity and agency. Is this not the task, then, of feminist theory? As Jones (2000) argued, “theory analyzes the signposts (orders, rules, assumptions) that structure and direct thought” (p.4).

The boundaries of feminist theory remain unstable, “constantly being made and remade as the objects they map move differently into focus. They have to be remade, revised, abandoned when they cease, in practice, to generate workable, politically viable effects” (Code, 2000, xviii). While it may not be formally identified as feminist theory, I argue the lived experience of women in AA create and expand the borders of feminism.

**Limitations**

As with all social science, this research is limited in scope. The sample utilized for this study was intentional. Participants needed to meet specific requirements based on the different ways I hypothesized women found healing and empowerment within AA. This sample was also chosen within a specific geographic location where meetings of AA are abundant and diverse. This sample did not account for women that have left AA due to the feminist critiques outlined or lack of meetings due to geographic location.

**Future Study**

The researcher will continue to expound upon the discussion of this project, yet there are many topics for future study. This thesis did not attempt to definitely answer a question, but rather explore the still existing tension between academic critique and the lived
experience of women in AA. As such, there are three specific areas the researcher would like to expand on. First, I would like to conduct a similar project, yet change the words within the questions and title. I used many loaded words, such as empowerment. For example, the title on the consent form reads “Alcoholics Anonymous and Female Empowerment.” As stated in the methodology chapter, this may have skewed data as the women interviewed already know I hope to examine the empowerment that may be found within AA. I question if they tailored their answers at any point during our conversation to fit what they thought I might want to hear. A future project may simply state that this is a study of women in AA and their experiences.

Secondly, I would like to examine the correlation between religiosity and the textual language of the Big Book. For example, a woman with strong religious ties found AA to be less sexist than a woman employing spiritual techniques with concern to a higher power. How, then, does one’s religiosity affect their approach to discourse of addiction, healing, and treatment?

Finally, I hope to conduct a study on women that have left AA. I hypothesize it may be for the same reasons this current thesis argued women have stayed within AA. Women may have renounced AA due to the language of powerlessness, a male-centered and patriarchal text, and/or the inability to form a community with other women. Geographic location may also play a large role. In any case, future research should continue to honor women’s lived experiences through their oral histories and narratives.

In the absence of women’s stories, or if her story is written by male authors, women’s perspectives and ways of knowing are excluded. As Carol Christ (1995) reminds us, “Women have lived in the interstices between their own vaguely understood experience and the shapings given to experience by the stories of men. The dialectic between experience and shaping experience through storytelling has not been in women’s hands” (p. 5). Consequently, in the absence of women’s narratives, how do women validate their feelings? How do women see themselves and their stories as interconnected or part of a larger meta-narrative they agree or disagree with? Thus, the telling of women’s stories as oral history or written narratives serve as primary sources expressed from women’s own experience and not through the interpretation of the male lens.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

HANDOUT FOR INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS
RESEARCHER LOOKING FOR WOMEN FOR IN-PERSON INTERVIEW ABOUT FEMALE EMPOWERMENT IN ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

Investigator: The project investigator is Lindsay Bond, Graduate Student of Women’s Studies at San Diego State University. Dr. Doreen J. Mattingly is an Associate Professor of Women's Studies at San Diego State University and is responsible for supervising the research.

Purpose of the study: The purpose of this study is to analyze if Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) offers women forms of healing and empowerment. In this study, about 10 women will be interviewed in person about what Alcoholics Anonymous means in their lives.

Description of the study: This is an interview study that will take place in-person at a location of your choice. It will take about one to two hours to complete the interview. I will ask questions concerning your experiences as a woman in recovery. Please contact me for more information.

Requirements: You must have a minimum of three years of continuous sobriety, regularly attend a women’s only meeting, have a sponsor, and finished all 12 Steps. Women of all age ranges, sexual orientation, and racial/ethnic backgrounds are encouraged to reply.

Contact: Please email me at lindsaymbond@gmail.com or call me at 760.500.2980 and let me know your background and how AA is empowering for you. You may also contact the supervising faculty member, Dr. Doreen J. Mattingly, at MATTINGL@mail.sdsu.edu. Thanks for your interest!
APPENDIX B

POTENTIAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Ask every participant:

1. Does saying you are powerless over alcohol make you feel powerless as a woman? Why or why not?

Possible follow-up questions as needed:

1.1 Why are humility and humiliation listed together in the book? What does this mean to you?

Ask every participant:

2. Do you find any language in the Big Book sexist? How does this make you feel and what do you do about it?

3. How do you feel about the chapter “To The Wives?” How do you feel about it knowing it was written by a man? What do you do about it?

Ask every participant:

4. What is the role of female fellowship/women’s community in your life? Why is this important for you?

Possible follow-up questions as needed:

4.1 Why are women’s only meeting important?

4.2 Why is sponsoring other women important?

Ask every participant:

5. Are there any ways you have ever felt different from other women in recovery?

Possible follow-up questions as needed:

5.1 Has your race, sexual orientation, or class ever made you feel different in meetings?

Biographical information if it does not come up during the interview:
6. What is your age?

7. What is your sexual orientation?/How do you define your sexuality?

8. What is your racial/ethnic background?

9. What is your socio-economic status? Would you define yourself as lower, middle, or upper class?