Spiritual Awakening and Its Meaning for Individuals in 12-Step Addiction Recovery Dissertation Research Prospectus

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Substance use disorders (SUDs) are complex, progressive, and chronic behavioral health conditions characterized by problematic patterns of substance use (Liu et al., 2020). Despite the increased availability of treatment methods in the past two decades, SUDs remain resistant to treatment and those individuals who do experience periods of remission (sobriety) experience high rates of relapse (Mulvaney-Day et al., 2019). These facts indicate a need for research to identify effective strategies to promote sustained recovery.

Unlike treatment for other medical and psychological disorders, the path to SUD recovery has spiritual roots. In the early 20th century, the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) emerged, embracing the concept of one sober alcoholic helping a suffering alcoholic find sobriety. The first hundred people of AA to find effective recovery developed the 12 Steps – a guide to sobriety through restoring relationships with self, others, and a higher power (Wilson, 2002). AA is rooted in the concept of alcoholism as a disease rather than a moral weakness, which was the prevailing belief of the time.

Problem Statement

The problem is a lack of understanding of the application of spirituality and its role in recovery because SUD research typically relies on quantitative methods to validate treatment techniques rather than qualitative methods that give voice to personal experiences (Sang et al., 2022). Prayer, meditation, honesty, self-reflection, making amends, and working with others, all of which may culminate in a spiritual awakening, are important elements of recovery through the 12 Steps (Wilson, 2002). This recovery program has both strong supporters and vocal critics. The program developed by AA continues to serve as the foundation of many traditional treatment approaches. There is no doubt that participation in 12-Step groups has changed countless lives, but there is little understanding of how this change occurs. Critics complain that the spiritual foundation of the 12 Steps does not fit neatly into contemporary behavioral health practice and cannot be considered good medicine (Kaskutas, 2009).

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study is to explore the role of spirituality in SUD recovery and the meaning individuals assign to the phenomenon (Sargeant & Yoxall, 2023). Emergent themes in data analysis will be used to explore the mechanisms of spirituality in the recovery process. A better understanding of the actions of spirituality on the individual level might lead to a change in clinical practice in SUD treatment.

**Background of the Problem**

Substances of abuse act on the mesolimbic (reward) system of the brain producing an unnatural knowledge of pleasure for which some people lack defense (Liu et al., 2020). In these individuals, the result is addiction – an obsessive and compulsive need to use more of the substance. These substances fit the construct of the biblical forbidden fruit providing human knowledge that should not be known (Gen 2: 16-17). Like Adam and Eve, the result for the addict is both loss of innocence and connection – social, emotional, and spiritual. The addict, lost in a wilderness, begins to seek comfort in the substance as an alternate god or spirit. The cure, in the words of seminal psychologist Carl Jung, is a spiritual awakening, *spiritus contra spiritum* (spirit against spirit) (*Carl Jung Letter to Bill W.*, 2018).

Individuals suffering from SUDs have long been cast out of society or warehoused in asylums (Malleck, 1999). That approach began to change when Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith met in Akron, Ohio, and Alcoholics Anonymous was born. Wilson (better known as Bill W.) had a spiritual awakening through the outreach of the Oxford Groups, which was an interdenominational Christian movement founded by Dr. Frank Buchman in the early 20th century. Rigorous practice of the group's four absolutes: honesty, purity, unselfishness, and love. Wilson described his spiritual awakening as a flash of white light and believed he had to devote himself to helping others in order to maintain his conscious contact with God (Wilson, 2002). Recognizing the power of one alcoholic helping another led to the formation of AA in 1935.

Alcoholics Anonymous, often synonymous with its self-help groups, prefers to see itself as a fellowship of men and women with a common purpose of sobriety (Wilson, 2002). From the foundation of the four absolutes, Wilson and the first 100 AA members created the 12 Steps as a spiritual route to recovery (Wilson, 2002). They are:

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable.

2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

7. Humbly 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.

Spirituality is recognized to be an important element of health and wellness. Often defined as the connection between oneself and the greater world and a higher power, spirituality is well-studied and recognized by public health authorities as a positive force for wellness (Byerly, 2023). However, the concepts of health and wellness, and healing are different. The acceptance of spirituality as a dimension of health and wellness is not representative of its role in the healing process. Physicians and other healthcare practitioners, as scientists, often minimize the role of spiritual practice in the treatment and healing process (López-Tarrida et al., 2021).

In the United States, greater acceptance of SUD as a medical condition reduced the reliance on spirituality as a cure. Funding parity laws such as the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act of 2008 helped diminish the influence of the 12 Step model in SUD treatment (Mulvaney-Day et al., 2019). Prior to parity legislation, SUD treatment programs often lacked adequate funding and relied on paraprofessional peers with various levels of training to work with their patients. As parity laws mandated that health insurance plans treat mental health and substance use disorders equally to physical health conditions, physicians and counseling professionals began filling the SUD workforce.

Science and its reliance on evidence-based practice reduced the role of spirituality in SUD treatment. Historically, treatment models embraced spiritual practice in the form of the 12 Steps. One such treatment method, the Minnesota Model developed by Hazelden in 1949, came to be considered the gold standard in treatment (Montague & Fairholm, 2019). Hazelden patients focused on the first steps of Alcoholics Anonymous within a supportive residential environment for 28 days. Aftercare took place in the community with AA sponsors (mentors) and local 12-Step groups. These programs continue to exist, but greater acceptance of SUD treatment in mainstream medicine due to insurance parity for SUD, mental health, and physical healthcare, led to a demand for more evidence-based methods (Drake et al., 2019). Researchers have found AA hard to study, which means it does not fit neatly within accepted evidence-based practice. The principle of anonymity makes it hard to access groups. Furthermore, quantitative methods commonly employed to study treatment techniques often fail to capture the value of spirituality in SUD recovery (Sang et al., 2022).

It is not clear how spirituality contributes to recovery. Founding members of AA cited seminal psychologist and philosopher William James and his work on how individuals achieve a degree of God-consciousness to explain the process (Benevides b. g., 2021). Jung attributed the success of AA to its ability to create an environment that promotes a psychic rearrangement of values (*Carl Jung Letter to Bill W.*, 2018; Ponte & Schäfer, 2013). The social connection that forms within the fellowship of these groups often is cited as the basis for recovery (Wnuk, 2022). The concept of spiritual awakening and how it results from working the 12 Steps merits more research into its meaning and how it affects SUD recovery.

Significance

This study will contribute to the gap in research into the phenomenon of spiritual awakening in SUD recovery. This will be achieved by exploring the lived experiences of individuals who share their spiritual experiences as a result of the 12 Steps and the meaning they assign to the phenomenon. As a spiritual program, the 12 Steps promote a relationship with a higher power of one’s own understanding but promote no specific religious practice (Wilson, 2002). Understanding how spirituality is applied to recovery may help develop new treatment techniques that create an environment conducive to the spiritual connection that results in the psychic rearrangement necessary to break the unhealthy relationship with substances of abuse (*Carl Jung Letter to Bill W.*, 2018; Ponte & Schäfer, 2013)

Research Questions

The following research questions will guide the basic qualitative study:

RQ1: How do individuals who report having a spiritual awakening using the 12 Steps for SUD recovery describe their spiritual practices?

RQ2: What spiritual methods do individuals in SUD recovery using the 12 Steps incorporate into their daily lives?

RQ2: What meaning do individuals who used the 12 Steps for SUD recovery assign to spiritual practice?

**Research Methodology**

This study will utilize a basic qualitative methodology. The foundation of qualitative research is the belief that understanding human experiences requires understanding the meaning individuals assign to lived experiences (Philipps & Mrowczynski, 2021). Basic qualitative method emphasizes the researcher's role as an active participant in the research process. Data is collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis. This approach appreciates the subjective nature of human experience, seeking data that captures the depth of patterns, themes, and narratives. Using this methodology, the researcher can give voice to research participants in SUD recovery as they describe their spiritual awakening in rich detail, which can only be achieved through a personal narrative (Korstjens & Moser, 2017).

**Theoretical/Conceptual Framework**

This study will be framed by constructivist theory. Constructivism is a learning theory that emphasizes the active role of individuals in the development of their own knowledge and understanding (Alanazi, 2016). According to this theory, knowledge can be conceptualized as building blocks of personal experiences, self-reflection, and social interaction.Learning within this framework is not passive, but rather as an active process in which the individual engages with the material to connect it with prior learning to develop new insights.

To better understand the role of spirituality in SUD recovery, the concept of justice described by N.T. Wright will be used to guide the study. Justice, according to Wright, is rooted in the biblical narrative and is not just about punishing the wrongdoings but about repairing the harm caused. This concept of restorative justice aligns well with the 12 Steps and involves creating a world where justice, peace, and righteousness prevail (McEwen et al., 2016).

**Instrumentation**

The study will use open-ended questions delivered by email in questionnaire developed in Google Forms as the primary data collection tool. This study will utilize a field-tested researcher-developed questionnaire validated by feedback from subject matter experts in spirituality and/or SUD recovery. Research participants will be asked to be available for follow-up questions to explore emergent themes that may arise in the course of data analysis.

**Research Design**

This basic qualitative study willexplore emergent themes from open-ended participant responses (qualitative, inductive). This qualitative study will utilize a basic qualitative design because it will explore perceptions of the spiritual awakening among individuals who have used the 12 Steps to achieve recovery. Data analysis will follow data collection; however, data collection may continue if saturation of data is not achieved with the initial sample (Cresswell, 2014).

**Population and Sampling**

The target population for this study will be individuals in SUD recovery who report experiencing a spiritual awakening through the use of the 12 Steps. A purposeful sample of 25 individuals will be recruited through snowball sampling. Initial recruits will be identified via SUD peer specialists publicly listed in the Arkansas Department of Human Services website. These individuals must attest to at least three years of SUD recovery as part of their certification process. These recruits will be contacted by email through publicly available email addresses and asked to complete a questionnaire exploring their spiritual experience, and then suggest additional research subjects that meet the inclusion criteria. Subsequent recruits will be asked to suggest potential participants until 25 potential subjects who meet the inclusion criteria return informed consent documents. If the initial sample fails to produce data saturation, a second set of 25 individuals will be recruited using the same inclusion criteria.

Research subjects will be adults over age 18 who have been diagnosed with a substance use disorder and have achieved at least one year of continuous recovery in a self-help program that uses the 12 Steps. These subjects must report personal experiences with the phenomenon of a spiritual awakening within the recovery process.

**Data Analysis Plan**

This study will utilize manual coding and Braun and Clarke’s six step method for data analysis (Naeem, 2023). These steps include:

1. Familiarization**:** Understand the data, reading and re-reading it.
2. Generating Initial Codes: Identify initial codes that capture key concepts.
3. Searching for Themes: Group codes to form potential themes.
4. Reviewing Themes: Refine and develop the themes.
5. Defining and Naming Themes: Clearly define each theme.
6. Producing the Final Report: Present the findings, describing the themes with relevant details from the data.

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