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Narcotics Anonymous

Anonymity, Admiration, and Prestige in an Egalitarian Community

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26   **Abstract**

27   Narcotics Anonymous (NA) supports long-term recovery for those addicted to drugs. Paralleling

28   social dynamics in many small-scale societies, NA exhibits tension between egalitarianism and

29   prestige-based hierarchy, a problem exacerbated by the addict's personality as characterized by

30   NA's ethnopsychology. We explore how NA's central principle of anonymity normatively

31   translates into egalitarianism among group members. Turning to the lived reality of

32   membership, building on Carr's (2011) concept of script-flipping (2011), we identify *script-*

33   *embellishment* as speech acts that ostensibly conform to normative therapeutic discourse while

34   covertly serving political ends. We argue that, in spite of the overtly egalitarian context, NA

35   members differ dramatically in prestige, with more experienced members being admired and

36   emulated. Critically, prestige acquisition occurs via structural functions that are central to the

37   maintenance of the institution, as experienced members serve a central role in the transmission

38   and enforcement of cultural norms, paradoxically including norms of egalitarianism.

39   KEYWORDS: Twelve-Step Program, Narcotics Anonymous, Prestige, Egalitarianism

NARCOTICS ANONYMOUS: ANONYMITY, ADMIRATION, AND PRESTIGE IN AN EGALITARIAN COMMUNITY

Introduction

All else being equal, egalitarianism inherently entails a status-based version of the tragedy of the commons (Hardin 1968), as, while the group's interests are best served by minimizing status differences between individuals, any given actor's interests will often be best served by pursuing higher status. As a consequence, egalitarian societies and organizations face a fundamental tension between egalitarian norms and the actions of status-striving individuals. Importantly, this tension is exacerbated by i) the fact that knowledge transmission between experts and learners automatically yields inequality, as it generates prestige-based hierarchies in which experts are admired by learners (Henrich & Gil-White 2001), and ii) the need for governance in any social group (Van Vugt 2006; Van Vugt et al. 2008). In this paper, we aim to examine and elucidate how the tension between egalitarianism and status-striving is manifest and managed in the actions of individuals participating in one of the most popular institutions supporting the recovery of addicts, Narcotics Anonymous (NA).

As we will discuss in detail, NA, like other Twelve-Step self-help programs, is an explicitly egalitarian system. The structure of such programs brings into stark relief the conflict between egalitarianism and the social dynamics of knowledge transmission. In contrast to most societies, in which the majority of learners are children or adolescents, individuals are almost always adults when they join a Twelve-step program. This creates knowledge-based asymmetries between individuals who are ostensibly equals in the social structure. Compounding this threat to egalitarianism, new members of NA often exhibit problems of impulse control and generalized resistance to norm compliance, features that constrain efforts by existing group members to impose conformity to egalitarian ideals. At the same time, by virtue of the circumstances and

64 attributes that bring them to the group, new members are often quite vulnerable to exploitation

65 by other members, including those who seek status advantages. Against this backdrop, new

66 members legitimately strive for self-efficacy in the domain of cultural competency within the

67 local group. Those who succeed both progress in their struggle with addiction and, in so doing,

68 recreate anew the social dynamics that pose a challenge to egalitarianism; this problem is then

69 compounded by the need for leaders in a self-governing group characterized by a heterogeneous

70 and shifting membership. The codified norms and institutional practices of NA both recognize

71 these multiple threats to egalitarianism and provide avenues for mitigating them. NA meetings

72 are thus characterized by social dynamics wherein individuals navigate a culturally-constituted

73 social arena that both affords and constrains the pursuit of status; in turn, these dynamics are

74 integral to the maintenance and reproduction of the institution itself.[1]

75 NA is a Twelve-Step self-help / mutual-aid group patterned after, and historically derived from,

76 Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). Like AA, NA is a free, long-term recovery-oriented program,

77 frequently offered to individuals in need via referrals by healthcare and criminal justice

78 institutions. However, while volumes of clinical reports and ethnographic works address AA,

79 NA remains woefully understudied. The majority of descriptive works concerning AA focus on

80 discourse and identity change, and take at face value the claim that egalitarianism characterizes

81 social relationships in Twelve-Step programs (Bateson 1971; Brandes 2002; Cain 1991; Holland

82 et al. 1998; Humphreys 2004; Jensen 2000; Wilcox 1998). We argue that, while accurate, this

83 characterization is superficial. In NA, below the surface of an overt ethos of egalitarianism exists

84 an implicit prestige hierarchy. The social terrain of an ideology of egalitarianism juxtaposed with

85 a prestige-based social structure is navigated by members as part of their identity change, as their

86 own social standing is inextricably linked to their identity. Members negotiate their social

87   standing within the NA community according to the orthodoxy of the organization and norms

88   taught and modeled by experienced members. Hence, NA relies on prestigious individuals to

89   form the core structure of this decentralized institution, maintaining it in a relatively uniform

90   fashion across numerous instantiations around the world. In this way, while nested within larger

91   nation-states, NA parallels the dynamic tension in small-scale societies between egalitarianism

92   and hierarchies based on prestige. Of particular importance, as is likely true of many small-scale

93   societies, in NA it is largely prestigious individuals who reinforce local norms – including the

94   norm of egalitarianism.

95   One prominent exception to the largely descriptive existing literature on addiction recovery is E.

96   Summerson Carr's explorations of the semiotics of power in recovery (2006, 2011). Carr richly

97   portrays the power dynamics at work in a homeless women's outpatient drug-treatment center. In

98   this context, counselors who oversee patient progress are also in effect the gatekeepers of critical

99   and basic social services, as any instance of patient relapse can result in an end to public aid to

100   the patient. Carr (2011) provides two key observations: First, narratives as "totally unmediated

101   language" are thought to have the potential to accurately reveal the clients' internal

102   psychological states and belief systems (p. 4). Importantly, these speech acts are also widely

103   believed by both therapists and clients alike to have a transformative impact on the psychology

104   of addicted individuals. Second, in a process termed *script flipping* by Carr, clients are able to

105   essentially deceive their caregivers by controlling their narratives. Script flipping is a speech act

106   that conforms to the norms of therapeutic talk yet provides inaccurate information regarding the

107   client's inner thoughts or enacted resistance to the proscriptions and prescriptions of the

108   outpatient program.

109 Carr's work is an invaluable contribution to understanding the power dynamics at play in

110 addiction treatment, and has significant overlap with the current research. In particular, in both

111 formal and informal treatment settings, recovering individuals believe (or at least act as if they

112 believe) that not only can their inner-most psychological states and beliefs be articulated through

113 speech, but, moreover, that such speech acts are crucial to recovery. Likewise, as is true in the

114 out-patient center studied by Carr, in NA meetings, a key feature of narratives is that they may

115 appear to be serving one purpose while actually serving another. However, consonant with

116 fundamental social structural differences between the clinic – an organization funded by the state

117 and staffed by paid professionals holding institutional authority – and the acephalous NA group,

118 the covert objectives undergirding some speech acts in NA concern not the subordinate's

119 manipulation of the office-holder, but rather the pursuit of others' admiration and the informal

120 status that this entails. More complexly still, the two contexts differ not only in their overt power

121 structures, but also in the underlying systems of reward that motivate the provision of care –

122 whereas clinic staff receive remuneration to (attempt to) treat clients, the benefits obtained by

123 NA members take the form of the (avowed) therapeutic consequences of aiding others and the

124 (tacit) rewards of granted prestige, thus creating a mutualist dynamic that is absent in the clinic.

125 Our primary departures from Carr's work thus lie in our considerations of the contexts and

126 dynamics of power contestation. So as to provide a backdrop for these explorations, before

127 setting out to describe the dynamics of admiration and prestige-based status hierarchies within

128 NA, we first describe in detail the structure of present-day NA, set against the historical

129 background from which it derives.

130 <div align="center">**The Structure of NA**</div>

131 Beginning in the 1940s, various attempts to establish mutual-aid support groups for drug

132 addiction were made in several locations, but most failed (NAWS 1998a; Stone 1997). It is

133 widely believed that NA was founded in California's San Fernando Valley. Jimmy Kinnon is

134 credited with adopting and revising the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of AA with minimal

135 changes so as to be applicable to drug addiction. Other early movements that did not follow the

136 Twelve Traditions splintered under the influence of outside organizations and strong

137 personalities within the organization who attempted to control the specifics of other individuals'

138 ideologies with respect to recovery (Humphreys 2004; Stone 1997). Hence, it is widely believed

139 that the central tenets of Twelve Traditions allowed NA to grow and flourish by the 1960s.

140 The NA World Service Office (WSO) serves as the legal entity in intellectual property matters,

141 publishes NA's literature, and provides limited services to NA groups. NA's self-produced

142 literature has been cited as both the reason for NA's growth and the source of its identity

143 independent from AA (NAWS 2008b). This literature distinguishes NA from AA with a more

144 secular tone, a more accessible voice, and encouragement of total abstinence from illicit drugs,

145 prescription abuse, and alcohol. Like AA, membership in NA is voluntary and can be quite fluid,

146 with new members attending and dropping out on a frequent basis – although most groups have a

147 stable core of regular attendees. While attendance records are not kept, it is known that,

148 compared to fewer than 200 groups at first count in 1978, today there are more than 58,000

149 weekly meetings, held in 131 countries (NAWS 2010b).

150 NA's stated goals for its members are abstinence (referred to as "being clean"), to become free

151 of the obsession to use drugs, and to find a new way of life in the interests of long-term recovery

152 from addiction. The latter reflects an explicit endorsement of the disease concept of drug

153 addiction, paralleling that of alcoholism (Jellinek 1960; see NAWS 2008a:13), and the belief that

154 abstinence and personal change are necessary for recovery. This process of change has the

155 explicit goal of attaining a personal spiritual awakening, the nature of which is largely undefined,

156 primarily being left to NA members to understand in their own fashion. The main text of NA

157 notes that an awakening can take many forms, but may include "an end to loneliness and a sense

158 of direction in our lives," and may be "accompanied by an increase in peace of mind and a

159 concern for others" (NAWS 2008:50). As codified by Step Twelve, the spiritual awakening is

160 believed to be the direct result of practicing the Steps themselves.

161 As in AA, the basic organizational unit of NA is the group, a collective of individuals who

162 acknowledge being addicts and who come together for the purpose of helping each other stay

163 clean. A group may hold several meetings per week, but, in most cases, one group corresponds to

164 one meeting place and time per week. Just as personal recovery is guided by the Twelve Steps,

165 so too is the service structure of NA guided by the Twelve Traditions.

166 The Twelve Traditions establish the group as completely self-supporting and autonomous

167 "except in matters affecting other groups or NA as a whole" (NAWS 2008a:60). NA is a

168 nonprofessional organization, and has no official stance or stake in other organizations (political,

169 religious, clinical, etc.). Membership is open to anyone who has a "desire to stop using" (NAWS

170 2008a:60). Leaders serve the organization; they do not govern over groups, service bodies, or

171 individuals. Paramount is an emphasis on unity and anonymity (more on this below). The Ninth

172 Tradition tells members that "we ought not create a governing hierarchy, a top-down

173 bureaucracy dictating to our groups or members" (NAWS 1993:193). However, service boards

174 or committees may be created to help groups achieve their purpose. This gives NA a nested,

175 hierarchical structure (see NAWS 2002; NAWS 2010a). However, in principle and in practice,

176 larger levels of the organization are accountable to, and ultimately serve, the groups. Service

177   boards and committees support groups by providing services such as directories of local

178   meetings, informational helplines, and interfacing with public and private organizations

179   (healthcare, judicial, etc.) (NAWS 2010b).

180   Decision-making in NA is consensus-based, taking place primarily at the group level (NAWS

181   1993:134-143). Systems of communication between groups and the WSO allow this bottom-up

182   structure to function. Central to this process is an adamantly egalitarian creed. NA literature

183   states: "the conscience of a group is most clearly expressed when every member is considered an

184   equal" (NAWS 1993:138). In sum, NA is an acephalous, egalitarian organization relying heavily

185   on the nonprofessional leadership of members who are accountable to groups at the local level.

186   Below we present a description of NA meetings, followed by an analysis of the tension between

187   the selflessness and egalitarianism prescribed by the organization's codified norms and implicit

188   prestige hierarchies. This account is based on the first author's (JKS') interactions with NA in

189   varying contexts and locations since 1984, familiarity with hundreds of NA members, attendance

190   at many hundreds of NA meetings, and reading of NA's literature. In addition to observing as a

191   visiting anthropologist, JKS was able to observe many meetings in his capacity as a mental

192   health professional escorting clients to NA meetings. Observations are recounted from memory,

193   as recording meetings or taking notes would violate norms of anonymity and privacy that are

194   foundational to meetings. All names listed are pseudonyms; meeting locations are redacted to

195   protect the privacy and anonymity of informants; and specific events recounted are a mosaic

196   constructed from multiple NA meetings. These observations are supplemented by short semi-

197   structured interviews that JKS conducted in the spring of 2012 with thirty Southern Californian

198   NA members (fifteen men and fifteen women) using a snowball sampling method. Informants

199   were recruited at NA meetings and later interviewed by phone, with the understanding that

200 written notes were being taken. Twenty-four informants agreed to be quoted verbatim. Per

201 recommendations of the UCLA Institutional Review Board, the sample was restricted to those

202 who reported being a member of NA for at least seven years (and hence were unlikely to be

203 current users of illicit substances). Open-ended interviews focused on three questions: What

204 attributes (traits / characteristics) do you find admirable in NA members? How much do you

205 value time clean as an important attribute in other members? What attributes in other NA

206 members do you find to be contemptible?

The NA Meeting

208 Just as groups are the primary unit of social organization, meetings are the primary context of

209 social interaction among members. NA meetings are structurally similar to AA meetings

210 (Brandes 2002; Jensen 2000; Wilcox 1998). Meetings begin and end with a ritual invocation,

211 typically recited in unison by all members. Invocations mark the sacredness (Brandes 2002) of

212 the temporal space, or at least the formality of the context. Meetings open with several two- to

213 three-minute readings from NA texts, generally intended to inform newcomers – and make

214 experienced members mindful – of the basic structure and tenets of NA. Most meetings take one

215 of two forms: speaker meetings and open discussion meetings (see NAWS 1997). A speaker

216 meeting consists of one relatively experienced member presenting a verbal narrative of their

217 experiences as an addict, why they decided to get clean, and how they got clean. A goal of this

218 format is to evoke identification between the speaker and the other members. In open discussion

219 meetings, members take turns presenting shorter narratives. Discussions may be topical or freer

220 in content. Narratives may include briefer versions of personal experiences akin to those

221 presented at speaker meetings, but can also be expressions of pain, or accounts of difficulties.

222 These narratives are often intended to be cathartic and / or elicit the support of other members.

223 Narratives may also be intended to be inspirational. Meetings have strong norms governing

224 participation (cf. Mäkelä et al. 1996 regarding AA): turn taking is cardinal, individuals should

225 only speak about themselves, individuals should not directly contradict previous speakers'

226 statements, nor should direct advice be offered, and members should not endorse outside entities

227 (therapeutic, religious, etc.). Members introduce themselves before sharing with a stereotypical

228 statement, "My name is X and I am an addict." The norm is for everyone in attendance to

229 respond in unison "Hi X!"

230 Detailed ethnographic descriptions of Twelve Step meetings themselves are available in other

231 works (for example, see Brandes 2002 for a description of AA meetings in Mexico City). With

232 regard to meeting formats, there are large differences in tone, marginal differences in narratives,

233 but minimal differences in structure between AA and NA meetings. Therefore, we will focus our

234 description on examples of two meeting events that are central to the current discussion: the

235 celebration of clean-time anniversaries and the group's monthly business meeting.

236 After the secretary has called the meeting to order and sections of NA text have been read aloud,

237 one member (here labeled Michael), previously designated to recognize milestones in recovery,

238 stands and asks members "Does anyone have one to twenty-nine days clean? … Is anyone

239 celebrating 30 days of recovery?" etc. (The WSO provides colored key-fobs commemorating

240 early milestones in recovery [30 days, 60 days, 90 days, etc.] and bronze medallions

241 commemorating yearly milestones.) No one accepts a key-fob, but Michael goes on: "I know we

242 have one birthday to celebrate tonight…" (a "birthday" being the commemoration of a yearly

243 milestone) "Bob is celebrating six years clean!" The group claps and cheers for Bob as he walks

244 to the front of the room where a cake with six lit candles awaits. The group sings "Happy

245 Birthday" with the refrain at the end "…keep coming back … CLEAN!" and claps again. Bob

246 holds up the medallion for the group to see while bowing his head slightly, in apparent

247 deference, then says softly: "I'd like to thank my sponsor Michael for giving me the cake, all his

248 support and putting up with me…" [The group laughs lightly.] "I'd also like to thank my Higher

249 Power and the group. Thank you for my recovery." The group cheers and applauds again as Bob

250 returns to his seat, and then focuses again on the more formal events of the meeting.

251 The leader reports that she has selected the topic of gratitude for the meeting and, according to

252 the agreed format of the meeting, "shares" for approximately ten minutes, introducing the topic.

253 Having set the tone, she then opens the meeting for other members to take turns sharing.

254 Members raise their hands to share and are selected, in turn, by the secretary. Most echo the

255 structure and sentiment of her presentation, "sharing" for three to five minutes; beginning by

256 recounting how bad their addiction had been, and contrasting that experience with their current

257 lives in recovery.

258 Just before 9:00 p.m., the leader announces that time has run out for sharing, thanks everyone for

259 doing so, and notes that the meeting will close with a moment of silence for the addict who still

260 suffers, followed by the Third-Step Prayer. The group breaks up into knots of members engaged

261 in conversation, with an abundance of smiles and hugs about the room. People gravitate to new

262 members and those who reported having difficulties, in order to offer sympathy and support.

263 The group business meeting follows. This is open for anyone to attend and all are encouraged to

264 do so; however, only six core members of the group and I (JKS) are present. Group business is

265 quickly addressed, primarily concerning how much of the month's donations should be allocated

266 to rent, literature, and contributions to the area body (the next level in the organizational

267 structure).

268   Immediately following the conclusion of monetary matters, Carolyn, a regular attendee with

269   substantial clean time, rather eloquently raises a concern and suggests a solution. Carolyn reports

270   that she has noticed several members monopolizing the meeting time with exceptionally long

271   narratives. Carolyn notes that this violates both the letter and the spirit of the Twelve Traditions,

272   as, when a narrative goes on too long, fewer members are able to take their turn speaking,

273   including newer members who often need to share their progress and struggles. She makes a

274   motion that members be asked to conclude their narratives within three to five minutes, with a

275   change in the meeting format so as to include an announcement of this; a trusted servant (the

276   term for a member designated to perform a given task) would keep track of how long someone is

277   sharing. The secretary of the meeting accepts a second to the motion and opens the floor for

278   discussion.

279   Bob, who accepted a medallion earlier, somewhat less eloquently supports the motion, singling

280   out a member named Carrie, not present, as being particularly guilty of such actions. He

281   complains that Carrie "takes the entire meeting hostage" with long diatribes intended to chide

282   and advise newcomers, rather than "sharing experience, strength, and hope" (an orthodox goal).

283   Other members, speaking out of turn, noisily agree with Bob.

284   The secretary brings the meeting back to order and focuses on the motion on the floor, calling for

285   a vote; there is unanimous support for the motion. Then the secretary asks informally for a

286   volunteer to speak to Carrie about the length and content of her narratives. Carolyn

287   acknowledges having a good relationship with Carrie, and volunteers to talk to her in private

288   regarding the concerns raised by the group.

289   **Orthodoxy: Egalitarianism, Anonymity, & Mutualism**

290 As evident in the exclusive use of first names, the self-revealing nature of statements, the

291 extensive turn-taking, and the emotional, social, and physical support offered by members to one

292 another, NA meetings are overtly egalitarian. For example, the "leader" of a meeting simply

293 serves to set the tone and facilitate the meeting in an orderly fashion. Importantly, egalitarianism

294 is a central feature of NA orthodoxy, articulated at length in NA's literature (NAWS 1991, 1993,

295 2002, 2004, 2008a, 2008b, 2010a). As we will explain in detail, egalitarianism is valued for three

296 reasons. First, participation in the fellowship among members of equal footing is idealized as

297 part of the process of individual recovery from the disease of addiction. Second, egalitarianism is

298 viewed as the foundation on which mutualism (relations in which both participants benefit) rests.

299 Third, egalitarianism, codified as anonymity, is believed to be necessary to the structural

300 integrity of the organization. In short, egalitarianism is thought to be good for the individual,

301 necessary for mutualistic aid, and good for the institution. We address each aspect in turn below.

302 In deconstructing the dimensions of egalitarianism, we turn first to NA ethnopsychology as

303 articulated in NA's literature. This ethnopsychology holds that addicts are a type of person

304 characterized by an intense desire for gratification, and, indeed, many addicts report that they

305 went to great lengths to manipulate those around them in order to try to fulfill their desires, often

306 weaving elaborate stories, justifying their behaviors by casting themselves as the victim of

307 circumstance or some vague persecution (NAWS 2008a). When those around them confront the

308 addict regarding their dishonesty and manipulations, and consequently withdraw financial or

309 emotional support (for example, many families refuse to offer bail monies after several instances

310 of incarceration), the addict often feels betrayed and isolated. In addition, individuals who were

311 acquainted with or intimate with the addict often offer unwanted advice and pressure them to

312 behave differently, to stop or control their substance use. Addicts often recoil at this and choose

313 to withdraw or strike back at those trying to intervene. Intervening institutions (such as the

314 justice system or the health care system) may be deeply resented by the addict. Many NA

315 members report that, as stigmatized and marginalized individuals, they previously experienced

316 extreme resentment toward, and resistance to, society. Addicts often state that they felt both

317 profound inferiority and superiority – sometimes simultaneously. One quipped to JKS that "an

318 addict is the only person who can be laying in the gutter and still stare down their nose at

319 someone."

320 Either through the result of self-imposed withdrawal or institutionally or individually imposed

321 marginalization, the end result is the same: isolation and alienation. Most NA members relate

322 deeply to the assessment that, at the core of their problems is a deluded desire for gratification,

323 the pursuit of which yields a deep sense of isolation. Many addicts report that, even when they

324 were surrounded by a community of other addicts, their social network was unreliable, and other

325 addicts were not true friends. Many are fond of saying: "I had acquaintances that I used with –

326 not friends."

327 One of the prescribed solutions to the above maladies is to find humility. Humility is

328 conceptualized as a central spiritual principle for recovery (NAWS 2008a). One route to humility

329 is achieving accurate self-assessment through the process of practicing Steps Four and Five –

330 taking a thorough inventory (a systematic self-appraisal) and sharing it with another person.

331 Often this other is another addict because "[w]e recognize that one addict can best understand

332 and help another addict" (NAWS 2008a:59). Intrinsic to this process is the realization that one

333 suffers an affliction – an affliction for which the individual is not responsible, but that has a

334 solution for which one can be responsible (NAWS 1993). Fundamental to humility is a creed of

335 egalitarianism. The member's acceptance that he or she is neither the worst nor the best person is

336   based on the equality of addicts. Exemplifying this, when asked about admiration of other

337   members, an informant reported that "NA has helped me see people eye-to-eye; nobody is above

338   me or below me."

339   As noted above, NA also suggests to addicts that they have an intrinsic problem with a selfish

340   notion that all their desires must be immediately gratified; NA characterizes this as self-

341   centeredness (NAWS 1993:26). To address this malady, NA suggests that another route to

342   humility comes in the form of intentional ego deflation – the eventual realization, and

343   acceptance, by the member that their expectations are largely unrealistic and that they may not be

344   the most important person in any given context. Members are encouraged to replace self-

345   centeredness with "selfless" aid to other members, as codified by the Twelfth Step; this

346   admonishment is taken seriously as a basic tenet of the program and is uniformly practiced by

347   NA members. Central to this practice is the acknowledgement that all members are of equal

348   status. Hence, egalitarianism is viewed as the starting point of ego deflation and the diminution

349   of self-centeredness.

350   Another prescribed solution to the maladies described above – particularly the addict's sense of

351   isolation – is for members to integrate themselves into and participate in the fellowship.

352   Participation may consist simply of attending meetings, but can also include socializing before or

353   after meetings, and participating in other activities with NA members. More experienced

354   members typically suggest that new members get as involved in the fellowship as much as

355   possible – especially early on in the recovery process, as intense feelings of isolation can make

356   abstinence difficult. Some of the materials read before the vast majority of meetings speak

357   directly to new members and highlight an egalitarian ethos:

15

358　　　　Anyone may join us regardless of age, race, sexual identity, creed, religion or lack of

359　　　　religion. We are not interested in what or how much you used, who your connections

360　　　　were, what you have done in the past, how much or how little you have, but only in what

361　　　　you want to do about your problem and how we can help. (NAWS 2008a:9)

362　These words are important to members because addicts can often be deeply suspicious and

363　mistrustful of any institution. In addition, NA explicitly prescribes identification with other

364　addicts as the solution to the feeling of isolation (NAWS 2008a).

365　NA codifies egalitarianism as necessary to mutualistic endeavors. In the abstract, mutualism is

366　not contingent on egalitarianism. For example, agricultural patron systems are mutualistic

367　arrangements with a clear status differential between landowner and farmer, wherein the

368　landowner serves as the interface with larger market and governmental systems, while the farmer

369　provides labor (Causi 1975). However, despite the logical possibility of mutualism without

370　egalitarianism, NA orthodoxy holds that the characteristics of the addict are such as to

371　necessitate egalitarianism if addicts are to help one another in mutualistic interactions.

372　Consonant with their portrait of the addict as isolated, aloof, and recalcitrant, all of NA's

373　prescriptions for personal recovery are presented as suggestions. The comments introducing the

374　Twelve Steps exemplify this: "If you want what we have to offer and are willing to make the

375　effort to get it, then you are ready to take certain steps" (NAWS 2008a:17). Many members

376　repeat a common observation that NA is not a program for those that need it; it is a program for

377　those that want it (cf. Holland et al. 1998, ch.4 on AA).

378　While individuals' accrued experience is overtly valued, that valuation is tempered by the notion

379　that the NA fellowship is based simply on *any* one addict helping *any* other addict. Exemplifying

380 this, a 33-year old woman with ten years clean reported that she has been more inspired by a

381 person with one year clean sharing at a meeting than by a member with twenty years clean. NA

382 explicitly admonishes its members: "We don't set ourselves up as gods… we help [new people]

383 feel welcome and help them learn what the program has to offer" (NAWS 2008a:50), and "[f]or

384 anyone that wants our way of life, we share experience, strength, and hope instead of preaching

385 and judging" (NAWS 2008a:58).

386 A special mutualistic relationship among NA members is that of the sponsor and sponsee. A

387 sponsor is a member who helps another member, the sponsee, to practice a daily program of

388 recovery and negotiate/practice the Twelve Steps. Exemplifying the value placed on experience,

389 the sponsor is almost always a more experienced member than the sponsee. The transmission of

390 information is usually unidirectional – from sponsor to sponsee. Sponsees typically solicit input

391 from the sponsor by presenting a particular difficulty or question to the sponsor; importantly,

392 however, orthodoxy dictates that the sponsor's response is to consist of recounting the sponsor's

393 relevant past experiences and suggestions, rather than direct dictates to the sponsee. Although the

394 flow of information usually travels from a more to a less experienced member, this is still viewed

395 as a mutualistic relationship. While sponsors sometimes receive help from sponsees, even if this

396 never or only rarely occurs, NA nevertheless considers the relationship to be mutualistic because

397 the sponsor is thought to profit from the opportunity to provide selfless service to another. As

398 outlined in Step Twelve, selfless help provided to another member is viewed as beneficial to the

399 provider. Consonant with NA's ethnopsychological model of addicts as suspicious of authority,

400 the mutualistic nature of the relationship is explicitly framed in egalitarian terms – describing the

401 sponsorship relationship, NA states: "We're developing a give-and-take relationship based on

402 equality and mutual respect" (NAWS 1993:56). Even if a sponsor has professional training,

403   direct advice, with its connotations of authority and inequality, should not be offered in the

404   context of the sponsorship relationship: "the value in the message we share with one another lies

405   in our personal experience in recovery, not in our credentials, our training, or our professional

406   status" (NAWS 1993:186). Hence, mutualistic aid is viewed as necessarily rooted in

407   egalitarianism – one member helping another, with both being on equal footing.

408   In NA orthodoxy, egalitarianism and mutualism are intrinsically linked to anonymity via the

409   concept of spirituality. Tradition Twelve states: "Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all of

410   our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities" (NAWS 1993:209).

411   Indeed, anonymity is considered to be a *spiritual* principle by NA and its members.

412   Though largely ill-defined, according to NA, spirituality is divorced from any particular religion.

413   NA intentionally leaves spirituality under-specified in order to allow for a diversity of personal

414   experience – members are encouraged to pursue and define the spiritual experience for

415   themselves (including the identification of a power greater than themselves). NA spirituality can

416   be understood as an acknowledgement that certain aspects of the human experience are non-

417   tangible and non-material. Anonymity as a spiritual principle thus does not mean that members

418   will be uniformly devoid of defining characteristics. Rather, framing anonymity in spiritual

419   terms, NA endorses putting one's own desires aside in the interest of personal recovery, in the

420   interest of mutualistic aid to other members, and for the good of the group. NA literature states:

421   In personal recovery, we seek to replace self-will with the guidance of a Higher Power in

422   our personal affairs. In the same way the Traditions describe a fellowship that takes its

423   collective guidance from spiritual principles rather than individual personalities. That

424   kind of selflessness is what the Twelfth Tradition means by the word "anonymity"

425   (NAWS 1993: 209).

426   Highlighting the contrast between self-will and anonymity, NA literature states: "Self-will still

427   leads us to make decisions based on manipulations, ego, lust and false pride" (NAWS 2008a:80),

428   but "[t]he drive for personal gain in the areas of sex, property and social position…falls by the

429   wayside if we adhere to the principle of anonymity" (NAWS 2008a:76), and, when helping

430   others "[we] place the principle of anonymous, selfless giving before whatever personal desires

431   we may have for recognition or reward" (NAWS 1993:212). This "namelessness" and putting

432   aside of self-serving desires is intended to create a state of equality among members. Hence,

433   anonymity, a central tenet of the organization, translates into egalitarianism and mutualism.

434   Consistent with the ethos of egalitarianism and the principle of anonymity, leaders are intended

435   to serve – not guide, direct, or dictate. Leaders are selected by consensus, and leadership is

436   explicitly guided by the principle of anonymity: leaders "are not governors but servants taking

437   their direction from the collective conscience of those they serve" (NAWS 1993:193). NA

438   acknowledges that its "trusted servants" will have both personalities and individual talents or

439   skills relevant to service. However, more important than any specific skill set, leaders should

440   have humility and integrity (NAWS 1991; NAWS 1993; NAWS 2008b). Leaders are explicitly

441   dissuaded from pursuing personal agendas and personal desires in service to NA (NAWS 1993).

442   In addition, trusted servants are expected to serve limited terms in every service position, with

443   rotating leadership; this constraint is explicitly aimed at limiting personal ambitions and resulting

444   inequality "so that no one personality dominates" (NAWS 1993:193). Trusted servants are

445   admonished to be open to new ideas, cultivate good listening skills, and, above all else, heed the

446   consensus of the members and groups that they serve or represent. NA literature clearly states

447 that, despite the appearance of hierarchy introduced by the organizational structure, "[w]e are

448 equal in NA membership" (NAWS 1993:215). NA orthodoxy thus explicitly prescribes an

449 egalitarian ethos in all domains of the organization.

<center>**Heterodoxy: Prestige, Power, and Stratification**</center>

450

451 **Prestige and Reverse Hierarchies**

452 Having reviewed the orthodoxy of an egalitarian ethos in NA, we turn to the social reality of

453 prestige inequalities among members. Before doing so, however, it is important to first explain in

454 greater detail the theoretical framework that we employ in understanding prestige. Henrich and

455 Gil-White (2001) usefully define prestige as freely conferred deference; following Barkow

456 (1989), they distinguish prestige from dominance, two conceptually distinct routes to status.

457 Dominance-based status is social position achieved through force or the threat of force. In

458 contrast, prestige-based status is achieved through others' recognition of the prestigious

459 individual's skill, accomplishments, or expertise (cf. Carr 2010). Henrich and Gil-White argue

460 that others defer to an accomplished individual because deference is an avenue for access,

461 allowing deferring actors to observe, and thus learn from, the successful model. Hence, whereas

462 dominance is the foundation of social structures in other social animals, because humans rely on

463 cultural transmission to a far greater extent than other species, prestige, being an outgrowth of

464 the desire to learn from successful others, is the basis of many human hierarchies. Consonant

465 with this perspective, we argue that members of NA have goals, including long-term personal

466 recovery and cultural competency within the context of the organization; they identify

467 knowledgeable members; and, consequently, they admire, elevate, and emulate the latter in an

468 effort to achieve those goals. Complementing this view of prestige, Van Vugt and colleagues

469   (Van Vugt 2006; Van Vugt et al. 2008) argue that followers may voluntarily surrender authority

470   to leaders in order to facilitate coordination and collective action among group members; skillful

471   experts are thus elevated by the group to positions of power because doing so can serve the

472   interests of both the group and its members. However, whether status is achieved due to

473   deference motivated by others' desire for knowledge or deference motivated by their need for

474   governance, once individuals have achieved such status, the possibility exists that they will

475   exploit it in ways counter to the interests of those who elevated them to their position. Critically,

476   these issues potentially plague any social entity, be it a band-level society or an anonymous self-

477   help group, in which egalitarianism is valued.

478   Examining the tension between egalitarianism and hierarchical structure in small-scale societies,

479   Boehm (1993; see also 1997,1999; Fried 1967) argues that many such groups are characterized

480   by reverse hierarchies wherein followers control their leaders through leveling mechanisms,

481   including disapproval, ridicule, disobedience, and extreme sanctions including deserting,

482   deposing, or assassinating the leader. Boehm suggests that humans have an evolved ambivalence

483   toward leadership such that they attend carefully to whether the benefits of submitting to

484   authority outweigh the costs, leading them to frequently resist being controlled by others. While

485   the extent to which this assessment characterizes all groups remains uncertain, the concepts of

486   reverse hierarchies and leveling mechanisms are nonetheless frequently applicable to egalitarian

487   groups. Importantly, as individuals attain status through the prestige dynamics outlined by

488   Henrich and Gil-White and Van Vugt and colleagues, opportunities arise to employ such status

489   in the pursuit of self-interested goals, including translating prestige into dominance by

490   marshaling followers in coercive actions against others. The propensity to pursue status is thus

491   doubly threatening to egalitarian groups, as even seemingly innocuous competitions for prestige

492 can ultimately translate into concrete inequality, a persistent problem addressed by the leveling

493 mechanisms described by Boehm. We suggest that the principles and guidelines that structure

494 NA are designed (whether intentionally, by architects of the institution, or, absent intention, via

495 cultural evolution) to preempt this problem. However, they are only partially successful in this

496 regard.

497 A number of factors lead to the subversion of the prescribed ethos of anonymity and equality

498 among NA members. First, as the organization recognizes, it takes time for members to fully

499 grasp the relationship between egalitarianism and anonymity. Second, members may understand

500 anonymity yet fall short in practice, or simply ignore it in the pursuit of self-interest. Third,

501 despite its extensive textual corpus, NA relies on the face-to-face interpersonal transmission of

502 knowledge from more to less experienced members, often in a dyadic fashion: members note that

503 they could have read NA's literature and still died – it was another addict that saved them. This

504 reliance on face-to-face transmission encourages both the identification of experienced members

505 and clear differentiations based on such experience. Subsequently, experienced members may be

506 sought out for advice in both personal and group matters, creating a context in which reputations

507 are evaluated and become a source of social capital. Fourth, the formal relationship between

508 sponsor and sponsee, being generally premised on a disparity in experience and success in

509 abstinence, inherently lends itself to the model / learner dynamic central to the generation of

510 prestige. Lastly, the need for governance creates the possibility of self-interested leadership

511 strategies. Below we first detail the vital constructive contributions of experienced members,

512 then consider how the organization's reliance on them opens the door to prestige competitions.

513 **The Roles of Experienced Members and the Emergence of Prestige**

514   Consonant with Van Vugt's thesis regarding the emergence of leaders through the relinquishing

515   of equal footing in the service of coordination, at the organizational level, experienced members

516   play a key role in maintaining NA as an institution, as they are tapped to keep groups and service

517   bodies functioning according to codified principles, or take it upon themselves to do so.

518   Likewise, experienced members start new meetings more frequently than newer members, and

519   play the primary role in specifying the format of a meeting, including decisions about which

520   invocations and readings will be used and the nature of opening remarks; the format, in turn,

521   shapes the tone of a meeting. Indeed, the critical role of experienced members is evident in

522   natural experiments when they are absent. Some meetings are composed primarily of those

523   having minimal experience with NA. Such meetings can deteriorate into litanies, as members

524   share their struggles and discomfort without sharing any resolutions, hope, or core principles of

525   NA. This is not a case of norm violations – new members are doing what is expected of them.

526   However, if experienced members are present, they interject hope when a meeting takes a

527   negative turn, pointing to NA core principles; without such management, meetings often fail to

528   achieve their purpose.

529   In addition to their public roles, experienced members make vital contributions at a dyadic level.

530   It is common for someone who has recounted difficulties during a meeting to subsequently seek

531   the counsel of more experienced members. Likewise, experienced members are often adept at

532   gauging someone's discomfort and connecting it conceptually to a codified principle combined

533   with their own experience, doing so after nearly every meeting. Many members state that this

534   informal process is as important to personal recovery as the meetings themselves.

535   Dyadic exchanges following the meeting are an ephemeral form of the relationship that is

536   formalized in sponsorship. In spite of the fundamentally equivalent status in principle of the

23

537   sponsor and sponsee, in practice, the sponsor teaches the sponsee to work the Steps the same way

538   that the sponsor learned from her own sponsor. Likewise, sponsors play the primary role in

539   teaching sponsees the Twelve Traditions and norms of behavior in the context of the service

540   structure, subjects discussed less in meetings than other aspects of personal recovery. The

541   sponsee is thus a protégé of the sponsor. Correspondingly, sponsees often report feeling indebted

542   and grateful to their sponsors. Members often share about their positive experiences with their

543   sponsors in the public context of meetings – sometimes referring to their sponsor by name

544   despite proscriptions against this. Naming and extolling the virtues of a sponsor in meetings

545   appears to reflect the sponsee's desire to pay public tribute to the sponsor, and has the

546   consequence of enhancing the sponsor's reputation. More broadly, paying tribute to a member

547   during a meeting is not restricted to the sponsor / sponsee relationship: mutual aid is common,

548   hence members often feel indebted to each other, and gratitude for another's help is sometimes

549   acknowledged publicly. Generally, these tributes appear not to be initiated, suggested, solicited

550   or even endorsed by the target thereof.

551   As noted above, many NA groups publicly recognize milestones of clean time during meetings.

552   Members report that this ritual is enacted with the express purpose of encouraging newer

553   members in their recovery, demonstrating that long-term recovery is possible. However, this

554   ritual also has the (perhaps unintended) consequence of drawing attention to clean time. When a

555   member is recognized for multiple years in recovery, others often offer congratulations,

556   accolades, or brief tributes at the meeting. In addition, public tribute is similarly paid to members

557   who perform service functions. Meeting formats regularly include thanking the trusted servants,

558   sometimes by name, followed by applause and both literal and metaphoric pats on the back.

559 Within the context of service boards or committees, new volunteers are usually welcomed and

560 mentioned by name.

561 Importantly, as is common in many egalitarian societies, whenever a member is offered public

562 tribute, in any context – as a sponsor, a helping member, someone celebrating a milestone, or for

563 services performed – the recipient of the tribute responds stoically, as if the incident never

564 occurred, with deferent gestures or postures, and expressions of self-effacing gratitude and

565 humility if asked to speak. Overt self-aggrandizement in this context would constitute a serious

566 norm violation, and we have never witnessed it. Nevertheless, despite this prescribed humility,

567 because both formal and informal practices can generate disparities in prestige among members,

568 competition for status is an ever-present threat to the egalitarian principles central to NA

569 orthodoxy.

570 **Prestige Competition, Script-Embellishment, and Leveling Mechanisms in NA Meetings**

571 The codified orthodoxy in NA's literature serves as the basis for leveling mechanisms intended

572 to limit the pursuit of personal prestige. Members frequently remind each other of NA principles

573 in every context of interaction – during service meetings, during fellowship social activities, and

574 in informal conversation. Particularly during group business meetings, members are quick to

575 point out self-centered behaviors or personal agendas that threaten to conflict with the group's

576 primary purpose. Although this practice can reflect a genuine effort to teach less-experienced

577 members the norms of conducting group business or practicing personal recovery, it can also

578 reflect a calculated effort to negatively sanction members who are attempting to exert control

579 over others. However, precisely when and how to marshal such sanctions is itself a fluid issue.

580 The principal problem is that, at their core, meetings consist of give-and-take discussions that

581 can constitute arenas for speech acts that, like those observed by Carr (2011) in the clinic, are

582 undergirded by motives that may be opaque to (some) listeners. Whereas speakers may overtly

583 seem to be exclusively performing the normative functions of a supportive group member,

584 because their displays of expertise and participatory diligence can win them admiration, it is at

585 times unclear to what extent their actions are motivated by the pursuit of prestige rather than an

586 exclusive desire to help others and a belief that doing so is itself therapeutic. Importantly, the

587 ambiguity of the objectives of these actions can itself have strategic value, as an adroitly framed

588 utterance creates plausible deniability as to the speaker's objectives.

589 Ironically, voicing the codified norms of NA in an apparent effort to negatively sanction self-

590 aggrandizing members can itself serve as a display of expertise that is an attempt at self-

591 aggrandizement. Some speakers memorize passages of NA literature and integrate them into

592 their narratives at meetings; less frequently, speakers compose narratives almost entirely from

593 passages of NA literature, reciting verbatim and quoting page numbers. Such extreme practices

594 yield mixed results: some are impressed with the speaker's familiarity with literature, while

595 others remark that they find such recitations to be pretentious or insincere. Pejorative

596 colloquialisms such as "book thumping" and "NA Nazi" connote disdain for perceived excessive

597 attention to textual material and dogma.

598 Consonant with the above dynamic, meetings sometimes appear to digress from the transmission

599 of norms and experience into an implicit competition to voice the most enlightened viewpoint on

600 a given topic. On such occasions there is a sense of rising tension in the meeting as each person

601 shares; each member building on, and sometimes contradicting, viewpoints expressed by those

602 who have shared previously – contravening the norms of conduct at meetings (cf. Wilcox

603 1998:52, on AA). At such times, near the end of the meeting the most senior, or most respected,

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604 member in the room may be selected by the leader from among those volunteering to speak, in

605 order to give them the final say on the topic – indeed, some groups make this an unspoken norm.

606 Some members appreciate this practice as providing a positive dynamic; however, consonant

607 with the tension between prestige and egalitarianism, others resent it on the grounds that it entails

608 singling out individuals for special treatment. This exemplifies how the voices of experienced

609 members rise above those of others with the help and appreciation of deferent individuals.

610 However, if a group has a member who consistently poses as an authority, others may begin to

611 avoid attending that group.

612 As noted above, it can be difficult to distinguish between a member seeking admiration and one

613 who is simply very knowledgeable about NA – indeed, they can be one and the same. Members

614 seeking admiration often allude to having long periods of time clean, or baldly announce how

615 long they have been clean – ostensibly to give newcomers hope that recovery is possible. Such

616 members may also speak with great authority or spin narratives that demonstrate how successful

617 they are in recovery. Additionally, some meetings have a norm of speaking inspirationally rather

618 than sharing personal experience, strength, and hope. Attempts to inspire can digress into overtly

619 directive speech or fear-based appeals such as "work the steps or die, motherf_____." Some

620 members appreciate such candor and are inspired to work harder at recovery; others recognize

621 such directive speech as a clear violation of the spirit and codified orthodoxy of anonymity. In

622 both compliment and contrast to Carr's term script-flipping (2011), we term such speech

623 performances *script-embellishment*.

624   In the context of NA meetings, script-embellishment includes any performative public

625 speech act that may serve to draw attention to the actor's expertise, experience, and commitment

626 to NA; examples include extraneously interjecting the number of years clean, or other significant

627   deviations from the codified norms of sharing at meetings which may index a degree of authority

628   over others. Importantly, script-embellishment has the potential to help and inspire others while

629   simultaneously being self-aggrandizing. This appears to be a fluid process: while members may

630   sometimes perform script-embellishment in earnest, at other times they appear to get caught up

631   in the moment, switching back and forth between experience and overly enthusiastic, unsolicited

632   direction to other members (cf Dubois 1986; Harding 1987).

633   Although newcomers may fail to perceive script-embellishment as self-aggrandizement,

634   experienced members are quick to see through what they perceive to be veiled attempts to gain

635   recognition and admiration. More than one-third of interviewees reported that they find this

636   practice contemptible. A middle-aged woman with ten years clean remarked "Some people carry

637   clean time as badges and derive ego from it." Describing what he finds contemptible, a 52-year-

638   old man with nineteen years clean stated "Power hungry people; people who are looking for a

639   following." It is in this context – a member who is clearly seeking social position – that leveling

640   mechanisms are most often employed. Negative gossip is circulated, or others may directly

641   confront the member, citing orthodox NA principles. However, despite such efforts, some

642   members succeed in gaining local fame, and have a small group of admirers. This interaction of a

643   prestigious member with deferent followers is often formalized in sponsor / sponsee

644   relationships.

645   Some individuals seek out sponsors who are well known in the local NA community, or have

646   noteworthy clean time. These sponsees often advertise their association with well-known

647   members, sometimes in contexts in which such information is extraneous. Contravening norms

648   of anonymity and selflessness, the sponsor / sponsee relationship can thus provide a bilateral

649   platform for self-aggrandizement – status-seeking sponsees gravitate toward prestigious sponsors

650   in order to "bask in their reflected glory" (Cialdini et al.1976), while the latter can, in turn,

651   enhance their reputations by attracting a coterie of sponsees.

652   Consonant with the relationship between status and opportunities for self-interested behavior, a

653   frequent violation of NA norms involves an experienced member (typically male) using his

654   influence and social ties to attract a vulnerable newer member (typically female) into a romantic

655   relationship. This is such a common occurrence that in the parlance of Twelve-Step programs it

656   is called the "Thirteenth Step." Individuals may present themselves as a helpful member offering

657   the newcomer advice and assistance, invoking a sentiment of reciprocity in the latter, then

658   rapidly shift the relationship towards romance. This strategy is often effective because new

659   members tend to experience significant isolation, confusion, and discomfort, and are looking for

660   emotional solace or simply distraction from the intensity of early recovery. In addition, relatively

661   unrestricted sexuality is common among individuals in active addiction. Nevertheless, because it

662   is difficult to keep secrets in such an intimate group, other members often quickly become aware

663   of the situation. Experienced members thus enact such behaviors at their peril, as they are

664   gossiped about, are usually confronted directly, and frequently suffer reputational damage.

665   Additionally, if particular individuals or groups gain a reputation for predation, they may

666   consequently be avoided by newer members.

667   Overall, the most common leveling mechanism utilized is direct confrontation (cf. Hoffman

668   2006, on AA). Confrontations can occur in the context of playful banter – common between men

669   – phrased as competitive exchanges of codified norms. Although such banter is often intended to

670   test another's wit, mettle, oratory skills, and command of norms, it can also include aggressive

671   ridicule intended to cut another down to size. Alternately, confrontations sometimes take place in

672   private, and can be delivered as either compassionate reminders or direct criticisms. In the

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673 privacy of business meetings, experienced members may also decide to act in consort during

674 public meetings to limit the self-aggrandizing actions of an errant member. As a last resort,

675 members may "vote with their feet" by shifting their attendance to another meeting in order to

676 avoid a self-aggrandizer. In sum, paralleling ethnographic descriptions of many acephalous

677 egalitarian societies as reviewed by Boehm (1993, 1999), gossip, direct confrontation, and, in

678 extreme cases, desertion of a group may be used as leveling mechanisms in response to self-

679 aggrandizement, attempts at control, or efforts to leverage one's position for personal gain.

Conclusion

681 Commensurate with its importance as a public health challenge, the problem of substance abuse

682 in contemporary American society has resulted in the development of a diverse range of

683 institutions, from top-down treatment centers embedded in the formal structures of medical care

684 to bottom-up mutual aid groups such as Narcotics Anonymous. Drawing on Carr's (2006, 2011)

685 work as both a starting point and a point of contrast, we have suggested that the goals of

686 individuals seeking recovery from substance abuse vary significantly across these different

687 treatment contexts. As Carr has shown, within the hierarchical context of medicalized substance-

688 abuse treatment centers, individuals sometimes seek efficacy through resistance, enacting speech

689 acts termed *script-flipping*. In contrast, within the egalitarian context of mutual-aid groups,

690 individuals may seek efficacy through the pursuit of prestige, at times enacting speech acts we

691 term *script-embellishment*. In each case, the relationship between utterances and motives can be

692 opaque, as individuals shift between actively conforming to relevant norms and merely

693 appearing to do so in pursuit of what are, in fact, antithetical goals. More broadly, we suggest

694 that, due to the psychology undergirding cultural transmission, a particular tension between

695 actions and the motives that underlie them is characteristic not only of mutual-aid addiction

696 recovery programs, but of any social group having similar features.

697 Be they hunter-gatherer bands or mutual-aid groups, all egalitarian social entities suffer the

698 problem that successful performance in culturally-valued domains of action and the underlying

699 possession of valued knowledge create the basis for voluntary deference by learners, generating

700 inequalities in prestige that, in turn, threaten the egalitarian basis of interactions. At the same

701 time, groups benefit from the coordination functions performed by leaders; experience is often

702 necessary for the successful performance of such functions, and this augments the inequalities

703 generated by deference in pursuit of knowledge. For multiple reasons, these problems are

704 particularly acute in NA. On the one hand, sharing past experience is the cornerstone of aid – it is

705 explicitly believed that recovery from addiction is premised on learning from others' accounts.

706 Likewise, lacking institutionalized mechanisms for enculturation, cultural competence is

707 achieved primarily via tutelage by more senior members. Furthermore, leadership is required

708 both due to the fluid nature of the organization's membership and due to the strong tendency for

709 the sharing process to degenerate into pessimism in the absence of direction. Yet, on the other

710 hand, NA is premised on an ethnopsychology wherein addicts are seen as suffering from a

711 critical personality flaw, egocentrism, which must be combated through the practice of selfless

712 giving and the suppression of self-interest. Accordingly, viewed with regard to the containment

713 of threats, leveling mechanisms are required to preserve the larger institution in the face of the

714 corrosive effects of prestige competition and, relatedly, the temptation to abuse authority.

715 However, viewed with regard to the function of the institution, it is not obvious that prestige

716 competition is an unalloyed bad. Minimally, mild competition motivates individuals to deepen

717 their knowledge of textual orthodoxy and take on prescribed social functions. More broadly, the

718   ever-present opportunities for pursuing prestige afforded by NA allow members to practice

719   exactly that selflessness that NA prescribes. The experienced member who is able to serve

720   anonymously, gently return meetings to an even keel, and provide sponsorship without self-

721   interest, is, in so doing, exercising precisely those attributes that are believed to be the foundation

722   for continued recovery. Hence, even as it proscribes self-interest, by inherently affording the

723   pursuit thereof, NA continually presents its members with the opportunity to practice selflessness

724   – an elegant, and effective, arrangement indeed.

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