

Narcotics Anonymous: Anonymity, Admirability, and Prestige in an Egalitarian Community

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Abstract Narcotics Anonymous (NA) supports long-term recovery for those addicted to drugs. Paralleling social dynamics in many small-scale societies, NA exhibits tension between egalitarianism and prestige-based hierarchy, a problem exacerbated by the addict's personality as characterized by NA's ethnopsychology. We explore how NA's central principle of anonymity normatively translates into egalitarianism among group members. Turning to the lived reality of membership, building on Carr's (2011) concept of script flipping, we identify *script embellishment* as speech acts that ostensibly conform to normative therapeutic discourse while covertly serving political ends. We argue that, in spite of the overtly egalitarian context, NA members differ dramatically in prestige, with more experienced members being admired and emulated. Critically, prestige acquisition occurs via structural functions that are central to the maintenance of the institution, as experienced members serve a central role in the transmission and enforcement of cultural norms, paradoxically including norms of egalitarianism. [Twelve-Step Program, Narcotics Anonymous, Prestige, Egalitarianism]

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 (1) 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 and Gil-White 2001), and (2) the need for governance in any social group (Van Vugt 2006; Van Vugt et al. 2008). In this article, 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 attributes that bring them to the group, new members are often quite vulnerable to exploitation by other members, including those who seek status advantages. Against this backdrop, new members legitimately strive for self-efficacy in the domain of cultural competency within the local group. Those who succeed both progress in their struggle with addiction and, in so doing, recreate anew the social dynamics that pose a challenge to egalitarianism; this problem is then compounded by the need for leaders in a self-governing group characterized by a heterogeneous and shifting membership. The codified norms and institutional practices of NA both recognize these multiple threats to egalitarianism and provide avenues for mitigating them. NA meetings are thus characterized by social dynamics wherein individuals navigate a culturally constituted social arena that both affords and constrains the pursuit of status; in turn, these dynamics are integral to the maintenance and reproduction of the institution itself.¹

NA is a Twelve-Step self-help/mutual-aid group patterned after, and historically derived from, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). Like AA, NA is a free, long-term recovery-oriented program, frequently offered to individuals in need via referrals by healthcare and criminal justice institutions. However, while volumes of clinical reports and ethnographic works address AA, NA remains woefully understudied. The majority of descriptive works concerning AA focus on discourse and identity change and take at face value the claim that egalitarianism characterizes social relationships in Twelve-Step programs (Bateson 1971; Brandes 2002; Cain 1991; Holland et al. 1998; Humphreys 2004; Jensen 2000; Wilcox 1998). We argue that, while accurate, this characterization is superficial. In NA, below the surface of an overt ethos of egalitarianism exists an implicit prestige hierarchy. The social terrain of an ideology of egalitarianism juxtaposed with a prestige-based social structure is navigated by members as part of their identity change, as their own social standing is inextricably linked to their identity. Members negotiate their social standing within the NA community according to the orthodoxy of the organization and norms taught and modeled by experienced members. Hence, NA relies on prestigious individuals to form the core structure of this decentralized institution, maintaining it in a relatively uniform fashion across numerous instantiations around the world. In this way, while nested within larger nation-states, NA parallels the dynamic tension in small-scale societies between egalitarianism and hierarchies based on prestige. Of particular importance, as is likely true of many small-scale societies, in NA it is largely prestigious individuals who reinforce local norms—including the norm of egalitarianism.

One prominent exception to the largely descriptive existing literature on addiction recovery is E. Summerson Carr's explorations of the semiotics of power in recovery (2006, 2011). Carr richly portrays the power dynamics at work in a homeless women's outpatient drug-treatment center. In this context, counselors who oversee patient progress are also in effect the gatekeepers of critical and basic social services, as any instance of patient relapse can result in an end to public aid to the patient. Carr provides two key observations: First, narratives

as “totally unmediated language” are thought to have the potential to accurately reveal the clients’ internal psychological states and belief systems (2011:4). Importantly, these speech acts are also widely believed by both therapists and clients alike to have a transformative impact on the psychology of addicted individuals. Second, in a process termed *script flipping* by Carr, clients are able to essentially deceive their caregivers by controlling their narratives. Script flipping is a speech act that conforms to the norms of therapeutic talk yet provides inaccurate information regarding the client’s inner thoughts or enacted resistance to the proscriptions and prescriptions of the outpatient program.

Carr’s work is an invaluable contribution to understanding the power dynamics at play in addiction treatment and has significant overlap with the current research. In particular, in both formal and informal treatment settings, recovering individuals believe (or at least act as if they believe) that not only can their innermost psychological states and beliefs be articulated through speech, but, moreover, that such speech acts are crucial to recovery. Likewise, as is true in the outpatient center studied by Carr, in NA meetings, a key feature of narratives is that they may appear to be serving one purpose while actually serving another. However, consonant with fundamental social structural differences between the clinic—an organization funded by the state and staffed by paid professionals holding institutional authority—and the acephalous NA group, the covert objectives undergirding some speech acts in NA concern not the subordinate’s manipulation of the officeholder, but rather the pursuit of others’ admiration and the informal status that this entails. More complexly still, the two contexts differ not only in their overt power structures, but also in the underlying systems of reward that motivate the provision of care—whereas clinic staff receive remuneration to (attempt to) treat clients, the benefits obtained by NA members take the form of the (avowed) therapeutic consequences of aiding others and the (tacit) rewards of granted prestige, thus creating a mutualist dynamic that is absent in the clinic. Our primary departures from Carr’s work thus lie in our considerations of the contexts and dynamics of power contestation. So as to provide a backdrop for these explorations, before setting out to describe the dynamics of admiration and prestige-based status hierarchies within NA, we first describe in detail the structure of present-day NA, set against the historical background from which it derives.

The Structure of NA

Beginning in the 1940s, various attempts to establish mutual-aid support groups for drug addiction were made in several locations, but most failed (NAWS 1998a; Stone 1997). It is widely believed that NA was founded in California’s San Fernando Valley. Jimmy Kinnon is credited with adopting and revising the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of AA with minimal changes so as to be applicable to drug addiction. Other early movements that did not follow the Twelve Traditions splintered under the influence of outside organizations and strong personalities within the organization who attempted to control the specifics of other individuals’ ideologies with respect to recovery (Humphreys 2004; Stone 1997). Hence, it is widely believed that the central tenets of Twelve Traditions allowed NA to grow and flourish by the 1960s.

The NA World Service Office (WSO) serves as the legal entity in intellectual property matters, publishes NA's literature, and provides limited services to NA groups. NA's self-produced literature has been cited as both the reason for NA's growth and the source of its identity independent from AA (NAWS 2008b). This literature distinguishes NA from AA with a more secular tone, a more accessible voice, and encouragement of total abstinence from illicit drugs, prescription abuse, and alcohol. Like AA, membership in NA is voluntary and can be quite fluid, with new members attending and dropping out on a frequent basis—although most groups have a stable core of regular attendees. While attendance records are not kept, it is known that, compared to fewer than 200 groups at first count in 1978, today there are more than 58,000 weekly meetings, held in 131 countries (NAWS 2010b).

NA's stated goals for its members are abstinence (referred to as "being clean"), to become free of the obsession to use drugs, and to find a new way of life in the interests of long-term recovery from addiction. The latter reflects an explicit endorsement of the disease concept of drug addiction, paralleling that of alcoholism (Jellinek 1960; see NAWS 2008a:13), and the belief that abstinence and personal change are necessary for recovery. This process of change has the explicit goal of attaining a personal spiritual awakening, the nature of which is largely undefined, primarily being left to NA members to understand in their own fashion. The main text of NA notes that an awakening can take many forms but may include "an end to loneliness and a sense of direction in our lives" and may be "accompanied by an increase in peace of mind and a concern for others" (NAWS 2008a:50). As codified by Step Twelve, the spiritual awakening is believed to be the direct result of practicing the Steps themselves.

As in AA, the basic organizational unit of NA is the group, a collective of individuals who acknowledge being addicts and who come together for the purpose of helping each other stay clean. A group may hold several meetings per week, but, in most cases, one group corresponds to one meeting place and time per week. Just as personal recovery is guided by the Twelve Steps, so too is the service structure of NA guided by the Twelve Traditions.

The Twelve Traditions establish the group as completely self-supporting and autonomous "except in matters affecting other groups or NA as a whole" (NAWS 2008a:60). NA is a nonprofessional organization and has no official stance or stake in other organizations (political, religious, clinical, etc.). Membership is open to anyone who has a "desire to stop using" (NAWS 2008a:60). Leaders serve the organization; they do not govern over groups, service bodies, or individuals. Paramount is an emphasis on unity and anonymity (more on this below). Tradition Nine tells members that "we ought not create a governing hierarchy, a top-down bureaucracy dictating to our groups or members" (NAWS 1993:193). However, service boards or committees may be created to help groups achieve their purpose. This gives NA a nested, hierarchical structure (see NAWS 2002; NAWS 2010a). However, in principle and in practice, larger levels of the organization are accountable to, and ultimately serve, the groups. Service boards and committees support groups by providing services such as directories of local meetings, informational helplines, and interfacing with public and private organizations (healthcare, judicial, etc.) (NAWS 2010b).

Decision making in NA is consensus based, taking place primarily at the group level (NAWS 1993:134–143). Systems of communication between groups and the WSO allow this bottom-up structure to function. Central to this process is an adamantly egalitarian creed. NA literature states: “the conscience of a group is most clearly expressed when every member is considered an equal” (NAWS 1993:138). In sum, NA is an acephalous, egalitarian organization relying heavily on the nonprofessional leadership of members who are accountable to groups at the local level.

Below we present a description of NA meetings, followed by an analysis of the tension between the selflessness and egalitarianism prescribed by the organization’s codified norms and implicit prestige hierarchies. This account is based on the first author’s (JKS’) interactions with NA in varying contexts and locations since 1984, familiarity with hundreds of NA members, attendance at many hundreds of NA meetings, and reading of NA’s literature. In addition to observing as a visiting anthropologist, JKS was able to observe many meetings in his capacity as a mental health professional escorting clients to NA meetings. Observations are recounted from memory, as recording meetings or taking notes would violate norms of anonymity and privacy that are foundational to meetings. All names listed are pseudonyms; meeting locations are redacted to protect the privacy and anonymity of informants; and specific events recounted are a mosaic constructed from multiple NA meetings. These observations are supplemented by short semistructured interviews that JKS conducted in the spring of 2012 with 30 Southern Californian NA members (15 men and 15 women) using a snowball sampling method. Informants were recruited at NA meetings and later interviewed by phone, with the understanding that written notes were being taken. Twenty-four informants agreed to be quoted verbatim. Per recommendations of the UCLA Institutional Review Board, the sample was restricted to those who reported being a member of NA for at least seven years (and hence were unlikely to be current users of illicit substances). Open-ended interviews focused on three questions: What attributes (traits/characteristics) do you find admirable in NA members? How much do you value time clean as an important attribute in other members? What attributes in other NA members do you find to be contemptible?

The NA Meeting

Just as groups are the primary unit of social organization, meetings are the primary context of social interaction among members. NA meetings are structurally similar to AA meetings (Brandes 2002; Jensen 2000; Wilcox 1998). Meetings begin and end with a ritual invocation, typically recited in unison by all members. Invocations mark the sacredness (Brandes 2002) of the temporal space, or at least the formality of the context. Meetings open with several two- to three-minute readings from NA texts, generally intended to inform newcomers—and make experienced members mindful—of the basic structure and tenets of NA. Most meetings take one of two forms: speaker meetings and open discussion meetings (see NAWS 1997). A speaker meeting consists of one relatively experienced member presenting a verbal narrative of their experiences as an addict, why they decided to get clean, and how they got clean. A goal

of this format is to evoke identification between the speaker and the other members. In open discussion meetings, members take turns presenting shorter narratives. Discussions may be topical or freer in content. Narratives may include briefer versions of personal experiences akin to those presented at speaker meetings but can also be expressions of pain or accounts of difficulties. These narratives are often intended to be cathartic and/or elicit the support of other members. Narratives may also be intended to be inspirational. Meetings have strong norms governing participation (cf. Mäkelä et al. 1996 regarding AA): turn taking is cardinal, individuals should only speak about themselves, individuals should not directly contradict previous speakers' statements, nor should direct advice be offered, and members should not endorse outside entities (therapeutic, religious, etc.). Members introduce themselves before sharing with a stereotypical statement, "My name is X, and I am an addict." The norm is for everyone in attendance to respond in unison "Hi X!"

Detailed ethnographic descriptions of Twelve-Step meetings themselves are available in other works (for example, see Brandes 2002 for a description of AA meetings in Mexico City). With regard to meeting formats, there are large differences in tone, marginal differences in narratives, but minimal differences in structure between AA and NA meetings. Therefore, we will focus our description on examples of two meeting events that are central to the current discussion: the celebration of clean-time anniversaries and the group's monthly business meeting.

After the secretary has called the meeting to order and sections of NA text have been read aloud, one member (here labeled Michael), previously designated to recognize milestones in recovery, stands and asks members "Does anyone have one to 29 days clean? . . . Is anyone celebrating 30 days of recovery?" etc. (The WSO provides colored key fobs commemorating early milestones in recovery [30 days, 60 days, 90 days, etc.] and bronze medallions commemorating yearly milestones.) No one accepts a key fob, but Michael goes on: "I know we have one birthday to celebrate tonight . . ." (a "birthday" being the commemoration of a yearly milestone) "Bob is celebrating six years clean!" The group claps and cheers for Bob as he walks to the front of the room where a cake with six lit candles awaits. The group sings "Happy Birthday" with the refrain at the end ". . . keep coming back . . . CLEAN!" and claps again. Bob holds up the medallion for the group to see while bowing his head slightly, in apparent deference, then says softly: "I'd like to thank my sponsor Michael for giving me the cake, all his support and putting up with me . . ." [The group laughs lightly.] "I'd also like to thank my Higher Power and the group. Thank you for my recovery." The group cheers and applauds again as Bob returns to his seat and then focuses again on the more formal events of the meeting.

The leader reports that she has selected the topic of gratitude for the meeting and, according to the agreed format of the meeting, "shares" for approximately 10 minutes, introducing the topic. Having set the tone, she then opens the meeting for other members to take turns sharing. Members raise their hands to share and are selected, in turn, by the secretary. Most echo the structure and sentiment of her presentation, "sharing" for three to five minutes;

beginning by recounting how bad their addiction had been and contrasting that experience with their current lives in recovery.

Just before 9:00 p.m., the leader announces that time has run out for sharing, thanks everyone for doing so, and notes that the meeting will close with a moment of silence for the addict who still suffers, followed by the third-step prayer. The group breaks up into knots of members engaged in conversation, with an abundance of smiles and hugs about the room. People gravitate to new members and those who reported having difficulties in order to offer sympathy and support.

The group business meeting follows. This is open for anyone to attend, and all are encouraged to do so; however, only six core members of the group and I (JKS) are present. Group business is quickly addressed, primarily concerning how much of the month's donations should be allocated to rent, literature, and contributions to the area body (the next level in the organizational structure).

Immediately following the conclusion of monetary matters, Carolyn, a regular attendee with substantial clean time, rather eloquently raises a concern and suggests a solution. Carolyn reports that she has noticed several members monopolizing the meeting time with exceptionally long narratives. Carolyn notes that this violates both the letter and the spirit of the Twelve Traditions, as, when a narrative goes on too long, fewer members are able to take their turn speaking, including newer members who often need to share their progress and struggles. She makes a motion that members be asked to conclude their narratives within three to five minutes, with a change in the meeting format so as to include an announcement of this; a trusted servant (the term for a member designated to perform a given task) would keep track of how long someone is sharing. The secretary of the meeting accepts a second to the motion and opens the floor for discussion.

Bob, who accepted a medallion earlier, somewhat less eloquently supports the motion, singling out a member named Carrie, not present, as being particularly guilty of such actions. He complains that Carrie "takes the entire meeting hostage" with long diatribes intended to chide and advise newcomers, rather than "sharing experience, strength, and hope" (an orthodox goal). Other members, speaking out of turn, noisily agree with Bob.

The secretary brings the meeting back to order and focuses on the motion on the floor, calling for a vote; there is unanimous support for the motion. Then the secretary asks informally for a volunteer to speak to Carrie about the length and content of her narratives. Carolyn acknowledges having a good relationship with Carrie and volunteers to talk to her in private regarding the concerns raised by the group.

Orthodoxy: Egalitarianism, Anonymity, and Mutualism

As evident in the exclusive use of first names, the self-revealing nature of statements, the extensive turn taking, and the emotional, social, and physical support offered by members

to one another, NA meetings are overtly egalitarian. For example, the “leader” of a meeting simply serves to set the tone and facilitate the meeting in an orderly fashion. Importantly, egalitarianism is a central feature of NA orthodoxy, articulated at length in NA’s literature (NAWS 1991, 1993, 2002, 2004, 2008a, 2008b, 2010a). As we will explain in detail, egalitarianism is valued for three reasons. First, participation in the fellowship among members of equal footing is idealized as part of the process of individual recovery from the disease of addiction. Second, egalitarianism is viewed as the foundation on which mutualism (relations in which both participants benefit) rests. Third, egalitarianism, codified as anonymity, is believed to be necessary to the structural integrity of the organization. In short, egalitarianism is thought to be good for the individual, necessary for mutualistic aid, and good for the institution. We address each aspect in turn below.

In deconstructing the dimensions of egalitarianism, we turn first to NA ethnopsychology as articulated in NA’s literature. This ethnopsychology holds that addicts are a type of person characterized by an intense desire for gratification, and, indeed, many addicts report that they went to great lengths to manipulate those around them in order to try to fulfill their desires, often weaving elaborate stories, justifying their behaviors by casting themselves as the victim of circumstance or some vague persecution (NAWS 2008a). When those around them confront the addict regarding their dishonesty and manipulations, and consequently withdraw financial or emotional support (for example, many families refuse to offer bail monies after several instances of incarceration), the addict often feels betrayed and isolated. In addition, individuals who were acquainted with or intimate with the addict often offer unwanted advice and pressure them to behave differently in order to stop or control their substance use. Addicts often recoil at this and choose to withdraw or strike back at those trying to intervene. Intervening institutions (such as the justice system or the health care system) may be deeply resented by the addict. Many NA members report that, as stigmatized and marginalized individuals, they previously experienced extreme resentment toward, and resistance to, society. Addicts often state that they felt both profound inferiority and superiority—sometimes simultaneously. One quipped to JKS that “an addict is the only person who can be laying in the gutter and still stare down their nose at someone.”

Either through the result of self-imposed withdrawal or institutionally or individually imposed marginalization, the end result is the same: isolation and alienation. Most NA members relate deeply to the assessment that, at the core of their problems is a deluded desire for gratification, the pursuit of which yields a deep sense of isolation. Many addicts report that, even when they were surrounded by a community of other addicts, their social network was unreliable, and other addicts were not true friends. Many are fond of saying: “I had acquaintances that I used with—not friends.”

One of the prescribed solutions to the above maladies is to find humility. Humility is conceptualized as a central spiritual principle for recovery (NAWS 2008a). One route to humility is achieving accurate self-assessment through the process of practicing Steps Four and Five—taking a thorough inventory (a systematic self-appraisal) and sharing it with another person. Often this other is another addict because “[w]e recognize that one addict

can best understand and help another addict” (NAWS 2008a:59). Intrinsic to this process is the realization that one suffers an affliction—an affliction for which the individual is not responsible, but that has a solution for which one can be responsible (NAWS 1993). Fundamental to humility is a creed of egalitarianism. The member’s acceptance that he or she is neither the worst nor the best person is based on the equality of addicts. Exemplifying this, when asked about admiration of other members, an informant reported that “NA has helped me see people eye-to-eye; nobody is above me or below me.”

As noted above, NA also suggests to addicts that they have an intrinsic problem with a selfish notion that all their desires must be immediately gratified: NA characterizes this as self-centeredness (NAWS 1993:26). To address this malady, NA suggests that another route to humility comes in the form of intentional ego deflation—the eventual realization, and acceptance, by the member that their expectations are largely unrealistic and that they may not be the most important person in any given context. Members are encouraged to replace self-centeredness with “selfless” aid to other members, as codified by Step Twelve; this admonishment is taken seriously as a basic tenet of the program and is uniformly practiced by NA members. Central to this practice is the acknowledgement that all members are of equal status. Hence, egalitarianism is viewed as the starting point of ego deflation and the diminution of self-centeredness.

Another prescribed solution to the maladies described above—particularly the addict’s sense of isolation—is for members to integrate themselves into and participate in the fellowship. Participation may consist simply of attending meetings but can also include socializing before or after meetings and participating in other activities with NA members. More experienced members typically suggest that new members get as involved in the fellowship as much as possible—especially early on in the recovery process, as intense feelings of isolation can make abstinence difficult. Some of the materials read before the vast majority of meetings speak directly to new members and highlight an egalitarian ethos:

Anyone may join us regardless of age, race, sexual identity, creed, religion or lack of religion. We are not interested in what or how much you used, who your connections were, what you have done in the past, how much or how little you have, but only in what you want to do about your problem and how we can help. (NAWS 2008a:9)

These words are important to members because addicts can often be deeply suspicious and mistrustful of any institution. In addition, NA explicitly prescribes identification with other addicts as the solution to the feeling of isolation (NAWS 2008a).

NA codifies egalitarianism as necessary to mutualistic endeavors. In the abstract, mutualism is not contingent on egalitarianism. For example, agricultural patron systems are mutualistic arrangements with a clear status differential between landowner and farmer, wherein the landowner serves as the interface with larger market and governmental systems, while the farmer provides labor (Causi 1975). However, despite the logical possibility of mutualism without egalitarianism, NA orthodoxy holds that the characteristics of the addict are such

as to necessitate egalitarianism if addicts are to help one another in mutualistic interactions. Consonant with their portrait of the addict as isolated, aloof, and recalcitrant, all of NA's prescriptions for personal recovery are presented as suggestions. The comments introducing the Twelve Steps exemplify this: "If you want what we have to offer and are willing to make the effort to get it, then you are ready to take certain steps" (NAWS 2008a:17). Many members repeat a common observation that NA is not a program for those that need it; it is a program for those that want it (cf. Holland et al. 1998, chap. 4 on AA).

While individuals' accrued experience is overtly valued, that valuation is tempered by the notion that the NA fellowship is based simply on *any* one addict helping *any* other addict. Exemplifying this, a 33-year old woman with ten years clean reported that she has been more inspired by a person with one year clean sharing at a meeting than by a member with 20 years clean. NA explicitly admonishes its members: "We don't set ourselves up as gods . . . we help [new people] feel welcome and help them learn what the program has to offer" (NAWS 2008a:50), and "[f]or anyone that wants our way of life, we share experience, strength, and hope instead of preaching and judging" (2008a:58).

A special mutualistic relationship among NA members is that of the sponsor and sponsee. A sponsor is a member who helps another member, the sponsee, to practice a daily program of recovery and negotiate/practice the Twelve Steps. Exemplifying the value placed on experience, the sponsor is almost always a more experienced member than the sponsee. The transmission of information is usually unidirectional—from sponsor to sponsee. Sponsees typically solicit input from the sponsor by presenting a particular difficulty or question to the sponsor; importantly, however, orthodoxy dictates that the sponsor's response is to consist of recounting the sponsor's relevant past experiences and suggestions rather than direct dictates to the sponsee. Although the flow of information usually travels from a more to a less experienced member, this is still viewed as a mutualistic relationship. While sponsors sometimes receive help from sponsees, even if this never or only rarely occurs, NA nevertheless considers the relationship to be mutualistic because the sponsor is thought to profit from the opportunity to provide selfless service to another. As outlined in Step Twelve, selfless help provided to another member is viewed as beneficial to the provider. Consonant with NA's ethnopsychological model of addicts as suspicious of authority, the mutualistic nature of the relationship is explicitly framed in egalitarian terms—describing the sponsorship relationship, NA states: "We're developing a give-and-take relationship based on equality and mutual respect" (NAWS 1993:56). Even if a sponsor has professional training, direct advice, with its connotations of authority and inequality, should not be offered in the context of the sponsorship relationship: "the value in the message we share with one another lies in our personal experience in recovery, not in our credentials, our training, or our professional status" (NAWS 1993:186). Hence, mutualistic aid is viewed as necessarily rooted in egalitarianism—one member helping another, with both being on equal footing.

In NA orthodoxy, egalitarianism and mutualism are intrinsically linked to anonymity via the concept of spirituality. Tradition Twelve states: "Anonymity is the spiritual foundation

of all of our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities” (NAWS 1993:209). Indeed, anonymity is considered to be a *spiritual* principle by NA and its members.

Though largely ill-defined, according to NA, spirituality is divorced from any particular religion. NA intentionally leaves spirituality underspecified in order to allow for a diversity of personal experience—members are encouraged to pursue and define the spiritual experience for themselves (including the identification of a power greater than themselves). NA spirituality can be understood as an acknowledgement that certain aspects of the human experience are nontangible and nonmaterial. Anonymity as a spiritual principle thus does not mean that members will be uniformly devoid of defining characteristics. Rather, framing anonymity in spiritual terms, NA endorses putting one’s own desires aside in the interest of personal recovery, in the interest of mutualistic aid to other members, and for the good of the group. NA literature states:

In personal recovery, we seek to replace self-will with the guidance of a Higher Power in our personal affairs. In the same way the Traditions describe a fellowship that takes its collective guidance from spiritual principles rather than individual personalities. That kind of selflessness is what the Twelfth Tradition means by the word “anonymity.” (NAWS 1993: 209)

Highlighting the contrast between self-will and anonymity, NA literature states: “Self-will still leads us to make decisions based on manipulations, ego, lust and false pride” (NAWS 2008a:80), but “[t]he drive for personal gain in the areas of sex, property and social position . . . falls by the wayside if we adhere to the principle of anonymity” (2008a:76), and, when helping others “[we] place the principle of anonymous, selfless giving before whatever personal desires we may have for recognition or reward” (NAWS 1993:212). This “namelessness” and putting aside of self-serving desires is intended to create a state of equality among members. Hence, anonymity, a central tenet of the organization, translates into egalitarianism and mutualism.

Consistent with the ethos of egalitarianism and the principle of anonymity, leaders are intended to serve—not guide, direct, or dictate. Leaders are selected by consensus, and leadership is explicitly guided by the principle of anonymity: leaders “are not governors but servants taking their direction from the collective conscience of those they serve” (NAWS 1993:193). NA acknowledges that its “trusted servants” will have both personalities and individual talents or skills relevant to service. However, more important than any specific skill set, leaders should have humility and integrity (NAWS 1991, 1993, 2008b). Leaders are explicitly dissuaded from pursuing personal agendas and personal desires in service to NA (NAWS 1993). In addition, trusted servants are expected to serve limited terms in every service position, with rotating leadership; this constraint is explicitly aimed at limiting personal ambitions and resulting inequality “so that no one personality dominates” (1993:193). Trusted servants are admonished to be open to new ideas, cultivate good listening skills, and, above all else, heed the consensus of the members and groups that they serve or represent. NA literature clearly states that, despite the appearance of hierarchy introduced by

the organizational structure, “[w]e are equal in NA membership” (1993:215). NA orthodoxy thus explicitly prescribes an egalitarian ethos in all domains of the organization.

Heterodoxy: Prestige, Power, and Stratification

Prestige and Reverse Hierarchies

Having reviewed the orthodoxy of an egalitarian ethos in NA, we turn to the social reality of prestige inequalities among members. Before doing so, however, it is important to first explain in greater detail the theoretical framework that we employ in understanding prestige. Henrich and Gil-White (2001) usefully define prestige as freely conferred deference; following Barkow (1989), they distinguish prestige from dominance, two conceptually distinct routes to status. Dominance-based status is social position achieved through force or the threat of force. In contrast, prestige-based status is achieved through others’ recognition of the prestigious individual’s skill, accomplishments, or expertise (cf. Carr 2010). Henrich and Gil-White argue that others defer to an accomplished individual because deference is an avenue for access, allowing deferring actors to observe, and thus learn from, the successful model. Hence, whereas dominance is the foundation of social structures in other social animals because humans rely on cultural transmission to a far greater extent than other species, prestige, being an outgrowth of the desire to learn from successful others, is the basis of many human hierarchies. Consonant with this perspective, we argue that members of NA have goals, including long-term personal recovery and cultural competency within the context of the organization; they identify knowledgeable members; and, consequently, they admire, elevate, and emulate the latter in an effort to achieve those goals. Complementing this view of prestige, Van Vugt and colleagues (Van Vugt 2006; Van Vugt et al. 2008) argue that followers may voluntarily surrender authority to leaders in order to facilitate coordination and collective action among group members; skillful experts are thus elevated by the group to positions of power because doing so can serve the interests of both the group and its members. However, whether status is achieved due to deference motivated by others’ desire for knowledge or deference motivated by their need for governance, once individuals have achieved such status, the possibility exists that they will exploit it in ways counter to the interests of those who elevated them to their position. Critically, these issues potentially plague any social entity, be it a band-level society or an anonymous self-help group, in which egalitarianism is valued.

Examining the tension between egalitarianism and hierarchical structure in small-scale societies, Boehm (1993; see also 1997, 1999; Fried 1967) argues that many such groups are characterized by reverse hierarchies wherein followers control their leaders through leveling mechanisms, including disapproval, ridicule, disobedience, and extreme sanctions including deserting, deposing, or assassinating the leader. Boehm suggests that humans have an evolved ambivalence toward leadership such that they attend carefully to whether the benefits of submitting to authority outweigh the costs, leading them to frequently resist being controlled by others. While the extent to which this assessment characterizes all groups remains uncertain, the concepts of reverse hierarchies and leveling mechanisms are nonetheless frequently

applicable to egalitarian groups. Importantly, as individuals attain status through the prestige dynamics outlined by Henrich and Gil-White (2001) and Van Vugt and colleagues (Van Vugt 2006; Van Vugt et al. 2008), opportunities arise to employ such status in the pursuit of self-interested goals, including translating prestige into dominance by marshaling followers in coercive actions against others. The propensity to pursue status is thus doubly threatening to egalitarian groups, as even seemingly innocuous competitions for prestige can ultimately translate into concrete inequality, a persistent problem addressed by the leveling mechanisms described by Boehm. We suggest that the principles and guidelines that structure NA are designed (whether intentionally, by architects of the institution, or, absent intention, via cultural evolution) to preempt this problem. However, they are only partially successful in this regard.

A number of factors lead to the subversion of the prescribed ethos of anonymity and equality among NA members. First, as the organization recognizes, it takes time for members to fully grasp the relationship between egalitarianism and anonymity. Second, members may understand anonymity yet fall short in practice or simply ignore it in the pursuit of self-interest. Third, despite its extensive textual corpus, NA relies on the face-to-face interpersonal transmission of knowledge from more to less experienced members, often in a dyadic fashion: members note that they could have read NA's literature and still died—it was another addict that saved them. This reliance on face-to-face transmission encourages both the identification of experienced members and clear differentiations based on such experience. Subsequently, experienced members may be sought out for advice in both personal and group matters, creating a context in which reputations are evaluated and become a source of social capital. Fourth, the formal relationship between sponsor and sponsee, being generally premised on a disparity in experience and success in abstinence, inherently lends itself to the model/learner dynamic central to the generation of prestige. Lastly, the need for governance creates the possibility of self-interested leadership strategies. Below, we first detail the vital constructive contributions of experienced members, then consider how the organization's reliance on them opens the door to prestige competitions.

The Roles of Experienced Members and the Emergence of Prestige

Consonant with Van Vugt's (2006) thesis regarding the emergence of leaders through the relinquishing of equal footing in the service of coordination, at the organizational level, experienced members play a key role in maintaining NA as an institution, as they are tapped to keep groups and service bodies functioning according to codified principles, or take it upon themselves to do so. Likewise, experienced members start new meetings more frequently than newer members and play the primary role in specifying the format of a meeting, including decisions about which invocations and readings will be used and the nature of opening remarks; the format, in turn, shapes the tone of a meeting. Indeed, the critical role of experienced members is evident in natural experiments when they are absent. Some meetings are composed primarily of those having minimal experience with NA. Such meetings can deteriorate into litanies, as members share their struggles and discomfort

without sharing any resolutions, hope, or core principles of NA. This is not a case of norm violations—new members are doing what is expected of them. However, if experienced members are present, they interject hope when a meeting takes a negative turn, pointing to NA core principles; without such management, meetings often fail to achieve their purpose.

In addition to their public roles, experienced members make vital contributions at a dyadic level. It is common for someone who has recounted difficulties during a meeting to subsequently seek the counsel of more experienced members. Likewise, experienced members are often adept at gauging someone's discomfort and connecting it conceptually to a codified principle combined with their own experience, doing so after nearly every meeting. Many members state that this informal process is as important to personal recovery as the meetings themselves.

Dyadic exchanges following the meeting are an ephemeral form of the relationship that is formalized in sponsorship. In spite of the fundamentally equivalent status in principle of the sponsor and sponsee, in practice, the sponsor teaches the sponsee to work the Steps the same way that the sponsor learned from her own sponsor. Likewise, sponsors play the primary role in teaching sponsees the Twelve Traditions and norms of behavior in the context of the service structure, subjects discussed less in meetings than other aspects of personal recovery. The sponsee is thus a protégé of the sponsor. Correspondingly, sponsees often report feeling indebted and grateful to their sponsors. Members often share about their positive experiences with their sponsors in the public context of meetings—sometimes referring to their sponsor by name despite proscriptions against this. Naming and extolling the virtues of a sponsor in meetings appears to reflect the sponsee's desire to pay public tribute to the sponsor and has the consequence of enhancing the sponsor's reputation. More broadly, paying tribute to a member during a meeting is not restricted to the sponsor/sponsee relationship: mutual aid is common, hence members often feel indebted to each other, and gratitude for another's help is sometimes acknowledged publicly. Generally, these tributes appear not to be initiated, suggested, solicited, or even endorsed by the target thereof.

As noted above, many NA groups publicly recognize milestones of clean time during meetings. Members report that this ritual is enacted with the express purpose of encouraging newer members in their recovery, demonstrating that long-term recovery is possible. However, this ritual also has the (perhaps unintended) consequence of drawing attention to clean time. When a member is recognized for multiple years in recovery, others often offer congratulations, accolades, or brief tributes at the meeting. In addition, public tribute is similarly paid to members who perform service functions. Meeting formats regularly include thanking the trusted servants, sometimes by name, followed by applause and both literal and metaphoric pats on the back. Within the context of service boards or committees, new volunteers are usually welcomed and mentioned by name.

Importantly, as is common in many egalitarian societies, whenever a member is offered public tribute, in any context—as a sponsor, a helping member, someone celebrating a milestone, or for services performed—the recipient of the tribute responds stoically, as if the

incident never occurred, with deferent gestures or postures, and expressions of self-effacing gratitude and humility if asked to speak. Overt self-aggrandizement in this context would constitute a serious norm violation, and we have never witnessed it. Nevertheless, despite this prescribed humility, because both formal and informal practices can generate disparities in prestige among members, competition for status is an ever-present threat to the egalitarian principles central to NA orthodoxy.

Prestige Competition, Script Embellishment, and Leveling Mechanisms in NA Meetings

The codified orthodoxy in NA's literature serves as the basis for leveling mechanisms intended to limit the pursuit of personal prestige. Members frequently remind each other of NA principles in every context of interaction—during service meetings, during fellowship social activities, and in informal conversation. Particularly during group business meetings, members are quick to point out self-centered behaviors or personal agendas that threaten to conflict with the group's primary purpose. Although this practice can reflect a genuine effort to teach less-experienced members the norms of conducting group business or practicing personal recovery, it can also reflect a calculated effort to negatively sanction members who are attempting to exert control over others. However, precisely when and how to marshal such sanctions is itself a fluid issue. The principal problem is that, at their core, meetings consist of give-and-take discussions that can constitute arenas for speech acts that, like those observed by Carr (2011) in the clinic, are undergirded by motives that may be opaque to (some) listeners. Whereas speakers may overtly seem to be exclusively performing the normative functions of a supportive group member, because their displays of expertise and participatory diligence can win them admiration, it is at times unclear to what extent their actions are motivated by the pursuit of prestige rather than an exclusive desire to help others and a belief that doing so is itself therapeutic. Importantly, the ambiguity of the objectives of these actions can itself have strategic value, as an adroitly framed utterance creates plausible deniability as to the speaker's objectives.

Ironically, voicing the codified norms of NA in an apparent effort to negatively sanction self-aggrandizing members can itself serve as a display of expertise that is an attempt at self-aggrandizement. Some speakers memorize passages of NA literature and integrate them into their narratives at meetings; less frequently, speakers compose narratives almost entirely from passages of NA literature, reciting verbatim and quoting page numbers. Such extreme practices yield mixed results: some are impressed with the speaker's familiarity with literature, while others remark that they find such recitations to be pretentious or insincere. Pejorative colloquialisms such as "book thumping" and "NA Nazi" connote disdain for perceived excessive attention to textual material and dogma.

Consonant with the above dynamic, meetings sometimes appear to digress from the transmission of norms and experience into an implicit competition to voice the most enlightened viewpoint on a given topic. On such occasions, there is a sense of rising tension in the meeting

as each person shares—each member building on, and sometimes contradicting, viewpoints expressed by those who have shared previously—contravening the norms of conduct at meetings (cf. Wilcox 1998:52, on AA). At such times, near the end of the meeting, the most senior, or most respected, member in the room may be selected by the leader from among those volunteering to speak, in order to give them the final say on the topic—indeed, some groups make this an unspoken norm. Some members appreciate this practice as providing a positive dynamic; however, consonant with the tension between prestige and egalitarianism, others resent it on the grounds that it entails singling out individuals for special treatment. This exemplifies how the voices of experienced members rise above those of others with the help and appreciation of deferent individuals. However, if a group has a member who consistently poses as an authority, others may begin to avoid attending that group.

As noted above, it can be difficult to distinguish between a member seeking admiration and one who is simply very knowledgeable about NA—indeed, they can be one and the same. Members seeking admiration often allude to having long periods of time clean or baldly announce how long they have been clean—ostensibly to give newcomers hope that recovery is possible. Such members may also speak with great authority or spin narratives that demonstrate how successful they are in recovery. Additionally, some meetings have a norm of speaking inspirationally rather than sharing personal experience, strength, and hope. Attempts to inspire can digress into overtly directive speech or fear-based appeals such as “work the steps or die, motherf—.” Some members appreciate such candor and are inspired to work harder at recovery; others recognize such directive speech as a clear violation of the spirit and codified orthodoxy of anonymity. In both compliment and contrast to Carr’s term script flipping (2011), we term such speech performances *script embellishment*.

In the context of NA meetings, script embellishment includes any performative public speech act that may serve to draw attention to the actor’s expertise, experience, and commitment to NA; examples include extraneously interjecting the number of years clean or other significant deviations from the codified norms of sharing at meetings which may index a degree of authority over others. Importantly, script embellishment has the potential to help and inspire others while simultaneously being self-aggrandizing. This appears to be a fluid process: while members may sometimes perform script embellishment in earnest, at other times they appear to get caught up in the moment, switching back and forth between experience and overly enthusiastic, unsolicited direction to other members (cf. Dubois 1986; Harding 1987).

Although newcomers may fail to perceive script embellishment as self-aggrandizement, experienced members are quick to see through what they perceive to be veiled attempts to gain recognition and admiration. More than one-third of interviewees reported that they find this practice contemptible. A middle-aged woman with ten years clean remarked “Some people carry clean time as badges and derive ego from it.” Describing what he finds contemptible, a 52-year-old man with 19 years clean stated “Power hungry people; people who are looking for a following.” It is in this context—a member who is clearly seeking social position—that leveling mechanisms are most often employed. Negative gossip is

circulated, or others may directly confront the member, citing orthodox NA principles. However, despite such efforts, some members succeed in gaining local fame and have a small group of admirers. This interaction of a prestigious member with deferent followers is often formalized in sponsor/sponsee relationships.

Some individuals seek out sponsors who are well known in the local NA community or have noteworthy clean time. These sponsees often advertise their association with well-known members, sometimes in contexts in which such information is extraneous. Contravening norms of anonymity and selflessness, the sponsor/sponsee relationship can thus provide a bilateral platform for self-aggrandizement—status-seeking sponsees gravitate toward prestigious sponsors in order to “bask in their reflected glory” (Cialdini et al. 1976), while the latter can, in turn, enhance their reputations by attracting a coterie of sponsees.

Consonant with the relationship between status and opportunities for self-interested behavior, a frequent violation of NA norms involves an experienced member (typically male) using his influence and social ties to attract a vulnerable newer member (typically female) into a romantic relationship. This is such a common occurrence that in the parlance of Twelve-Step programs it is called the “Thirteenth Step.” Individuals may present themselves as a helpful member offering the newcomer advice and assistance, invoking a sentiment of reciprocity in the latter, then rapidly shift the relationship towards romance. This strategy is often effective because new members tend to experience significant isolation, confusion, and discomfort, and are looking for emotional solace or simply distraction from the intensity of early recovery. In addition, relatively unrestricted sexuality is common among individuals in active addiction. Nevertheless, because it is difficult to keep secrets in such an intimate group, other members often quickly become aware of the situation. Experienced members thus enact such behaviors at their peril, as they are gossiped about, are usually confronted directly, and frequently suffer reputational damage. Additionally, if particular individuals or groups gain a reputation for predation, they may consequently be avoided by newer members.

Overall, the most common leveling mechanism utilized is direct confrontation (cf. Hoffman 2006, on AA). Confrontations can occur in the context of playful banter—common between men—phrased as competitive exchanges of codified norms. Although such banter is often intended to test another’s wit, mettle, oratory skills, and command of norms, it can also include aggressive ridicule intended to cut another down to size. Alternately, confrontations sometimes take place in private and can be delivered as either compassionate reminders or direct criticisms. In the privacy of business meetings, experienced members may also decide to act in consort during public meetings to limit the self-aggrandizing actions of an errant member. As a last resort, members may “vote with their feet” by shifting their attendance to another meeting in order to avoid a self-aggrandizer. In sum, paralleling ethnographic descriptions of many acephalous egalitarian societies as reviewed by Boehm (1993, 1999), gossip, direct confrontation, and, in extreme cases, desertion of a group may be used as leveling mechanisms in response to self-aggrandizement, attempts at control, or efforts to leverage one’s position for personal gain.

Conclusion

Commensurate with its importance as a public health challenge, the problem of substance abuse in contemporary American society has resulted in the development of a diverse range of institutions, from top-down treatment centers embedded in the formal structures of medical care to bottom-up mutual aid groups such as Narcotics Anonymous. Drawing on Carr's (2006, 2011) work as both a starting point and a point of contrast, we have suggested that the goals of individuals seeking recovery from substance abuse vary significantly across these different treatment contexts. As Carr has shown, within the hierarchical context of medicalized substance-abuse treatment centers, individuals sometimes seek efficacy through resistance, enacting speech acts termed *script flipping*. In contrast, within the egalitarian context of mutual-aid groups, individuals may seek efficacy through the pursuit of prestige, at times enacting speech acts we term *script embellishment*. In each case, the relationship between utterances and motives can be opaque, as individuals shift between actively conforming to relevant norms and merely appearing to do so in pursuit of what are, in fact, antithetical goals. More broadly, we suggest that, due to the psychology undergirding cultural transmission, a particular tension between actions and the motives that underlie them is characteristic not only of mutual-aid addiction recovery programs, but of any social group having similar features.

Be they hunter-gatherer bands or mutual-aid groups, all egalitarian social entities suffer the problem that successful performance in culturally valued domains of action and the underlying possession of valued knowledge create the basis for voluntary deference by learners, generating inequalities in prestige that, in turn, threaten the egalitarian basis of interactions. At the same time, groups benefit from the coordination functions performed by leaders; experience is often necessary for the successful performance of such functions, and this augments the inequalities generated by deference in pursuit of knowledge. For multiple reasons, these problems are particularly acute in NA. On the one hand, sharing past experience is the cornerstone of aid: it is explicitly believed that recovery from addiction is premised on learning from others' accounts. Likewise, lacking institutionalized mechanisms for enculturation, cultural competence is achieved primarily via tutelage by more senior members. Furthermore, leadership is required both due to the fluid nature of the organization's membership and due to the strong tendency for the sharing process to degenerate into pessimism in the absence of direction. Yet, on the other hand, NA is premised on an ethnopsychology wherein addicts are seen as suffering from a critical personality flaw, egocentrism, which must be combated through the practice of selfless giving and the suppression of self-interest. Accordingly, viewed with regard to the containment of threats, leveling mechanisms are required to preserve the larger institution in the face of the corrosive effects of prestige competition and, relatedly, the temptation to abuse authority. However, viewed with regard to the function of the institution, it is not obvious that prestige competition is an unalloyed bad. Minimally, mild competition motivates individuals to deepen their knowledge of textual orthodoxy and take on prescribed social functions. More broadly, the ever-present opportunities for pursuing prestige afforded by NA allow members to practice exactly that selflessness that NA prescribes. The experienced

member who is able to serve anonymously, gently return meetings to an even keel, and provide sponsorship without self-interest, is, in so doing, exercising precisely those attributes that are believed to be the foundation for continued recovery. Hence, even as it proscribes self-interest, by inherently affording the pursuit thereof, NA continually presents its members with the opportunity to practice selflessness—an elegant, and effective, arrangement indeed.

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Notes

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1. Note that our goal here is to explore the problems intrinsic to egalitarianism in small groups and examine how these problems are both exacerbated by the nature of NA and partially mitigated by its structure and lived practice. NA is clearly a successful organization when judged in terms of its ability to recruit and retain members, hence exploring the beliefs, practices, and interpersonal dynamics of NA can thus shed light on how the pitfalls of egalitarianism can be addressed. Our data do not allow us to address the extent to which NA's success does or does not stem from its clinical efficacy, a point about which is simultaneously understudied and remains a central debate in the clinical literature.

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