

# Spirituality and AA Practices

J. Scott Tonigan

Clinical Research Branch

Center on Alcoholism, Substance Abuse, and Addictions (CASAA), University of New Mexico

## INTRODUCTION

AA is beneficial for many problematic drinkers (Emrick et al., 1993; Tonigan et al., 1996; Tonigan et al., 2003), but AA-related change mechanisms are poorly understood and rarely investigated. An obvious candidate for investigation is the spiritual aspect of AA because it is identified in the core AA literature to be central for achieving and sustaining sobriety.

There is a large literature documenting that the spirituality of AA-exposed individuals changes over time, and recent work suggests that such changes in spirituality cannot be explained by maturational processes alone. Also clear, contrary to AA doctrine spirituality does not appear to exert a main effect on drinking reductions (e.g., Connors et al., 2001). What, then, is the purpose of spirituality in AA? This study investigated the hypothesis that the practice of spirituality serves a mediational effect, one that results in keeping individuals engaged in other AA practices that are predictive of positive outcome.

## METHODS

This study was a 10-year follow-up of the Project MATCH clients recruited in Albuquerque, NM. Of the total sample recruited in Albuquerque (N = 226), 193 (85%) were interviewed at the 3-year follow-up and 189 (98%) signed an informed consent stating a willingness to participate in future interviews. Of these clients, 14 (7%) died since the 3-year interview leaving 175 eligible clients for this 10-year follow-up study. A Chi square test indicated that there was no relationship between therapy assignment and survival status. To date, 133 (76%) of the 175 clients have been interviewed.

The 10-year assessment took 3 hours to complete. Core measures in this study consisted of the Form 90 (Miller, 1996), and a modified Alcoholics Anonymous Inventory (AAI; Tonigan et al., 1996). Both the Form 90 and the AAI have demonstrated reliability (Tonigan et al., 1996; Tonigan et al., 1997), and both measures were administered at the 3 and 10-year Project MATCH follow-up. The Religious Background and Behaviors (RBB; Connors et al., 1996) is a 13-item assessment, and has 2 scales: Formal religious practices, and God consciousness. The RBB was administered in Project MATCH at intake and the 3, 9, and 15-month follow-ups. Other measures of religiosity and spirituality included the Spiritual Coping Questionnaire (SCQ; Pargament, 1988; Brief Measure of Religiousness and Spirituality, (BMRS; Fetzer;) and the General Alcoholics Anonymous Tools of Recovery (Montgomery et al., 1995). All of these measures had good-to-excellent reliability.

## RESULTS

Path analysis and hybrid structural equation modeling (SEM) provided strong support for the prediction that the function of spirituality, *within* AA, may be to sustain AA-related behaviors and practices over time that are predictive of positive outcome. In Figure 1 the predicted role of spiritual beliefs and practices were ignored. Here, 3-yr AA-related behaviors, e.g., having a sponsor, were predictive of 10-year AA-related behaviors which, in turn, predicted drinking reductions at 10-years.

With spirituality included as a mediator (Figure 2), the path between 3 and 10-year AA practices was virtually eliminated, and spiritual beliefs strongly and significantly predicted 10-year AA-related behaviors, such as having a sponsor. As before, 10-year AA-related behaviors predicted drinking reductions, but somewhat better (.40 vs. .34). Also predicted, the path between spirituality and drinking reductions was nonsignificant, suggesting that there is no main effect of spirituality on drinking reductions.

Figure 1: Simple Model

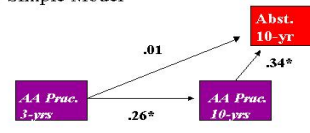
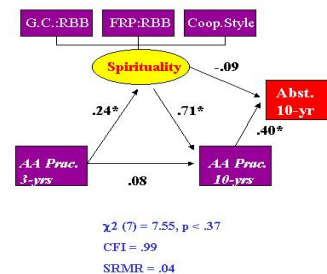


Figure 2: Mediation Model



The mediational effect of spirituality was not robust. Specifically, this study included 6 measures of spirituality and religiousness many of them with multiple scales. The measures in Figure 2 were selected a priori, but post hoc analyses using alternative definitions of spirituality did not replicate the mediational effect.

## DISCUSSION

Spirituality is a dependent and independent variable in the core AA literature. One may have a spiritual experience as the result of working the 12-steps, and sustained spiritual growth is necessary, in the core literature, for achieving and sustaining sobriety. In general, changes in spirituality and religiosity have been documented in longitudinal studies, but the main effect of spirituality as an independent variable has not been demonstrated.

This study offered an alternative view to understanding the utility of spirituality in AA, a perspective that considered spirituality as a mediator to sustain engagement in AA-related practices that are predictive of positive outcome. Findings support this interpretation of AA-based spirituality. To our knowledge, this study offers the first prospective and longitudinal confirmation that spirituality does, indeed, help to explain subsequent drinking reductions. Clearly, additional work is necessary to gain a better understanding of the mediating role of spirituality, especially with AA-exposed persons with shorter periods of affiliation. Also important, our ability to detect the a mediating role of spirituality was not robust. Several excellent measures of religiosity and spirituality, for example, did not perform as expected, and some of these measures were thought to be sensitive to AA-related spirituality.

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