The Higher Power Project: Phase 1 – Preliminary Findings

A Study of Contemporary Spirituality in Addiction and Twelve Step Recovery

Investigators: Dr Wendy Dossett and Professor John Stoner

PROJECT BACKGROUND

The Higher Power Project is a qualitative study of the diversity of the language of Higher Power used by people in twelve-step recovery from addiction. The twelve-step approach to recovery identifies the problem of addiction as rooted in the powerlessness of the individual over the substance or behaviour which is causing them or others harm. Given acceptance of this, an alternative power must be sought. Historically, this power was seen in religious and/or spiritual terms, however it is legitimate to enquire whether this remains the case today.

The Higher Power Project seeks to generate a contemporary phenomenology of the language of Higher Power used by those in twelve-step recovery either in anonymous fellowships or other treatment settings in the UK.

PHASE 1 SURVEY STRUCTURE

Participants who volunteered to take part in Phase 1 of the study are former residents of a drug and alcohol addiction treatment centre in Wales and were recruited during ex-resident reunions in August 2011 and 2012.

Participants completed a comprehensive questionnaire and subsequent 30-minute semi-structured telephone interview. Interviews were transcribed verbatim prior to analysis alongside questionnaire responses.

The ways in which participants described the nature and use of their notions of Higher Power were explored with reference to categories used in the study of contemporary spirituality.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

To date eleven participants have completed the questionnaire and interview process. These participants come from a variety of age-groups and socio-economic backgrounds. They have been clean and sober for between 15 months and 15 years. They attest to using the 12-Step Programme principles in their lives and are or have been active in their respective Anonymous Fellowships.

Whilst each participant speaks of their own individual experience of recovery and Higher Power, there are several findings which emerge as themes:

- All identify as practicing the 12-Step Programme or a daily Fellowship meeting at least one Fellowship meeting a week and are or have been active in their respective Anonymous Fellowships.
- All participants had exposure to religious practice during their childhood but 8 of the 11 consider themselves not to be religious today.
- Of the 3 identifying as religious, one attends a Formal Church, whilst another attends a Welsh Non-conformist Chapel, whilst the third considers herself ‘more spiritual than religious’ and does not regularly attend the Chapel of which she is a member.
- All claimed that the development of a Higher Power that ‘worked for them’ had been and remains essential or very important to their recovery, although the described nature of their individual concepts of a Higher Power varies.
- Terms used to describe Higher Power included: God the Creator, the Spirit of the Universe, Nature, 12-step fellowships and programmes. All claimed that their experience of their Higher Power has developed and broadened over time in recovery.
- Most identified resources outside of those of the fellowships which contributed to this development.
- Participants explained that in order to stop drinking/substance use they needed help. They have used their Higher Power and the 12-step programme to change their thinking, behaviour, relationships and attitudes and see this as a continuing process.

CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER WORK

These findings are not necessarily representative of those in 12-step recovery in anonymous fellowships or of those from different treatment backgrounds, nonetheless they do indicate that whilst a powerful interpretive community shapes the language of Higher Power, diversity still emerges as a strong feature, and 12-step spirituality may helpfully be understood in terms of ‘post-modern negotiated spirituality’ (Gray 2008).

The HPP has secured a grant from the Sir Halley Stewart Trust and plans to gather further data from those in recovery from different backgrounds, faiths, treatment centres and fellowships in future phases of the study.

From our data...

‘My Higher Power is….

...not me! But everything I want to be...

...a power greater than myself that gives life

...now a constant part of my life rather than something I happen to notice now and again

...closer to the spiritual sort, the Universal Spirit

...God my keeper and God my creator

...the spiritual force of good that binds the world on earth together through love

...something bigger than me….well, ultimately something that’s not me

...the flow of energy in the universe, the creative force which brings life

...personal and endogamic

...within all of us

...the fellowship and friendship in AA

...a loving presence that gives me a sense of connectedness with other people and the earth

...caring and loving and only wants the best for me

...impossible to explain

...the “whole of life” and I am part of life

...in the rooms, and in my being

...all embracing spiritual force, an energy around me and within me; it’s unexplainable, can’t see or touch it, but I can sense it

...[participant]

From our data...

Some reflections on Higher Power and spirituality in recovery

[My Higher Power is] linked to my “inner self”… and guides my path through life… I feel the hand of a Higher Power in the miracles of recovery I have witnessed.

My wish to help another drunk is the key to my spiritual wellbeing and forgetting that my Higher Power acts through me.

I am pleased to say I’ve been able to separate God from religion… it’s not the archetypal fellow with the white robe, the grey beard and the face even, but I feel all these to be part of my Higher Power. I feel loving, loving and only wants the best for me.

I don’t really talk about my Higher Power. One part of this is because I cannot really articulate clearly what my Higher Power is but it is important to me and so I don’t want to debate it.

...so when I’m working with other people it’s not me that’s doing it; it’s my Higher Power, I’m trying not to use religious words here, but I’m only aware of what happens.

[My Higher Power] has evolved over the course of my recovery from a theistic being to whom I appealed and a loving presence that gives me a sense of connectedness with other people and the earth…

I don’t need to go to church.

I feel that my spiritual awakening is more (than) one of understanding a loving presence. It’s not about feeling better about myself, being able to relate to other people in a kinder way and starting to feel more at peace within myself.

I cannot rely on my own will and direction and I firmly believe that the guidance of a higher power is needed.

I pray rarely as I’m not sure what I’m praying for, but I do pray, especially when I am struggling with temptation and deep feelings of loneliness.

I feel that my conception of my Higher Power as a communion/connectiveness is my path to spiritual health and consequently, continued sobriety.

[My sense of] a Higher Power can change day by day.

I describe God in the feminine because my concept of ‘life giver’ is exclusively purporting to the feminine of all species.

Some Key Literature


Alcoholics Anonymous: cult or cure? New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services Inc


The Higher Power Project • www.chester.ac.uk/higherpowerproject

Follow the HPP on Twitter: @higherpowerproj