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ABSTRACT

Performance terminology can be applied as a form of analysis to evoke unique understandings of the identity of adult children of alcoholics (ACoA). By observing ACoA meetings, one can see members relying on positive reinforcement, validation perceptions, rewriting and visualizing healthy parenting skills, and rehearsing more functional alternative behavior. It appears that creation and acknowledgement of inner selves become the primary means by which members construct identity. It is the inner child who can begin to show the individual how to take care of and parent the adolescent and young adult parts of the self. Members' descriptions of and scripting and rehearsing with these inner selves suggests a dynamic, performance approach to recovery. Identity for the adult child, then, may be a complex and creative reworking of the crisis of addiction into the drama of recovery. For some adult children of alcoholics in recovery, support groups can aid the individual in learning how to rewrite the past and practice healthier possibilities for the future. Some members of mutual self-help groups imagine dialogues with and take on the roles of child, adolescent, and young adult as a part of recovery work. Understanding these unique parts of the self is key to working through dysfunction and synthesizing the inner selves into a functional, recovering whole. These strategies provide hope and health to individuals who come from alcoholic homes as well as other children of trauma. (NB)

'SCRIPTING' THE INNER CHILD IN ADULT CHILDREN OF ALCOHOLICS: AN APPROACH FOR REHEARSING RECOVERY

by

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"'SCRIPTING' THE INNER CHILD IN ADULT CHILDREN OF ALCOHOLICS: AN APPROACH FOR REHEARSING RECOVERY".

I am interested in exploring how performance metaphors evoke unique understandings of dysfunctional family systems. Specifically, I am looking at how adult children of alcoholics in mutual self-help support groups describe, script, and rehearse the dialogues with and metamorphosis of the "inner child". The inner child grows up in recovery. As this child ages, the "teenage" and "young adult" selves are revealed. Rehearsal may be viewed as a cognitive term describing the dynamic relationship between an individual and her/his inner selves. Also, rehearsal suggests a range of somatic responses and activities. To illustrate, some members of mutual self-help groups imagine dialogues with and take on the roles of child, teenager, and young adult as a part of recovery work. Understanding these unique parts of self is key to working through dysfunction and synthesizing the inner selves into a functional, recovering whole. This type of intrapersonal communication may be viewed as an exciting and creative approach for rehearsing recovery. In this context, performance metaphors elaborate theoretical discussion as well as suggest implications for practical application.

"'SCRIPTING' THE INNER CHILD IN ADULT CHILDREN OF ALCOHOLICS: AN APPROACH FOR REHEARSING RECOVERY"

During the past decade, concern with compulsive and addictive behaviors such as alcoholism, food addiction, codependency, and drug abuse has gained national attention. These diseases cost society untold emotional and physical pain. Not the least of this pain is absorbed by the children of addictive families. One area of health communication research is concerned with studying the impact of addiction on children. This research is crucial since it is not only children of alcoholics that are affected by addiction. According to Gravitz and Bowden,

> children of alcoholics are but the visible tip of a much larger social iceberg which casts an invisible shadow over as much as 96 per cent of the population in this country. These are the other "children of trauma." Surviving their childhoods rather than experiencing them, these children of trauma have also had to surrender a part of themselves very early in life. Not knowing what hit them, and suffering a sourceless sense of pain in adulthood, they perpetuate the denial and minimization which encase them in dysfunctional roles, rules, and behavior . . . Over 200 million of us are denying our past, submerging our realities, and ultimately misplacing both our "little" self and our "big" Self.[1]

Since a majority of individuals come from families that are to a greater or lesser extent dysfunctional, it is useful to examine strategies used by adult children of alcoholics. These strategies may eventually prove to be helpful to many other "children of trauma." Primarily, this discussion is concerned with explicating one way recovering adult children of alcoholics construct

their identity.

The paper is interested in exploring ho performance terminology can be applied as a form of analysis and so evoke unique understandings of self-identity against a backdrop of dysfunctional family systems. Specifically, this brief discussion will look at how adult children of alcoholics in mutual self-help groups describe, script, and rehearse the dialogues with and metamorphosis of the "inner child". It is not that the inner child grows up in recovery. Rather, as an individual begins the difficult journey of recovery, "teen-age" and "young adult" selves are revealed. These inner selves can promote conflict since they frequently respond to situations in an addictive manner. The recovering adult child must learn to "parent" these parts of self. This task challenges the adult child since she/he never received healthy parenting in the past. Understanding these unique parts of self, through scripting and role-taking, is key to working through dysfunction and bringing selves together into a functional inner family. This type of intrapersonal communication may be viewed as an exciting and creative approach for "performing" recovery. In this context, performance terminology suggests implications for practical application.

Background

During the past nine months I have been a participant-observer at Adult Children of Alcoholics, a twelve step based self-help group. The group meets every Friday night at a building located in a large city in the mid-west. After the meetings, a majority of the participants go out to eat dinner, socialize, and continue discussing issues brought up during the meeting. While the composition of the ACoA group changes depending on who attends, primarily, meeting participants are professionals in the twenty-four to forty-eight year age range. Generally, at least two dozen adults attend, with

between one-half and two-thirds who are female while one-third and one-half are male participants.

The Friday night meeting was not my first introduction to ACoA. I regularly attended meetings for several years prior to my recent experiences. However, I attended this new meeting after moving from another part of the country. This new gathering involved an unfamiliar group of people and several first time observations. I was familiar with the jargon of the "inner child" and the "child within" and had heard such labels used at previous meetings. This vocabulary can be useful when identifying the part of the self who suffered abandonment and alcohol related abuse as a child. I had also read several texts which elaborate the essential role of the "inner child". In these, recovery professionals consider this part of self to be the "true or real self".[2] While attending the new meetings, I started hearing participants refer to their "teen-ager" and "young adult" selves. I found this vocabulary compelling and descriptive. The "inner child" may be viewed as loosely corresponding to the "child" ego state essential to the structure of transactional analysis. However, the "teen-ager" and "young adult" seem more like distinct additions to T.A.'s other ego states, "parent" and "adult".[3] I decided to observe how meeting participants verbally describe the "teen-ager" and the "young adult". This discussion presents several observations as well as suggestions for researching this fascinating and useful strategy in adult children of alcoholic recovery.

Adult children have unique strategies when referring to their inner selves. They describe by talking about selves. Also, they script verbal interactions with selves through self-talk. Finally, they rehearse behavioral interactions with selves through role-playing and role-taking exercises. In

this context, description may be clear but the notion of scripting and rehearsing may benefit from a brief elaboration. The term script is used here to identify when adult children talk to themselves. They script interactions by finding words which will allow access to inner selves and further self-knowledge. Rehearsal may be viewed as a cognitive term describing the dynamic relationship between an individual and her/his inner selves. Also, rehearsal suggests a range of somatic responses and activities. To illustrate, some members of mutual self-help groups imagine dialogues with and take on the roles of child, teen-ager, and young adult as part of recovery work. Recovery, then, is a process of restructuring cognitive processes from negative into positive messages which translate into healthy behavior.

This discussion is divided into two sections: "describing" and "scripting and rehearsing". The first section presents identifying characteristics of the inner child, teen-ager, and young adult. In this, adult children of alcoholics talk about their inner selves. The second section presents several illustrations of the way adult children engage in self-talk, primarily through visualizing talking to inner selves. Also, adult children try-on and rehearse interactions with inner selves by taking on the role of healthy parent. The vocabulary of inner child, teen-ager, and young adult is as important as how such communication translates into the behavior of recovery.

Describing

Within the adult child of the alcoholic, there are many different voices vying for control of the individual. Frequently these voices speak inside the adult child in ways that reinforce addictive and dysfunctional behaviors. Bradshaw refers to the "inner voice" which tells the individual she or he is bad. He suggests that this inner voice grows out of toxic shame.

> Eric Berne referred to it as a set of parental recordings that are like cassette tapes. Some have estimated that there are 25,000 hours of these tapes in the normal person's head. Fritz Perls and the Gestalt school call these voices "introjected parental voices". Aaron Beck calls them "automatic thoughts". Whatever we call them, all of us have some voices in our heads. Shame-based people especially have dominant negative shaming, self-depreciating voices.[4]

In the group I observed, adult children of alcoholics name the "inner child", "teen-ager", and "young adult" parts of self. Bradshaw's inner voice corresponds to a certain extent with the two latter parts of self as well as internalized critical parental voices. Recovery entails listening to the inner child regarding ways to transform these critical parental voices into nurturing voices. Before going further, it is useful to examine how adult children describe their inner selves.

Inner Child

During ACoA meetings, individuals talk about how they feel in the here-and-now and how daily situations remind them of past events. In talking about feelings and memories, members spend the majority of their talk time describing their inner selves and how these selves respond in socio-emotional situations. As previously stated, the notion of an inner child is frequently associated with the child ego state presented in transactional analysis literature. While not a perfect match, T.A. can provide some insight into the child part of self. ACoA group members also see this child part as impulsive and emotionally motivated. Also, some transactional analysts

> seem to grow fond of this ego state in their patients. They speak

> of the Child as "the only part that can really enjoy itself" and as "the best part of the person."[5]

Many professionals in the field of recovery view the inner child as key to unlocking functional relationships and healthy behavior. Whitfield says

> although mentioned since ancient times, the concept of the "Child Within" has been referred to and talked about with increasing frequency in the last decade. Indeed, it has become the central healing metaphor, principle and approach for adult children of dysfunctional families precisely because it is far more than a metaphor. It is a <u>reality</u>. Our Child Within is who we really are--ultimately alive, energetic, creative and fulfilled.[6]

The inner child is the part of self that may have gone into hiding while in a dysfunctional family. However, this child within can be accessed to help the individual in her/his recovery. In the twelve step group I attended members spoke extensively about this part of self. According to members, the inner child has several identifying characteristics, including but not limited to:

1. holds the individual's feelings
2. often "feels" the uncomfortable emotions
3. frightened and scared of parents and events beyond control
4. hurt
5. confused
6. needy of affection, care
7. wants to be spontaneous, capacity for play and having fun
8. innocent, honest
9. fear of abandonment

Acceptance of the inner child may be difficult since this is the vulnerable, "powerless" part of self and the ACoA member seeks control and power in

her/his interactions with self and others. While frequently difficult to accept as part of the individual, this is the very part of the self that offers hope of recovery. The inner child is the guide to past painful memories as well as future healthy behaviors.

Teen-ager

From what I have viewed, recovery literature does not fully describe the teen-age or young adult parts of self. Based on ACoA meetings, members self-talk reveals that the teen-ager can be the volatile, acting-out part of self. Often, this is the part of self that seeks to change uncomfortable feelings by adopting compulsive and addictive behavior. The teen-ager looks outside of her/his self to objects (gambling), substances (food, alcohol, drugs), and people (relationships, sex) in order to alter how she/he feels. According to Klausner and Hasselbring,

> compulsions are symptoms of discomfort with self. Underneath the surface of any compulsive behavior, we find a deeper, underlying dependency problem that has its origin in our childhood alcoholic families. The compulsive behaviors protect us--at least temporarily--from having to confront our underlying unhealthy dependencies. . . .The addiction or unhealthy dependency on jobs, persons, or substances acts to mask our inability to be interdependent with others and conceals our painful unmet deperdency needs from childhood.[7]

Many members also reveal that the acting out part of self was not let out when growing up and they, therefore, developed addictive and compulsive behaviors later in life. While some individuals were actively rebellious others were afraid to show their feelings and engage in "normal" establishment questioning

behavior. Nevertheless, this part of self remains locked within the individual's self. Members report that the teen-ager has several identifying characteristics, including but not limited to:

1. rebellious
2. "anti-social behavior" such as swearing, cursing, lying
3. talks about sexuality
4. likes to try new experiences
5. inappropriate high risk behavior such as indiscriminate sex, car racing, alcohol and drug addiction
6. anger
7. acting-out behavior - "in the addiction"
8. anger about abandonment

The teen-ager is often responsible for addictions and compulsions. This part of self desperately needs positive, functional parenting from the adult child.

Young Adult

For members in the ACoA group, the young adult is the most well developed part of the self. This is frequently that part of self who acts in rigid, manipulative, dysfunctional and other addictive ways and behaviors under the guise of "being an adult". The prospect of "being an adult" is very important since it represents a pseudo-control of the uncontrollable. The ACoA member wishes to control people, places, and things. In so controlling outside situations, the adult child reduces feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness. The individual strives to act mature, serious, and non-playful in her/his interactions. Also, the individual describes an overriding concern with avoiding painful feelings and so, tries not to "dwell on the past". The young adult sensibility is one in which the individual consciously and subconsciously uses self-talk to maintain her/his addictive behaviors. The

young adult is highly goal, success and work oriented, often to the exclusion of recreation, family and relationships. Members suggest that the young adult has several identifying characteristics, including but not limited to:

1. all or nothing thinking such as super responsible or super irresponsible
2. manipulates relational partners
3. holds on to resentments
4. wants to "get it perfect"
5. feels guilt when focused on self
6. desire to control other people, places, and things
7. independent - "doesn't need anybody"
8. over attempts projects/commitments for ego gratification
9. abandons others first in order to protect self from being abandoned

This lists of characteristics is not inclusive. Rather it is intended to suggest a cluster of attitudes and behaviors as described by ACoA group members. A suggestion for further research may be in the examination and explication of the teen-age and young adult parts of self in additional recovery literature. In the following, members elaborate on the inner selves as they script possible interactions and role-take positive behaviors.

Scripting and Performing

When adult children of alcoholics talk to parts of their inner self they are engaged in scripting. They choose the language and tone of voice with which to address the inner self. In a very real way they are scripting a role to play in their own life drama. A goal of such role-playing is improved self-esteem and healthier interactions with others. Many meeting participants reported that the most effective way to script interactions was to imagine

what they wished caretakers would have said to them or what sounds healthy to them now. Other members aid in scripting since they are able to act as a sounding board, validate perceptions, and provide suggestions of healthy and loving parental messages. The main way members script is to rely on meditations and visualizations for insight into appropriate language and behavior. Easily, this type of work also frequently leads to rehearsing possibilities for interaction of the recovering self with the wounded inner self. The following visualizations are reconstructed writings based on self-disclosure and oral in-meeting work demonstrated by adult children.

In the following visualization a member talks about beginning to connect with and care for her inner child.

Visualization #1

> I'm walking down a long corridor. It is a hall in the house where I lived when I was a child. At the end of it is a door. It is the door to my old room. I open the door and go in. I see myself as a child. I go over to her. She says she's scared. I hold her. I tell her that I won't let anything happen to her. She is safe now. I won't abandon her. Everything's going to be all right. She's crying in my arms. [Member begins to cry.] I'm crying too. This is really painful.

In many respects this visualization suggests a longer meditation by Bradshaw which he titles, "Meditation: Embracing Your Lost Inner Child".[8] In it, Bradshaw stresses that the inner child, the vital spontaneous part of self, needs to be integrated into the individual's life. In a visualization such as this, the adult child is vocally and somatically engaging with the imagined scenario. The member is not just speaking about and retelling an occurrence. Rather, the adult child experimentally tries on the feeling of lovingly

interacting with the inner child. Often the member will begin to cry and will rock back-and-forth as though she/he is comforting a young child. This behavior is telling since the member is learning how to comfort themself. When this level of involvement occurs the member is actively rehearsing positive parenting with her/his inner child. This type of somatic responsiveness is, typically, validated by other meeting members through positive reinforcement such as nodding, smiling, hugging, and touching. Finally, members encourage this type of public rehearsal with verbal reinforcement. Often members will say statements such as: "that was good work you just did," "I'm proud of you," and "that was hard--you deserve a reward." In this way, group members also rehearse positive parenting skills on each other.

The following visualization depicts the relationship between inner child, teen-ager and young adult.

Visualization #2

> Most of my life has been a struggle between my teen-ager and my young adult. They both want control. My teen-ager wants to do what she wants when she wants it. My young adult wants to have everyone think she's perfect. My whole life has been ignoring my little girl. Just like when I was a kid.

The relationship between parts of the self is often emotionally charged. In this, the adult child describes differences in selves as she elaborates her inner struggle for control. This is less a "rehearsal" than a clear profile of the identity of child, teen-ager, and young adult.

In this next visualization, conflict between inner selves is again highlighted. Spirituality, a cornerstone of twelve step programs, plays an

important role in this member's engagement.

Visualization #3

> I envision God or my higher power, you know? My teen-ager is standing back and scowling. Like this is so stupid. And my young adult is shaking her head. Like, it's a waste, I've got lots of work to do. But my child is standing there holding his hand. She's looking up into God's face, smiling. That's what I imagined when I was a child. That God would save me. He was the only one who loved me. I guess my kid knows what I need. I should trust her more. I should rely on her and my higher power more.

In this, the adult child is able to visualize the power dynamics between her parts of self. This type of displayed interaction between selves can be empowering for the individual. She can learn to rely on inner child, higher power, and ACoA program and philosophy. This reliance on self and supportive others reinforces the possibility of members developing a positive sense of identity.

According to Klausner and Hasselbring, healing from the losses of childhood involves three stages: recognition, feeling the feelings, and grief work.[9] For adult children of alcoholics, scripting and rehearsing interactions becomes a way to combine all three of these stages of healing losses. In meetings, members recognize past hurts by moving out of denial and realistically describing the past. Also, they learn to feel feelings by modeling healthy in-group behavior and gaining positive, safe reinforcement from other members. This stage of healing losses is very important. Klausner and Hasselbring stress that "if you recognize losses without feeling them, the losses continue to be re-enacted in your life."[10] ACoA meetings are frequently perceived as safe for participants since members validate and support the

healing of losses rather than invalidate and minimize such work. Finally, members grieve losses. For many individuals this may mean crying, moaning, weeping, or other behavioral signs of emotionally and physiologically feeling pain and saddness. After feeling the range of feelings surrounding the loss, the adult child is encouraged to withdraw emotional investment in the loss. By withdrawing emotional investment, the individual may realize that they are now responsible for creating healing experiences and moving forward from their loss.

In this final visualization, the group member grieves his lost childhood. While grief work is a painful process, it is a natural response to loss and a crucial bridge to recovery.

Visualization #4

> Sometimes I just imagine I'm talking to my little boy. I see myself as a little child and I try to explain why his mama couldn't be a mama to him. [Member begins to cry.] She wanted to but she didn't know how. And then I tell him she hurt real bad 'cause she didn't have a mama. Her mama had died. And that's why she wasn't a very good mama even though she loved him. And I have to remind him of this a lot.

In this visualization the adult child can rehearse healthy ways to parent his inner child. He does not excuse his alcoholic mother but explains her inability to parent in a healthy manner. The adult child recognizes his pain through validation before exploring feelings and grieving the loss. This member gently parents himself. Other members, in turn, may parent this member by physically and/or vocally supporting his difficult healing work. Likewise, these members may empathize by being somatically involved. Members sometimes

oegin to cry with the disclosing individual. This interaction between members encourages adult children to get needs met.

Conclusion

The focus of this brief discussion has been in applying performance terminology as a form of analysis in order to evoke unique understandings of the identity of adult children of alcoholics. This initial examination highlights selected recovery strategies adopted by some adult children. By observing ACoA meetings, members can be seen as relying on positive reinforcement, validation perceptions, rewriting and visualizing healthy parenting skills, and rehearsing more functional alternative behavior. In observing these adult children, creation and acknowledgment of inner selves becomes the primary means by which members construct identity. Further, it is the inner child who can begin to show the individual how to take care of and parent the teen-ager and young adult parts of self. Members description of and scripting and rehearsal with these inner selves suggests a dynamic, performative approach to recovery. Identity for the adult child, then, may be a complex and creative reworking of the crisis of addiction into the drama of recovery. For some adult children of alcoholics in recovery, support groups such as ACoA can aid the individual in learning how to rewrite the past and practice healthier possibilities for the future. These strategies provide hope and health to individuals who came from alcoholic homes as well as other children of trauma.

NOTES

1. Gravitz and Bowden, preface.

2. There are many fine books which focus on accepting the "inner child" or "child within" who, although frightened and vulnerable to abandonment, has the capacity to become the wise potential parent of the self. See, e.g., Abrams, Bradshaw, Whitfield.

3. Although popularized by Harris' I'm OK--You're OK, it is Berne's early discussion of the Parent, Adult, Child ego states that fully explains the transactional analysis system. While the use of vocabulary by ACoA members in this study does not provide an exact correspondence with the terminology associated with T.A., there are several similarities, especially in therapeutic approach. The core belief, that individuals can consciously change, is central to T.A. adherents and ACoA members. Also, the ACoA meeting becomes, at times, not unlike group therapy. Some members take on the role of healthy parent to another member's wounded child, angry teen, or controlling young adult. Frequently, however, members work through their pasts and engage with their inner selves alone. See, also, Monaghan for a recent reworking of the principles of T.A., especially the child ego state.

4. Bradshaw, 184.

5. Harper, 76-77.

6. Whitfield, Gift, 1.

7. Klausner and Hasselbring, 72-73.

8. Bradshaw, 140-141.

9. Klausner and Hasselbring, 100-101.

10. Klausner and Hasselbring, 100.

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