

Final Project
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in partial fulfilment of

**Doctorate in Psychotherapy
by Professional Studies**

*An investigation of the dynamics of the personal will
versus a Higher Power in Alcoholics Anonymous
12-step treatment of Substance Use Disorder*

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Abstract

This Final Project is an exploration of the lived experience of dynamics of the personal will of substance-abusing individuals going through the process of recovery in a AA 12-Step self-help group. The study also investigates the dynamic of the personal will interfacing with the will of a perceived higher power. The research context is within the paradigm of Alcoholics Anonymous self-help groups and their 12-step program.

Most research in this field is related to predicting or measuring outcome of treatment in 12-step facilities and understanding the motivation for treatment among individuals with Substance Use Disorder. Few studies are found on the subject of the lived experience of the personal will prior to recovery, during recovery and into late recovery in the context of AA and the 12-step program.

Twelve-step groups are available worldwide, in some countries it is the only type of free self-help group available within which recovery processes take place. There is a need for an enhanced understanding of the psychological mechanisms involved with the dynamics of the personal will in the process of recovery in the field of 12-step facilitation and in the field of addiction treatment generally.

I chose to use qualitative research methods and the data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The participants were eight active members of AA with a sobriety time range of 2-17 years, with a mean length of 7.4 years. The analysis and description of the data were conducted using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

The results reveal the will Complex in Substance Dependence (WCSD) of the addicted personality as multilayered, compensatory selves of destructive intents that correspond to the undifferentiated term 'self-will' in the AA literature. In the continuum of recovery, the participants unanimously name the appearance of a qualitatively different and constructive aspect of the personal will emerging into conscious awareness at the point of 'hitting bottom', as an authentic intent or core will. These aspects of the personal will are described in all eight cases to exist in parallel, constituting internal conflict negotiated until the point of surrender to a perceived higher power. From the point of surrender, the core will is in correspondence with the experienced higher will, whilst the aspects of the will WCSD recede or withdraw. The dynamics of the will are concomitant with a shift in belief

system and consequently in intents. These paradoxical findings are discussed and interpreted through the theoretical lens of transpersonal psychology.

Building on existing knowledge, this study can contribute to deciphering the psychological mechanisms behind the fluctuations of the personal will of substance-dependent individuals in treatment, which in turn can be used to enhance therapeutic interventions in the treatment of Substance Use Disorder.

Suggestions for future research include a focus on further exploration into the proposed dynamic and the therapeutic effect of increased consciousness of one's internal dynamics and their effect on choice alternatives. The conditions leading to the emergence of the 'core will' might also be explored to understand how we can facilitate the development of this will aspect to achieve constructive intentionality.

The clinical significance of the study is potentially broad as the underlying psychological dynamic of the will of the substance-addicted individual can be incorporated into a variety of treatment approaches from different philosophical standings. This study is also significant and a helpful tool for psychotherapists working in rehabilitation facilities or in private practice with substance-dependent clients. For transpersonal therapists and the psychosynthesis community, this investigation will offer new knowledge, theory and competence to the complex field of Substance Use Disorder treatment.