

THE CODE OF GRACE: A CULTURAL APPROACH TO 12-STEP FELLOWSHIP PROGRAMS IN HUNGARY*

GABOR KELEMEN

MARTA B. ERDOS

University of Pécs, Hungary

ABSTRACT

This article proposes a cultural approach to Hungarian self-help and self-care groups for drug and alcohol addicts. Authors rely on previous results of a qualitative data analysis in outlining a new code of communication, representing differing values, norms, and attitudes of the speech community of sober addicts. Functionally, the code of grace facilitates integration of human experiences that would count as taboos in the dominant culture. Major constituents and interrelations of the code are described.

INTRODUCTION

In Hungary, the ban on anonymous self-help and self-care groups of addicted people abolished only in the years of social transition, putting an end to the communist rule in 1989. Hungary has been characterized by a remarkably high degree of self-destructive forms of behavior as suicide and alcoholism (Fekete & Schmidtke, 1996), parallel to the lack of autonomous human communities for social support (Baráth, 1999). The mere existence of such communities could have meant an unanswerable challenge to the controlling, manipulative, and demoralizing aspects of previous Soviet-type rule. This is why alternative ways of community life—such as communes or religious communities—have entirely

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been missing from our society, apart from some street subcultures labeled as harmful and destructive. With the advent of the self-help movement, a new pattern of community life has been introduced: these fellowships neither represent a subculture nor a counterculture but are *complementary* in nature to mainstream lifestyles, which are dominated by values of consumer society, entering an anomic social setting of the present transition.

Every distinct community is characterized by its specific code of communication—based on the mutual knowledge of its members—reflecting its own conventions and systems of socialization, and simultaneously constituting its view of the world (Horányi, 1999; Hymes, 1974; Philipsen, 1992). When trying to define the boundaries of this symbolic world constituted by human thinking and by the inseparable process of communication, there are some universal orienting questions to be answered by all the members of any given community: What makes a human being? What is our mission in life? What is our relation to the physical environment and to society? What is the temporal focus of human activity? (Gudykinst & Ting-Toomey, 1990; Philipsen, 1992).

When speaking about “speech codes,” we do not only relate to important theoretical antecedents, but want to emphasize the determining power of language, the constitutive-legitimizing power of codes. A speech code—as a system that governs the use of symbolic faculty—determines thematization, that is, the very nature of our experiences—our perspectives, reasoning, evaluation, related emotions, and the range of possible consequences of various types of actions for members of the speech community in a specific context. It includes symbols, meanings, presumptions, beliefs, rules and procedures of language use, and interpretation. Those sharing the code do not only construe and interpret meanings but in the same recursive process they reconstruct the given code itself.

A different speech code reflects and forms an alternative view of the world, where explanations for and solutions to basic human problems might totally differ and might be just as unintelligible for outsiders as the utterances themselves. When trying to reach a higher level of *existential experience*, the speech code has a key role in establishing coherence and it helps the individual to find the place—the *centre*—where he or she fits in the universe. This social rhetoric does not only determine what is correct but whatever can be interpreted as meaningful—coherent, consistent, and complete—by the members of the speech community.

A Hungarian linguist, long before the linguistic turn and the emergence of discursive theories defined language¹ as the *form* of culture (Karácsony, 1938). We are very well aware that the process of communication and the construction of experiences are not restricted to the verbal domain. Our

¹ For the Hungarian people, our language has always been a powerful means of the survival of the nation, almost continuously ruled and exploited by several foreign authorities since 1526. Major representatives of social improvements were not politicians, but novelists, essayist, or poets.

verbalizations are individually validated by direct bodily experiences; however, a number of researches have underlined that cultural aspects—the view of the world together with our norms, values, role-sets—are definitely coded in the language (Gergen & Gergen, 1983; Sapir, 1949; Shotter, 1993). In the context of 12-step fellowships, the addict in recovery first becomes a *verbal convert*; that is, the process of recovery starts with the repetition of new, alternative verbalizations about addiction and sobriety (Denzin, 1987, p. 129.).

We also propose a linguistic approach to reach a deeper understanding of the developing sober culture. The multi-disciplinary theoretical background for this linguistic endeavor includes works of Wittgenstein (1963), Bakhtin (1981), Shotter (1993), Anderson and Goolishian (1988), and other—distinguished authors representing the social constructionist perspective. In this framework, co-constructed meanings are central to any form of therapy, including self-help and self-care movements. Language, as the major manifestation of this communication process, serves as rich resource for the study. Processes and procedures of this sober culture—as the communal construction of differing norms, values, attitudes, or horizontal organization of the 12-step fellowship programs—have been studied by numerous authors (Antze, 1987; Bales, 1944; Tiebout, 1954), some of whom focused on recurrent linguistic patterns in the speeches of the members at Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings as constituents of a special social reality (Arminen, 1998; Denzin, 1987) or even suggested a new, updated terminology for better comprehension and sharing (Laguittton, 1992).

For a Hungarian native speaker, there are some prominent characteristics in the language use of sober addicts that make its semantics and pragmatics very unusual for those who try to understand it taking “normative,” ideologically dominant consumer language use as a starting point. First, sober language often seems “controversial” or “paradoxical.” How would one interpret such basic terms of sobriety as a “sober alcoholic,” “emphatic confrontation,” or “tough love”?² What is in this sort of deviation, manifested in the above phrases, that permits such extraordinary pairing of antonyms? Following commonsense reasoning, why should anyone attend the meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous regularly if he insists on having been sober for years? What sort of transformation does the speaker refer to in the following peculiar, contradictory way: “the real transition is if I can go for a walk tomorrow just as I did yesterday . . . and I’ll live the same way as I lived yesterday?”

By fundamental transformation, we do not “normally” mean *stability*; and the range of events is considered much beyond everyday activity or circumstance. Similarly, what is meant by frequently heard utterances of sober speakers like

² The Hungarian term for addiction (*szenvedélybetegség*) is paradoxical in itself. The mirror-translation of this word is “disease of passion,” while only a slight modification in the last syllable is needed to get “szenvedés,” which is translated as “suffering.” This language use is parallel or reflexive to the true nature of the dis-ease with the first period of “high” experiences followed by lasting misery.

“to my greatest luck everybody left me at that time so I could not find anybody to go to . . . practically nowhere” when ordinary structuring of experiences would demand a different organization of the personal narrative, for example: “it was an absolute disaster that everybody left me when I was really down”? For the addict, the first step in social reintegration—which is the first step in communally construing the culture of sobriety—is to get away from usual narrative structures and identifications.

These alterations, identified not only in the semantics but also in the dominant narrative structures, are hardly intelligible unless one is familiar with the specific construction system or world-view of these fellowships reflected in and reconstructed by language. In this philosophy, a sober addict would mean a person who is able to cope constructively with the fact that he has a lifetime disease, a specific, presumably lethal vulnerability to some substance or destructive behavior. In this definition, sobriety does not only refer to the actual status of the person—rather, to a lasting attitude, a *permanence* of 24-hour *temporary* cycles; a personal philosophy that is the result of experiential learning.

In our second example—in the unusual story construction—we may discover the reevaluation of experiences, or formation of the third perspective that is deeply connected to the notion of trusting a personally caring Higher Power (Kelemen & Erdos, 2003). While the first perspective is the disintegrated, split view of addiction (heaven and hell) and the second is the “alien” perspective of rehabilitation³ (as represented by external agents who encourage verbal converts), this third perspective is formed in the process of initial surrender and the subsequent experiences of being the *individual-in-the-community*. Consequentially, “traumatic experiences” fit into a different scheme where either stereotyped answers (“oh, poor boy”) offered by the macro-culture or traditional analytic therapeutic interrogation about possible explanations lose their relevance. As a Narcotics Anonymous-member put it: “I am interested in my recovery . . . *it does not really matter what mistakes my parents made when I was a child . . . that does not further my recovery.*” The same train of thought appears not only at the scale of interpersonal relations but on the macro-level as well: “before entering my recovery, I thought that I was a mere victim of the society”—which belief, the speaker states, did not promote the process of recovery either. The above “paradoxical” utterances inform us about a new, alternative culture that is a precious complementation of our everyday life—as it helps to cope with seemingly unanswerable questions that come from the reasoning of linear logic, governing dominant language use. These linguistic episodes are connected elements of a verbal puzzle which will be referred to here as the “code of grace.”

³ Psychosocial rehabilitation: a process that facilitates the opportunities for individuals who are impaired, disabled, or handicapped by a mental disorder to reach their optimum level of independent functioning in the community (WHO, 1996).

Empirically, our work is based on the results of a qualitative data analysis of videotaped speeches of recovering addicts from a Hungarian concept based therapeutic community (The Rehabilitation Centre of the Leo Amici Foundation, Komló) and from some other speakers who had a decisive role in the formation of the Hungarian 12-step fellowship programs and are also connected to the Foundation. This connection is not only existential, but it is also present on an organizational level, that is, by joining regular practical activities at the Komló TC. The texts came from two different contexts: the first unit of 23 transcribed speeches was collected at the “Liberation Ritual,” as the graduation ceremony from the TC is called.

In the current analysis, only texts of those recovering addicts were used where additional data on the successful progress in their recovery⁴ were obtained from the 12-step-based aftercare program of the center.⁵ The second unit includes 15 texts from lectures held at the Department of Social Work at the University of Pécs in 2003, where recovering addicts from various types of 12-step programs participated with several professionals in the field of addictions (psychiatrists, lawyers, journalists, etc.) and shared their experiences on substance abuse with the students. Texts from *both units*, however, were generated in settings where sober addicts and “normies” *joined in a dialogical process of making shared meanings*.

The structured approach of the “ethnography of speech” direction (Hymes, 1974; Philipsen, 1992) offers an all-embracing systematic framework for description. The notion of speech code can account for the fact that people whose mother tongue is identical may well belong to a different speech community and intergroup, “intertribal” communication can become either a source of misunderstandings and failure, or—in the moments of dialogic participation—of precious complementary knowledge. Hymes, in his seminal paper on the ethnography of speech, identifies several dimensions to be studied: the ethnographic orientation to SPEAKING would require to examine the *setting*, the *participants*, the goals or *ends*, the sequence of *actions*, the special *keys* as inherently determined by the code of communication, *instrumentalities*, and different *norms* and *genres* shared by the parties in the process of communication.

So far, we have briefly informed the reader about the broad social setting as well as the actual roles and possible actions of the participants. Goals, keys, and norms will be at the focus of our interest in the subsequent part of our study. Philipsen (1992), following this tradition of socio-linguistic research, in his qualitative analysis on two distinct speech codes of “Nacirema” (middle-class urban American) and “Teamsterville” (rural working-class American) communities, has claimed that the speech code has a major role in the identity

⁴ Recovery: a deeply personal, unique process of changing one's attitudes, values, feelings, goals, skills, and/or roles (Anthony, 1993).

⁵ For further details and results of the sequential-transformative data analysis on comparing texts of recovery and texts of relapse, see Kelemen and Erdos (2003).

formation of the speaker: “. . . in terms of answering questions of ultimate meaning, in terms of providing individuals and societies with ways to answer questions about why they exist and where they fit in a scheme of sense and meaning, a code of speaking provides the resources for creating a sense of coherence and form. Codes of speaking are, from this vantage point, rhetorical, interpretative and identificative resources” (Philipsen, 1992, p. 16). For a Nacirema speaker who constantly highlights the sanctity of Self as a unique, demarcated entity—speaking the “code of dignity”—the adoration of social status and social roles by Teamsterville speakers in the “code of honor” usually makes no sense at all. “Intertribal” communication is interpreted by members of the two groups as either “cowardly” or “primitive,” respectively. This basic distinction about man’s mission results in a great number of differences in the conception of relations, space, and time.

The Hungarian culture, as a macro-context of addictions and sobriety, seems to be a special amalgamation of the “code of honor,” and “code of dignity”: features of both can be identified but cannot be localized easily. This is probably due to our special historical development where, most importantly, the feudal system was almost immediately followed by the communist rule in the second half of the 20th century. Social stratification and mobility were fundamentally manipulated and distorted by the Soviet regime. First instances of individualistic, self-centered code of “Nacirema” speakers could publicly appear in the early 1970s, primarily in therapeutic context and among artists. Authoritative language use supported “community,” strictly controlled en masse behavior where “individual” was simply understood as “best representative of the socialistic specimen.” By “community,” a mass of hypothesized firm believers in the communist ideology was referred to—by the 80s, this entity practically turned into an empty set. “Community life” meant a continuous repetition of saturated phrases that legitimized the absolutistic power of few and the existential-spiritual poverty of many. This deviation from normative (dictionary-based) language use in the dominant culture—a recurrent element in data analysis—is a usual linguistic consequence of lasting dictatorships (Terestyéni, 2001).

MAJOR CONSTITUENTS OF THE CODE OF GRACE

In spite of its similarities to the language of the church, the speech code of 12-step fellowships and programs at the turn of the 21st century do not seem to match exactly any former, existing pattern in the Hungarian culture—neither formally nor functionally. As communism more or less successfully crashed the semi-feudal class system in our country, a space was created for new genres as a beneficial side effect.

The speech code of sobriety is composed of interconnected differences that make a real difference—for an addict, between life and self-destruction. Theoreticians of the field have often compared Alcoholics Anonymous and similar groups

to some kind of religious organization (Arminen, 1998). This, we believe, is only the first step to comprehension, a potential anchoring point for organizing unknown phenomena. Religious communities and the Alcoholics Anonymous movement do have certain features in common; first and most importantly, spirituality as a major value. In 12-step fellowship, this is the acknowledgment of a personally caring and individually understood Higher Power. Consequentially, there are similarities in their conception of suffering, surrender, and humility, which are conceived as meaningful, serving the welfare of the individual and the community: “There are people who must die so that I could live,” said a recovering heroine addict in her speech at the university.

Unlike world religions, Alcoholics Anonymous does not have an eschatology—it works within the frameworks of whatever is given for us in this world (Arminen, 1998). The pledge of its organizational independence is that it does not demand political or economic power as denominations or churches do, and is free of traditional hierarchic relations. The strong spiritual orientation of Alcoholics Anonymous is also expressed in the archaic language of the Church. Authors wanted to accommodate themselves to this wording: this is why we suggest “code of grace” as a new term for the language of sobriety. Grace is understood here as a special gift that helps the person to act the way he or she should even if these ways could not be seen clearly beforehand. It includes (for)giving, and supporting one another’s dignity (Prosch & Polányi, 1975).

Another similarity is that the language of sober addicts is highly metaphoric and relies on traditional common sayings of the fellowships. Metaphors play a very important role in structuring and reconstructing our experiences: these are the exceptional linguistic elements that may represent both the symbolic domain⁶ and the direct physical or sensual-experiential faculty (Lakoff, 1993).⁷ A metaphor as a linguistic element is able to carry the opposite poles of the same construct—its integrative force makes it a “first choice” in establishing coherence and cope with paradoxes.

In our study, sober addicts have often used basic metaphors of crisis to depict substance abuse: *abysses* or *gaps* (McNamee, 1992). Marginal status has been expressed by *walls* that exclude the addict not only from interpersonal relations but from everyday central knowledges of human society. While those who have not experienced sobriety often speak about drugs as agents of initiation into some special knowledge, recovering addicts, on the contrary, define their previous state as *a position of “not knowing”*: “I did not have eyes to see the world”; “I am like a

⁶ By symbol we mean a type of sign that stands for another sign by convention of the speech community.

⁷ According to Lakoff, metaphors are conceptual pairings between two domains and represent a very basic form of human thinking. Whatever cannot be grasped directly—e.g., the notion of “time”—is often conceived using a metaphor: e.g., time “passes,” that is, we orient ourselves in time as we do in space.

child who does not know anything”; “I did not have any idea about anything.” Addiction can make one a *zombie*: “there was something in me, slowly eating me up” (speaker refers to the movie “Alien”) or “I was like an animated corpse.”

Speakers of the dominant culture (i.e., professional helpers) have often highlighted the *commercial character* of drug-related issues. A journalist summarized her understanding of how 12-step fellowships work: “nobody (readers of the newspaper) is interested in that . . . people want horror, that *sells* well.” A representative of forensic medicine related: “Before the elections, the police is often asked to make a drug-raid in the village pub—it makes a good impression on would-be voters.” Similarly, a representative of National Health Care System claimed: “A good public health program can help win the elections.” Horror, safety of citizens, or even prevention and treatment are to be sold: “Our problem is how to make the addict use professional services of support.” *Substance abuse is therefore a mirror of consumer society*—as a psychiatrist put it: “You should use the world the same way you use drugs: looking for ersatz experiences at a reasonable price.”

Frequent metaphors of sobriety that constitute the code of grace are *birth* or *treasure*; so recovery is connected to *rituals* in the temporal dimension and *sacred places* in the spatial dimension. These metaphors are the most important nodes in the semantic web of the code.

Relation to Others: The Community as a Primary Group

In mainstream discourse, the individual and the community are described as opposite poles—with irreconcilable interests, incompatible values, and differing features. This is clearly represented not only in Philipsen’s distinct speech codes but in a number of intercultural studies on “individualistic” versus “collectivistic” societies (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1990). The logic of our language does not promote understanding of more complex connections either, such as the synergic relation between the two levels, recognizing that these social entities are interdependent units, mutually supporting and empowering each other’s operation. The strength of the community is a prerequisite for the strength of the individual and vice versa.

Koestler (1970) introduced the term “social holon” to characterize such complexity: each individual is inevitably a part of several embedded larger units (e.g., group, community, society, mankind, universe), a particle that does exist and can easily be identified in its own right as a whole. As the code of grace organizes opposite poles differently—not demanding the splitting of experiences, rather, supporting integration of the construct—this *holonistic* view of man is a central notion of the sobriety code. Whatever serves the person’s best interest is conceived as good for the whole therapeutic community: “how could I express my gratitude to everybody who has helped me to get so far (i.e., the Liberation

Ritual) . . . I don't think I can . . . *I try hard to stay in recovery . . . perhaps this is how I can thank you and my parents.*"

While normative rules of Hungarian would support a sentence like: "she has given us so much happiness that nothing has remained for her" as comments on the unexpected death of a popular Hungarian singer, a holonistic speaker may recognize that there may be exceptions to the physical law of the conservation of energy:⁸ "*thank you for letting me give . . . and I thank you what you have given to me.*" The essence of synergic or holonistic relations is captured best in the following utterance, made by a speaker at the Liberation Ritual at Komló: "I'd like to *thank you for everything . . . that I could be here, that you were with me and that I really did something* and I can stand here proudly." *Here, the speaker recognizes her own results as a gift coming from true participation in the community.* Individual achievement is conceived as inseparable from the accomplishments of the community.

In fact, the code of sobriety represents a *critical position* outside dominant language use. Self-help and self-care programs are often criticized (and sometimes are appreciated) for not taking an active, agentive role in social reforms. In our view, they represent social transition by their mere existence, primarily but not exclusively in the field of rehabilitation, their main focus of interest.

These attitudes to self and community have their consequences on interpersonal relations. Roles, tasks, and processes in the TC are often compared to those in a good-enough, well-functioning family ("outsourcing" more and more of family functions seems to be a concomitant of our modern era). Original family relations may lose their overwhelming significance when the addict reaches a "turning point" in the course of dependency or taking his very first steps in recovery:

I last saw my mother on 28th April, 2000. My mother said she would not ruin her life so I could die wherever I wanted to . . . for the very first time in her life she made a consistent decision.

Alcoholics are my own flesh and blood. They are much closer to me than my children.

I restore everything in my family . . . but it did not work, it was the same . . . so I switched to my other addiction, codependence.

I prayed that the power of every sober alcoholic would strengthen me so that I should not drink. . . .

The relative distancing from original family relations seems necessary for recovery, though, in many cases, a mutually satisfactory restoration of family ties is also possible.

⁸ Also in Laguitton (1992).

The consciousness of kind (Giddens, 1991), the strong symbolic boundaries of sober communities are manifested in the relation toward “normies.” Though addicts respect those who seem to know how to live without ever depending on a given substance or behavior, they are somewhat skeptical about the values of normalcy—which, as we see, are clearly not identical with those of sobriety. Recovering addicts are, for sure, “own flesh and blood” who can be trusted as owners of similar experiences about addiction and recovery: “*but for my fellows, I would have hanged myself. The one I used to be in those times was incapable of living.*” This strong trust and attachment to one’s fellows is acknowledged at Komló, where most therapists are addicts in recovery who graduated from a 12-step program of a rehabilitation center. These sober professionals—respecting the institutional requirements of their role as helpers—usually get a college degree and graduate as social workers, nurses, or counselors, surrendering to the demands of external social reality.

Function of Communication

Speaking about speech codes, another important issue to be discussed is the function of communication which is always specific to the community and is reflected in the co-constructed communication settings and forms defined by rules, customs, and traditions of the organization. These rules are very explicit and speakers can easily orient themselves to them: “you are allowed to speak only about yourself . . .” or, at Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous meetings “there’s no room for conversation . . . you are to make a speech”; “you are not to speak about scientific theories.” Behind these norms—and the seeming monologue—there’s continuous referral to the fellows and the fellowship (Arminen, 1998). The sense in making speeches or entering into a conversation is that they help the process of recovery: “it (the speech held at the university) helps me to *remember*.” Addiction is conceived as the disease of denial and forgetting: “I am very grateful for every opportunity when I can speak about these things.” Communication—and not his or her “true self”—orients the speaker in his development “when I come back to Komló, *tell me what do you think about me . . . ’cause I, I am not sure that I can always tell you what’s with me.*”

The therapeutic setting—including 12-step work—is a special space opened by modernity for *confessions*. In the linguistic ritual of confession the object of the utterance is identical with the subject. Authenticity of the confession is the result of internal struggles—telling the truth to others and to himself in a public confession induces transformations in the self, that is, in interpersonal relations (Foucault, 1976). Confessions, considering their vital function in individual and community life and the deep struggle to make a meaningful narrative of fragmented stories of the self require a structured setting, as there is in a church confessional, a therapeutic room, or at a fellowship meeting. It is not the “trauma” in the usual sense that has to be remembered, as we have already quoted elsewhere:

“it does not really matter what mistakes my parents made when I was a child. . . .” “Trauma” could serve as an excuse for *breaking* sobriety—this is why the process of recovery and personal responsibility is accentuated. It is the addiction as a disease that has to be continuously remembered, communally related.

Naturally, sober addicts can and do speak “normie” language. Speaking about and *into* sobriety requires special occasions: actual participation in the global network of 12-step fellowships and programs. Outside this speech community, code of grace is hardly spoken and understood. Our dominant culture does not offer occasions for the addict to remember and share his or her experiences: “I cannot even speak about myself, this is in sharp contrast with Komló (TC)—if they see that I’m down they would give me an extra kick instead.”

Human relations are at the center of communication—information or knowledge in the traditional sense are less important. The 12-step programs are not about scientific theories, though these programs can be translated to technical language for a professional’s sake. The relatively high risk of mere intellectualization would impair the process of recovery. Scientific theories, on the other hand, presuppose non-immediacy in the use of language, which is alien to the code of grace. The only measure of “right” communication—authenticity—is the full-version narration of personal experiences.

Control

Control is a special issue in sober holonistic community participation. Entering a TC or any other 12-step program demands entire surrender, full acknowledgment of the failure in efforts to control dependency: “I’d been convinced that I’d drunk because I’d wanted to but later it became clear that I had to drink—it did not matter what I wanted”—as a Hungarian member of Alcoholics Anonymous put it. The disease of addiction is seen as a faulty attitude to control—this is why ambitious plans are substituted for a continuously repeated 24-hour abstinence.

From a macro-cultural perspective, however, as a member of our society, one is to have a definite plan for his or her future career where the “end product” is what really matters—that attitude demands extended consciousness and strict determination. As an addict, you are allowed to concentrate on the process instead of expected results: “(*recovery*) is a process . . . you don’t have to see where’s the end of it.” Dominant culture expects the individual to control as many aspects of his or her life as possible, including significant others in interpersonal relations, narratives on past experiences, and preferably most elements of future. Perhaps this *craving for control* can explain why “normies” readily accept frequent utterances of alcoholics like “I can stop whenever I want” while having difficulties in understanding the sober attitude to control. “If I were to say these things elsewhere, among older people, they would say: what boasting, he’s making a parade of his alcoholism”—as a member of the Alcoholics Anonymous

told the university students about his experiences on the acceptance of usual AA-narratives outside the fellowship.

In the code of grace a harmonizing disposition is embodied as a result of the holonistic perspective. Harmony, but not passivity: man can alternately construe himself as either a *precipitator or participant of transformations*. This attitude to control also results in a different view on personal freedom, which, in this sense—a paradox again—depends on surrender and humility.

Temporal Focus

By emphasizing memories, communicators take a position from where the significance of past experiences can be discovered and personal history can be reconstructed as a valuable resource that has an influence on current activities. The temporal orientation of the macro-culture focuses mainly on present or future experiences. If past is related it is either an element of the “Golden Age” myth about ideal life with ideal relations or—more frequently in Hungary—it is depicted as a semi-processed product of resentment, a collection of unresolved traumas. Therefore, past is represented in the dominant language as a *fragmented sequence* in time where “*black holes*” often interrupt the temporal texture. Mirroring of macro-cultural structure of time is manifested in the repeated sequence of blackouts of substance abusers.

From this perspective—irrespectively of the high value culture bearers explicitly posit on change—true transition seems impossible as the identification of initial state is either prohibited or the way of change is blocked by disintegrated, fragmented experience. This conception of the past may lead to current inhibitions of autonomous actions—the result is a decrease in the personal freedom that is greatly appreciated but not realized by dominant culture agents. The code of grace, however, introduces past experiences as the most important resource of personal and collective wisdom. The ability to learn from one’s and others’ *faults* is an important constituent of holonistic operation. The sober addict has a freedom to admit mistakes and shortcomings. The undisturbed flow of time and acceptance of opposites open a new direction in personal narratives: one does not have to be stable *and* progressive (Gergen & Gergen, 1983), therefore fundamental change is possible: “what made me really upset in those times makes me proud now.”

Macro-cultural context would prohibit speaking about such reevaluation as it is against consistency: a “normie” could either speak about unresolved “traumas” or say nothing about the past, mentioning only current positive state. This is not specific to the Hungarian culture: Gergen and Gergen also relate a strong community preference for stable-progressive narratives. In sum, speaking about traumas or a bad state, emotions are accepted either if one does not expect a solution and avoids being too “personal,” that is, speaks about problems in the language of commonplaces; or wants a solution but is speaking in a therapeutic setting.

Temporal continuity plays a very important role in establishing individual and communal narrative coherence. Arminen (1998) has pointed out that speakers in these fellowships adapt their own story-telling to those of others. Utterances—as well as speeches—are always responsive and addressive in nature, that is, every utterance responds to previous ones and expects further responses—approval, disapproval, or mere recognition. Speakers of a given community co-construct narrative coherence and, through the same process, improve the community they are members of. As a prerequisite, speakers have to be able to listen to the others, to accept the common process of construction of meanings as participants of dialogue and connect seemingly distant experiences. A major node where stories are connected is the “Odyssey” of the addict, the hero’s story about his or her becoming a sober person. *Everyday* jobs, such as daily work or time spent on self-care, are also constructed as elements of this *heroic* progress. These activities seem to belong to the “sacred” dimensions—in the sense that they are symbolized—and are interpreted as creative tasks that *help* fighting alienation: “I was very naughty still I went to work and did everything I had to and I was really proud of it.” Parallel to this, in a TC there’s no difference between “odd jobs” and “very important tasks,” “small talk” and “real conversation,” “dull” or “interesting” personalities—each moment spent together opens a potential space for transformative dialogue.

Contrary to “code of honor” that orders a hero to be proud or to code of dignity where “respect” or even “unconditional positive regard” is emphasized, the sober addict must be *humble* enough to reach this *heroic* state: “Work was dull because there was no humility in me.” Here, respect and humility are equally important, the contrast pole being represented with the positive one. The “unusual” integrated framework offered for past experiences facilitates mentioning of topics that would count as taboos—hostile, destructive feelings or even self-destruction: “I could not find my way out of this (heroin-addiction) but I did not dare to die . . . as I did not dare and I was not successful in my suicide attempts I had to try something else.” “I had two ritualized suicide attempts: first I burnt all my clothes in our garden and later I changed my name officially.”

In addition to the alternative conception of the sequence of time, temporal orientation of holonistic speakers is also reflected as cyclic in their speech. As Eliade (1983) proposed, this notion of time is related to the reconstruction or re-creation of “exhausted” time, to the re-birth of the personality and the community he or she belongs to: “It is very important to celebrate the first birthday—one has survived a Christmas, an Easter . . . he has survived one of all these occasions.” Very often speakers identify themselves according to these temporal dimensions: “I have been sober since 2 years, 6 months and 9 days” said one of the speakers at the university in his very first sentence, right after his name; usual information about his age, occupation, and place of residence were of secondary importance. Cyclic conception of time is related to structuring everyday activities which are considered crucial in personal progress.

Macro-cultural preference of “peak experiences” is alien to the nature of sobriety. Sometimes speakers identify a deep crisis, “hitting the bottom” as a peak experience that helped them take their first steps in recovery.

Spatial Orientation

While the hide-and-seek game is a central feature in the addict’s life (Denzin, 1987), sobriety begins with disclosure: *revealing* one’s self as an addict in a community of recovering fellows. The occasions for sharing the code of grace are often referred to as staying in *special “sacred” places*, while “out there” represents the world of normies, who lack this personal experience on the nature of addictions. Therefore, in the code of grace, space is *inhomogeneous*—there are transitory places, *niches for sobriety*, which serve as *centers*,⁹ and neutral territories that sober addicts share with those people who are out of the know. Spatial references are very frequent in texts of the Liberation Ritual as the whole ceremony is a departure in itself. Our previous interpretation of holy centers in the space is confirmed by speaking about people and place as two entities that are deeply connected but cannot be substituted by each other: “I am very grateful to the people, and to this place, too.”

Sacredness is related to eternity—the place itself does not symbolize the actual therapeutic community but the everlasting significance of the message of sobriety. This is how spatial orientation is matched to temporal continuity:

I had thought that I would leave and life would be different . . . but these people are here . . . built deeply into my soul . . . when I am not here . . . you feel that, in fact, they are with you. . . . (. . .) I was very much surprised that I can think of a place like that . . . together with the people.

The place gave me everything so that I could be sober . . . I can thank this place my parents and my son . . . had I not come here I should not have met them again, never in my life. . . .

Next follows some glossary in the Code of Grace (also, see Figure 1).

- *Space*: inhomogenous; “sacred” ritual places of the community where revealing is possible.
- *Time*: processes, cycles, authenticity, personal history as a rich resource, community traditions.
- *Control*: surrender; consciously making a difference between possible and impossible objects of control.
- *Function of communication*: remembering, sharing—phatic communication, links.
- *Human relations*: communities of commitment.

⁹ Social judgment is often formulated in spatial metaphors: e.g., “marginalized.”

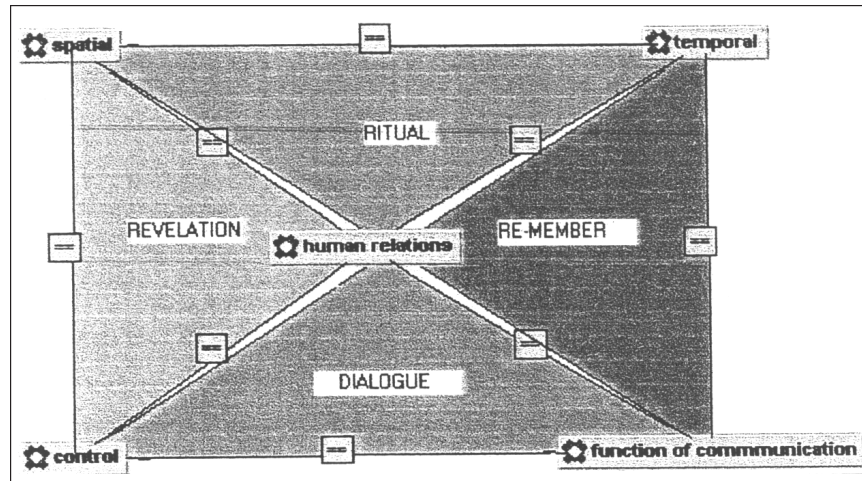


Figure 1. Meaning-making: a section of semantic structuring of experience in the code of grace.
 (A network view of the code of grace as shown by ATLAS.ti.4.2 for qualitative data analysis (Muhr, 1997).)

CONCLUSION

In this article, authors propose a cultural-linguistic approach to introduce the reader into an exploration of alternative culture of self-help and self-care groups in Hungary. We have identified major components of the code of grace, a code of communication in these alternative communities. The term “alternative” is in close etymological connection with the idea of being “twice-born,” having authentic internal experience of faith through previous sufferings and doubts (James, 1961). The significance of alternative cultures is perhaps best seen in an anomic setting of social transition where people either turn to their traditions for possible solutions or search the margins, the “communitas” for some special knowledges facilitating social innovation (Turner, 1974).

The most important feature of the code of grace is the dissolution of seeming controversies that would entrap the individual in a world of irreconcilable opposites. In the code of grace, the profane, everyday, practical aspects of life are understood as holonistic participation in the “sacred” community domain. These communities form a global network in countries that are ready to accept them—a democratic environment is a necessary prerequisite of their autonomous operation.

In our view, addictions are like a distorting mirror to modernism and consumer society in many ways: in temporal orientation, problem-solving strategies, and in

issues of order (Bauman, 1992; Kelemen & Erdos, 2003). The passion of sobriety represented by the self-help and self-care movement of recovering addicts is a valuable resource for social innovation.

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Direct reprint requests to:

Gabor Kelemen, M.D., Ph.D.
 Dept. of Social Work
 University of Pécs
 7624 Pécs, Rókus u.2
 Hungary
 e-mail: Kelemen@btk.pte.hu