

**CONCEPTIONS OF A HIGHER POWER
AMONGST RECOVERING ALCOHOLICS**

by

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**A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS**

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

Counselling Psychology

**WE ACCEPT THIS THESIS AS CONFORMING
TO THE REQUIRED STANDARD**

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

October, 1997

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Date OCTOBER 9, 1997

Abstract

Historically, mainstream psychology has viewed spirituality as irrelevant and/or inappropriate material for non-religious counselling settings. With increasing recognition of constructivist research and a renewed interest in holistic counselling approaches, spirituality has become an acceptable topic for counselling research and is theorized to be a central factor in the development of wellness across the life span. However, spirituality has not been clearly defined, and no known study has been made of the ways in which people conceptualize a higher power. Working from within the constructivist paradigm, this study used phenomenographic techniques to arrive at categories of description which capture the qualitatively different ways in which recovering alcoholics understand and experience a higher power. Using purposeful sampling methods, a sample of seven women and men was drawn from the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous, a program which actively promotes reliance on a power greater than oneself but does not specify any particular conception of a higher power. During individual, audio-taped interviews, participants described concrete experiences which had in some way affected their conception of a higher power. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed, yielding seven qualitatively different ways of conceptualizing a higher power: as *Vengeful Judge*, as *Human Fabrication*, as *Bird-Goddess*, as *Loving Father*, as *Spirit of Love*, as *Universal Order* and as *Everything*. The conceptions describe not people, but the various ways in which people think about a higher power; individuals were found to shift from one conception to another over time, and in different circumstances. Viewed along a continuum, the conceptions reveal an increasing sense of connection with self, others

and the infinite as the source of power is internalized and an intrinsic system of values is developed. The findings support recent theories suggesting that spirituality plays a central role in the development of wellness.

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Acknowledgments

I would like, first, to thank the women and men who participated in this study. Without their open and honest sharing of thoughts and experiences this research would not have been possible.

Secondly, I wish to thank my friends and family for their consistent encouragement and support throughout the duration of my Master's degree, and particularly during my thesis research. I am especially thankful to my partner Susan for the patience, love, and encouragement she has offered throughout.

A very special thank you to Dr. Marvin Westwood and Dr. Judith Daniluk, whose professional guidance and compassionate reassurance enabled me to continue with this thesis when the process seemed impossible. I also want to thank my committee members, Dr. Chris Lovato and Dr. Larry Cochran, for their contributions to the quality of this research.

I Introduction

As a relatively new profession attempting to establish its credibility as an empirical science, psychology has rarely focused its theoretical, research or clinical attention on spiritual or religious issues (McWhirter, 1989). Shafranske and Gorsuch (1984) suggest that counsellors have generally taken one of two stances toward mystical and spiritual issues. They are either viewed as irrelevant and perhaps even inappropriate to the counselling process, or they are treated as relevant, but viewed from within the subjective framework of the counsellor, rather than explored from the spiritual perspective of the client. Other authors such as Chandler, Miner-Holden & Kolander (1992) and Grof (1985) point out that some mystical experiences (e.g. near-death experiences) are easily confused with, and often labelled, psychotic. New discoveries in physics, chemistry and biology, however, have resulted in a shift away from the mechanistic world view which ridiculed mysticism and spirituality, making study of such phenomena more credible (Grof; Rogers, 1980; Shafranske & Gorsuch). In the warmer climate created by a shift toward a constructivist world view, the counselling profession has begun to explore the role which spirituality plays in the development of wellness across the life span (Chandler et al.; Myers, 1991, 1992; Witmer & Sweeney, 1992). It is being forcibly argued, in fact, that inclusion of religious and spiritual issues in the counselling process is essential in order to meet the ethical standards set by the American Association for Counseling and Development (Myers; Pate & Bondi, 1992).

There is no agreed-upon definition of *spirituality*, however, and the research and theory-building which will eventually provide a foundation for integrating spiritual work

into the counselling process is still in its infancy (Conway, 1989). It is generally acknowledged that, given the current lack of emphasis on religious and spiritual issues in North American counsellor training programs, it is inevitable that counsellors in our culture will base interpretations of client issues and counselling interventions on their own personal spiritual beliefs (Chandler et al., 1992; Pate & Bondi, 1992; Shafranske & Gorsuch, 1984). One challenge ahead of the counselling profession, then, is to build awareness of the divergent ways in which spirituality is experienced in our multicultural society.

This study explored a specific aspect of spirituality--the qualitatively different ways in which individuals understand and experience a *higher power*--with the intention of strengthening the foundation upon which we as counsellors base our assessments and interventions with clients who present spiritual issues.

The community of Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) provided a unique opportunity to study this phenomenon, as A.A. is a program which actively promotes reliance on a power greater than oneself but does not specify any particular conception of a higher power. The specific question addressed in this study was: *What are the conceptions of a higher power held by recovering alcoholics?* This chapter introduces the growing body of literature from which this question arises, and the theoretical and research approaches which were used in the study.

Interest in spiritual issues is not entirely new to the counselling profession. William James (1958), Abraham Maslow (1964), and Carl Jung (1933), for example, all demonstrated a belief in the capacity for human beings to achieve a higher, transcendent

level of consciousness. Erikson's (Corey, 1991) theory of psychosocial development and the existential works of Victor Frankl (1992) and Rollo May (1982) bear a certain resemblance to major religious disciplines, in their emphasis on discovering and creating meaning for one's life through meaningful engagement with others, and involvement in productive work. However, the spiritual flavour of these works did not have a significant impact on mainstream psychology in North America. Many theories have been advanced about why this has been the case, ranging from limitations in practitioners' own religious development (McWhirter, 1989) to the efforts of a new profession to establish credibility and earn respect as an empirical science, as opposed to a speculative discipline (Shafranske & Gorsuch, 1984). Authors such as Stanislav Grof (1985) and Carl Rogers (1980), however, have been quick to point out that psychology lags far behind the natural sciences it wished to emulate, in recognizing the subjective and ultimately unknowable nature of *truth*.

All the theories of natural phenomena, including natural laws, are considered in this view to be creations of the human mind. They are conceptual schemes that represent more or less adequate approximations and should not be confused with accurate descriptions of reality or with reality itself. (Grof, p. 57)

As it becomes more acceptable to explore areas of psychology which were once written off as improvable, an increasing number of authors are arguing for the relevance and importance of welcoming clients' religious and spiritual issues into the counselling room (Bergin, 1989; Myers, 1991; Pate & Bondi, 1992; Worthington, 1989). One factor which is boosting interest in spiritual issues is a renewed commitment in the counselling

profession to a proactive, preventive approach to counselling which promotes a focus on clients' *wellness* rather than pathology (Myers, 1991, 1992; Witmer & Sweeney, 1992).

Wellness is defined as "the maximizing of human potential through positive life-style choices" (Myers, 1991), and emphasis is placed on how a positive decision in the present produces a compounding positive effect over the remainder of the life span. Spirituality is identified in the literature as an essential component of wellness (Chandler et al., 1992; Myers, 1991; Witmer & Sweeney; Worthington).

While widespread interest in spirituality is fairly new to mainstream counselling psychology, it has been a key area of interest for those counselling alcoholics since Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) first appeared on the scene with its spiritual program of recovery, in 1935. Many alcoholism treatment professionals, based on the apparent success of the A.A. program and their own clinical experience, have concluded that surrender to a power greater than oneself is at the very core of recovery from alcoholism (Brown, 1985; Fowler, 1981; Goldsmith, 1992). Fowler likens recovery within the A.A. program to the type of change he describes in his stages of faith development: It involves acceptance of a new set of beliefs, attitudes and behaviour patterns; willingness to relate to others in a more authentic and caring way; and willingness to risk trust and reliance on someone or something other than self. Others, however, raise concerns which merit exploration. For example: Does the concept of surrendering to a higher power encourage abdication of personal responsibility (Le, Ingvarson & Page, 1995)? Does it encourage lifelong dependency rather than autonomy (Bean, 1975)? Does it encourage women to give up even more of their sense of self than is already normative in our culture

(Clemmons, 1991; Kasl, 1990)? Alcoholism recovery literature contains a running debate about the appropriateness and effectiveness of A.A.'s emphasis on the need to surrender one's will and one's life to a higher power. However, a thorough literature review covering databases for counselling psychology, wellness, mental health and social work revealed no studies, prior to this one, focussing on recovering alcoholics' actual conceptions of a higher power. It was the intent of this study to add to the meagre database of information currently available to the counselling profession about how people conceptualize and relate to the higher power which is so central to spirituality.

Within A.A., where individuals are strongly encouraged to formulate whatever conception of a higher power seems feasible for them, it is said that conceptions of a higher power range from the traditional Judaeo-Christian God to the door knob (Brown, 1985). Marton's (1981a, 1984, 1988) studies suggest that one individual's conception of the same phenomenon may vary over time and also in different circumstances. This is consistent with Fowler's (1981; 1993) theory of faith development, which asserts that individuals' conceptions of a higher power have the potential to mature over time. Consistent with the intention of this research to explore the variation in people's conceptions of a higher power, this study worked from a definition of spirituality which is both dynamic and generic.

The study was approached from within the constructivist paradigm which asserts that if such a thing as reality exists independent from our unique human constructions of it, we are not capable of apprehending or describing it in a non-appraising manner (Smith, 1989). Human beings have access to phenomena only through the frameworks of

their own values and constructed meanings. Thus, researchers' conceptual definitions, instrument selection, study parameters and findings are irrevocably intertwined with their values and their unique constructions of *reality*. In that sense, this study created findings, rather than discovered them (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Qualitative methods were used, in order to draw out full and rich descriptions of the variety of ways in which the higher power is manifested. Traditional quantitative studies in the field of alcoholism recovery have focused on measuring spirituality or faith and calculating the relationship between recovering alcoholics' faith or spirituality and their level of recovery from alcoholism (e.g., Gorsuch, 1993). In an attempt to predict, control and generalize, such studies necessarily work with rigid definitions and sacrifice the richness and complexity of the human experience. In selecting qualitative techniques, this study (1) recognized the subjective role of researcher as data collector rather than relying on an objective instrument; (2) studied data within its rich context; and (3) produced results which are descriptive rather than statistical in nature. The goal was not to measure, control, predict or to study the phenomenon in relation to any other phenomenon, but to explore and describe the various ways in which it is perceived and experienced by recovering alcoholics.

Specifically, the study followed the phenomenographical research design developed by a research group at the Department of Education at the University of Goteborg in Sweden. Phenomenography takes a second-order perspective, seeking to produce categories of description which capture "the most essential and distinctive structural aspects of the relation between the individual and the phenomenon" (Marton,

1986, p. 34). Phenomenographic studies have consistently revealed that people conceptualize phenomena in a limited number of qualitatively different ways (Marton, 1981a, 1981b, 1986). Interest lies, therefore, not only in categorizing different conceptions, but in discovering some logical relationship between conceptions of the phenomenon being studied. Marton (1984) asserts that phenomenographic research can bring to light the taken-for-granted, tacit belief that we see the world as it really is, and that others see it in the same way. In preparing to work with the spiritual issues of clients, counsellors must become willing and able to explore the full range of spiritual beliefs which exist in our multicultural society.

Chapter two provides a fuller context for the research question, reviewing literature related to the research focus.

II The Research Question in Context

This chapter begins with a discussion of the shift toward a constructivist research paradigm which has encouraged exploration of spiritual issues within the field of counselling psychology. The chapter continues with discussion of the emergence of a wellness paradigm, within which spirituality figures as a key component. Spirituality is defined for the purposes of the study, and the literature is reviewed for an historical and current interest in spiritual issues within the field of counselling psychology. The chapter then turns to a brief look at how the concept of spirituality is viewed within the narrower body of alcoholism recovery literature, an overview of the spiritual origins of the A.A. program, and a summary of what is currently known about how A.A. members and people in general understand and experience a higher power.

A Paradigm Shift

Psychological research, following the lead of the natural sciences, has traditionally favoured a strictly objective, value-free description of brain function and behaviour that discredits any consideration of freedom of will, conscious purpose, values, morality and other subjective phenomena that are essential to spirituality (Sperry, 1988). It is not surprising, then, that Carl Rogers expresses some trepidation in his 1980 publication A Way of Being as he proposes that it is time to explore a frontier "scarcely mentioned by hard-headed researchers--the area of the intuitive, the psychic, the vast inner space that looms before us" (p. 312). Rogers describes how recent research in the physical sciences has disproved our belief in a universe composed of solid concepts whose objective truth can be fully comprehended:

In modern physics the universe is thus experienced as a dynamic, inseparable whole which always includes the observer in an essential way. In this experience the traditional concepts of space and time, of isolated objects, and of cause and effect lose their meaning. Such an experience, however, is very similar to that of the Eastern mystics. (p. 81)

Rogers goes on to describe astonishing parallels between modern science and Zen, Taoism, Buddhism, and other Oriental views. His own conviction is that "physics and Eastern mysticism are separate but complementary roads to the same knowledge, supplementing each other in providing a fuller understanding of the universe" (p. 130-131). Rogers also cites chemist-philosopher Ilya Prigogine's exploration into the tendency of all systems, chemical or human, to transcend themselves through natural fluctuations caused by instability. In humans, instability is supposed to be caused by the fact that the human brain (which comprises only 2% of body weight) uses 20% of the oxygen available to the body. The human system, it is theorized, is therefore naturally driven toward an ever-increasing state of order and coherency--a theory which Rogers believes sheds light on the transformative shifts which can be brought about through meditation, relaxation techniques and altered states of consciousness.

Rogers was not alone in his speculation that the time had come for spiritual issues to be recognized as an important component of the counselling process. Allen Bergin (1980) discusses how the spiritual and social failures of many organized religious systems and the subsequent failures of mechanistic psychology have resulted in an era of existential angst, which seems to have stimulated a new interest in looking once again at

the human condition, personality, and even science itself from a spiritual perspective. Bergin notes a broad-based and growing interest in spiritual phenomenon. As evidence, he cites rapid growth of the American Psychological Association's Division 36 (Psychologists Interested in Religious Issues), publication of new journals with overtly spiritual contents such as the Journal of Judaism and Psychology and the Journal of Theology and Psychology, and publication of straightforward religious psychologies by academicians such as Scott Peck (1978). A more inclusive view of spirituality might have prompted Bergin to include in this list the Journal of Transpersonal Psychology.

Along the same lines, Sperry (1988) points out that prior to the 1960's, mainstream science and religion were archenemies: "Things such as moral values, the human spirit, purpose, dignity, and freedom to choose, if they existed at all, were supposed to be only inconsequential epiphenomena or passive attributes of physical brain activity and best ignored in scientific explanation because, supposedly, they in no way changed the course of events in the real world, either in the brain or in the universe at large" (p. 608). Sperry describes, however, a new paradigm in which subjective, inner experience is placed near the top of the brain's causal control hierarchy, and is understood to play a vital role in determining conscious behaviour and evolution.

At about the same time, Counselling Psychologist published an exhaustive literature review by Everett Worthington Jr. (1989) which highlighted the ways in which religious development and religious issues across the life cycle affect the counselling process. By the late 1980's, then, religious and spiritual issues were beginning to be accepted as suitable topics for discussion within the profession of counselling psychology.

Holistic Models For Wellness Across the Life Span

Worthington (1989) argues that counsellors could do a better job of assessing and counselling clients if they understood clients' religious development throughout the life span. He reviews several models of development, including Piaget's theory of cognitive development, Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, transition theory and stress and coping theory. Worthington highlights the types of issues which might be likely to present at various stages throughout the life span, and ways in which these issues might affect the counselling process. Meaningful work, procreation, identity development, coming out as gay or lesbian, nonmarital sex, abortion, death and many other client concerns are discussed as issues which are best addressed by a counselling model which recognizes both developmental and religious/spiritual implications. Worthington concludes: "Each era of life is filled with transitions and life events that can easily involve religious issues. The psychologist informed about the possible involvement of religion in normative life transitions can more sensitively assess and treat the highly committed religious client and the client who has questions about his or her faith" (p. 587).

From 1990 to 1992 the Journal of Counseling and Development and Counselor Education and Supervision published a number of articles which (1) called upon counsellors to commit themselves fully to an holistic, developmental perspective, (2) identified wellness, prevention and development as the cornerstone of the counselling profession, and (3) began to propose theoretical models of wellness over the life span. Arguments are put forward that the wellness paradigm (Myers, 1991) and developmental

perspective (Van Hesteren & Ivey, 1990) are embraced more fully by the counselling and development field than other fields of psychology (such as counselling psychology), and that counselling and development should claim this niche as its own. The authors argue that the counselling profession in general has undermined its commitment to the developmental approach, focusing instead on pathology in an effort to gain credibility in the mental health care field and gain access to third-party payments. In the ensuing debate, Heck (1990) and Robinson (1990) oppose this view, presenting evidence that the field of counselling psychology has, in fact, a very strong commitment to the concept of development and that counselling and development is not, therefore, so unique in this regard. There is no debate whatsoever, though, about the need for an holistic counselling approach which takes into account development across the entire life span:

The holistic wellness philosophy has been described as:

. . . a proactive approach in which individuals enhance the quality of their lives through progressively responsible choices for self-care. Clients are helped to become more self-sufficient and experience a sense of empowerment that allows them to choose and maintain more healthy life-styles. (Myers, 1991, p. 185)

Health is more than just an absence of illness; it is "a zest and enthusiasm for life... wellness incorporates not just the whole person, but the whole person throughout the totality of the life span" (p. 185). Optimize a client's human development today, whatever the life stage, and a positive effect will be felt throughout the remainder of the life span (Myers, 1992).

Witmer and Sweeney (1992) propose an holistic model for wellness and

prevention over the life span which draws upon theoretical concepts from psychology, anthropology, sociology, religion and education. The model includes eleven characteristics desirable for optimal health and functioning, expressed through the five life tasks of spirituality, self-regulation, work, friendship, and love. Spirituality, in whatever form it takes, is depicted in the model as being central to life itself:

Throughout history including contemporary times, every civilization, culture, or nation has expressed and practiced religious beliefs that represent values that reflect what is considered sacred and essential for the sustenance of life. For some groups, religious practices have focused on nature worship, and for others, a divine being who knows about and intervenes in human activities. Still others seek an inner or higher consciousness that is in harmony with the forces of the cosmos.

. . . Little dissonance is seen among the systems in what it means to live in full humanness. Their commonality seems to be summarized in the proverbial Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Spirituality for our purposes assumes certain life-enhancing beliefs about human dignity, human rights, and reverence for life. (p. 141)

Witmer and Sweeney present several dimensions of spirituality. The first, recognized by both Eastern and Western religions, is the desire for a sense of wholeness, free from inner conflicts and fragmentation. Inner voices, inner wisdom, higher consciousness, and the Spirit of God are mentioned as sources/forms of the spiritual side of wholeness. Meditation, prayer, worship, contemplation, and introspection are noted as ways of seeking peace, guidance and contact with the universal force. Other dimensions of

spirituality identified by the authors are a sense of purpose or meaning in life, hope or optimism about the future, and values which can guide us in human relationships and decision making. Valuelessness is considered by the authors to be "the ultimate disease of our time" (p. 141), leading to value illnesses such as apathy, alienation, hopelessness and cynicism.

Chandler et al. (1992) attempt to define more clearly what is meant by spiritual health, and discuss ways of working with clients to enhance spiritual wellness and spiritual development. The authors suggest that spirituality is not just another dimension of wellness, but a central component of wellness which is essential to the others:

Spiritual health should be considered as a component present, along with a personal component, within each of the interrelated and interactive dimensions of wellness (i.e. social, physical, emotional, intellectual, and occupational... Working to achieve high-level wellness necessitates the development of the spiritual component in each of the five dimensions of wellness. Without attention to spiritual health in each dimension, the individual remains incomplete. (p. 171)

Chandler et al. define spiritual wellness as a balance on a continuum which runs from an extreme where experience of the sublime is repressed, to extreme preoccupation with spiritual issues, or *spiritual emergency*. Spiritual emergency is defined as a situation where too much spiritual energy is present to be fully integrated, resulting in a feeling of being overwhelmed. This is a common occurrence, for instance, with individuals who have experienced clinical death (Moody, 1977, 1988), LSD experiences (Grof, 1985) or other mystical experiences which cannot be adequately explained or described in human

language. While Moody, Chandler et al. and Grof consider such experiences to be spiritual in nature, many would not. It becomes readily apparent that a counsellor's assessment and range of interventions with clients (and a researcher's findings) are irrevocably intertwined with his/her subjective definition of spirituality. It is, therefore, important to explore the many ways in which spirituality has been described in the literature, and clarify how the term has been defined for the purposes of this study.

What is Spirituality?

There is no agreed-upon definition of the term spirituality in the literature. Sometimes it is used interchangeably with religion, sometimes great efforts are made to differentiate spirituality from religion and sometimes the term is used to describe states which could easily be confused with psychosis. Worthington (1989) and Bergin (1980, 1989), although they describe a developmental process similar to that which other authors have called spiritual, confine themselves to the term *religious development* and describe values and mores which are typically associated with organized religions. Pate & Bondi (1992) note that "spirituality, which is usually defined as a view of one's place in the universe, is a more inclusive concept than religion" (108). Berenson (1987) writes: "Spirituality, as opposed to religion, connotes a direct, personal experience of the sacred unmediated by particular belief systems prescribed by dogma or by hierarchical structures of priests, ministers, rabbis, or gurus" (p. 59). Chappel (1990) agrees, arguing that religion is an externalized set of beliefs, often rigid, while spirituality is an internal matter having to do with the soul. Gange-Fling and McCarthy (1996) describe spirituality as ". . . a complex, multi-dimensional construct that involves ultimate and personal truths

that individuals hold as inviolable in their lives" (p. 253). Chandler et al. (1992) propose that spirituality pertains to ". . . the innate capacity to, and tendency to seek to, transcend one's current locus of centrality, which transcendence involves increased knowledge and love" (p. 169). Shafranske and Gorsuch (1984) describe spirituality as the "courage to look within and to trust" where what is seen and what is trusted "appears to be a deep sense of belonging, of wholeness, of connectedness, and of openness to the infinite" (p. 233).

Rogers (1980) cites modern advances in the physical sciences as full justification for including intuitive and psychic powers within the realm of healthy spirituality:

"Paranormal phenomena such as telepathy, precognition, and clairvoyance have been sufficiently tested that they have received scientific acceptance. Furthermore, there is evidence that most people can discover or develop such abilities in themselves" (p. 344).

Noble (1987) and Grof (1985) point out the tendency of Western psychology to discount transcendent or direct spiritual experiences as psychotic:

Direct spiritual experiences, such as feelings of cosmic unity, a sense of divine energy streaming through the body, death-rebirth sequences, visions of light of supernatural beauty, past incarnation memories, or encounters with archetypal personages, are then seen as gross psychotic distortions of objective reality indicative of a serious pathological process or mental disease. (p. 334)

A growing body of literature suggests, however, that such experiences are far more common and more productive of psychological health than was previously believed (Noble). Chandler et al. argue that counsellors have a responsibility to either develop

the knowledge, skills and understanding required to work with these issues, or refer such clients to someone who is better prepared to do so.

The Collins English Dictionary (Hanks et al., 1986) defines spirituality as: "1. the state or quality of being dedicated to God, religion, or spiritual things or values, esp. as contrasted with material or temporal ones. 2. the condition or quality of being spiritual. 3. a distinctive approach to religion or prayer." (p. 1472). While the reference to spiritual values might provide some definitional latitude, this definition seems too restrictive for the purposes of this study. Given that discussion of spirituality in the literature almost always involves discussion of faith, it seems useful to look in this related direction.

Collins defines *faith* as:

1. strong or unshakeable belief in *something* esp. without proof or evidence.
2. a specific system of religious beliefs: the Jewish faith
3. Christianity.
4. trust in God and in his actions and promises.
5. a conviction of the truth of certain doctrines of religion, esp. when this is not based on reason.
6. *complete confidence or trust in a person, remedy, etc.*
7. *any set of firmly held principles or beliefs.*
8. *allegiance or loyalty, as to a person or cause (esp. in the phrases keep faith, break faith).*
9. *bad faith. insincerity or dishonesty.*
10. *good faith. honesty or sincerity, as of intention in business (esp. in the phrase in good faith).* (p. 546, emphasis added)

This comes closer to a useful working definition for a research study designed to search out and describe as much variety as can be found in recovering alcoholics' conceptions of a higher power. This study defines spirituality in its broadest sense, and is guided theoretically by James Fowler's (1981, 1993) notions of faith and spirituality. Fowler

defines faith as "a dynamic process of construal and commitment in which persons find and give meaning to their lives through trust in and loyalty to shared centers of value, images and realities of power, and core stories" (p. 114). From this perspective, faith is not about religious doctrines or beliefs, but a factor by which all human beings construct meanings and values, make commitments, connect to others and form ultimate frames of reference which give their lives coherence. Fowler views recovery from alcoholism (and conversion, in the faith development perspective) as a shift from competitive and prideful relations with others, characterized by a *false self*, to a view of the self as being in complementary and more genuine relations with the world and others. It involves acceptance of a new set of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour patterns; willingness to relate to others in a more authentic and caring way; and willingness to risk trust and reliance on someone or something other than self. Faith, when operationalized in this way, allows for non-traditional concepts of a higher power.

Spirituality and the Counselling Profession

While spiritual concerns have not, until now, had a substantial influence on mainstream psychology, a small minority of thinkers and clinicians have always expressed keen interest in such matters. In Varieties of Religious Experience William James (1958) defines religion generically as "the belief in an unseen order and the good which people derive from accepting and adhering to it" (as cited in Walle, 1992, p. 92), and suggests that truly transforming spiritual experiences are nearly always founded on calamity and collapse. Carl Jung (1933) identifies spirituality as the source of the faith, hope, love and insight which enable his patients to heal neuroses deeply buried in the unconscious:

Among all my patients...there has not been one whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook on life. It is safe to say that every one of them fell ill because he had lost that which the living religions of every age have given to their followers, and none of them has been really healed who did not regain his religious outlook. This of course has nothing whatever to do with a particular creed or membership of a church. (p. 229)

Abraham Maslow (1964) writes of transcendent or *peak experiences* which transcend the rituals and trappings of organized religion, resulting for the experiencer in:

. . . his own private religion, which he develops out of his own private revelations in which are revealed to him his own private myths and symbols, rituals and ceremonials, which may be of the profoundest meaning to him personally and yet completely idiosyncratic, i.e., of no meaning to anyone else. (p. 28)

Victor Frankl (1992) writes about the importance of challenging individuals to find meaning and purpose through things such as suffering, work, and love. Rollo May (1983) also emphasizes the need to help people discover meaning in their lives by finding ways to contribute to the betterment of society and pursuing values that make life worth living.

As appreciation grows for an holistic approach to understanding human functioning, spiritual issues are taking a more central place in mainstream psychology (Bergin, 1980; Westgate, 1996; Worthington, 1989). Bergin argues, in fact, that spirituality is an ethical issue which *must* be addressed if counsellors are to fulfil their mandate: "Until the theistic belief systems of a large percentage of the population are

sincerely considered and conceptually integrated into our work, we are unlikely to be fully effective professionals" (p. 95). He presents six theses intended to broaden the scope of clinical psychology to include spirituality more systematically in theories, research and techniques. They are:

1. Values are an inevitable and pervasive part of psychotherapy.
2. Not only do theories, techniques, and criteria reveal pervasive value judgments, but outcome data comparing the effects of diverse techniques show that non-technical, value-laden factors pervade professional change processes.
3. Two broad classes of values dominate in the mental health professions. Both exclude religious values, and both establish goals for change that frequently clash with theistic systems of belief. [Bergin identifies the first as the pathology-oriented system espoused primarily by psychiatrists, nurses, behaviour therapists and public agencies. The second is the humanistic idealism espoused by clinicians such as Erich Fromm, Carl Rogers and Rollo May, which frequently takes issue with theistic teachings about issues such as marriage, abortion, and child care.]
4. There is a significant contrast between the values of mental health professionals and those of a large proportion of clients.
5. In light of the foregoing, it would be honest and ethical to acknowledge that we are implementing our own value systems via our professional work and to be more explicit about what we believe while also respecting the value systems of others.
6. It is our obligation as professionals to translate what we perceive and value

intuitively into something that can be openly tested and evaluated.

Bergin's six theses encompass three key issues which will be separately addressed here:

(a) the value-laden nature of spiritual counselling, (b) spirituality as a multicultural issue, and (c) counsellor training requirements.

The Value-laden Nature of Spiritual Counselling

Worthington (1989) states that there are at least five reasons why counselling psychologists should give attention to the implications of religious faith in understanding both normal development and remediation:

1. A high percentage of the population in the United States identifies itself as religious [According to a 1978 public opinion poll by the American Institute of Public Opinion, over 90% expressed a belief in a divine being, and 30% described their belief as one of strong conviction].
2. Many people who are undergoing emotional crises spontaneously consider religion in their deliberations about their dilemmas, even if they have not recently been active in formal religion.
3. Despite their private consideration of religion, many clients, especially religious clients, are reluctant to bring up their religious considerations as part of secular therapy.
4. In general, therapists are not as religiously oriented as their clients [Worthington cites Bergin's (1980) report that only 40% of a random sample of psychologists from the A.P.A., studied in 1976, reported a belief in God.].
5. As a result of being less religiously oriented than their clientele, many therapists

might not be as informed about religion as would be maximally helpful to their more religious clients.

While Worthington's article heightens awareness of the ways in which counsellors' subjective religious values might interfere with clients' therapeutic processes, he himself works from a narrow definition of spirituality. While he points out that the general population is showing an ever-increasing interest in Eastern religious practices, his literature review excludes mystical/transpersonal work which goes beyond the concepts of autonomous ego maturity, social concern and faith development, to the transcendence dealt with in the consciousness disciplines of Eastern religions (Hendlin, 1989). Noble (1987) points out that in Western culture, transcendent experiences have been considered both very rare and symptomatic of pathology. Having reviewed the literature, however, she claims that there is virtually no data to support the belief that these experiences are regressive. The literature suggests, in fact, that transcendence is "significantly more productive of psychological health than pathology" (p. 605). Transcendent experiences are such a radical departure from one's ordinary state of consciousness, however, that virtually no one discusses them freely, for fear of being labelled *crazy* (Noble). In order to assist such clients in regaining their balance and integrating such experiences into their daily lives, counsellors require knowledge, training, and above all, an open mind and willingness to work in this area. The same requirements pertain to work in an area which is more familiar to most counsellors-- multicultural counselling.

Spirituality as a Multicultural Issue

Worthington (1989) and Bergin (1989) argue that religious identity is just as important a factor in the counselling process as cultural, ethnic, or racial identity.

Worthington states: "As psychologists, we have an ethical responsibility to understand differences among people, including religious differences, to remain aware of the effect of such differences on the counselling process, and to address them when relevant" (p. 627). Conway (1989) points out that the significance of religious issues and themes, the characteristic ways in which these issues arise in counselling and the most appropriate ways of addressing them will vary depending upon three factors: (1) The religious tradition or group with which the person identifies (agnostic, atheist, Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, and so on) provides invaluable information in understanding and anticipating the possible religious concerns of the person; (2) The concept of religious maturity may differ for males and females, and between different religious traditions, and is likely to be related to the way in which religious themes are presented and resolved in counselling; and (3) The individual's sociocultural environment (family, peers, work, ethnic group, and so on) is likely to influence the type of religious issues raised and the manner in which such issues become relevant during the counselling process.

Counsellor Training Requirements

Is the counselling profession well prepared to respond to the spiritual dimension of clients' lives? Are counsellors being trained to recognize and respect clients' spiritual values, and be aware of spiritual issues within the therapeutic process? Data from a study of 272 clinical psychologists conducted by Shafranske and Gorsuch (1984),

indicated that little or no training and dialogue concerning spirituality or religious issues was occurring at that time. The indexes of five major texts used in the University of British Columbia's Masters program in Counselling Psychology from 1994 to 1996 contain two references to *religion*, one to *higher consciousness*, and none to *spirituality*. Corsini's and Wedding's (1989) text includes a few sentences about the importance of spirituality in both Jungian theory and the Asian goal of transcendence. Corey (1991) and Cormier and Hackney (1993) mention briefly the need to examine one's own religious beliefs and the influence these might have on clients whose beliefs differ.

Shafranske's and Gorsuch's (1984) survey of California psychologists investigated the extent to which psychologists' personal spiritual beliefs and history, and their theoretical orientation, influenced their clinical work with clients' spiritual issues. They concluded that "the essential factor in the perception of spirituality as relevant within clinical work is the psychologist's personal stance towards spirituality" (p. 238). The authors recommend "a more careful focusing of the profession's attention on issues of spirituality and religion as legitimate subjects of study, particularly in connection with psychotherapeutic practice" (p. 240). Pate and Bondi (1992) concur, suggesting that religious and spiritual values should be included in the multicultural component of counsellor education programs: "The CACREP [Council for Accreditation of Counselling and Related Educational Programs] standard that requires the recognition of client diversity should be addressed by the inclusion of religious and spiritual values in the multicultural component of the counselor education curriculum" (p. 112).

Role of Spirituality in Recovery From Alcoholism

Prior to the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous in 1935, professionals were generally ineffective in helping alcoholics, and tended to view them as insane and morally degenerate (Brasher, Campbell & Moen, 1993). Margaret Bean (1975) points out that "it was only after the appearance of numerous self-declared recovered alcoholics in A.A. that many professionals began to feel less hopeless about alcoholism" (p. 60). Judging by the widespread popularity of A.A. [A.A. World Services estimates a current membership of 1,308,000 in 59,000 groups spread across 146 countries], the A.A. program is considered effective by a large number of alcoholics. No empirical evidence exists, however, to support the efficacy of A.A. A.A.'s tradition of anonymity (See Appendix F) and the constantly shifting membership of its groups make it impossible to conduct tightly controlled empirical studies. However, the reports of millions of recovering alcoholics have resulted in a popular belief that the success of the A.A. program lies in its spiritual foundations.

The spiritual origins of A.A. date back to a conversation between Carl Jung and a patient who was desperately seeking help for his alcoholism (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1976; Kurz, 1988). Jung told his patient that his condition was hopeless as far as medical or psychiatric treatment were concerned. Jung offered the hope of a spiritual cure, however:

Here and there, once in a while, alcoholics have had what are called vital spiritual experiences. To me these occurrences are phenomena. They appear to be in the nature of huge emotional displacements and rearrangements. Ideas, emotions and

attitudes which were once the guiding forces of the lives of these men are suddenly cast to one side, and a completely new set of conceptions and motives begin to dominate them. (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1976, p. 26)

Jung's patient joined the Oxford Group, a Christian organization which taught that conversion could be achieved through five procedures involving giving into God, listening to God's direction, checking for guidance, achieving restitution, and sharing (Kurtz, 1988). Jung's patient *did* report having a spiritual experience, was able to stop drinking, and began working with an old drinking friend, whose first name was Ebby. Ebby showed up, in turn, at the door of his friend, Bill Wilson--the man who would become one of the co-founders of A.A. Ebby announced to Bill: "I've got religion" (Alcoholics Anonymous, p. 58). Bill was profoundly affected by this experience, as he had long considered his friend Ebby's case to be far more hopeless than his own. Bill later wrote:

Yet here he was in a very evident state of release which by no means could be accounted for by his mere association for a very short time with the Oxford Group...Because he was a kindred sufferer, he could unquestioningly communicate with me at great depth. I knew at once I must find an experience like his or die. (cited in Berenson, 1987, p. 26)

Bill's physician had told Bill and his wife that his condition was hopeless, and that his options were institutionalization or insanity. Bill still couldn't quit drinking, however, and was hospitalized for the fourth time. Ebby visited, but did not evangelize. He waited until Bill, deep in despair, asked him again for the "neat little formula" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1985, p. 62) that had helped him get sober. Ebby then told him:

You admit you are licked; you get honest with yourself; you talk it out with somebody else; you make restitution to the people you have harmed; you try to give of yourself without stint, with no demand for reward; and you pray to whatever God you think there is, even as an experiment. (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1985, p. 62-63)

Bill describes what happened next:

My depression deepened unbearably and finally it seemed to me as though I were at the very bottom of the pit. I still gagged badly on the notion of a Power greater than myself, but finally, just for the moment, the last vestige of my proud obstinacy was crushed. All at once I found myself crying out, "If there is a God, let Him show Himself! I am ready to do anything, anything!"

Suddenly the room lit up with a great white light. I was caught up into an ecstasy which there are no words to describe. It seemed to me, in the mind's eye, that I was on a mountain and that a wind not of air but of spirit was blowing. And then it burst upon me that I was a free man. Slowly the ecstasy subsided. I lay on the bed, but now for a time I was in another world, a new world of consciousness. All about me and through me there was a wonderful feeling of Presence, and I thought to myself, "So this is the God of the preachers!" A great peace stole over me and I thought, "No matter how wrong things seem to be, they are still all right. Things are all right with God and His world. (Alcoholics Anonymous, p. 63)

Then Bill wondered if he might have been hallucinating. He related the experience to his

doctor, who told him: "No, Bill, you are not crazy. There has been some basic psychological or spiritual event here. I've read about these things in the books. Sometimes spiritual experiences do release people from alcoholism" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1985, p. 63).

The next piece of A.A.'s spiritual foundation was put in place when Ebby brought to the hospital a gift for Bill--a copy of William James' (1958) Varieties of Religious Experience.

During his hospitalization, Bill read James' book cover to cover (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1985) and was attracted to James' acceptance of all religions, and his generic definition of religion as: "the belief in an unseen order and the good which people derive from accepting and adhering to it" (Walle, 1992, p. 92). Bill later wrote in the book Alcoholics Anonymous (1976):

The distinguished American psychologist, William James, in his book "Varieties of Religious Experience" indicates a multitude of ways in which men have discovered God. We have no desire to convince anyone that there is only one way by which faith can be acquired. If what we have learned and felt and seen means anything at all, it means that all of us, whatever our race, creed, or color are the children of a living Creator with whom we may form a relationship upon simple and understandable terms as soon as we are willing and honest enough to try. (p. 28)

Bill was also deeply impressed by James' account of an alcoholic's spiritual conversion, and later cited James as stating that truly transforming spiritual experiences are nearly always founded on calamity and collapse (Walle, 1992). This concept is clearly reflected

in the twelve steps of the A.A. program (See Appendix E), and many recovering alcoholics and the clinicians who work with them consider it necessary for an alcoholic to *hit bottom* before she or he is ready and willing to try new ways of approaching life.

What alcoholics need, Chappel (1990) and Twerski (1990) argue, is to humbly acknowledge that they have been totally ineffective in controlling their use of alcohol and its effect on their lives, and to realize there is *something* other than themselves that can help the healing process. The literature mentions a wide range of *some things* which A.A. members have acknowledged as higher powers. However, an exhaustive literature review covering counselling psychology, wellness, mental health and social work revealed no research focussing on the qualitatively different ways in which AA members or any other individuals understand and experience a higher power.

What is Known About Conceptions of a Higher Power?

Research in this area has focused not on conceptions of a higher power, but on stages of faith development. Actual curiosity about the conceptions themselves seems to have been limited to alcoholism recovery literature, where heated debate has arisen about whether A.A. does or does not truly encourage people to develop their own, unique conception of a higher power. Once again, however, references to the ways in which the A.A. higher power is conceptualized are anecdotal or speculative, not empirical.

Clemmons (1991), a feminist, states that some members of A.A. conceive of a "raging summer thunderstorm" or an "uplifting response to an aesthetic experience such as music or art" (p. 98) as their higher powers. Bean (1975) and Madsen (1974), long-

time researchers of A.A., point to the A.A. group as a higher power. As someone reported to Madsen, "...separately we're just so many drunks. When we get together, our relationship produces a spirit I can't define. But it's a spirit that keeps us sober. I call it God" (p. 181). Booth (1987), a minister, reports encountering higher powers ranging from the love experienced in alcoholism treatment, to the joy of being drug-free, to the beauty of the universe. Consistent with the view of Chappel and Twerski, Booth suggests that while many A.A. members pray to a higher power expecting a miracle or cure, the power is actually to be found in the alcoholic's own admission of defeat and acceptance of the label *alcoholic*. Madsen concurs, suggesting that when alcoholics surrender and admit that alcohol is stronger than they are, they become willing "to give up many of the old ideas and fantasies of the period of active alcoholism" which creates "an openness to new and more constructive ideas" (p. 182). This is consistent with Smith's (1994) view of the spiritual experience as the "tapping of an unexpected inner resource and identification of this resource as an individually-defined and experienced conception of a Power greater than themselves" (p. 111). In conclusion, then, A.A.'s higher power is a frequent subject for discussion in alcoholism treatment literature, and various authors refer to their personal working knowledge of novel conceptions of a higher power. However, this is the first known effort to research how people actually do understand and experience a higher power.

III Methodology

Chapter III begins by examining phenomenography, the particular research technique to be used, and its relevance for this particular study. Examples from phenomenographic research will be used as a basic orientation to the method. Personal assumptions of the researcher, participants, sampling technique, recruitment, and data analysis are examined. Chapter III closes with a look at limitations and delimitations of the study.

Phenomenography

The term *phenomenography* was first coined in 1979, and appeared in print for the first time two years later (Marton, 1981a). The research technique was developed by Ference Marton and others with the Department of Education at the University of Goteborg, in Sweden. Phenomenographers' purpose is to discover and map out previously unspecified ways in which individuals perceive, experience, understand and conceptualize aspects of the world around them (Marton, 1986). Marton reports that this research approach arose out of "some common-sense considerations about learning and teaching" (1986, p. 40). In the early 1970's the Goteborg research group was using traditional research techniques in an attempt to arrive at some generalizable insights which could be applied across various teaching/learning situations. Discovering that generalizations about learning and teaching did not hold across specific content domains, they began to explore the more subjective, experiential world of the individual student in a single learning situation. They discovered that students who shared the same teaching/learning environment tended, nonetheless, to understand particular phenomena

or concepts in a limited number of qualitatively different ways. Neuman (1987; cited in Marton, 1988), for example, explored young Swedish children's understanding of the number concept. Her study revealed that many pre-school children and quite a few up to age seven (when Swedish children begin school) had not grasped the concept of counting. They viewed it as a naming process, whereby the last of a set to be named also named the set:

...in a group of objects, the name of the last object mentioned serves as the name of the whole group. (This is why the last "name" has to be repeated when counting some objects. "How many apples have we here? Can you count them? "One, two, three, four...four." "Four, yes, that's right.") An extreme example of this is a little girl who, when asked how many fingers she had on her right hand, answered "Five," and when asked how many fingers she had on her left hand, said "Ten." Of course, the "names" of the fingers on the right hand are "one," "two," "three," "four," and "five." The last-mentioned name is also the name of all the fingers together. The names of the fingers on the left hand are "six," "seven," "eight," "nine," and "ten." In consequence they are called "ten" together. In this case, because her peculiar understanding was revealed, a qualitatively better understanding of the number concept, with both cardinal and ordinal aspects, could be developed as a base for her acquisition of acceptable skills in elementary arithmetic (p. 190).

In other studies (Marton, 1975; Marton & Saljo, 1976, both cited in Marton, 1988), the group interviewed university students who had been asked to read identical

pieces of written text. They discovered that students tended to take either a "deep" or "surface" approach to learning. While some students searched for underlying meaning and related the material to personal experience or prior learning, others focussed on surface content, either missing or misunderstanding the concepts which the content was meant to illustrate. The former had a more complete or holistic grasp of learning; the latter viewed learning as memorization and reproduction of content. Those who concentrate on understanding the main idea underlying the text may well not retain the surface content to the same degree. Marton states: "If we focus on the understanding of a main idea underlying a text, the reader's delimiting a part of the whole structure does not mean that he or she has retained less of it but, rather, that he or she has arrived at a qualitatively different understanding" (p. 188). Ultimately, the research group concluded that "students who did not get "the point" failed to do so because they weren't looking for it" (Marton & Saljo, 1984, p. 39).

The Goteborg group discovered, then, that a concept, a phenomenon, and even an identical piece of written text is understood by different individuals in quite different ways. Yet in study after study, the variety of understandings could be classified into a limited number of clearly distinguishable categories (Marton, 1988, 1986). When these conceptions were pooled and studied for similarities and differences, an underlying structure could be seen. In many cases, some of the conceptions could be considered more scientifically correct, or more current than others: "Commonsense conceptions held by today's laymen and judged wrong by science frequently turn out to be identical to conceptions accepted previously in history as scientifically valid ways of thinking"

(Marton, 1981a, p. 185). The group concluded that if teachers were to have any impact on the quality of learning, they would have to shift the focus from themselves and their teaching techniques to the individual student's perspective. They would have to stop taking for granted that they *knew* how their students perceived particular phenomena, and that students' understandings were the same as their own.

Just as teachers often take for granted the conceptions of their students, researchers often take for granted that research participants hold conceptions of the phenomenon being studied which are similar to their own. Based on their own assumptions, for example, authors have attempted to study and measure belief in a higher power, and have expounded upon the ways in which surrender to a higher power might relate to recovery from alcoholism. However, as Gibbs (1982) has pointed out: "In order to measure something, you must know what "it" is" (p. 140). This study will explore in depth the phenomenon of a higher power as it is experienced by the participants, rather than make assumptions about its nature. If we want to know how recovering alcoholics experience and think about a higher power, we need to investigate *that*; we cannot deduce this information from what we know about alcoholism, recovery from alcoholism, spirituality in general, the workings of the human mind, or any combination of the above. This requires a shift from the researcher's perspective to that of the participant: "One needs to adopt a second-order perspective in order to see [an individual's] experience and to describe it rather than simply to imagine what it might be" (Gibbs, Morgan & Taylor, 1980, p. 22). Marton (1981a) describes the difference in this way: "We do not try to describe things as they are, nor do we discuss whether or not

things can be described "as they are"; rather, we try to characterize how things appear to people" (Marton, 1986, p. 33).

Whereas phenomenologists transcend factual variations produced in their investigations to seek the *essence* of the phenomenon, focussing on commonalities, phenomenographers are looking for variation. They seek, however, a level between what is common to all and the idiosyncratic, because experience has taught them that, while aspects of the world are perceived differently by different people, there are a relatively *limited* number of ways in which phenomena are conceptualized. Their purpose is not simply to make a listing of different conceptions, but to systematically map out the various ways in which one category of conceptions relates to another (Marton, 1981a, 1984, 1986, 1988). The goal is a logical structure by which one category of conceptions can be related to another.

The primary result of this study, then, is a categorization of recovering alcoholics' conceptions of a higher power--a result referred to as the *outcome space*. Marton (1981a) stresses that these are not categories describing individuals, but rather individuals' conceptions; as mentioned earlier, an individual may hold several conceptions over time, or even several at one time, depending upon context. The "set of categories remains stable and generalizable between situations, even if the individuals "move" from one category to another on different occasions" (Marton, p. 195). The categories, then, reflect different ways of viewing and relating to a higher power. Phenomenographers believe that "the mapping of the hidden world of human conception should be a specialization in its own right" (Fetterman, 1987, p. 33). Separating out categories of

description from that which has been described allows us to "see all the taken-for-granted conceptions embodied in contemporary society as well as in traces of the past" (Marton, 1984, p. 69).

Personal Assumptions

It is my assumption that researchers' personal values and assumptions inevitably influence the findings of any study, no matter how well controlled: "Values quite simply determine and are ultimately entwined with what we hold to be statements of fact and even with what is to count as a fact" (Smith, 1989, p. 104). Having said that, it remains important to try to identify and expose my personal assumptions, in order that I and readers of my research be aware of how these might influence my findings.

I embarked on this research with a personal understanding of a higher power which encompasses ideas from many of the world's great religions, as well as New-Age ways of thinking. From personal affiliation with many members of A.A., I expected that I would be able to find a very broad range of conceptions of a higher power, ranging from very traditional to highly non-traditional, and certainly not all religious in nature. I also anticipated that people's conceptions of a higher power would develop over time, and perhaps vary depending upon the situation.

I expected to find that in general, the current conceptions of a higher power described by people who had been active in A.A. for a year or more would be experienced as empowering. I suspected that newer members of A.A. might still be struggling with conceptions which they were experiencing as oppressive or constrictive. Overall, I expected to discover that some conceptions of a higher power were

experienced as more constructive than others, in terms of the development of wellness.

Participants

Participants were drawn from the fellowship of A.A. members attending meetings in the greater Vancouver area. It was assumed for the purposes of this study that Greater Vancouver's A.A. community would provide enough variety of a general nature to support diversity at the level of conceptions of a higher power. Such diversity was sought out through the use of purposeful sampling.

Demographic information is included in Table 1. The sample included a mix of gender, age, length of sobriety and length and intensity of involvement with AA.

Table 1
Demographic Information

Participant	Gender	Age	Length of Sobriety (Yrs)	Duration of Involvement with AA (Yrs)	Average # AA Meetings Attended Per Month
A	F	49	20	10	3
B	F	64	31	34	11
C	M	38	2	2	15
D	F	50	18	7	2
E	F	66	18	18	7
F	F	42	10	10	6
G	M	25	5	5	11

The Sampling Technique

Purposeful sampling is done to maximize the utility of information gathered from small samples. It is a strategy of choosing co-researchers because they are likely to be able to make a unique contribution to the data (Schumacher & McMillan, 1993). For the purposes of this study, the strategy consisted of a combination of the techniques of network sampling and maximum variation sampling. Network sampling refers to a process in which the researcher provides a description of what is being sought, and asks people in the network to suggest individuals who might fit the profile. In maximum variation sampling, the researcher searches out maximum differences of perceptions of a phenomenon, by selectively sampling subgroups of the population being studied. Given the suggestions noted above that both recovery from alcoholism (Brown, 1985) and spiritual development (Fowler, 1993) follow a path of progressive development, it was considered useful to include in the study sample alcoholics ranging in age, length of sobriety, and length of involvement with the A.A. program.

These sampling techniques were carried out through the sponsorship network of A.A., which encourages newcomers to ask for the support and guidance of an A.A. member who is further advanced in the program. While the quality and duration of the sponsoring relationship varies widely, it is quite common for A.A. members and their sponsors to develop a very warm and caring friendship which endures for many years. In guiding newcomers through the twelve steps of A.A., sponsors become familiar with the unique ways in which newcomers interpret and adapt the program to their personal beliefs and values. Sponsors, therefore, were helpful in identifying types of conceptions

not yet included in the study.

Some initial standards for involvement were also set. In order to qualify, individuals were required to have at least three months' clean and sober time, and involvement in the A.A. program. This condition was intended to ensure that participants had had an adequate period of time to re-establish their physical health and social stability, and could be counted on as reliable. It was also assumed that members who had attended A.A. regularly (averaging one or more meetings per week) for at least three months would have reached a point at which they would be at least beginning to focus on thoughts about a higher power. Finally, there was a conscious effort to include both women and men, to allow for differences in how the two genders might approach the idea of spirituality in general, or the specific phenomenon of a higher power.

Procedures

A letter of recruitment, respondent consent form, demographic questionnaire, interview protocol and description of the research project were developed and submitted to the University of British Columbia's Ethics Committee. The project and the submitted documents were approved.

As mentioned earlier, participants were recruited through the sponsorship network of A.A., using opportunistic sampling techniques. The sponsors were provided with a letter of introduction to the research project (Appendix A), inviting individuals to contact me directly should they be interested in exploring the possibility further. An initial discussion was held by telephone, at which time potential participants were provided with detailed information about the purpose of the study, how it would be

carried out, and the level of commitment required of participants. This also provided an opportunity to ascertain that the individual met the screening criteria for the study. At the same time, it offered an occasion to begin building a rapport which was essential for the sharing of such deep and personal information. Following the telephone conversation, a personal interview was arranged. At the beginning of the meeting, participants were provided with a chance to ask any questions which may have arisen, or discuss any concerns they had. That done, they were asked to read and sign the informed consent (Appendix B), and were provided with a copy. A few minutes were then provided to complete a brief pre-interview questionnaire (Appendix C), designed to collect information about demographics and length and level of participation in the A.A. program. An audio-taped interview then began, ranging from one to two hours in length.

Each interview began with a standard script read by the interviewer (see Interview Protocol, Appendix D), which addressed the intent of the interview, and suggested that a discussion of concrete experiences which had influenced the participant's conception of a higher power might help with the description of the higher power itself. Participants were given an opportunity to offer any comments of a general nature they might want to make about their higher power. The interview then proceeded as follows: "Thinking back now, over the time frame from when you decided to stop drinking, up until the present-- are there four or five experiences which stand out in your mind as having influenced the way in which you conceptualize a higher power?" Each of the experiences identified by the participant were then explored in depth during the interview, looking at what happened, what led up to it, what effect it had on the participant, what role the

experience had in the participant's recovery, and ultimately how the experience influenced his or her conception of a higher power. Probing questions and prompts were used, as required, to flush out rich, detailed description of the participant's experiences.

Data Analysis

Each interview was transcribed verbatim, making an attempt to note all pauses, non-lexical expressions, and alterations in tone, pitch, rate and volume of speech. The words alone, withdrawn from this context, might easily have been misinterpreted to have radically different meaning than that originally intended by the participant. Svensson and Theman (1983) point out that "...when you express the content of a conversation by means of a text, you reduce the meaning of the spoken word" (p. 30). With this in mind, the tapes and transcripts were compared several times, searching for and correcting omissions or distortions in the original transcript.

The next step was immersion in each transcript, studying the participants' descriptions in order to gain an understanding of whether only one higher power was being described, or more. The data was analyzed to clarify what the higher power *was* and what it *did*, as well as what it was *not* and what it did *not do*. Relevant pieces of text were studied for references to how the higher power was described, its function(s), the ways in which the participant related to the higher power, and personal outcomes (see Appendix E for sample).

In the third stage of analysis, the individual conceptions were pooled, and the focus shifted to a search for similarities and differences, and ways in which the various conceptions might be seen in relation to one another. Marton and Saljo (1984) describe

a process of discovery, which is not linear, but iterative. The categories are not determined in advance, but emerge as the pooled text is examined for important similarities and differences. Where characteristics are considered to be superficial rather than core (i.e., they do not contribute to the content and structure of a given category) a process of reduction occurs (Dahlgren, 1984). The qualitatively different conceptions emerge from the data as two statements are either integrated into one, or set apart as revealing an important difference (Svensson & Theman, 1983). (see Appendix F for sample).

The result was a limited number of distinctly different categories of meaning describing the qualitatively different ways in which the higher power is understood and experienced by recovering alcoholics--a result known as the *outcome space*.

IV Results

This chapter presents the findings of this research in the form of the outcome space, which describes the conceptions and serves as an illustration of their interrelatedness.

The outcome space portrays the uniquely different ways in which participants understand and experience a higher power in their lives. The focus, therefore, is on variation rather than common themes. Each conception is studied for differences in how the higher power is described, how it functions, what one can do to relate to it, and resulting personal outcomes. The personal outcomes described by participants are discussed against the background of wellness literature, which suggests that spiritual wellness is associated with a sense of meaning and purpose, intrinsic values, transcendent beliefs and experiences, and community involvement/concern (Westgate, 1996).

The conceptions do not describe individuals, but the various ways in which individuals conceptualize a higher power. As shown in Table 2, each of the participants described at least two conceptions of a higher power, and Participant B described four qualitatively different ways of experiencing a higher power. Participants' conceptions were found to change with time, and also in different circumstances. Participant B, for instance, described an early conception of God as *Vengeful Judge*, but went on to describe how as an adult she had recognized and claimed the right to choose what would have ultimate power in her life (*Human Fabrication*) and ultimately developed a new conception of a deeply personal conception of a higher power which she chose to call the *Spirit of Love*.

Table 2

Distribution of Conceptions

Participant	Conception								Number of Conceptions Held by Participant
	Vengeful Judge	Human Fabrication	Morrigan, Bird-Goddess	Loving Father	Spirit of Love	Universal Order	Everything		
A		x					x	2	
B	x	x			x	x		4	
C	x	x		x				3	
D	x	x					x	3	
E	x	x					x	3	
F		x					x	2	
G	x	x	x					3	
Number of Occurrences in Database	5	7	1	1	1	2	3		

Table 3

Qualitatively Different Ways of Conceptualizing a Higher Power	
<p>I) Infinite Power Externalized</p> <p>1. Vengeful Judge 3. Morrigan, Bird-Goddess 4. Loving Father</p>	<p>II) Infinite Power Internalized</p> <p>6. Universal Order 7. Everything</p>
<p>III) Human Power</p> <p>2. Human Fabrication 5. Spirit of Love</p>	

In summary, three major categories of description were discovered (see Table 3), each containing two or more subcategories. Category I, Infinite Power Externalized, encompasses three subcategories in which a supernatural power is experienced as coming from a source outside of the self. To the extent that power is experienced internally (e.g. new insight, inner peace) it is described as a gift of grace bestowed at a particular time by a supernatural being separate from self. Category II, Infinite Power Internalized, encompasses two subcategories in which self-empowerment is experienced through recognition of oneness with the infinite. Category III, Human Power, encompasses two subcategories in which the higher power is described in terms of human potential rather than a supernatural force or being.

The Outcome Space: Qualitatively Different Ways of Understanding the Higher Power

Conception One: The Higher Power as Vengeful Judge

Description. The participants who had at one time held this conception of a higher power identified it as a God associated with a specific religion in which they had been raised as children. This higher power is described as a supreme, male authority, viewed as unapproachable, angry, unjust, unforgiving and punitive: "I believed that God was something very.. angry.. and he was watching me all the time.. and.. and I was *bad*" (E-1).

Function. Its function is described as one of making and enforcing rules for human living, and punishing those who break the rules. This involves constant monitoring of people's thoughts and behaviour, experienced as invasive. Lisa began her fight with God at age eleven when, angry that God had allowed her father to die, she was told that even her innermost thoughts were known: "I found out that he was listening in on my *thoughts*, and I could be punished for my thoughts as well as my deeds. And that was *rotten!*" (B-2). Margaret, who struggled with this conception of God well into her adulthood, says: "I really believed, in my drinking.. there was a lot of depression and hopelessness.. I really believed God was doing this.. *to me*.. for something that I had done... (D-3).

How does one relate to a higher power understood in this way? People describe their relationship as one of fear, puzzlement and anger:

And um.. growing up.. because of this.. this religion and this *angry* God.. that I was supposed to do nothing but *fear*.. I wasn't able to do a lot of things that other

Table 4
A Comparison of Conceptions

Conception	Relational Focus	Locus & Nature of Power	Moral Values	Life Purpose & Meaning	Transcendent Beliefs & Experiences
1 Vengeful Judge	Self Infinite Isolation from community	Divine Being watches, judges	Divine Being defines good vs. bad	Avoid judgment Try to belong	None
2 Human Fabrication	Self	Individual is responsible for what has ultimate power in one's life	Humans define good vs. bad Choice comes with responsibility	Personal choice & responsibility	Hope, optimism Rightful existence in universe Right to choose
3 Morrigan, Bird-Goddess	Self Infinite	Divine Being provides grace, inspires strength & heightens awareness of need for or probability of significant change	Good/bad polarized Good = honest, humble, & emotionally strong	Live spiritual life leading to dignity, serenity & self-respect Follow intended path, potential & purpose set by higher power	Capacity to shapeshift Spiritual emergency Divine grace, intervention & guidance Freedom to choose Serendipity
4 Loving Father	Self Infinite	Divine Being provides grace & empowers one through new self-awareness	Good/bad polarized Good - whatever results in inner peace & harmony	Live spiritual life leading to dignity, serenity & self-respect	Divine grace, intervention & guidance Freedom to choose Serendipity
5 Spirit of Love	Self Connection with community	Life experience provides inner knowing needed to live a decent, caring life	No polarities: viewed as spiritual learning journey	Live decent life leading to self-respect and the respect, acceptance & affection of others	Increased love & knowledge Some movement beyond one's own locus of centrality

Table 4 (Continued)

Conception	Relational Focus	Locus & Nature of Power	Moral Values	Life Purpose & Meaning	Transcendent Beliefs & Experiences
6 Universal Order	Self Nature	Empowerment through association with majestic universe.	No polarities All things in the universe are equal, deserving of respect, and integrally connected	Individuals create their own purpose by taking responsibility for self, and reaching out to others in need	Appreciation for order & harmony of the universe Oceanic feeling of belonging, harmony Acceptance of a universal order & purpose beyond human comprehension Clear movement beyond personal locus of centrality Freedom to choose
7 Everything	Self Community Nature Infinite	Power experienced externally as miraculous occurrence, serendipity & infusion of strength; internally as intuition & knowledge; cosmically as awesome wonder of nature	No polarities; viewed as spiritual learning journey Keen awareness of social role and responsibility, and respect for all of creation	Individual purpose divinely inspired, guided & protected & ultimately beyond human comprehension Recognition of the order, balance, inter-connections underlying all of creation	Divine grace, intervention & guidance Protection of individual life, to fulfil divine purpose Serendipity Freedom to choose Increased love & knowledge Clear movement beyond one's own locus of centrality Appreciation for order & harmony of the universe Oceanic feeling of belonging, harmony

kids did. Like go to movies, and uh.. couldn't play on Sundays.., had to go to these *meetings* and sit around a listen to these very sad, long stories and testimonials. (E-1)

Personal Outcomes. Describing themselves as feeling alienated from both their community and the higher power, people speak of a painful need for acceptance and belonging. Margaret, a minister's daughter speaking about the church community she grew up in, describes it this way: "I didn't feel I belonged in there. It was like, um... everybody has this sort of unspoken bond... and I don't, I don't feel it and I don't know how to get in there" (D-2). Steve describes a similar struggle: "... they seemed to have something and I couldn't get it... And I was just.. I hated 'em, I was so mad at 'em. You know, but I wasn't gonna, you know, let them know that" (G-6).

With this conception, power resides in an external, unapproachable divine being and there is a sense of helplessness and futility about connecting with it. Margaret says: "It was a punishing, punitive relationship. And, and not something that I can turn to, for strength" (D-3). In Paul's words: "...it was hard to see how... how could I love something and fear it at the same time? ... I can't sit in fear and feel love" (C-19).

Each of the participants had rejected this conception of a higher power at least a year before the time of the interview, and most had discarded it many years earlier. Their recollections of it, however, were associated with times in their lives when they were struggling with fear, guilt, anger, depression, and alienation from the community. Each participant turned to substances in an attempt to alleviate or block out some of the pain they were feeling. Three of the participants report repeated suicide attempts. In descriptions of this conception of a higher power, life has no meaning or purpose; the

values by which people live are externally imposed, not intrinsic; and there are no transcendent beliefs or experiences to alleviate the sense of helplessness and hopelessness which is described.

Conception Two: The Higher Power as Human Fabrication

Description. In this conception, participants describe as a higher power literally anything which human beings choose to invest with power over themselves, whether it be a religious concept of God, addictive substances, or their own, unique conception of a higher power. Lisa describes the idea:

I read a story once, you know, about the creation of the first religion. And it was.. in the days of the.. great hunter.. from the caves. And he was running down the hill, and he fell over a little.. rock. Stumbled over it and fell. He turned around and he picked up this rock and brought the rock to his.. most favourite place in his home. And there he put it down to worship it. Because that little rock could throw a big brave warrior over. It had more power than he had.. And I thought about that.. a power greater than myself.. you know, it could be money, it could be whisky.. and I have.. I have the ah, the right and the intelligence to choose. (B-9)

Function. The power of this conception is described as one of enlightenment; a dawning awareness that one has the power and the right to choose what one invests with ultimate power. It acts as an intellectual foundation which enables exploration of and transition to other conceptions of a higher power. For Paul, it was recognition that his

parents' and teachers' interpretations of God as punishing and unforgiving, and the beatings he received "in the name of God", were human rather than divine in origin: "...all this stuff when I was growing up, that wasn't God. That was my parents, that was my school.. my church. That wasn't the way God was when I was a child. That was the way humans were when I was a child" (C-20). Margaret attended her first AA meeting not for herself, but to explore what it was about AA that seemed to be helping the heroin addicts she was counselling. She felt a door fly open for her when she read the 12 steps and realized that she was not limited to the conception of a higher power with which she had grown up:

And then I got to the part where it said 'God as you understood Him.' And a light came on for me... that said that's *it*. *That's* the piece that I've been struggling with.. is I have been trying to, like mimic and model and act, um, in the way that I have been taught? In my Christian upbringing.... I had been searching for what other people believe instead of looking at what do *I* believe. What is my personal experience of God? (D-2)

How does one relate to a higher power understood in this way? People describe this as a process by which they recognize conflict between two authorities, and then take responsibility for choosing amongst options in order to resolve the conflict. This was triggered early in childhood for some, by parental conflict about religion, or when beliefs about the immaculate conception were challenged by teachings about the theory of evolution. For others, it occurred much later when something they read or heard caused an "aha" that enabled them to recognize and act upon their right and responsibility to

choose for themselves.

Personal Outcomes. The focus in this conception is once again upon the need for personal belonging. Margaret typifies people's response as they recall their first realization that they are free to choose:

I really felt.. elated and relieved. Oh I get it! I can have my own, I don't have to have *theirs!*... And I started to feel a sense of connectedness and my own.. sense of.. being, that I'm here, I have value and I have a right, I'm worthy.. I'm worth something, I uh, I have a worthiness that says, it's OK that I actually have a relationship with God. (D-3)

Power in this conception is internalized. Along with the right to choose comes personal responsibility. In recalling the way in which he allowed drugs and alcohol to take precedence in his life, Paul takes responsibility for his choices:

I always had the faith.. that they were my higher power? That it was gonna give me that feeling again? It was gonna calm me down and it was gonna relax me and it was gonna make me feel good? But they never ever done it no more.. it really turned on me, because what it would do, it would.. multiply my shame.. and my guilt... And I would get high and I would feel.. so much worse.. and if I ever decide to go back into.. that world of insanity.. that's a choice I make and.. I'm cheating myself and God has nothing to do with it... (C-17,18)

Conceptualizing a higher power in this way, people describe themselves as being free to adopt less rigid views of dominant religious teachings, taking what is personally useful and leaving the rest: "And the religions I hear about, all of them, are man-made, and

they all have got some.. some flaws. But then, that is OK, they can have that. I can take the best out of each one and make my own and stay with that" (B-6). Mary, likening her struggle with Christian stories to her current struggle with First Nations myths, concludes: "I can't swallow whole some of the.. the *things* that they believe.. but.....you know.. that doesn't really matter, now... you don't *have* to swallow them whole. It's, you just *choose* to.. to pray that way, or whatever, hey?" (F-13).

In rejection of the external authority of conception one lies the beginning of an intrinsic system of values, and a fledgling sense of self-worth and optimism. The descriptions also provide evidence of a more flexible world view which allows for the co-existence of conflicting perspectives and opinions. Discussion of connection with community remains at the level of meeting personal needs for inclusion and acceptance.

Conception Three: The Higher Power as Bird-Goddess

Description. In conceptualizing his higher power, Steve reaches back to ancient times of Goddess worship in Old Europe and chooses the Celtic Bird-Goddess Morrigan, whom he calls Morgana. In ancient literature, Morrigan often appears in battle scenes as vultures, crows, cranes, or ravens, and is feared and respected for her powers on the battlefield. Steve is attracted to Morrigan's ability to be powerful in the most difficult of times, and associates this with an ability to drop false pretences and "get real":

Morgana is a pretty powerful goddess. And that's why she would *be there* during war and death, because.. a powerful goddess is *needed*. War is a tragic time. It's a *difficult* time. It's also a time where people.. are given a chance.. to really tap in..

deeply.. to who they are. There's no illusion. There's no.. false presence with her. You know.. during those difficult, harsh times, you really gotta tap deep. And find out.. those reserves. (G-18)

Function. Morrigan's function in this conception is not unlike that of conception four, the *Loving Father*. She is perceived as having a purposeful plan for Steve, as knowing what is best for him, as guiding him along a path of experiential learning and intervening when necessary to help him through difficult situations:

I don't understand.. exactly her plans... you know, she doesn't get my marching orders, and do things, you know? The way I exactly see them.. But my experience has been, in the end, it usually works out better. Like it *always* has worked out better. You know.. what actually happens in my *life*, I could never plan.. and it's always.. my life has continually gotten better. (G-18)

Also similar to conception four, Morrigan provides freedom of choice, in that Steve is not forced to act in accordance with her plans. A final similarity with conception four is that Morrigan boosts Steve's level of self-awareness, thereby providing him with more options. With the higher power conceptualized as *Loving Father*, however, self-awareness is brought about through an increased ability to identify and take responsibility for one's own thoughts and actions. Conceptualized as Morrigan, the higher power shapeshifts into bird form, forewarning him that significant change is either needed or about to occur. It is the arrival of birds--sometimes in an unusual manner, sometimes not--that causes him to focus more acutely on what is happening within himself and in his life:

... if I have a bunch of *crows* flocking in my head.. there's gonna be shit...

Generally, something's gonna happen in my life. You know.. some.. kinda shift's gonna have to happen. (G-18,19)

How does one relate to a higher power understood in this way? Connection with Morrigan is stimulated by taking time out to be quiet, connecting with nature, prayer and meditation, yoga, the First Nations smudging ceremony, and the I-Ching. As evidenced in the first quote provided above, it is viewed as essential to first, be sincere in asking the higher power for help and second, have faith that whatever comes is the higher power's response to the request. This entails letting go of what is seen as excessive worry and control:

... she's given me a sort of set-up or whatever.. and I can go with it or not. [What happens when you don't?] ... Um, it just doesn't feel good. It just ah.. everything gets speeded up, and then it gets crazy... that calm, quietness, any bit of serenity I have starts to go out the window. I start trying to manage the world around me, I start trying to.. control everything. (G-19,20)

This is a theme that runs through several of the conceptions that will be presented here, and lends credence to a theory much written about in addiction treatment literature, namely that ego-deflation is an essential aspect of recovery. In simplistic terms, the theory posits that addicts' motivation to reach out and connect to a new way of life increases in direct proportion to their recognition of the futility of trying to avert disaster by controlling everything and everyone in their lives.

Personal Outcomes. In the beginning, Steve's experiences with crows stimulated feelings which Grof (1985) would classify as spiritual emergencies, in that he felt

overwhelmed and frightened and was unable, at the time, to assimilate them into his prior experience. He recalls a time in his first three months of sobriety when painful feelings were beginning to overwhelm him, no matter how hard he tried to suppress them. As he relates what happened, his voice trembles and he begins to cry:

I went outside.. and there was literally..... um.. hundreds .. of crows.. Flying over my head. And it *freaked* the shit out of me. And.. like that was it. The front, everything, the false front, whatever, stuff? Was gone. Like that.. completely *blew* it out of the water. And I had... about a 45-minute walk home... and for a half an hour they flocked, over my head. Hundreds and hundreds of crows and I just, I just, you know I just completely broke down... I don't know what the medical or technical terms for a nervous breakdown are.. but .. I thought I was gonna die.... And the crows came out (tears). And it was... scary and it (crying) two days later I was in a recovery house. And my life's, you know, never been the same since... I was able to get the support in the recovery house that I needed.. to really let go and go through the stuff that I had to go through... (G-3,4)

Other aspects of Steve's experience of his higher power are more similar to those experienced with other conceptions. If he takes time out from the busyness of life to pursue the spiritual practices which connect him with Morrigan, Steve experiences inner calm and serenity, and serendipitous occurrences occur with frequency. If he does not take time to do spiritual work, he finds himself once again trying to control and manipulate everything and everyone in his life, and is soon overcome by feelings of confusion and powerlessness.

Conception Four: The Higher Power as Loving Father

Description. Paul conceptualizes the higher power as a loving, respectful, patient father: "When I sincerely ask, I have no doubt that, because God is loving and.. and I'm his child, and he cares for me, I'm gonna have that grace..." (C-5). All-knowing and all-powerful, the loving father is viewed in different situations as teacher, guide, buddy, provider of basic needs, and source of unconditional love. A key aspect of this conception of a higher power is the fact that the higher power can be approached in total honesty as an intimate friend and confidante, without fear of judgment or punishment:

God is perhaps my only source of.. complete and.. total honesty.. within myself.

The only.. yeah, that's the only time that I think I find.. complete truth.. in my sharing who I am and the exact nature of who I am... is when I'm sharing with God. I can't find that ability to be that honest.. with other people. (C-6)

Function. When invited to do so, the higher power of this conception directly intervenes in human lives. The most vital function of the higher power viewed as loving father is to forgive all, and grace one with freedom from addiction. Through grace, one is given freedom from addictive behaviour, and with that, a chance to make amends and start over:

If I had to.. understand that God wasn't going to forgive me, well, why would I be alive even, you know? I don't believe I could have recovered [from addiction] under that old God... if I had to try to bring that into my recovery... that's, that's like bringing my past with me... if I done all those things, if I had to carry that

God with me, God would never forgive me.. for the things I done." (C-19).
 As a trusted and forgiving confidante, the higher power makes it easier to be fully honest, and acts as a mirror by which one can see oneself more clearly. The loving father's "answers" to problematic situations manifest as self-awareness:

I say, God show me my part in this... And I'll show [God] where I was trying to manipulate a situation... into what I want, you know? ...so I've been shown my part that I'm being selfish. I'm being very self-centred, ah.. I have a lot of expectations that I have no right to put on somebody else. (C-8)

How does one relate to a higher power understood in this way? First of all, one must exercise one's option to ask for help. Secondly, as with a higher power conceptualized as universal order, faith is vital. One's attempts at controlling life around oneself cannot be relaxed if one cannot trust something more powerful and capable to take charge. It is not enough to believe that the higher power exists, or even to ask for help; one must have faith that if one asks for help, help will be provided. This involves trusting that whatever happens in response to one's request for help is indeed God's "answer", whether or not it is to one's liking:

I remember saying to God, I needed help with.. you know, getting this, with this relationship, right? And.. and, he removed it! Now, that wasn't, I didn't know, I wasn't expecting that help when I asked.. but it lets me know that.. when I ask for help, I have to be more willing and open-minded to.. to accept whatever comes.. I asked for help, so this is how God's seeing that, this is what it was meant to be.
 (C-15)

Thirdly, one must allow feelings to surface, in order to learn from them, rather than suppress them with addictive substances:

...today I try and.. treasure my experiences. I treasure the pain, treasure the feelings and.. I mean, I don't treasure 'em while I'm in 'em, but.. as I go through 'em, I think OK, I'm gonna be stronger for this. I'm gonna be a stronger, healthier person. (C-14)

Finally, because God's answers are experienced as an ability to focus on one's own responsibility and choices regarding problematic situations, this means a willingness to act in accordance with what one is learning about oneself. It also involves a willingness to be forgiving of oneself:

I've developed an instant, sort of ah, mirror where, I can see.. you know? And God allows me to see when I'm off path and.. and when I'm wrong... like you know, I got up this morning and I snapped at someone in the house, and that's not.. that's not.. good. You know, I work here, I'm not supposed to snap at, you know? Although I'm human.. but, but that also gives me the freedom to say I'm sorry. I was wrong. (C-7)

Personal Outcomes. The focus here is primarily on developing a quality relationship with oneself and with the infinite. Discussion of relationship with others in the community is in terms of personal rewards (self-respect, acceptance) rather than social interest. The process is as follows: Through the grace of a loving father, one is gifted with freedom from addictive substances. By choosing not to use mood-altering substances, one accepts the challenge of living with and learning from feelings and life

experiences, rather than suppressing and avoiding them. The result is growing self-awareness, which brings with it new choices and new responsibilities. As choices are made and responsibilities accepted, one earns the respect and high regard of others, and finds a place and a purpose in the community.

With this conception, power is experienced both internally and externally. To the extent that individuals exercise their freedom of choice and responsibility for their own behaviour, control and power are experienced as within. However, unlike the higher power conceived of as the Spirit of Love, there is a very clear sense that the inner-knowing is gifted by an external, divine being/guide, rather than simply learned through human struggle and experience. Paul states: "of myself I am nothing. You know? I ah, I tried it on my own. I, and I tried it with AA don't work. And I say that in the sense that, for me, AA don't work if I don't have a God in my life" (C-14).

As one day after another is lived to the best of one's ability, the personal history associated with shame and guilt begins to be replaced by a "good" past, one which provides meaning and purpose and allows one to feel good about oneself:

... if I live enough good days in a row, I have a good past. You know, and that's what I need. I need to.. get a solid past for myself again... because my life won't be that old.. hopeless, helpless life any more.. It'll be this life of doing good and ah.. being a good person... and by creating a good past I'll feel good about myself and where I came from. (C-21).

There is a fairly simplistic system of intrinsic values here, monitored by what could be called one's conscience. Human behaviour is categorized as "human/right/on

path" vs. "abhuman/wrong/off-path". One knows when one is engaging in right behaviour when one feels a sense of internal peace and happiness. Wrong behaviour results in feelings of emotional pain and anguish. The human journey is seen as one of striving to distinguish right from wrong and achieve "perfect peace" (C-11).

Personal growth is understood as being achieved through human striving, but the grace which serves as its foundation and the personal experiences to which one is guided are considered to be gifts from a transcendent power: "Ah, I don't believe in coincidences any more. You know? I believe things are acts of God" (C-12).

Conception Five: The Higher Power as the Spirit of Love

Description. Conceptualized as the spirit of love, the higher power is a universal resource which is available to all who choose to tap it: "God is the spirit of love. So the spirit of love is available to all of us, anywhere. And it is.. it is available to you, but it is your choice, too" (B-18,19). Conception four is Lisa's understanding of a higher power. For Lisa, who describes herself as an atheist, this is a conception which absorbs "the best" of the world's many religions, while at the same time allowing her to bypass the things about religions that she finds objectionable. Lisa was taught by an AA sponsor to understand the meaning of *love* by breaking it down into component parts which are more manageable, and quotes from Henry Drummond's book entitled The Greatest Thing in the World: "patience, kindness, generosity, humility, courtesy, unselfishness, good temper, guilelessness and sincerity" (B-8).

Function. Conceptualized in this way, the higher power does not have a function,

as such. It simply exists as a resource which offers the potential for decent, caring human existence. Lisa describes herself as reliant upon a loving human community (in this case, AA) to fully experience the spirit of love: "Since I don't believe that God is a person, that you can deal with as such, he's a spirit of some sort, he's the spirit of love... the only way that I can get it is through other people" (B-21).

How does one relate to a higher power understood in this way? In order to tap this resource, one must study the concept of love in depth, in order to understand everything one can about how to live by its principles. Through ordinary life experience (one's own and others'), one is given all of the knowledge necessary to understand the difference between a decent, loving way of life and its opposite. By meditating upon all that one knows about love, and identifying the ways in which one is and is not choosing to live in love, one can choose to continuously improve upon one's way of life. Lisa begins her description of this process with a definition of meditation:

Ah, in the dictionary.. it says musing. Which really means to take a certain subject.. and.. work on it...[For example] I decided to take honesty and try to.. think about when I first heard about honesty, and then what is the difference between honesty and dishonesty. And then.. various happenings in my life, from as far back as I could remember, that had to do with honesty or dishonesty? Or the consequences of either one? ... I felt as if I all of a sudden had a bigger understanding and more knowledge. And it occurred to me that *everything* that happens to me, everything I read, everything I hear, everything that happens, is recorded somewhere, in me, there. All the knowledge that I need for.. the living

that I do, I already have it. If I only bother to dig it up by.. a sort of a concentrated type of.. meditation. (B-14)

Lisa does pray to her higher power, and describes it as a process whereby she focuses her own inner resources on whatever it is she is praying for:

I really and truly believe in the power of prayer? Because prayer is a sincere desire of the soul. If you want something bad enough, then you will, with all the cells in your body, make sure that this.. that you're laying yourself ready for this. I mean, if you want a Cadillac more than anything else in your life, you will pool all your money, sell the things you have and you will make sure you get that Cadillac.... Um.. if I want the strength to pull myself through, that means I'm not allowing myself a fault or failure. (B-22)

Although meditation is done alone, practising the spirit of love in one's life requires surrounding oneself with others who are pursuing a similar path: "I believe that it is very, very important with whom you are surrounding yourself. ...it is hard to, to.. wrap myself into the coat of the spirit of love if.. if everybody around me are negative and nasty and.. swearing and stealing and lying..." (B-23).

Personal Outcomes. Here, there is both a personal focus and a focus on community, in that personal needs are met through the give and take of caring fellowship. Power is somewhat externalized, in that Lisa is reliant upon other human beings to experience her higher power. However, Lisa views herself as having all the inner power she needs to live a decent life, which in turn connects her with the spirit of love in a caring community: "...we are so incredibly perfect that we have been given

everything we would need. And all through our life, we have choices. And we can choose.. to do.. with what we have been given" (B-15).

Lisa's conception of a higher power provides her with strong, intrinsic values which she attempts to implement in her relationships with self and others. Living a decent, caring life gains her a place of belonging, and the respect and affection of a community which values this way of life. Over time, the shame and guilt of the past are replaced with positive self-regard.

Conception Six: The Higher Power as Universal Order

Description. In this conception, the higher power is described as the antithesis of human chaos. It is a benign, impersonal force which orders and connects literally everything in the universe. As with conception one, it is omnipotent and omnipresent. However, it does not intervene in human affairs and has no interest in judging or punishing. This conception could easily be described as Nature:

I look out on the ocean and I realize, like, there's gotta be something so much more powerful than me, because I mean, could I make an ocean? And I look at the sky and I look at the forest and I think, like, there has.. you know there has to be more meaning to life... (C-11)

It's like order vs. chaos. It can't be.. it's too *perfect*. It works too well... it can't be totally random. But.. but it's at such a.. different level that, I can't, how could I ever say that it could.. have any kind of direct intervention.. you know... (F-20).

Function. People describe in this higher power an awesome beauty and harmony

which transcends the chaos of human affairs:

Well, what was soothing about it for me.. was that .. I could believe that there still was something.. that existed.. in the universe.. that wasn't people... the fact that we weren't *all there was*, 'cause I guess.. that was just ah.. too scary for me, 'cause I wasn't doing.. I wasn't in a good place. (F-4,5).

Nature's rhythm and beauty suggests by its very existence a meaning and purpose for life, including human life. Margaret describes an experience of intense and vibrant connection with nature:

...and that became the giving of a higher power being very connected to the spiritualness of things that are living which is nature and... like all living things, which included *me*. That was the key. I felt.. a oneness or an inclusion... That was the day I felt that I belonged here. I had a right to be here... that I was sort of *noticed* in this universe. (D-4)

How does one relate to a higher power understood in this way?

To understand this conception, one must understand an important paradox: It is in association with the awesome wonder of Nature which one feels significant, and it is in association with that same awesome wonder that one feels a sense of humility and insignificance:

I'm really a peon... That doesn't take away from my self-importance. I'm very important in who I am and I'm very much a part of this world. But ah, in the scheme of things, I'm no more than any other person.. or a tree, or a bit of sand or a rock. (C-11,12)

If one truly has faith in the ability of a higher power to manage the affairs of the universe, one can relax one's own efforts to do so:

... it helps me to just think that, you know, it doesn't matter how much you worry, Mary, 'cause you ain't in.. charge of this... and that, that to me is comforting. To know that I'm not in charge of this, 'cause it's hard to be in charge of everything, you know. So it's um... kind of a relief thing, sometimes? (F-12)

While the universe is in charge of a higher-level order, however, individuals are believed to have choice and responsibility about their own particular paths through life, and the ability to create meaningful purpose in their lives at the level of human relations:

I believe that people choose, you know, their paths and stuff, but I guess it's just on a different level.. somehow.... I believe that I can *choose* to put meaning into my life by.. um.. well, in terms of the AA program, to try and help other people through that *program*. And that, that's a meaning that I can put in my life, so I have a meaning because.. maybe I can help some poor drunk... But it's a purpose that I choose, as well, to put in my life. (F-21)

Personal Outcomes. Here, the focus is primarily on personal needs being met through connection with the cosmic. It is soothing and comforting to know that something bigger and stronger than humans is in charge of the universe, and to know that one can, through connection with nature, draw upon its strength. It is a relief to know that one is responsible only for oneself, and not everything that happens in one's world. However, there is some focus, as well, on achievement of meaning and purpose through participation in the community.

Conception Seven: The Higher Power as Everything

Description. The higher power conceptualized as *Everything* combines several aspects of previous conceptions, without absorbing any of them in totality. Conception seven views the higher power as a spirit of love which is directly accessible, unlike the *Spirit of Love* which can be accessed only through human beings. The higher power is seen here as a universal life force and energy, as is *Universal Order*, but is a force which does intervene in human affairs. As with the *Loving Father*, this conception of a higher power is experienced as loving, patient, and non-judgmental. It is not conceptualized, however, as having any form or gender.

This higher power is described as being light, spirit, energy, power, love, nature, inner knowing, divine guidance and, finally, the process of spiritual commitment and connection itself. Asked to clarify which of these things might be paramount, people cannot choose; the terms are used interchangeably: [To what extent is this an entity? To what extent is it a life force or an energy? To what extent is it a process?] Mmmm. I think it's all those things. I think one, it is definitely a process. (D-15) "God is my guide, my love, my.... my everything" (A-10). "God is either everything, or he is nothing. And for me, God *is everything*." (E-17)

Ultimately, the higher power conceptualized in this way is described as beyond human comprehension, let alone language. Hence, its description as "everything":

... the energy is *here* (gestures to the room), you know, it's in *everything*... my inner God is a *part* of that.. yours.. the trees.. everything is a *part* of that whole essence. But it's (laughs), it's hard, because I mean, gee whiz, it's so much beyond

me! Sitting here trying to, trying to define God! (A-22,23)

Function.

As with conceptions three and four, the higher power here is viewed as a giver of grace to all who ask, with the freedom to ask or not left up to the individual. Also similar to conceptions three and four, the higher power is experienced as a purposeful teacher who guides individuals toward meaningful life experiences. Divine intervention reaches a new level here, however, as people report miraculous occurrences and internal voices which are viewed as direct interventions of the higher power. Margaret tells of a voice she heard at a time when she was feeling quite lost and alienated in her life, before she stopped drinking: "There was a sense of something trying to get my attention. And I heard very clearly, in an internal way, 'Margaret, I have something for you to do.'" (D-7) Jill reports her doctor's conclusion, after she survived surgery for a ruptured brain aneurism which was expected to leave her dead, or at best paralysed and unable to see or speak: "And the doctor said: 'I did the best I could, but I had help.' And you don't usually *hear medical people say that*" (E-3). Recalling two life-threatening situations on mountain roads when mind and body seemed to separate, as she was guided through physical manoeuvres which were beyond her conscious awareness, skill and strength, Margaret says:

[So in both cases, there's a sense of unreality about it... As if you've kind of gone into another world for a few moments.] Yeah! And there's an immediate sense of.. oh, thank you. I know *I didn't do that!* By myself. I just *know it*. Um.. some, something helped me there. Because.. because I know *I didn't do that*. I couldn't

repeat that if.. I was going to say my life depended on it (laughs). But my life did depend on it. ... I couldn't repeat that. And it's at a time like that, that I feel that guardianship, and I feel that sense of purpose... it was not my time, it was not in the plan.. that I am finished here. (D-10,11)

How does one relate to a higher power understood in this way?

In conceptions three and four, there is simple mention of the importance of asking sincerely for help and having faith that it will be given. In conception seven, the process of commitment or faith development becomes paramount, and is in itself one way of describing the higher power. In an effort to commit this concept to human language, Margaret likens it to her relationship with the Harley Davidson she rides:

...you actually are connected to the machine.. and for a moment, I guess, I could interpret it as, that becomes like a higher power. I have to be connected to the bike, in order for the bike and I to work together. It is not something I operate. My body's actually a big part of how the bike handles and.. how it turns a corner... My whole being becomes involved in.. making this happen... you make a decision, you commit, and you follow through. Um.. because I have to be that connected to that process, it allows me to.. release all the other stresses, anger, frustration.. anything else that's going on in my life. So the longer you ride.. you kinda hit this place, it's like the garbagey stuff is *gone*.. And I have a oneness with this machine? (D-13,14)

Jill describes it as a process of awakening to life as she becomes increasingly aware of the divine presence within her, within others and within the universe:

And to be awake, to be aware, to ah, to be alive, and to me that is, that is how I experience.. the God of my understanding. It's.. it's that *incredible power*, that aliveness in me. Ah.. that, ah.. that *trust*.. (E-9)

Personal Outcomes. In conception four the focus is on developing self-awareness, and the new choices and responsibilities that result from that. In conception five it is the ability to live a decent, caring life amongst human beings and to be warmly received by them. In conception six it is a feeling of being at one with the universe, and a more intense experiencing through the five senses. In describing conception six, people speak of all of these in combination. However, in conception six the focus is, for the first time, as much on others as on self:

I don't even have to look at the miracles in my *own* life, the fact that I am alive and what's been happening for *me*... I see that *all around* me. People.. waking up.. and coming alive. and.. living lives with.. true purpose. (E-11)

It is also as much on giving to others as it is on receiving:

... it's certainly helped me to.. bond with women and to act as a guide in their work... If I'm not connected to the higher power, I'm not connected to people. Because that's where the life force, the living energy of people.. is, is in that spiritual power. (D-11)

I feel God, I sense this wonderful, loving power, around me. And *in* me. Um.. the, the awakening for me to be able to *feel* compassion.. for other human beings. (E-10)

Summary of Findings

In summary, the outcome space maps out three categories of conception, each encompassing two or more subcategories representing a qualitatively different way of understanding and experiencing a higher power.

Conceptions 1. *Vengeful Judge*, 3. *Morrigan, Bird-Goddess*, 4. *Loving Father*, 6. *Universal Order* and 7. *Everything* describe relationships with the infinite. Viewed along a continuum representing a more or less externalized locus of power, conceptions one, three and four are described by participants as more externalized in nature while conceptions six and seven describe a oneness with the power source.

Conceptions 2. *Human Fabrication* and 5. *Spirit of Love* are firmly rooted in the human realm, describing a process of personal empowerment through connection with oneself and with others.

Chapter four has outlined the findings of this research, mapping out the various conceptions which were discovered and discussing the ways in which one conception relates to another. Chapter five will discuss implications of the research findings for counselling theory, practice and research.

V Discussion

The literature review provided in chapter two reveals an increasing interest on the part of the counselling profession in the role which spirituality plays in the development of wellness. This chapter explores the findings of this research study in light of that literature. Chapter five begins with a summary of the research findings. Consideration is then given to ways in which the findings of this research might relate to the process of change theory which forms the foundation of person-centred therapy (Meador & Rogers, 1984). Chapter five continues with discussion of the implications of these findings for counselling theory, practice and future research.

The Outcome Space: Qualitatively Different Ways of Understanding a Higher Power

The outcome space maps out seven qualitatively different ways of understanding and experiencing a higher power: 1. *Vengeful Judge*, 2. *Human Fabrication*, 3. *Bird-Goddess*, 4. *Loving Father*, 5. *Spirit of Love*, 6. *Universal Order* and 7. *Everything*. Five of the conceptions (1,3,4,6,7) are described by participants as a process of connection with an infinite power, while two (2,5) are described in terms of a transcendent human power.

Conceptions of a higher power are described as changing over time, as participants confront conflicting sources of information and authority and develop increasingly personalized ideas of a power greater than themselves. This is the case for each of the participants who reported having replaced the *Vengeful Judge* conception with a more positive, supportive idea of a higher power. Some participants also describe a number of concurrent conceptions, depending upon context. For instance, it is not unusual for participants to describe the higher power as *Human Fabrication* when

discussing their freedom and responsibility to choose what has ultimate power in their lives; to describe the higher power as *Universal Order* when discussing a feeling of oneness with the beauty and balance of nature; and to use a third conception to describe direct intervention of the higher power in their personal lives.

If placed on a rough continuum (see Table 5), the conceptions appear to describe a shift from an externalized, infinite power source with which one has no connection (*Vengeful Judge*), to an internalized, human power source which connects one with community (*Spirit of Love*), to an infinite power source experienced both within and without which results in a sense of oneness with everything in the universe--within self, with others, and with the infinite (*Everything*). Studying the language used by the participants to verbalize their experience with a higher power, one notes a shift which is reminiscent of the process of change theory which underlies the person-centred theory of Carl Rogers (Meador & Rogers, 1984).

Person-centered theory postulates that the inherent growthful potential of any individual will tend to be released in any relationship in which a helping person is able to experience and communicate personal congruence, accurate empathy and unconditional positive regard. Rogers (1987) describes the following process: As children, our natural tendency toward organismic growth based upon inner experience is interrupted when some of our behaviour is judged as unacceptable by those upon whom we rely for nurturance. We learn that the acceptance and regard of others is conditional upon our behaviour, and ultimately, we introject the values of others, basing our self-concept upon a value system which is not always in tune with our inner experience. In a

climate of acceptance and trust, feelings and attitudes previously hidden from awareness will begin to surface and be expressed. If they are not judged by the helper, person-centered theory suggests that the client will move along a continuum from not recognizing or disowning feelings, to a growing awareness of inner experiencing, an ability to allow one's inner experiencing to flow and change in the moment, and ultimately, behaviour which is increasingly congruent with that inner experiencing. Meador and Rogers suggest that the person-centered approach is theoretically applicable to a wide range of relationships:

The person-centered approach is theoretically applicable to any relationship where the persons want to understand each other and want to be understood; where the persons are willing to reveal themselves to some degree; and where the persons want to enhance their own growth. These characteristics are present in a wide variety of relationships, and consequently the person-centered principles are being used in more and more situations. The elements of genuineness, empathic understanding, and positive regard promote and enhance a healthy relationship regardless of the circumstances in which they are present. (Meador & Rogers, 1984, p. 182)

This researcher is unaware of any effort on Rogers' part to study the impact of these three conditions when experienced in relationship with a higher power rather than a helping person. However, the personal changes reported by the participants in this study suggest that when a shift is made toward a conception of a higher power which is experienced as congruent, empathic and non-judgmental, a process of growthful change

begins.

Table 5

A Continuum of Change

7 Everything
6 Universal Order
5 Spirit of Love
4 Loving Father
3 Morrigan, Bird-Goddess
2 Human Fabrication
1 Vengeful Judge

Language used by participants to describe relationship with higher power suggests:



Increasing internalization of/oneness with the higher power
 Developing awareness of inner experiencing
 Increasing ability to allow inner experiencing to flow and change
 Behaviour increasingly congruent with inner experiencing
 Development of intrinsic system of values

In the context of this study, the participants presumably experience whatever characteristics they have chosen to attribute to the higher power of their understanding. Knowing that it is ultimately within one's power to shift from one conception of a higher power to another, it is interesting to examine reported relationships with each of the higher power conceptions for evidence of these three conditions, and any impact the

presence of these conditions might have in terms of growthful change.

Meador and Rogers (1984) make reference to the Process Scale, which has been proven reliable in correlating positive process movement in therapy with the presence of the three therapist conditions of genuineness, caring and understanding. They propose that, since inward processes cannot be accessed directly, it is reasonable to "attempt to identify inward processes through the quality or types of verbalization, the way an individual reports himself" (sic) (p. 182). The Process Scale measures seven different behaviour strands: 1) the ability to own, express and flow with changing feelings in the moment; 2) awareness of inner experiencing and ability to use it as a referent for behaviour; 3) the ability to base meanings upon one's own inner experience, rather than externally-imposed constructs; 4) the ability to experience and communicate one's subjective self; 5) congruence between one's behaviour and one's inner experience; 6) the ability to own one's own contribution to life problems, and seek solutions within self; and 7) the ability to trust in relationship, and express one's feelings freely as they occur.

For the purposes of this study, the Process Scale itself has not been used. However, the following section draws upon some of the ideas of the process of change theory described above. The continuum suggested in Table 5 is speculation on this researcher's part about a change process which seems to be reflected in the language used by the participants of this study to describe their relationships with various higher powers. Description of a loving, caring, supportive relationship with a higher power and ultimately, a feeling of oneness with a higher power, seems to be accompanied by language which reflects the process of change theorized by Meador and Rogers (1984).

The participants of this study describe their relationship with Conception 1, the *Vengeful Judge*, as lacking congruence, empathy and unconditional positive regard. The *Vengeful Judge* engages in an invasive watchfulness and is interested in judging, without the possibility of future forgiveness. While participants were being taught that this higher power was loving, they experienced it as fearsome and angry. Striving to retain the high regard of others, participants internalized the conditions of worth imposed by others, and distanced themselves from the feelings which represented their own inner experiencing. This conception of a higher power was experienced as absolute truth; there was no sense that this set of beliefs could be questioned. Participants describe no ownership of life problems, and hence no responsibility for changing them. Interpersonal relationships were experienced as fearful, and there was no sense of how to relate to others.

With the *Human Fabrication* conception, the relationship is essentially with oneself. Participants describe becoming more aware of feelings, beginning to trust their inner experiencing, and taking ownership for personal constructs. In recognizing their ability to formulate their own conception of a higher power, they describe an experience of relief and a feeling of belonging, as the fear of eternal judgment fades; the beginning of self-acceptance, and hope for the future as they accept personal responsibility for healthy choices. This conception could be viewed as growth in congruence, empathy and understanding for self, which leaves the door open for connection with others and with the infinite. It can also be seen as the beginning of an intrinsic system of values.

Conceptions three (*Morrigan, Bird-Goddess*) and four (*Loving Father*) can be viewed as a little further along the continuum of the process of change (see Table 4), in

that participants' expression of inner experiencing is much more evident, there is a greater willingness to question and alter personal constructs and behaviours, and a greater awareness of incongruence between inner experiencing and outward behaviour. Both of these conceptions describe an externalized higher power, in that experiences such as increased self-awareness and the ability to act upon new awarenesses is viewed as a gift bestowed by the higher power. However, these conceptions of a higher power are experienced as loving, supportive, forgiving and patient, and participants talk about how this facilitates, within them, an ability to look honestly at their own behaviour, take ownership for mistakes, and learn from them. There is still great fear, however, about trusting one's inner feelings and experiences in intimate relationship with others.

Conception five, the *Spirit of Love*, describes a loving, trusting relationship with self and with others. The higher power here is internalized to the extent that power and direction are sought from an inner knowing based upon life experience, rather than an infinite source. However, it is externalized in that one can only access it through a loving, caring human community. The Spirit of Love describes a relationship with a higher power characterized by a love, warmth and acceptance experienced within the AA fellowship. Inner experiencing becomes a referent for behaviour change and construction of personal meaning, and solutions to problems are sought within oneself. Description of this conception reflects a greater willingness to trust the safety of human relationships and inner referents about how to behave in relationship. Hence its placement further along the continuum of change in Table 5.

Conception six, *Universal Order*, and conception seven, *Everything*, are placed high

on the continuum in Table 5, because participants describe in these conceptions such a closeness and comfort with the higher power that there is a sense of oneness. In conception six, it is a relationship with a benign, infinite force of order and balance which connects literally everything in the universe. The self is viewed as one with *Universal Order*, no more and no less significant than anything else in what is perceived as an awesome, perfect, purposeful universe. As such, self is viewed as part of a loving, meaningful, perfect balance. Here, there is a high degree of comfort with inner experiencing, verbalization of a continuing effort to let go of polarized and rigid ways of thinking, and description of the personal meaning found through community involvement.

Conception seven, *Everything*, is described, ultimately, as beyond the descriptive capability of human language. Efforts to describe it, however, suggest that relationship with this higher power is characterized by an unprecedented degree of congruence, empathy and unconditional positive regard. It is not surprising, then, to see that participants describing this conception are describing a level of awareness of inner experience and congruent behaviour which would be placed high on the continuum of change (see Table 5). These people speak of feeling connected to and in harmony with themselves, with others in their community, and with the cosmos itself. The higher power, experienced as light, energy, love, power, and knowledge is experienced within self, within others and within everything in nature. It is described as the very process of connecting and learning to trust--with oneself, with others, and with a cosmic order that is ultimately unknowable. Participants describing this conception use language that

reflects a very immediate sense of inner experiencing; a willingness to flow with inner experience as it changes in the moment; an ability to reference problems with inner experience, and seek solutions within self. Finally, with this conception there is a basic level of trust which allows the free expression of feelings as they occur in the moment.

Studying the language, then, that is used by participants to describe how they experience each of these conceptions of a higher power, there is a sense of progression between the conceptions which reflects the process of change identified by Meador and Rogers (1984).

Implications for Theory

This section explores ways in which these research findings contribute to counselling literature regarding the nature of the higher power, the nature of spirituality in general, and the role of spirituality in the development of wellness.

In literature relating to faith development and spiritual wellness, many assumptions are made about the nature of the higher power. Some authors assume the higher power to be religious in nature (e.g. Bergin, 1980; Worthington, 1989), while others work with a more expansive definition of spirituality, assuming that for some the higher power might be, for example, mother nature or cosmic consciousness (e.g. Berenson, 1990; Chandler et al., 1992; Chappel, 1990; Witmer & Sweeney, 1992). In addiction recovery literature, speculation and assumption abounds about the ways in which A.A. members do/do not feel restricted (by A.A.'s religious origins and its frequent use of the word *God*) in developing personal conceptions of a higher power. Prior to this study, however, no known effort has been made to study the ways in which

people actually do conceptualize a higher power.

In this study, participants' conceptions of a higher power were found to be consistent with the more expansive views of spirituality. The conceptions reflect a view of spirituality which is a) far more inclusive than organized religion, b) unmediated by the dogma or hierarchical structure of any particular belief system, c) deeply personal and d) ever changing and developing. With regard to encouragement of non-traditional conceptions of a higher powers within the program of A.A., participants reported no feelings of external pressure or restriction in conceptualizing their higher powers, and the broad range of conceptions identified suggests that they have felt very free to develop highly personalized and unique conceptions.

The participants' stories lend credence to recent theories (e.g. Chandler et al., 1992; Myers, 1991, 1992; Witmer & Sweeney, 1992) portraying spirituality as central to the development of wellness. The participants describe a process by which connection with a higher power fills a spiritual vacuum characterized by isolation, alienation, hopelessness and helplessness. Whether viewed as recognition and acceptance of one's own power and responsibility to choose, connection with loving human fellowship, connection with a divine being who knows about and intervenes in human lives, or connection with nature, the participants describe a process whereby they find a place to belong, a reason to live and hope for the future. Whether understood as divine gift of grace or the combined strength and purpose of human fellowship, participants talk about awakening to a new reverence for the beauty and joy of life itself, and about learning to embrace problems as opportunities for personal growth rather than using addictive

substances to suppress uncomfortable feelings. Whether viewed as divine gift or an inner knowing developed through life experience, increasing self-awareness is described as a stepping stone toward healthier, more responsible life choices. All of this, in turn, is described as enabling people to participate more effectively in their social and working lives, and ultimately, to feel in harmony with the universe as a whole. The process of change theory (Meador and Rogers, 1984) which underlies person-centered theory has been offered as one way of understanding how different conceptions of a higher power contribute to this process.

These research findings support the idea, then, that spirituality plays a central role in the development of wellness. The concepts of *spirituality* and *higher power*, however, are understood in a number of qualitatively different ways and conceptions of a higher power change over time and in different contexts. It cannot be taken for granted that others share our understandings of these phenomena, or even that one individual will be consistent in her or his conceptualization; individuals can be expected to shift from one concept to another over time and in different circumstances.

Implications for Counselling Practice

In this section, the research findings will be studied as they relate to literature regarding counsellor preparation for spiritual counselling, conflicting spiritual values between counsellor and client, and the actual process of spiritual counselling.

Increasingly, spirituality is being recognized as a vital aspect of any holistic counselling approach. However, counsellor training programs have not yet responded to the challenge of preparing counsellors to recognize and work with spiritual issues in the

counselling process (Pate & Bondi, 1992; Shafranske & Gorsuch, 1984). To do this type of work effectively, counsellors must be aware of their own spiritual beliefs and values, be aware of and knowledgeable about different ways of viewing spirituality, and be open-minded and willing to respect those differences. As Bergin (1980) and Worthington (1989) suggest, clients' spiritual or religious identities are just as important to the counselling process as are their cultures and ethnic or racial identities. Pate and Bondi's (1992) suggestion of including study of diverse spiritual beliefs in the multicultural component of counsellor training programs is a valid one.

In order to recognize how spiritual differences might impact on the counselling process and to be able to address issues as they arise, counsellors must first be aware that differences exist. Herein lies the unique contribution of phenomenography, which focuses on differences rather than common themes. The findings of this study indicate that counsellors can expect to encounter amongst clients remarkably different understandings of spirituality and a higher power, and spiritual values highly divergent from their own. As Bergin (1980) and many others emphasize, values are an inevitable and pervasive part of counselling. It is essential that counsellors be consciously aware of their own understandings of these concepts and be alert to ways in which personal values and goals might affect the spiritual process of individual clients.

Carl Rogers (1980) theorizes that if a counselling relationship provides the three necessary conditions of congruence, empathic understanding and unconditional positive regard, the client's natural tendency to move toward fulfilment of inherent potential will exert itself. The findings of this research study suggest that the same process occurs in

people's relationships with a higher power. Describing how they recognized their power to choose what had power in their lives (*Human Fabrication*) and how they replaced the *Vengeful Judge* conception with a more approachable, loving and accepting conception, participants talked about coming alive--developing awareness, making responsible choices, learning to love and respect themselves and others, and eventually, finding meaning through productive participation in the world around them.

This process was described to a greater or lesser extent by each of the participants in the study, regardless of whether the higher power was conceptualized in more common ways (e.g. Loving Father, Everything) or less common ways (e.g. Bird-Goddess, Spirit of Love manifested through human fellowship). It was described by people who declared themselves to be of Christian, atheist, agnostic, and Wiccan persuasion. Counsellors, then, who wish to be congruent, empathic and prizing of clients whose spiritual beliefs and goals differ from their own must a) be aware of the different ways in which clients might view these phenomena and b) be alert to the ways in which their own beliefs and values might interfere with clients' spiritual process.

This could occur in blatant ways. For instance, four of the seven participants in this study reported that their journeys toward wellness had necessitated a shift away from a conception of the higher power as *Vengeful Judge*. Encountering clients with this conception, will a counsellor with orthodox religious beliefs consciously or unconsciously try to correct clients *mistaken* perceptions of their religion, as suggested by Gorsuch (1993)? Or will this be viewed as an opportunity to explore whether a client's religious background was experienced as abusive; whether there are issues with trust and authority

that are based in the client's religious past; and whether the client might benefit by separating out religion from spirituality and exploring alternate ways of understanding of a higher power?

Another situation in which counsellors' spiritual beliefs might blatantly affect clients' process is with experiences described by Noble (1987) and Grof (1985) as transcendent. The fact that two of the seven participants report such experiences as pivotal in their recovery progress supports Noble's and Grof's claims that such experiences are much more frequent and more productive of psychological health than is currently believed. In both cases, the individuals reported that they had survived, against all odds, situations which would normally have resulted in death. One of these participants also reported hearing an internal voice, telling her that there was something for her to do. In both cases, these experiences fostered a stronger personal sense of belonging, connection and purpose which led to more constructive choices and a healthier lifestyle. A counsellor who has no experience with spiritual emergencies precipitated by events such as near-death, internal voices or visions might easily presume that a client reporting such events is psychotic, when what Noble and Grof suggest is needed is to help the client regain balance, derive personal meaning from the experience, and integrate it into her or his experience.

There is also great potential to interfere with a client's process in more subtle ways. For instance, premature disclosure of a counsellor's spiritual beliefs and values (e.g. a casual remark about a New-Age spiritual publication, whether interpreted by the client as positive or negative) may pre-empt client disclosure of differing beliefs.

The stories told by participants in this study, then, support the position that spirituality is a key component of wellness. The findings also indicate that spirituality and a higher power are complex, multi-faceted and dynamic concepts which are understood in very different ways. One cannot take for granted that one understands how another views these concepts, or even that understanding of these concepts is consistent over time or in different contexts. To be positioned to identify and address spiritual issues as they arise in the counselling relationship, counsellors must be conscious of their own conceptions and willing to explore and support conceptions which differ from their own.

Implications for Future Research

Marton (1986, 1988) claims that phenomenographers have found, in study after study, that people conceptualize various phenomena in a relatively limited number of qualitatively different ways. Limited time and resources have made it impossible to determine whether the findings of this study have exhausted the ways in which a higher power might be conceptualized. To ensure this, it would have been necessary to continue interviewing until the data being collected was found to be consistently redundant. The small sample used for this study does not include, for instance, individuals with East Indian, Asian or First Nations heritage who are actively practising the spiritual disciplines of their cultures. The sample also excludes individuals who closely adhere to the doctrines of Western religions. Although an attempt was made to include such individuals, none were identified through the purposeful sampling method used. This may be, in part, due to A.A.'s emphasis upon spirituality rather than religion, and upon the importance of developing one's own personal conception of a higher power.

However, a replication study with more time and resources would permit a more thorough search. A larger sample would also enable a distribution study, to determine the relative frequency of different conceptions.

Given A.A.'s emphasis on spirituality and the development of a personalized conception of a higher power, this community provided a convenient sample for the purposes of this study. However, A.A. is known to be a community where the majority of members have rejected strict religious beliefs in favour of more expansive spiritual beliefs (Smith, 1994). This reduces the chance of finding individuals who are working with religious conceptions of a higher power which support the development of wellness. Certain cultures (e.g. Asian, East Indian) are also under-represented within the fellowship of A.A. It would be useful to expand the search for conceptions of a higher power beyond the community of A.A., to see whether the new data would result in an expansion or modification of the outcome space developed in this study.

A final but obvious consideration for future research is one already identified above, in the section on implications for counselling. Just as the counsellor's spiritual beliefs and values pervade the counselling process, so do those of the researcher permeate the research study, from the question being posed through to results. Prior to this study, no known effort had been made to explore how people actually do understand and experience a higher power. Hence, the literature is replete with articles and studies which are necessarily based upon *assumptions* about how people understand and experience a higher power. Literature reviews (e.g. Worthington, 1989) based upon a religious view of spirituality produce results which exclude non-religious works. Research

which defines spirituality from a Christian perspective (e.g. Gorsuch, 1993) exclude the experience of many North Americans. Studies such as this one provide a more solid empirical base upon which to base our assumptions about how a higher power is understood. Ultimately, however, it is important to remember that no matter how tightly controlled the research, research findings are a human construction arising out of the particular beliefs and values of those who design and conduct the research--they do not represent *truth*.

Finally, in the field of addiction recovery, a great deal of energy is being expended in heated debate about whether the program of A.A. can be effective for people who are not Christian or Jewish. In this research study, non-religious conceptions of a higher power were related by individuals who describe themselves as atheist or agnostic, and who have been regular members of A.A. for a decade or more. If replication of this study with a larger sample were to produce similar results, perhaps energy could be diverted away from this age-old debate and focused, instead, on study of the process by which connection with the various types of higher powers facilitates wellness.

Summary

Historically, mainstream psychology has viewed spirituality as irrelevant and/or inappropriate material for non-religious counselling settings. With increasing recognition of constructivist research and a renewed interest in holistic counselling approaches, spirituality has become an acceptable topic for counselling research and is theorized to be a central factor in the development of wellness across the life span. However,

spirituality has not been clearly defined, and no known study has been made of the ways in which people conceptualize a higher power. Working from within the constructivist paradigm, this study used phenomenographic techniques to arrive at categories of description which capture the qualitatively different ways in which recovering alcoholics understand and experience a higher power. Using purposeful sampling methods, a sample of seven women and men was drawn from the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous, a program which actively promotes reliance on a power greater than oneself but does not specify any particular conception of a higher power. During individual, audio-taped interviews, participants described concrete experiences which had in some way affected their conception of a higher power. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed, yielding seven qualitatively different ways of conceptualizing a higher power: as *Vengeful Judge*, as *Human Fabrication*, as *Bird-Goddess*, as *Loving Father*, as *Spirit of Love*, as *Universal Order* and as *Everything*. The conceptions describe not people, but the various ways in which people think about a higher power; individuals were found to shift from one conception to another over time, and in different circumstances. Viewed along a continuum, the conceptions reveal an increasing sense of connection with self, others and the infinite as the source of power is internalized and an intrinsic system of values is developed. The findings support recent theories suggesting that spirituality plays a central role in the development of wellness.

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Appendix C: Questionnaire

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QUESTIONNAIRE

(For demographic purposes; to be completed after Consent Form has been signed,

1. Gender: Female ____ Male ____
2. Age: _____
3. How long is it since you last took a drink? _____
4. How long have you been attending AA on a regular basis (on average, at least once a week)? _____
5. About how many AA meetings do you attend per month now? _____

Appendix D: Interview Protocol

Script:

There is a growing recognition that spirituality seems to have an important role in recovery from alcoholism. The purpose of my study is to explore how recovering alcoholics conceptualize a higher power. Most people find it difficult, though, to just say what their conception of a higher power is. To make it easier, I would like to explore with you some concrete experiences that have influenced your conception of a higher power. Before we begin, is there anything in general you would like to say about your higher power?

(Response)

Thinking back now, over the time frame from when you decided to stop drinking, up until the present--are there four or five experiences which stand out in your mind as having influenced the way in which you conceptualize a higher power?

(Response)

Subsequent Interview Procedure:

The experiences mentioned by the participant will be explored in depth during the interview, looking at: what happened, what led up to it, what effect it had on the participant, what role the experience had in the participant's recovery, and ultimately how the experience influenced his/her conception of a higher power.

Sample follow-up questions, to be used as needed:

1. Has your conception of a higher power changed over time?
2. What role has a higher power played in your recovery from alcoholism?
3. Did the program of A.A. influence your conception of a higher power in any way?
4. Are there any further comments you would like to make before ending this interview?

Appendix E: Data Analysis - Individual Transcript

that, that was my experience with my faith that... when I sincerely ask, I have no doubt that, because God is loving and... and I'm his child, and he cares for me, I'm gonna have that grace.. for this day: And... and, and it

Participant C
 Externalized (I)
 Loving (4)
 Giver of grace

father. [Right]. I also heard that that was a punishing God. And I really believed, in my drinking, there was a lot of depression and hopelessness... I really believed that God was doing this, to me, for something that I had done, so it was a punishing, punitive [Yeh] relationship. And, not something that I can turn to, for strength. I thought I was going to be

Participant D
 Externalized (I)
 Punishing (1)
 Not accessible
 Not giver of strength

presence would guide me and give me the strength to do what I needed. So it wasn't a matter of turning something over or turning my life and my directiveness... I like to use the word directiveness instead of will... um, my directiveness over to any kind of being, it was more a sense of trusting this spiritual process that was part of me. [Mmhm. That it could hold you and

Participant D
 Internalized (II)
 Not a being (not 4)
 Spiritual process (7)
 Guides, strengthens

doubt about it. Since I don't believe that God is a person, that you can deal with as such, he's a spirit of some sort, he's the spirit of love and it's what I have chosen to call it... But.... the only way that I can get it is through other people. It is them that have to... everybody leaves something with me, even you know, an idea, a thought? Ah... everybody has a value of some sort. [Mmhm] Sometimes even a bad example is welcome because

Participant B
 Human base, not infinite (III)
 Accessible only through human community (5)

Appendix F: Data Analysis - Categories/Subcategories

And to be awake, to be aware, to ah, to be alive, and to me that is, that is
how I experience.. the God of my understanding. It's.. it's that.. that

incredible power, that aliveness in me. Ah.. that, ah.. that trust And..

(sighs) [Trust in yourself Jill, or trust in something outside of you? Because

I'm hearing that.. higher power.. is.. a being outside, but also within.] I

believe that God is everywhere. I believe that God is in you and me and in

every, every one. Asleep in some. And very much awake in others. I

believe that God is, is.. the power. I believe that God is the source of

power. Um.. I experience, or.. yes, experience God in many different ways.

There are days when I'm feeling.. um.. kind of down, and, and a little

concerned about things, and.. and kind of weary. And I say to this, this,

this.. power, that I call God, I ask, I ask that power to.. carry me today. I

really need arms around me today. [Mmhm] And that's.. what I sense. Is

that.. that feeling of being.. being carried. And, and then on the other hand

there are times when.. ah, you see I don't see any face on God. I don't see

a figure.. of any kind, it's not male, it's not female, I just use the term he

because it, it happens to.. fit in my vocabulary. [Mmhm] Um.. But I see

God in the eyes of other people. I see God in little children, I see God in

those magnificent cherry blossoms that are hanging on the trees these days.

I feel God, I sense this wonderful, loving power, around me. And in me.

Um.. the, the awakening for me to be able feel compassion.. for other

human beings. These things that have been turned on in me.

INTERNALIZED

INTERNALIZED
II

II 7

INTERVIEWS
H 6

NO FORM
OR GENDER
H 4

NATURE ~ 6

LOVING ~ 4

INTERNALIZED - II

And to be awake, to be aware, to ah, to be alive, and to me that is, that is
 how I experience.. the God of my understanding. It's.. it's that.. that
incredible power, that aliveness in me. Ah.. that, ah.. that trust And..
 (sighs) [Trust in yourself Jill, or trust in something outside of you? Because
 I'm hearing that.. higher power.. is.. a being outside, but also within.] I
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every, every one. Asleep in some. And very much awake in others. I
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 There are days when I'm feeling.. um.. kind of down, and, and a little
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 I feel God, I sense this wonderful, loving power, around me. And in me.
 Um.. the, the awakening for me to be able feel compassion.. for other
human beings. These things that have been turned on in me.

INTERNALIZED

INTERNALIZED - II

II 7

INTERVENES # 6

NO FORM OR GENDER # 4

NATURE - 6

LOVING - 4

INTERNALIZED - II

Appendix G: The Twelve Steps

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol--that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with *God as we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

(Alcoholics Anonymous, 1976, pp. 59-60, emphasis in original).

Appendix H: The Twelve Traditions

1. Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity.
2. For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority--a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience.
3. The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking.
4. Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole.
5. Each group has but one primary purpose--to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.
6. An A.A. group ought never endorse, finance, or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.
7. Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.
8. Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever non-professional, but our service centers may employ special workers.
9. A.A. as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.
10. Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy.
11. Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, and films.
12. Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.