

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Chester		
Unit of Assessment: 31 Theology and Religious Studies		
Title of case study: Facilitating Access to Addiction Recovery Spirituality in a Secular World.		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2012 – 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Wendy Dossett	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Dr, Associate Professor	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 2010 – ongoing
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014 – 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? Y		

1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)

Wendy Dossett's research on spirituality and substance misuse recovery led to the establishment of the Higher Power Project [HPP] and associated impacts documented in the REF2014 submission. Further significant impact of the data and publications associated with the HPP includes:

- A significant, positive, change in attitude to and greater take up of Twelve Step Mutual Aid among people with substance addictions.
- The dismantling of one of the most significant barriers to Mutual Aid (e.g. groups like Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous), namely the perceived 'religious nature of the [Twelve Step] programme' (Day et al, 2015) through the provision of Mutual Aid Facilitation (MAF) courses informed by the HPP data, and through Dossett's publications.
- The University of Chester's co-leadership in the emerging 'Recovery Friendly University' campaign in the UK, with collaborators at Teesside and Birmingham Universities, driven by Dossett & Metcalf-White's research on spirituality in the wider recovery movement, anti-stigma practice and recovery contagion.

2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)

Twelve Step fellowships (worldwide membership c. 3 million) consider engagement with a Higher Power as necessary to secure abstinence recovery, since personal will-power is ineffective. When the Steps were written in the 1930s in the US, Higher Power was largely assumed to be that of the God of Christianity. Twelve Step Programmes describe themselves as 'spiritual but not religious' (SBNR), but the use of the terms 'God', 'God of our understanding' and 'Higher Power' lead to the conclusion amongst substance misuse professionals and service-users that the Steps are explicitly religious or even specifically Christian.

Wendy Dossett launched The HPP in 2012 at the University of Chester, supported by a £25.8K grant from the Sir Halley Stewart Trust. Over a period of four years, substantial field research was undertaken at recovery events, treatment centres, and in open fellowship meetings and conventions. Questionnaire and interview data collection *n.107* focused on the concept of Higher Power, central to the Twelve Step Programme.

Dossett's published work on the findings shows that in AA & NA, there has been an observable shift from explicit Christian terminology towards that of non-religious spirituality. This shift, though significant, is not total. Explicitly Christian language persists within the fellowships, as a sub-discourse, calling the blanket SBNR label into question. However, individuals are assigned freedom to negotiate their own meaning-making; drawing on, amending or rejecting various sources of authority. Such sources include not only the formal fellowship literature, the guidance and performative utterances of 'old-timers' (people with several years of abstinence and step-working), the texts and slogans affixed to the walls of meeting rooms; but also sources external to the fellowship, including sacred texts of various religious traditions, popular culture, self-help and mind-body-spirit literature, as well as inspirational people, including celebrities, and the remembrance of the deceased. As such, a wide diversity of styles of higher power language and wider meaning-making strategies are deployed within the interpretive communities of the Fellowships. Dossett tracks this increase in diversity against the context of the emergence of non-religion in late- or post-modern Western society, along with the sociologically observed 'subjective

Impact case study (REF3)

turn' in religious belief and the rise of secular spiritualities. She also sets the professional antipathy for this approach in the context of a commonly constructed, understandable yet problematic, binary opposition of religious and secular discourses.

This factor has been shown to be the most significant impediment to accessing Twelve Step Mutual Aid amongst professionals and sufferers alike. In evidence provided on the impact of the HPP, The Home Office Recovery Champion Ed Day writes that “*Despite the popularity of Twelve-Step, and the evidence to suggest that it produces significant benefits, relatively little is understood about which of the many components of the process are most effective. Originally couched in 'religious' terms, the underpinning language of the Twelve-Step approach has evolved over time [...]. This is important in an increasingly secular society such as the UK, as it is often cited as a reason for not even considering Twelve-Step groups as a recovery option.*”

This hesitancy is a problem for two reasons: 1) the characterization of the Fellowships as 'religious' is not borne out by the evidence and 2) Fellowships offer the proven best long-term help for sufferers (Cochrane Review 2019).

Dossett has published four book chapters and four peer-reviewed journal articles in this field. The most noteworthy of these publications in terms of international reach and significance is her 2017 invited commentary in the leading clinical journal in the field (*Addiction* impact factor 6.343), on the work of the foremost Twelve-Step efficacy researcher, Prof John Kelly of Harvard University. To be invited, as a Religious Studies specialist, to publish in the leading journal in a wholly different field, one often hostile to religion, is a measure of the depth and quality of Dossett's interdisciplinarity. This commentary, and her other work, indicates the scope and potential for the specific tools and approaches of Religious Studies; namely, epistemological neutrality combined with practical empathy, to impact on a field usually dominated by clinical disciplines.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- [1] (2020). 'Spiritus contra spiritum': Spirituality, belief and discipline in Alcoholics Anonymous. in Schmidt, B and Leonardi, J. *Spirituality and Wellbeing: Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Study of Religious Experience and Health*. Sheffield, Equinox. pp113-134
- [2] (2019). Co-edited with L. Metcalf-White. Religion, Spirituality and Addiction Recovery *Implicit Religion*. 22.2 (co-edited special issue including an article 'Klešas and Pretas: Therapy and Liberation in Buddhist Recovery from Addiction.' *Implicit Religion: Religion, Spirituality and Addiction Recovery*, 22(2), 215–242. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1558/imre.40694>
- [3] (2018). 'Twelve Step Mutual Aid: Spirituality, Vulnerability and Recovery.' in Beckford, J., Harvey, S. & Steidinger, S. (Eds.). *New Religious Movements and Counselling: Academic, Professional and Personal Perspectives*. Routledge Inform Series on Minority Religions and Spiritual Movements New York; London: Routledge.
- [4] (2018). co-authored with Cook, C.C.H., 'Addiction and Forgiveness.' in Hance, S.(ed) *Forgiveness – Personal, Professional, Political*. London & Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley
- [5] (2017). 'A daily reprieve contingent on the maintenance of our spiritual condition.' A commentary on Kelly, J. F. (2016). Is Alcoholics Anonymous religious, spiritual, neither? Findings from 25 years of mechanisms of behavior change research: How AA works. *Addiction*. 112. 6 pp 942-943 (Journal Impact factor 6.343).
- [6] (2013). 'Addiction, Spirituality and Twelve Step Programmes.' *International Social Work* Special Issue 'Social Work, Religion and Spirituality'. Vol 56, No.3: 369-383.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The Chester Studies of Addiction, Recovery and Spirituality (CSARS) Group was created in 2013 to mobilize the research findings of the HPP for two beneficiary groups: i) people with substance addictions and ii) addiction treatment professionals. Over the past six years, CSARS Group (Prof John Stoner and Dr Wendy Dossett with assistance from project officers Tim Roberts, 2013-16 and Liam Metcalf-White, Dossett's PhD Student since 2017, have delivered fourteen Mutual Aid Facilitation (MAF) courses in partnership with local Substance Misuse Services and other agencies, and with the cooperation of local Mutual Aid groups, in locations in North Wales and Shropshire. These have been funded predominantly by the Welsh Government. In addition to this work with community-based beneficiaries, Dossett has also worked with policy groups and with Universities.

Impact case study (REF3)

Beneficiary Group 1: People with Alcohol or Other Drug Problems

The cost of alcohol and drug issues to the UK public purse in 2018 was £36bn. The cost, in suffering, to individuals and families cannot be measured. Dr Ed Day, the Home Office Recovery Champion, notes that *“There is no one solution, and although a range of professionally-led treatment strategies have been developed, it remains hard to predict what will work for a particular individual with a specific problem in their own unique social context”*; in response to the work of the HPP, he asserts his conviction that *“Mutual self-help, as exemplified by Twelve-Step recovery, is a valuable approach to overcoming addiction.”*

a) Mutual Aid Facilitation (MAF) Courses

CSARS MAF courses have been delivered in eleven different locations to total of 450 people with substance issues. The impact of the CSARS courses on people with substance abuse issues is best measured in terms of significance to individuals. We consistently receive feedback that indicates people attribute not only their recovery and quality of life, but their very lives, to the work of CSARS in translating the 1930s Christocentric Fellowship language for them and to support them to develop the confidence to engage with the Fellowships on their own terms. An outcome study of 75 members of Penrhyn House Bangor 2015-2018 is available on request. Of those in this cohort who completed the CSARS MAF course at Penrhyn and went on to join Fellowships, 100% gained stable recovery.

Jamie’s feedback indicates precisely what the courses seek to achieve. *“Bangor Recovery Project have shown me what the fellowships are all about. It can be very difficult to adjust to AA/NA with all the God references [sic] and literature [sic]. It helped me a lot to look at it from a different angle. I don’t have to believe in anything that other people do. I have my own opinion on higher power now. It is not always religious and BRP [Bangor Recovery Project] helped me see this. Thank you!”*

Jamie, whose life was previously decimated by addiction, has been living at Penrhyn House which is an abstinent recovery community in Bangor, North Wales, for the last year. The Operational Lead at Penrhyn House, James Deakin says, *“Wendy’s research into the way Twelve Step fellowship members engage with the concept of Higher Power is well-known world-wide, and here at Penrhyn House we’ve been privileged to be able to use her expertise and insight in the form of the CSARS Bangor Research Project Mutual Aid Facilitation Course. In our experience, the reference to God and Higher Power is one of the most significant barriers to participation in Twelve Step Mutual Aid. This is tragic because it is the most effective long-term intervention into addiction currently available. More than 300 members of the Penrhyn Community have taken the course offered by the CSARS team over the last five years and the results are overwhelmingly positive. During the course people are offered the opportunity, guidance and resources, to make the HP concept relevant to them personally. Wendy’s research into what fellowship members really think and believe (rather than what many addiction professionals imagine they believe) offers a tremendous supportive resource. Hearing a vast array of ways people in recovery have used the concept inspires and encourages our people to make their own choices about it. The take-up of community based Mutual Aid by people referred to Penrhyn has increased significantly since we started offering the CSARS groups courses. This in turn means Penrhyn people are making a real and ongoing contribution to the wider community recovery capital available in North Wales. Of that, I am incredibly proud.”*

b) Unsung Impact Award

In 2019 Dossett won the Fast-Track impact ‘Unsung Impact Award’ for hidden benefits of her research not measured by the REF. These benefits included the recovery-strengthening effect of participating reported by many of the 107 participants in the HPP. She used the prize money to bring 18 people in early recovery and experiencing multiple-disadvantage to a Visible Recovery Walk and a National Conference in Middlesbrough at which three of them spoke. Participating in the conference and having their stories valued by researchers, clinicians and other professionals was a life-changing experience for these participants. Sarah said *“It was a significant step in my recovery. Previously I wouldn’t have had the confidence to share my story...”*. (Sarah is now studying for a Masters in Social Policy).

Impact case study (REF3)

Beneficiary Group 2: Addiction Professionals

Since 2014 the CSARS team have had interactions with more than 200 addiction professionals, and formally trained 50. Prior to training 83% had never attended a Mutual Aid meeting. This figure is even higher than that found by Day et al 2005 in Birmingham, where 67% of workers had never done so. This reality indicates an understandable but problematic spiritual illiteracy among substance misuse professionals. The evidence is that once exposure to Fellowships is achieved, the positive impact is considerable. After training 78% said that they intended to attend a meeting.

"I found it hugely uplifting and the experience was one of warmth, acceptance and support that is unrivalled by anything that I have been involved with before."

"From a commissioning perspective it made me realise that we need to think carefully about how and by who services are best delivered. It also made me think about how we get more people to engage with groups like this."

In a different professional setting, the current Substance Misuse Interventions Lead at HMP Berwyn (the largest prison in Europe) was a part-time CSARS project officer 2013-2016. He now uses the HPP data in his current role.

"This knowledge [the HPP data] is invaluable to me [...]. Where a prisoner has a substance issue, developing abstinence is the single best predictor of future desistance from crime. The Twelve Step fellowships are the Rolls Royce of effective, non-judgmental community support for ex-offenders, and those that make the links in prison, and maintain them on release, are far more likely to do well. For this reason, it is essential to find ways of overcoming the resistance to the concepts of God and Higher Power, and making it clear that for many fellowship people Higher Power is just the group; that it really can be whatever you want it to be. For the evidence-base for that claim, I point to Wendy's research. She is one of very few voices in the academic world able to clearly articulate the value of the 12 Step movement for shaping current and future systems of care." Tim Roberts: Substance Misuse Interventions Lead, HMP Berwyn; Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board.

Tony Mercer, Substance Use Disorder Lead at Public Health England says, *"I always direct professionals and service users who have doubts about the spiritual dimension of twelve step mutual aid to the work of the HPP [...] By correcting misperceptions in a balanced and credible way, [this] research leads to significant public health impacts."*

Prof Keith Humphreys, Stanford University and former drugs advisor to President Obama says, *"I consider the Higher Power Project impactful [...] because while 12-step organizations are growing in the UK they remain poorly understood by many NHS professionals, particularly in terms of the spiritual aspects (e.g., many NHS professionals believe that only devout Christians will attend 12-step groups)[...]The Higher Power Project is generating the evidence that will allow UK health professionals to practice in a culturally competent fashion."*

A measure of the international reach of the work and its significance for public policy was the 2018 award of a Turkish Government funded placement to substance misuse researcher İsa Ceylan to facilitate knowledge transfer between Dossett, CSARS and the Turkish treatment context in which he works. As a result, Ceylan has published two papers and given six lectures reaching c.1000 professionals and academics in Turkey on the similarities and dissimilarities between the Muslim/post-Muslim (Turkey) and Christian/post Christian (UK) contexts regarding the place of spirituality language in addiction recovery.

Beneficiary Group 3: Universities

a) Lived-experience and the research agenda

Dossett has used her dual experience as a recovery researcher with knowledge of community based mutual aid gleaned from the field and a person-in-recovery herself to contribute to the shaping of six funded projects. She serves as a panel member with lived-experience on the Sheffield Addiction Recovery Research Panel (ShARRP), at the University of Sheffield. This panel evaluates proposals from PhD and Post-doctoral researchers in addiction from all over the UK in order to facilitate the input of people with lived experience into the research agenda. This is especially significant because people with lived-experience are often marginalized or considered objects of research rather than collaborators.

Impact case study (REF3)

b) Recovery Friendly University

Universities are arguably one of the last bastions of the failed 'War on Drugs.' Zero-tolerance policies mean they fail to address issues within the staff and student body, and potential applicants who are in recovery exclude themselves because universities are perceived as environments shaped by peer-pressure to use alcohol and drugs (NUS 2018). Three universities (Teesside, Chester and Birmingham) are working with colleagues in the Collegiate Recovery Movement in the United States to bring the idea of the Recovery Friendly University to the UK. In early March 2020 Dossett hosted a workshop with 40 colleagues within the University of Chester (HR, student support and academics, community recovery Home Office and Public Health England representatives) to explore the challenges and drive the agenda forward in her own institution. At a national level, she is co-chairing with the Home Office Recovery Champion the preparations for a multi-institutional online conference on the Recovery Friendly University, with input from the US experts, in May 2021. The University of Chester, which lit up its Chapel in Purple on International Recovery Day (30.09.20) is currently hosting the Sober Exposure Exhibition and has made a video exploring its impact <https://vimeo.com/460165331> (52 views to date). Reaching potential applicants with former substance issues (including ex-offenders) is the next frontier of Widening Participation. Raising the profile of recovery culture in Universities will achieve that by addressing stigma via inclusion and visibility and maximizing 'recovery contagion' through contact.

Impact on public opinion

Dossett's central position in shaping public discourse on Twelve Step recovery is evidenced by her media appearances as a prominent expert. She speaks regularly at practitioner conferences and conventions (22 since 2014) as well as at academic conferences (18 since 2014). The HPP Facebook page has 458 followers and the @higherpowerproj Twitter account has 2,473 followers. Her blog *post Is Spiritual Anonymity Depriving Us of Addiction Recovery Role Models?* has been read more than 700 times. Her research has featured on BBC Radio 4 *Beyond Belief* and twice on the *Sunday* programme, as well as on local radio. She has been interviewed for well-known podcasts *Things Unseen* (20.03.2015 – 2,393 listens to date) and *The Alcohol 'Problem' Podcast* (22.12.20 – 283 listens to date).

Impact on policy

Dossett's work has begun to shape Government policy decisions. She is named as a stakeholder in first annual report of the Home Office Recovery Champion. In Nov 2017, she was invited to present at the Senedd, and in Feb 2018 the CSARS MAF project was visited by Senedd Members Helen Mary Jones MS and Siân Gwenllian MS. She is a founder member of the newly formed Welsh Centre for Alcohol and Other Drugs, with colleagues from Welsh Government, academics and the clinical and treatment professions. In 2018 she served as an advisor to the Alcohol Change UK funded project *Faith in Recovery? Service user evaluation of faith-based alcohol treatment* carried out by a team from Cardiff University. She attends the *All Party Parliamentary Group for Twelve Step Recovery Programmes for Addiction* and has been asked to present her work at a future meeting.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

E1 – CEO of Faces and Voices of Recovery UK

E2 – CEO of Recovery Connections on Campus

E3 – Regional Commissioning & Development Manager, North Wales Substance Misuse Area Planning Board (APB)

E4 – Chair of Welsh Centre for Alcohol and Other Drugs