Second stories: the salience of interpersonal communication for mutual help in Alcoholics Anonymous

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Abstract

Second stories are stories told in a series in which later stories are designed to achieve a recognizable similarity with the first (or previous) story. This article explores therapeutic uses of second stories in meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). AA meetings are organized around a series of lengthy personal monologues. Overall, a second story is a procedure to display the speaker’s analysis and understanding of the first story. In AA, second stories gain therapeutic relevance. They are the method that members use to display alignment and identification with previous speakers. Further, they are not only a procedure to engage in reciprocal revelations of personal problems, but also a means to transvaluate experiences. Systematically, second stories focus on problems related in the first stories, and then recon-textualize and reinterpret these problems to provide resolutions. Thus, in mutual help second stories are a resource for empowerment.

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1. Introduction

This article explores the role of storytelling in identity reconstruction in a mutual help group. Narratives and social construction of identity have been on the research agenda for a while (see, e.g. Mitchell, 1981; Bruner, 1986). As for Alcoholics Anonymous, Denzin has proposed “Central to the recovery of self is learning how to become a storyteller about one’s own life, before and after AA membership. The self is recovered in and through the stories the member learns to tell. Talking and...
listening thus become the key processes that structure the member’s new senses of AA selfhood” (Denzin, 1987: 193). However, very little attention has been paid to storytelling as a concrete situated practice in mutual help settings.\(^1\) In an important article Arntson and Droge (1987: 157–164) emphasize the salience of the narrative form of the communication for social support, and point out some key aspects of how narratives contribute to social support in mutual aid groups. Storytelling allows the narrator to control the story and speak about self as a whole, thereby fostering a sense of control. Further, the temporal sequencing of the events in the story allows the narrators to rebuild the meaning of their life as a part of the narration that imposes order on a potentially chaotic set of events. As a whole, story telling is a meaning-making process in which a symbolic meaning can be given for past and for future events. Arntson and Droge also note that for the audience stories allow freedom to select relevant parts of the story and reenact those parts in their lives. On a general level, this study confirms Arntson and Droge’s findings, but it will also complement, specify, and modify these findings through the analysis of interpersonal co-construction of the meaning of the stories. I will show that much of the work attributed to narratives relies on interpersonal communication processes in which narratives are designed for recipients, prior stories are monitored, and subsequent stories are related so that the tellers display their understanding and appreciation of the prior contributions. Mutual help is an interactional achievement based on stories told in a sequence in which reciprocally narrated and shaped stories allow parties to reflect upon their identities to solve their problems.

People attend mutual help groups because they suffer from some relatively chronic condition with which they feel they cannot cope alone (Nylund, 2000). Individuals suffering from diverse problems such as addiction, debt, epilepsy, incest, and infertility have initiated mutual aid groups to solve or cope with their personal problems or experiences (Borkman, 1999). When a person suffers from a chronic condition or from an event with long-lasting impact (incest, suicide of a close relative), the person may be prone to recurrent crises, or fear such crises, and may seek mutual support from people who are alike. Indeed, the essence of mutual help is not an individual psychological process, but it is the support, the response, an individual gains in a group, that is critical for mutual aid. In this article, I will discuss a case in point when an AA member faces an acute crisis and does not know what he is talking about or why he has sobered up, and will concentrate on the response he gains that aims at soothing him and providing a more successful angle to tackle his problems. To summarize, the narrative perspective is important, but the focus on individual stories may not be sufficient as the crucial part of the mutual aid takes place through members’ sustained effort to communicate with each other, and to reshape their narratives so that they also help others while helping themselves.

Arntson and Droge (1987: 163) also note (though do not discuss) the point that “when a member’s narrative was responded to with other narratives on the same

\(^1\) As the interactional arrangements in AA meetings preclude “ordinary conversation”, I mainly do not discuss here studies on story telling in everyday occasions (see, e.g. Jefferson, 1978; Goodwin, 1990; Lerner, 1992).
subject, one could see most clearly the reciprocity process at work.” This article focuses on this aspect of mutual help. I will analyze the ways in which meeting participants show their understanding and appreciation of prior turns, and co-construct their experiences in delivering the turns of talk at AA meetings. The focus is on how a particular form of an interpersonal communication, called “second story”, contributes to mutual aid and social support.

This article is based upon and uses the set of cumulative findings that conversation analysis (CA) has produced in its studies on talk and interaction both in mundane and institutional settings. These observations include that stories in conversation are often produced in clusters (Sacks, 1992b: 30; Ryave, 1978). Second stories are a particular type of response to an original story, in which the teller of the second not only claims but proves her/his understanding of the first story through the designed resemblance of the second (Sacks, 1992a: 764–771; b: 249–260; Peyrot, 1987; Goodwin, 1990; Gardner, 1971). Canonically, stories project a response space during which the recipients can and must show their understanding of the story (Jefferson, 1978). The second story shows that the recipient has had a parallel experience, and so proves her/his understanding of the first story.

Mutual help groups may turn out to be an environment in which second stories play a particularly significant role. People attend mutual help groups to seek other people alike to find a suitable audience for sharing experiences. The AA preamble that is commonly read at the beginning of the meetings encapsulates AA’s purpose in the following way: “AA is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism.” Also Harvey Sacks, the pioneer of CA, suggested that the power of AA, in contrast to professional therapies, resides in the series of stories:

A collection of people get together and tell a series of stories, one alike to the next, i.e., places like AA involve a series of stories where we come to see that we’re all in the same boat, and people figure that they’re understood and that they’re not alone - where among the problems present in therapy is that for all you know, given that the therapist doesn’t respond with telling you he had the same experience, nobody had the same experience as you (Sacks 1992b: 260).

In this article I will study the second stories in action, that is, the ways in which AA members design their stories to accomplish the sense of being in the same boat. I will show that subsequent speakers may focus on problems that an earlier speaker has related, and provide new perspectives for solving the problems. The speakers may also lean on earlier narratives to echo and amplify the experiences shared to strengthen the group cohesion. As a whole, I will detail the process through which a symbolic meaning is created through a sequence of stories. Finally I will explicate the set of linguistic and communication devices that are members’ resources for achieving mutual aid in practice.
2. Data and methods

The material for this study comes from the large, open speaker-meetings held every week by an AA group in Helsinki, Finland. The audiotape recordings of these meetings were made by the group itself and are publicly available through the central office of AA in Finland. For this study, 12 of these meetings are used, of which seven were transcribed completely (about 11 hours of recording time), and the rest of the materials were transcribed partially. In addition, ethnographic notes about some AA meetings were collected in eight societies during a related international study (for further details, see Mäkelä et al., 1996; Arminen, 1998). These ethnographic materials have been used to point out the specificity of some of the features of the recorded meetings (Arminen, 1998), but here the analysis is concentrated on generic practices of interaction, which are not specific to this group.

The format of the meetings studied is the following. First, the meeting scene is set through the opening rituals (including a salutation, a moment of silence, and a reading of a selected AA text). After the opening rituals, a longer 20- to 25-minute opening speech follows. The slots for these opening turns are allocated two to three times a year, when the chair of the meeting requests that those who are willing to reserve a time for their opening speech come forward. The main part of the meeting, however, is devoted to commentary turns that follow the opening turn. After the opening turn the chairperson very briefly summarizes the opening turn with a couple of sentences, thereby proposing the topic of the meeting. Subsequently, the chair takes up the names of those who volunteer to share comments. The chairperson allocates the turns but does not usually comment on the speakers. The commentary turns are up to three minutes long at which time their closing is marked by a signal given by the secretary. There are as many commentary turns as can be

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2 One of the basic divisions in AA is between open and closed meetings. “Closed” meetings are only for AA members, i.e., for those who identify themselves as (recovering) alcoholics—there are no formal membership criteria. “Open” meetings are, in principle, open for everybody. In practice, the meaning of this distinction is variable. Any “closed” meeting may be attended by a visitor if all the participants accept it. Some open meetings may practically be closed, i.e., visiting “outsiders” are very rare. For instance, in the group studied all the speakers are AA members.

3 The restrictions posed by the tradition of anonymity generally preclude video recordings. Naturally, the lack of video recordings is unfortunate, as we cannot make use of gazes and nonverbal gestures. However, some setting features may alleviate this loss. My own observations and other ethnographic materials (Mäkelä et al., 1996) suggest that intensive eye contact may be avoided in AA meetings. The delicacy of the situation and respect for the integrity of persons who admit their personal failures may be partially constructed with the help of cautiousness toward others. The speaker’s devotion to autobiographical reflection can occasionally be seen also from a vacant look, as the speaker’s eyes, metaphorically speaking, are turned inside. The more or less unconditional ban on video recordings is itself part of this phenomenon through which a spiritual, even a sacred atmosphere is built. Moreover, the large size of the meeting hall and the large number of attendants may additionally weaken the chances for intensive eye contact in the group studied. The use of signals to mark the end of time for each turn demonstrates that not only talk but the setting itself is organized through audio signs.

4 Formally, the selection of opening speakers is not restricted. In practice, the opening speakers selected tend to be old-timers who are known as competent storytellers.
fit into the one and a half hour meeting time, from about 7 to 8:30 p.m. After about 20 commentary turns, the meeting is closed with brief closing ceremonies.

The formats of AA meetings are quite variable (Mäkelä et al., 1996). At the so-called speaker meetings only one or a few speakers give extended speeches. At the discussion meetings a “round”, or a series of sharing turns takes place. The type of meeting studied here is sometimes called a “lead meeting” (Denzin, 1987: 107), which falls between a speaker and a discussion meeting, so that a longer opening speech is followed by a series of shorter commentary turns. Despite the variation, the “core” features of all AA meetings include 1) the preallocation of turns in contrast to ordinary conversation (the turn-taking may be based on seating order, or on a list of volunteered speakers), 2) normally the use of only one round of extended turns, and 3) an autobiographical focus in the turns (Mäkelä et al., 1996; Borkman, 1999). The fact that AA meetings are composed of preallocated, extended self-stories might suggest that AA speakers produce disconnected and self-contained narratives the interrelations of which would be epiphenomenal at best. The current evidence proposes the opposite. Both the large international AA study (based on observations of 160 meetings in eight societies, Mäkelä et al., 1996), and independent ethnographic studies (Denzin, 1987; Borkman et al., 2000) suggest that speakers orient to each other’s contributions so as to maintain the cohesion of the speech event. Borkman and her colleagues note that only three speakers in four meetings were somehow speaking off topic, whereas the rest of the speakers (about 20 a meeting) were weaving the common fabric of understanding. In a more detailed fashion, I have shown that 124 out of 139 commentary turns (about 90%) in the studied meetings involved an overt reference to prior speakers or to the named topic immediately after the speaker’s self-identification (my name is x and I’m an alcoholic/addict) (Arminen, 1998). Furthermore, in the studied seven meetings, in 141 commentary turns there are 228 references by name to prior speakers (an average 1.6 references per turn) (Arminen, 1998).

These observations amount to a finding that despite their nonconversational features AA meetings are thoroughly interactional events. The organization of AA members’ experiences cannot be located in individual turns or within individual’s talk and cognitive processes. Rather, AA meetings are a seamless web of interconnected turns in which speakers build their turns as new contributions to the context provided by previous turns. As Borkman (1999: 168–169) puts it, mutual help is an emergent phenomenon that cannot be based on individual cognitive functioning or conduct. The dynamics of AA groups create group-level facets that cannot be traced to any individual act. Consequently, also research must move beyond the scrutiny of individual members and their narratives.

A potential limitation of this study is that it concerns “open” AA meetings. However, Denzin’s (1987) well-known study largely uses observations on closed meetings (note, a visitor may attend a closed meeting if the group decides so). According to his observations, members speak “on topic”. Denzin states that the discourse produced reflects back upon itself, member after member returns back to the original topic to elaborate it further (Denzin, 1987: 109–114). The existing evidence supports the idea that mutual help in AA is based on the co-construction
of experiences that emerges from the interrelationship between turns of talk. For example, Denzin (1987: 116) provides an account of a seriously distressed member who receives direct support. A relapsed man was flooding out, almost incapable of speaking. “Each member who spoke after this individual thanked him for coming back. A box of tissues was passed to him as he cried. Members offered him rides to other meetings. His show of emotion was not taken, then, as a sign of loss of face.” Speakers who due to acute crises end up “off topic”, actually, may activate the mutual support and strengthen the support function of mutual help that works through interpersonal relationships.

In this article, I will analyze the therapeutic relevance of second stories. CA relies on the principle that the speaker’s current turn displays the speaker’s interpretation of the previous turn (Heritage, 1984; Peräkylä, 1987). Thus, the data (i.e., the next turn) is used for validating the analyst’s interpretation of a turn (Seale, 1999: 70–71). Additionally, I will use a deviant case (Clayman and Maynard, 1995: 4–9) to show how a speaker’s avoidance of producing a second story can be used to indicate a disagreement. Through discussion of the deviant case, I show that in mutual help groups, or at least in AA, speakers orient to mutual solidarity because even when they disagree with another member (which they occasionally do), they leave the disagreement implicit. Consequently, second stories are used in a particular way in AA to build and emphasize mutual solidarity and support. In everyday life, ironical or challenging second stories are occasionally produced. In AA, however, speakers seem to refrain from overt irony, or explicit disagreements. Non-ironical second stories are participants’ way of speaking mutual help into being. I do not claim that there do not exist open strifes or destructively acting individuals in AA, I am only analyzing the methodical ways of establishing mutual help in AA as they routinely do it. The existing data both in the international comparative study and in independent ethnographies suggest that the following analysis can be generalized far beyond the individual group studied.

In this article, I will focus on two pairs of stories. I will show how Ari places his story in relation to Mari’s story, and Olavi does the same in relation to Kauko’s story (for the relevant parts of the first stories, see Appendix A). In order to be able to show the situated practices of storytelling I have had to restrict my analysis to only two cases, since stories, and pairs of stories even more, are extended units. However, as mentioned, this study was originally based on a broader corpus. These cases are selected so that they are quite different from each other, thus illuminating the range of variation, but also revealing the set of common linguistic practices.

5 Second stories can also convey an ironic relationship with the first if they are intentionally (or unintentionally) designed to be different from the first. To provide an example, once in a student party a bunch of people, mainly women, told stories about hitchhiking experiences. After a couple of stories, a male student told a story about how he gave a lift to a hitchhiker who turned out to be a hooker. (Note that in those days street prostitution was very uncommon.) After his story the male student was in big trouble. Perhaps unintentionally he had reversed the set of characters’ roles so that tactless implications were invoked through an ironic relationship to the previous stories. In particular, the role of the principal of the story is crucial for the “sameness” of the stories. In a well-fitted, aligned second story the principal has the same role as in the first story.
through which speakers display their understanding of the prior turns. In addition, through a deviant case in which a speaker refrains from producing a second story, I will build the contrast to enlighten what second stories achieve. As a whole this study discerns the methodic forms of realizing mutual help as a practical achievement. Consequently, the study helps to identify practices specific to mutual help in contrast to other types of group therapy processes.

3. Echoing the symbolic meaning of the prior story

I will start the analysis of interactive, co-constructive meaning-making through examining the relationship Ari establishes with Mari, whose story is a canonical AA story, portraying a path from “utter defeat” to a recovery and a new life. Here, we can explore how Ari maintains and strengthens the group ethos and solidarity by echoing the symbolic meaning of the prior story. Further, besides some unique features of this story pair, it also involves some properties common to all story sequences in this context. First, the entries to second stories are marked so that the subsequent speaker explicitly links his/her story back to the prior one. Second, the subsequent speaker’s focus on a prior story is selective. The established linkage not only invokes the reciprocal relevance of stories, but it also selects a particular aspect(s) of the prior story to the participants’ focus. Finally, this selective focus seems to follow a systematic pattern to be discussed later.

To clarify the work the second story accomplishes in relation to the first, I will first summarize the parts of the original story that the second story makes relevant. After this summary the reader can follow the analysis of the commentary turn’s work. (The reader who wishes inspect the relationship between stories independently may want to read first the relevant parts of the first story in Appendix A). The sequence of Mari’s turn that is then commented on by Ari is located in the final part of Mari’s “drunk-a-log”, the drinking-life story. Mari describes her condition by telling how she was even tied to a chair so that she could not get a drink (lines 1–2). Then she moves on to introduce her “last fateful thing,” as she calls the episode (3–5). We may also notice that Mari herself uses the double perspective, or the double exposure (cf. Arminen, 1996), when she introduces her story. First she notes that the incident was the most horrible thing that happened to her (5–6), but then she says from today’s perspective that it is the best thing that has happened to her (7–12). A story about the fateful weekend on an island follows. Mari’s husband had gotten the idea that it would be good for Mari to stay sober one weekend, and so Mari and her husband and children traveled to an island (14–21). However, Mari brought with her some bottles of vodka and perhaps also some pills (22–25). Eventually (Mari does not remember what happened) she woke up on a cliff with two empty bottles of vodka beside her (38–40). And at that point she had a revelation that she had been left alone for good (41–44). Mari ran around the island but did not find her children, husband, or their boat (47–49). While Mari was swimming back to the mainland, she found that an accident must have taken place (50–56). Subsequently, Mari evaluates the agony the accident caused.
Ari’s commentary turn begins with an extended appreciation of Mari’s story (lines 2–8), after which he focuses on his own experience “But,6 my own experience” (9). Quite soon after having initiated his narrative about his delusions, he refers to Mari (17–19). (For the transcription conventions and full text, see Appendix B.)

Extract 1) Ari’s commentary turn in V3 [V3AriT0990]

1 AT: krhm-krhm (.). I’m Ari-Tapani and I’m an alcoholic and (.)
2 I’m (.). crh one of those hh few who sure have (.)
3 been allowed to hear that mt.hhhhh Mari’s narrative
4 also in those parts, .hhhh but (.). krhm hhh ↑despite that (0.7)
5 it’s uhh (0.7) great to hear. (0.6) .hhh IT HAS (0.4) krh-hmm
6 <all those things> (1.0) mt.hhhhh what was, (0.6) what happened,
7 (0.5) and what is now. (0.5) .hh-hh-hh ↑it’s these things y-know
8 our?, hh .hh ↓meeting event (.). is composed of.
9 .hhhh But: (.). krhm-rhh my own experience (0.7)
10 mt.hhhhh u:h (0.8) I: had- eh .hhh hhh uhhhh
11 last hh time then, (0.2) in my own (.). odyssey:
12 .hhhh e- u:h hh hh drank, .hhhh also (.). for a long time (.).
13 nearly three: hh years. (0.4) .hhh and uhh then I
14 .hhhh eh became (0.4) sobered up (0.2) but? (0.3) uhh-hh (.)
15 I was sufferin’ from such (.). delusions
16 .hhhh a:nd I: (.). actually (.). heard (.). and I saw
17 .hhhh and I knew that somthing ’d happened (0.2) just like
18 (.) Mari told while being (0.2) there (0.2) on a ↑cliff
19 that (0.7) somthing has happened, (0.2) and that somthing
20 was, (0.2). hhh that she is (0.3) ↑alone,
21 .hhhh I: (.). felt that crhu-hmm ↑I felt su:ch (0.5) .mth
22 that .hhh I like (0.3) .hh observed myself (.). ↑from outside?,
23 (0.3) .hh hh I heard (0.2) fine:.?, (0.2) l-finest of all ↑music,
24 (0.4) I hh saw (0.2) my: self?, .hhh a:nd and e:rm
25 .hhhh u:h (.). it was somthing wholly (0.8) h:rrible.

Ari’s reference to Mari (17–18) works as an entry device that allows him to take the second story position to Mari’s telling. He sets their experiences into a comparison, and claims that their experiences mean the same for them. Notably, this sense of sameness does not derive from the factual similarity of the experience (for an ethnographic account of the phenomenon, see Wootton, 1977). Ari is telling about the delusions (15) during his withdrawal (21–25), whereas Mari’s story was about a

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6 A commentator suggested that “but” might here “mark a coming challenge”, as “but” occasionally conveys a contrastive sense. However, in spoken language, the turn- or utterance initial “but” is commonly used to indicate a topical redirection, as here; one will find a similar case in Extract 2, at line 36: “but then that humility” (for topical redirections, and the role of “but”, see Jefferson, 1984: 200; for a systematic discussion on the various uses of “but” in spoken language, see Sorjonen, 1989).
family tragedy. Nevertheless, with the help of the reference “just like Mari told” (17–18) Ari constructs the sense of their experiences as similar. The recognizability of a second story to its first is constructed and achieved through its design. To conclude, the secondness of the story is achieved in the same way as topical affinity. “Topic similarity is something that the second story can exhibit, though you wouldn’t have thought from the first that such a second would be a coherent topic with the first. That is to say, the relationship ‘topic similarity’ is one in which the second is crucial” (Sacks, 1992b: 255).

25 .hhh u:h (.) it was somthing wholly (0.8) h|orrible.
26 (.) > I’ve|n’t <|ever (0.2) before experienced such a thing
27 .hhh and ↑at that point (0.2) when Mari (.) told about the
28 (.) .hhh agony of soul (1.0) so I e- realized that
29 .hhh Mari meant thi:s point, (.) also (0.7) and I <identified >
30 with that. (1.0) .hhh It i::s (0.2) u:hhh the kind of condition, (0.5)
31 .hhh that you can’t really (0.6) describe with words. (1.5)
32 There’s only one <cha::nce >. (0.5) to experience, (1.0)

Ari also summarizes and evaluates his story with the help of a new reference to Mari’s story (27–28). He first concludes that his hallucinations were the most terrifying thing he had ever experienced (25–26), and then connects them with Mari’s agony of soul (27–30). In this way Ari conveys an experience of identification with Mari’s story, which represents a strong degree of personal attachment. Again, we may note that even if Ari’s and Mari’s stories are factually quite different, this incompatibility does not weaken the similarity felt by Ari. Instead, it emphasizes the imaginary, symbolic tie between the persons, and shows Ari’s persistent effort to present his story in ways that amount to a mutual tie between the speakers. Even intimate second stories are based on their speakers’ relentless orientation to mutual help in which experiences are constructed as shareable.

33 .hh a:nd uh .hh when you experience it?, (2.0)
34 ↑so it made it clear (. ) that, (0.4) you got to get away. (1.0)
35 ↓you got to get away. ((low whispering voice))
36 (0.4) .hhh This far it has go :ne well?,
37 (1.0)
38 A: ((cough))
39 AT: (0.5) I don’t know about tomo:row?, (1.0)
40 .hhhhh bu:t krhm-hmm whe:re (. ) have
41 I got with the help of this?, (. ) all. (1.0)
42 .hhh Like Mari leaves (. ) in order to build (0.3)
43 a: phase in her life. (1.0) .hh in another country (0.5)
44 so: (.) it tells about the: (.) <liberation >. (0.4)
45 which ↑Mari has gotten. (3.0) In my life too
46 there’s already happiness today, (0.5)
47 A: ((cough))
As for AA’s practice to empower its members, the conclusion Ari draws from his experience is most telling. Ari notes that his most horrible experience, his agony of soul, convinced him that he must do something to get relief (34–36). Ari conveys his experience that his most terrible moment opened the doors of AA to him. In this respect, Ari takes up one of AA’s core beliefs: “only through utter defeat are we able to take our first steps toward liberation and strength” (Anonymous, 1952: 21). This transvaluation of experiences is at the heart of AA. The grimmest moments and the most horrendous experiences are the threshold, which has to be crossed to step toward a new and purposeful life. As we already noted this double perspective, or the double exposure, was also used by Mari when she introduced her story about the fateful weekend (5–12). At the end of the day, Ari echoes this transvaluation and confirms it through a final reference to Mari’s liberation (42–46). With the help of his second story, Ari has shown that he, like Mari, has faced moments of utmost terror to find a path toward empowerment and high spirits. Here the second story echoes the symbolic meaning of the first. This is based on systematic practices—references to the first story as entry devices and a selective focus on key moments of the first story enabling an articulation of AA viewpoint. In this way mutual help is talked into being: the experiences are co-constructed so that even the most stubborn problems are transformed from unsolved handicaps into a resource for a new life.

4. Providing support through a second story

I will continue the study of second stories in action and show how the subsequent speakers orient to giving support. In the second story pair, Olavi’s commentary turn includes very many references to Kalle’s opening turn (at lines 7, 18, 21, etc.). The first sequence of Olavi’s turn is something he calls “a side remark” (5–6); I will likewise deal with it only in passing. This opening sequence sets the scene for the “main themes” (in contrast to the side remark), as we will notice. The anecdotes Olavi tells about his life and his attempts to help Kalle are related humorously (note bursts of laughter at lines 12 and 25), but they also bring up Olavi’s understanding of Kalle as a person who both needs help but also is a strong character: “Kalle was free even in prison” (line 35).

Extract 2) Olavi’s commentary turn in V2 [V2Olavi1089]

1 0: .kch Yeah I’m .KCH Olavi and an alcoholic and
2 .hhhh ↑I’ve ofte:n = stand- stated that, the most insane thou:ght
is the loudest and strikes as the most sane
> and then it’s clear that < the result is what it i:s?,

. hhhh Namely over there it occurred to me: such a side:: hhh
remark when (.) there was talk about those worksites =
= > Kalle also talked about so?, < . hh In year forty-five
I used to work for a power plant, where work began at si:x o’clock,
in [company name] at seve:n o’clock, and in the harbour at ei:ght,
and I went to eve:ry roll-ca:ll, and days I played car:ds,
but . hh[hhh t didn’t see anything wro:ng in that,

A: [hah haha
O: that I wasn’t- it was † natural for me ‡ in that life
really not (.) nothing † un ‡ usual. Of course
the results [were then > such as they were, <

A: [((coughing))

O: † not punishments but they were results,

. hh[hhh Th † it came to my mind during Kalle’s hhh
in Kalle’s presentation when . hh[hh he then had the la : st hh[hh
† prison trip and he really made it through† sober.

. hh[hhh And that he didn’t know † what’s going to happen,

I too used to try along with my sponsor to make (.)
something happen, and we went to fetch Kalle for a yo:ga course
and he escaped out from a † w[indow. (. )

A: [((laughter))

O: . hh[hh and evidently it was a good run, cause (. ) if he’d
then come with us he would hardly be † he:re now. . hh[hh

A: [((knock))

O: And in a same way when † I: went . ym = to see Kalle in prison
(. ) regularly uh,? . hh[hh ee: † there it occurred to me;

the word † free:do:m. That they are different things (. )

the sense of freedom and freedom, > they’re two different things <
Kalle had (. ) the † sense of freedom. I was free,
but for that I needed † sym:bols, so that I’m not in prison, ( . )

Kalle was free even in prison, . hh[hh And let’s keep this in mind.

. hh[hh But † then that hh[ humility as such,

Olavi’s reference to “humility” at line 36 brings him back to the main line of his talk. To highlight the interactive relationships between stories, I will first summarize the original story (see Appendix A: Extract 2). In this way, we capture the work the second story accomplishes in relation to the first. As we go into Kalle’s turn, we notice that he is facing acute crises. Consequently, Olavi’s commentary turn is designed to be a response to Kalle’s distress. Kalle’s uneasiness comes to the surface during his story about how he did not understand what humility is, which is what Olavi comments on.

The content of the segment of Kalle’s turn that Olavi sees as his first main topic (after side remarks) can be summarized as follows: Kalle introduces the notion
“humility” after he had been discussing his inability to understand the AA program when he had joined AA (1–4). He relates how another AA member (Pultsi) advised him to try to find humility in his life, but he did not understand what humility is (5–16). Subsequently, Kalle makes a stepwise topical move, offering an elaboration of his sobering up, his early time in AA, and notes that he still does not understand why he sobered up in AA 11 years ago (20–27). Then Kalle again makes a perspective shift, and starts to talk about his present-day problems (29–46). He notes that he has been upset (31–32), and that he did not know what to talk about in the group (33–34). After that, Kalle becomes increasingly emotional, and has difficulties continuing his talk (35–42). Eventually, when he is repeating that he had just clasped his hands7 (43/36), the time signal (line 44) is given to indicate that he has talked the time reserved, more than 20 minutes. As he was in the middle of an emotional reflection, he was still allowed to go on (for lawful places to go on speaking in extra time, see Arminen, 1998), and Kalle manages to say that he had asked for humility to speak honestly (46). For us, it is important to note that Kalle’s problem with humility was the topical link, which subsequently led to his emotional reflection about his present problems. Now, when we return to Olavi’s turn, we can appreciate the way in which it treats Kalle’s turn.

36 .hhhh But ↑then that hhh humility as such,
37 .hhhh ↑Sure I’ve seen it here, and I myself also used to get TIRE:D
38 of ↓being in AA. .hhhh And it ↑com#es#.yhm
39 paradoxically though from ↑INACT↓ivity,
40 usually you get tired when you are active but,
41 .hhhh my fatigue in AA happened for that (.) reason
42 that I wasn’t ↑active here at all.

Here the reference to “humility” is designed so that it takes into account the fact that several speakers had already addressed the issue of humility. That is, Olavi does not attribute the topic only to Kalle, since many speakers have shared their thoughts on the topic. Olavi, is his turn, formulates a personal angle on the topic “humility.” Immediately after naming this topic, he starts to speak about the reasons why he became tired of being in AA, i.e. he had a relapse (37–42), as if he almost went off the topic. However, in so doing Olavi discloses his understanding that inactivity in AA means a lack of humility and so he implies that humility simply means sufficient action in AA. In this fashion Olavi also provides an answer to Kalle, who was wondering what humility is. Olavi gains the answer to Kalle’s question by recontextualizing the notion and locating it in a new conceptual field. Kalle discussed humility as an abstract principle, which he did not quite grasp; in contrast, Olavi links humility to a person’s activity in AA and to the threat of a relapse. We may conclude that here Olavi, while recontextualizing an item introduced by Kalle, aims

7 It may be worth noting that “clasping hands” is presumably a stronger symbolic gesture indicating more courage in secular societies, like Finland, than in societies where church attendance is high and religious symbols common.
at accomplishing mutual help in practice: he attempts to give Kalle a new perspective for treating his problems and also hints that unsolved problems may lead to a relapse. After Olavi’s contribution, Kalle could reflect on whether he should also think of humility in the terms proposed by Olavi. Further, the formal organization of turn-taking excludes the possibility that Kalle could express his stance on Olavi’s turn. Normally, only a round of extended turns is used in AA, and there are no replies to commentary turns (Arminen, 1998). This suspension of conversational close-ordering may be seen as a part of the therapeutic apparatus of AA: since Kalle cannot come in and respond to Olavi, he can only meditate on this idea, and nobody but Kalle will at that point know whether he found Olavi’s suggestion helpful. AA’s turn-taking format precludes the possibility that the participants could converse about, or discuss, each other’s suggestions; eventually, the suggestions may be found useful, or they may be forgotten, or they may be discussed outside the meeting.

At line 43 we come across a new reference to Kalle.

43 .hhhh So I had like Kalle figuratively said the Blue Book in my
pockoet = > I didn’t have it even < in a ↑ po:cket but that,
44 .hhhh I’w- I wanted to stay sober without doing ↑ anything, hh
45 .hh So like I once stated that we’ve ↑ twelve steps hi
46 > ↓ and twelve traditions, < I wasn’t ready to take the: m?,
47 .hh but I took at least a hundred and ↑ twenty steps
to get a ↑ dri: nk, .h ↑ o and there’s a big ↑ di: ff↓ erence. o

The reference (43) is produced in the middle of Olavi’s treatment of his idea of why he relapsed, that is, he was not humble enough. Note that (in the sequence we have read) Kalle did not connect his “Blue Book story” to humility. Actually, somewhat earlier in his talk Kalle had told a story about having the ‘Blue Book’ (the AA Recovery Program, I.A.) in his pocket. Kalle’s story is shown in Appendix A (Extract 3), and the reader may want to look through it before we return to Olavi’s treatment of it. Kalle tells the story about having the Blue Book in his pocket in connection with his first period in AA (1–2). Kalle had bought the book with the idea that he will keep the book in his back pocket, so that he can then proudly take the book out from his pocket when celebrating his first year of sobriety (3–10). But, to make the story short, Kalle relapses despite having the Blue Book in his pocket (12–27). In all, Kalle’s account was a story about his relapse, which was artfully told with some amount of humor, as the bursts of laughter show (11, 28).

Olavi, for his part, reconnected Kalle’s story about having the Blue Book in his pocket to the theme of humility. With this we see another aspect of second stories: they can pick up several items from first stories, and reconnect and recombine items that originally were not linked together. In note 8, I drew attention to the symbolic

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8 Note that the term “proudly” was an analyst’s slip of the tongue. Albeit exactly that sense was conveyed by Kalle’s story, Kalle did not use the term. In passing, this actually shows us how complicated an issue topical connection is. Even if at the outset there is no topical connection between Kalle’s story and the topic of humility, we can now grasp that the connection can be found and made relevant. In this way almost any two “items” can be topically related to each other.
connection between humility and Kalle’s story about having the Blue Book in his pocket; but in his original story Kalle did not in any way make an explicit connection between these topics. (Actually, the notion of humility was not introduced until afterwards.) In this fashion, second stories can associate various separate items and recontextualize the original story, thereby providing a new understanding of the first story and a new angle to the teller of that story.

Notice also the form of Olavi’s reference to Kalle “So I had as Kalle figuratively said the Blue Book in my pocket” (49–50). Olavi characterizes Kalle’s account as *figurative*. However, Kalle actually related his story as a factual report of his relapse, although it was a rhetorically embellished retelling, which he had told previously, as he himself displayed (lines 26–27). Nevertheless, it was Olavi who portrayed Kalle’s telling as being a trope. In this fashion, Olavi concentrated on the symbolic meaning of Kalle’s story and established a symbolic understanding of it. Second stories thus can transpose the sense of the original stories, and invest them with metaphoric, or even epiphanic, qualities. Naturally, metaphors, which may be confirmed, or even established, via second stories, are potent symbolic representations for a community.

After having dealt with the lesson of “having the Blue Book in his pocket,” Olavi again produces a reference to Kalle (50–51).
Olavi’s reference to Kalle’s style of speaking about his past (50–51) does not seem to refer to any specific part of Kalle’s turn, but with the help of this reference, Olavi introduces a new polarity: the honest/dishonest relationship with one’s past and with oneself (52–62). Through his discussion of this polarity Olavi develops a new interpretation of humility (63–65) according to which “humility is to understand experiences positively” (65). In this fashion, Olavi has offered a reformulation for the notion of humility, which was a problem for Kalle in the first place. Hereby Olavi has proposed a resolution to Kalle’s problem. Olavi has worked to reinterpret and to transvaluate the concept, which was problematic for Kalle, thereby opening a possibility to transform a problem into a resource.

We have now shown how AA works so that personal problems are dealt with and transformations of meaning are proposed. As a whole, this is a part of the process by which personal powerlessness may turn out to be a bedrock for a new life. Anyway, AA is not only about sharing experiences but also about sharing strength and hope, as stated in the AA preamble (see e.g., Denzin, 1987: 207).

The scrutiny of second stories also supports an earlier finding that turns of talk in AA progress from problems to resolutions. The speakers in AA meetings seem to first discuss problems and then move on to provide resolutions before closing their turns (Arminen, 1998). Here we have pointed out the immediate, local context in which the movement from problems to resolutions is achieved through the turn being designed to help an individual member. The movement from problems to resolutions is evident also in the earlier part of Olavi’s turn. Olavi’s previous story (lines 18–35), which was occasioned by a reference to Kalle’s prison trip and to the fact that Kalle did not know what was going to happen (19–21), proceeds toward giving support to and sharing strength and hope with Kalle, who according to Olavi “was free even in prison” (35). Further, this sequence was also told by reference to this very same part of Kalle’s turn in which he expressed his inability to understand why he has sobered up (Kalle, lines 20–27).

To conclude, AA members design second stories in a systematic way. They are told by reference to some problem-relevant instance in the first story, and subsequently the meaning of this first story is transvalued in the course of the second story so that the problem gains, at least symbolically, a resolution. This same pattern is present in story pairs, and also elsewhere in the materials studied (Arminen, 1998).

5. Methodical character of second stories

Besides having individual and unique features, second stories are based on a set of systematic linguistic and interactional practices. First, the tellable items are introduced so that they are linked back to the issues raised by prior speakers. Second, the speakers display the type of relationship they are creating with prior speakers.
Third, speakers construct experiences as shareable and mark the sharing of experiences with a set of linguistic devices. Fourth, second stories in AA display the speakers’ orientation to the institutional context in that the stories are built to provide support and establish solidarity between speakers. These features are not only common to the stories studied here but also to the larger set of AA turns upon which this study is based (Arminen 1998). Further, ethnographic studies suggest that these findings are also generalizable beyond the group studied (Borkman, 2000; Denzin, 1987; Mäkelä et al., 1996).

In second stories, tellable items are introduced with a set of practices we can call “entry devices” (Jefferson, 1978; Maynard, 1992). These entry devices vary, allowing speakers to build various types of relationships with previous turns (Extract 1, lines 2–9; Extract 2, lines 5–8, 18–22, 36–38). To project different types of second stories, speakers select the respective type of entry device. Speakers can report a past change of state with expressions like “it occurred to me” (Extract 2, line 5) or “it came to my mind” (Extract 2, 18) and then locate the source of change of state; or they can pick up a topic “then that humility” (Extract 2, 36) which is introduced as being known to recipients, or they can elaborate their relationship with the earlier speaker, and display their appreciation of that contribution, thereby projecting a close and intimate second story (Extract 1, 2–8). In this fashion, subsequent speakers link their talkables to the items introduced by previous speakers. In all, these procedures create and reinforce the reciprocal relevance of AA members’ turns of talk. Through references to earlier turns, speakers display the relevance of the earlier contributions, but also make relevant their own contributions to the earlier speakers through the linkage to these turns. In AA, members construct their experiences as reciprocally shareable to show understanding and caring, and to exhibit “that I am not alone with my problems” (cf. Sacks, 1992b: 376–383). In this way, the cohesion of the speech event is maintained, and the possibility for mutual help in AA is achieved methodically.

Through storytelling the speakers not only convey information about some incidents but also construct relationships with story recipients. To create affinity and closeness the speakers may mark their stance as the same as the prior speaker’s, i.e., “I have also had that experience” or “I’ve experienced that too” (Extract 1, lines 10–12; Extract 2, 50–52). When Ari introduces his own experiences (Extract 1, lines 9–12), he establishes that his characterization fits the prior speaker’s experiences also.9 The aligning stance “I had drunk also for a long time” (lines 10, 12; insertion omitted) establishes a reciprocal relation between his forthcoming story and Mari’s story, his point of reference. First, the item marked with “too” or “also” is audible as being second to something. “I had drunk also for a long time” (10, 12) indicates that this telling is done in relation to some prior telling that has brought this to the teller’s mind. Secondly, a special relation between speakers is established. Not only

9 Note that Ari interrupts the initiation of the telling of his experience, and adds a specification about the period of his life he is going to talk about “I: had <eh hhh hhh uhhhh last hh time then, (0.2) in my own (. ) odyssey:;” (10–12). After the insertion, Ari returns to his telling, which is accompanied with an alignment marker “also” [in Finnish: myös] “.hhhh e- u:hh hhhh drunk, .hhhh also (. ) for a long time (. ) nearly three: hh years. (0.4)”.
does the second speaker show that he has listened, analyzed, understood, and found something interesting in the first speaker’s talk (or turn), but he also suggests that his own telling is reciprocally relevant for the first speaker. By producing “too” or “also” the speaker suggests that the forthcoming telling (description, characterization, idea) is designed to apply to the first speaker. Through the second story, the speaker gives an analysis and a characterization of the original story, thus enabling reflection and also possibly social support. Through his aligned second story, “I had drunk also for a long time, nearly three years”, Ari implies that not only had he been drinking heavily but that both he and Mari had been really heavy users, not amateurs, but real professionals at drinking. In that way the alignment marker works toward building commonality between speakers, thereby making the experiences reciprocally relevant. The alignment marker, thus, is a device that not only indicates the relevance of the first story for the second, but also vice versa. That is, the second story achieves its secondness through its displayed relationships with the first one (whether the first speaker accepts the second speaker’s view is another matter).

Further, the speakers cannot only build topical linkages, display an alignment, but can also demonstrate identification with a prior speaker (Extract 1, 17–18, 27–28; Extract 2, 43). One of the ways in which identification can be displayed is through what we might call the *as X said* device. In Olavi’s turn, after nominating “humility” as his topic (line 36), he goes on talking about the reasons why people get tired of being in AA, about the lack of humility (37–42). Subsequently, he states why he got tired, relapsed, which then is illuminated with the help of a reference to Kalle: “So I had as Kalle figuratively said the Blue Book in my pocket” (43). He then moves on to explicate the meaning of Kalle’ figurative talk: having the Blue Book in one’s pocket means that one is not working the program (45). Here, the *as X said* device is used to summarize and evaluate the story told. Further, the experience of identification is conveyed with the help of the device. Olavi makes the point that he has had the same experience that Kalle just related, that he has identified with Kalle’s story. At one point, both Olavi and Kalle were not practicing the program (and consequently relapsed). Identification becomes publicly manifested.

Finally, speakers also orient to AA as an institutional context in designing their stories. Second stories, in particular, follow a systematic trajectory so that the stories are connected to some problem a prior speaker has experienced (too). However, in the course of telling the second story a new perspective is sought from which the problem can be solved or wiped away. In all, members design second stories in AA as vehicles for mutual help.

To conclude, the whole course of telling the second story from its initiation to its closing is monitored through a set of linguistic devices that operate in different locations. New talkables are introduced with a set of practices establishing a relationship

10 Elsewhere (Arminen, 1994), I have drawn attention to the fact that AA life stories generally lack detailed descriptions of the amount of substance consumption. Naturally, the description “I had drank for a long time almost three years” is quite unspecific, but here the sense of the description is reflexively tied to its context. The “lived sense” of the description gains its meaning through its link to prior talk, as the speaker himself had also designed his turn. The meaning of second stories is always tied to that of first ones. This may also be members’ technique to use their context.
with prior turns. The speaker’s stance towards the topic is established immediately after the initiation of a topic so that various degrees of alignment between the speakers on this topic can be constituted. Eventually, the as X said device is used in topically intermediate positions so that it intensifies the intimate relation between the speakers. Speakers can monitor during the whole course of their talk how closely they align with other speakers, and exhibit the closeness of alignment in an inter-subjectively observable way.

6. A deviant case

Thus far, I have tried to establish that second stories manifest AA members’ orientation to mutual help and support. If the analysis is correct, then a member’s explicit refusal to link a turn to a prior one and produce a second story should display a disaffiliative departure from a mutual relationship. In this section, I will briefly introduce one such case in which a member avoids narrating a second story when it would be due. The case to be discussed is from the same meeting as Extract 1. In this meeting, the opening speaker, Mari, discussed in a lively and touching fashion her problems, many of which were drug-related (Appendix A). She received many affiliative responses (see also Arminen, 1998), one of which was Ari’s turn (as it has been analyzed above). However, some more traditionally minded members of the group felt at that time that drug-related issues should not be talked about in AA meetings. Notably, these members refrained from linking their talk back to Mari’s opening turn. Instead, they referred to each others’ turns to build a coalition that kept up what they felt to be the right AA spirit.

Extract 3 includes a relevant part of Kapa K’s turn (the opening and the end parts of the turn have been omitted). Kapa K first discusses other AA meetings he used to attend (1–3). Subsequently, he initiates talk about the fact that he has problems other than alcohol (4–7). At line 8, before completing this topic, he refers to Penna, who is another member who had spoken without linking his turn to Mari’s. Via this reference, Kapa K moves on to account for his relapse (9–14) and then finally returns to talk about his other problems, for which he attends NA (Narcotics Anonymous) (15–21). In this way he makes the point that he feels that drug-related problems should not be talked about in AA, but in NA meetings (unlike what Mari and some other members had done).

Extract 3 Part of Kapa K’s commentary turn in V3 [V3KapaK0990]

1K: the late Toumas also was from the Vuori-group and, (.)
2 many other elderly guys too, (.), and Pate Vattu too
3 mt.hhh almost every single time. (0.8) mt
4 .hhhhhhhh#ee#↑I’VE ALSO (had) hhhhhhhh

11 A debate along the same lines has also taken place in AA in the United States (Pollner and Stein, 1996: 214).
problems other than alcohol problem, and it’s also because of that? (0.2) hhhhh I attend nowadays (0.3) cause I ended up in the situation, (.) which, um (.) Penna mentioned (.) in his turn of talk, that I had to drink (0.2) hhhhhhh drink uh after AA experience (.) long AA experience. hhhh mt.hhh despite the fact that I had conveyed the message and even though I had followed the steps (.) mt .hhhh and on <so:me> day:- days practised the program so I had to drink after almost ten years, (.) mt.hhhh so now? hhhh TO↑> BEGIN THIS NEW LIFE <, hh (0.2) I’ve had to attend in addition to AA .hhh ↓cause I’ve had also other problems besides ↓alcohol problem among others a drug problem so I’ve attended for the sake of my ↑drug problem N:A it is?, .hhhh following the same principles and traditions as the AA community but it is the Narcotics Anonymous organization.

When we compare Kapa K’s turn above to Ari’s turn that was discussed earlier, the contrast is striking. The key is the selection of linkage to prior turns. Both Ari and Kapa K design their turns to construct them as compatible with prior turns. But whereas Ari links his turn to Mari’s turn, Kapa K aligns with Penna (line 8). Further, the selection of the target of the displayed alignment is tied with the selective description of experience. Later on, Kapa K’s turn reveals that he attends NA because of his drug problem. But while he speaks about the relapse with the assistance of a reference to Penna (8), he only mentions drinking, “I had to drink, drink after AA experience” (9–10). In this way, he selectively describes his relapse as compatible with Penna’s account, but not with Mari’s; that is, he could have also said that he had relapsed and started to use other drugs, as Mari had. Instead, by referring only to Penna, he shows his understanding of the appropriate code of conduct for an AA member and the proper topics for AA meetings. Furthermore, he then confirms and explicates his position by stating that because of his drug problem he attends NA (19), indicating that NA, and NA only, is the appropriate place to talk about drug problems and that AA is the place to talk about alcohol problems. In addition, by using his reference, Kapa K has aligned with Penna, and both have shown their nonalignment with Mari and other members who discuss their drug-related problems in AA. Of course, also Ari spoke only about alcohol-related experiences, but Ari did not make this distinction relevant. Further, this shows that the factual content of experiences does not determine AA members’ life stories, but that the interactional co-construction also shapes the experiences as they are related in the meetings.

Concluding, then, the linking of experiences to prior speakers in meetings is crucial for the establishment of mutual support in more ways than one. In AA meetings, the references to prior speakers seem to be conventionally used to display and reinforce alignment and solidarity, and their absence projects a weak or missing
alignment with prior speaker(s). Second, in linking their turns to prior ones, the speakers end up designing their turns so that their experiences are recounted in a selective way. Therefore these interactional practices are at the heart of the reshaping of identities in AA. Further, in contrast to accounts that have emphasized the homogeneity of AA (e.g. Antze, 1987), we can note that AA members engage in controversies. However, undercurrents of discontent or disagreement seldom develop into open argument. In Extract 3, both Penna and Kapa K avoided any direct challenge to Mari or any other member. We may also add that in this respect they are apparently well informed by AA’s first tradition that states, “Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon AA unity” (Anonymous, 1952). Speakers do choose to whom they refer, thereby articulating lines, coalitions, and underlying disagreements among speakers, but they also orient to mutual solidarity and avoid engaging in open controversy.

7. Functions of second stories

Many studies on mutual help have emphasized the role of storytelling for communicating social support (e.g. Arntson and Droge, 1987; Denzin, 1987). In this article, I have claimed that many functions of storytelling depend on stories being organized as series in which subsequent speakers display their understanding and the appreciation of the previous turns. In particular, I will discuss the following four functions of second stories: 1) Second stories amplify the core ideas and the forms of identity of the group; 2) they provide support for prior speakers; 3) they offer new interpretations of and perspectives on the problems discussed; and 4) they establish symbolic interpretations of prior stories, thereby contributing a figurative worldview that will serve as a sense-making device for group members.

In mutual help groups, speakers build functional narratives that help them to cope with their problems. In AA, speakers display a double perspective on their problems and testify that their worst experiences have become their most valuable experiences that have paved the way for recovery. The organization of stories into series strengthens the testimonies further, as the subsequent stories may corroborate the prior ones. The way Ari deals with Mari’s story offers us a crystal-clear example of the function of amplifying the key ideas. Via a reference to Mari, Ari concludes that both have gained liberation from the terror they have faced, recapitulating the main tenets of AA (Extract 1 lines 42–46; cf. “only through utter defeat are we able to take our first steps toward liberation and strength”, Anonymous 1986/1952: 21). On the other hand, the opening speakers are usually able to relate archetypal coping narratives (like Mari). Consequently, subsequent speakers can use the narrative models offered. As a whole, the subsequent stories amplify the prior ones thus articulating AA’s core ideas, but in so doing they rely on the models imposed by these same stories. The relationship between stories in series is reciprocal.

Occasions when a meeting participant faces an acute crisis reveal other contingencies of mutual help. A person’s loss of control and emotional flooding does not necessarily threaten the atmosphere of mutual help gathering; rather, it provides
a possibility for other parties to offer support for a person in trouble. Again, the interpersonal aspects of mutual help become crucial. In our materials, the design of Olavi’s turn clearly shows his determination to help the troubled person by multiple means, and ethnographic accounts like Denzin’s (1987) suggest this is a systematic pattern.

As a whole, references to prior turns are organized systematically. The subsequent turns are linked to the problems shared with earlier speakers, and then solutions to the problems are offered. The speakers display their orientation to mutual help vis-à-vis the way turns are connected with prior ones. Further, in orienting to solving troubles the subsequent speakers may formulate new angles on issues raised by the earlier speakers. For instance, Olavi reconceptualizes Kalle’s discussion about humility and links it to a new conceptual field that Kalle did not discuss in that connection (i.e., the person’s (in)activity in AA). In this manner, the subsequent speakers can utilize the array of experiences they have just heard about, and combine originally separate aspects of stories to find new ways to deal with problems. Again, the responsiveness of the stories is critical for mutual aid.

Finally, reflexive relationships between turns of talk in AA meetings seem to be salient in building a figurative worldview in which specific instances or events are constructed as part of a larger whole that can be used for making sense of each other’s experiences (Shearing and Ericson, 1991). In some cases, a symbolic meaning may be given for a unique experience. Olavi, for example, underlined the symbolic quality of Kalle’s story about “having the Blue Book in his backpocket” (Extract 2, 43–49). In this way, the meaning of a singular episode becomes generalized so that it can be used for making sense not just of identical experiences but also of all experiences that bear a symbolic resemblance to an original story. Moreover, figurative interpretation of stories may be much more common and more important than just those occasions in which an explicitly symbolic interpretation is given for a narrated event. Rather, the next turn always conveys a sense of the previous one. The next turn is designed as being on or off the topic, thereby also proposing what the topic has been in the first place (Sacks, 1992b: 255).

To find out how this reflexive relationship between turns works, we will look more closely at how Ari formulates the similarity between his and Mari’s experiences (Extract 2). In lines 25–26, Ari concludes that his delusions had been his most horrendous experience. Then he refers to Mari’s telling about her agony of soul, and notes that Mari meant (also) what he has been through, claiming that in fact Mari had been talking about his experience as well (28–30). In this way, Ari built a reflexive relationship between Mari’s and his own turns. He identified with Mari’s experience (29–30) as he himself understood its meaning. Strictly speaking, Ari did not identify with Mari’s talk in itself but with Mari’s talk as he constructed its meaning with the help of his own talk. Ari proposed a figurative way to understand Mari’s experience. The question is no longer about the similarity of experiences but about the way to look at the experiences to configure them as an AA member’s narrative.

It is not mere coincidence that meetings are the basic form of activity in mutual help groups. In meetings, members can relate series of stories to display their
understanding and appreciation of each other’s experiences. Second stories are a key aspect of members’ work to build the sense that “we are all in the same boat”. The interpersonal communication through series of stories constitutes the bedrock for mutual aid in mutual help meetings.

8. Discussion

In and through this article we have seen the artful, methodical character of second stories. Second stories do not just happen; members achieve them in an orderly fashion. This orderliness of second stories starts with their entry devices, which not only introduce a story but mark its position as a second story. Hence, second stories are conditionally relevant responses to first stories. Nevertheless, the relationship between the second and the first story is reciprocal, so that the second story is also relevant for the interpretation of the first. By topicalizing various aspects of the first story, second stories reactivate the interpretation of the first story. In this article, we have noted some techniques through which second stories contribute toward a new understanding of first stories. Second stories can recontextualize items and ideas introduced in first stories. They can also reconnect and recombine different threads of the original stories, thereby offering new perspectives on the meaning of individual items of the first stories. Further, they may also give figurative, symbolic interpretations, and crystallize the points offered in first stories. As a whole, second stories contribute toward transvaluating the experiences shared during first stories. Experiences are co-constructed through a series of stories.

In AA, first stories are told to offer a basis for sharing experiences, which allows also the first stories to be reinterpreted through the commentary turns. Members orient to the problem relevancy of each other’s talk, but they also respect others’ ownership of their experiences. The co-construction of experiences proceeds implicitly and indirectly as members help others by analyzing their own experiences in ways that make these relevant also for others. Mutual help in AA is a methodical achievement in which recipients can meditate upon their own experiences when speakers share their experiences in a mutually relevant way. Further, storytelling is not only a method of problem solving but also a vehicle to build and manage relationships between members. AA members have multiple methods to construct and display the degree of alignment and affinity they have with each meeting participant. Alignment markers and as X said devices are used to build reciprocal and intimate relations between speakers. The intimate meeting atmosphere is an artful achievement as members publicly and intersubjectively display the identification and affinity they feel with one another.

In all, the findings of this study help us to specify the ways in which mutual help differs from professional counseling and various types of therapies. Firstly, in contrast to psychoanalysis and psychodynamic approaches, AA interaction is based upon reciprocal personal revelations: there is no professional disengagement. Secondly, in contrast to professional counseling, brief therapy, and systemic family therapy, mutual help is a highly discreet approach in so far as AA members avoid
explicit advice-giving in meetings (but not necessarily outside them), but instead focus on their own experiences that only indirectly offer a new understanding of others’ experiences (cf. Silverman, 1997: 109–181).

To conclude, various types of professional therapies and mutual help involve particular constraints on what will be regarded as allowable contributions. The constraints vary according to the type of therapy so that each therapy is an achievement that relies on participants’ orientation to the constraints characteristic to that type. In mutual help, reciprocal personal revelations are prompted and dis-engaged advice is discouraged. These features together form the nature of mutual help in which personal relationships are built through reciprocal revelations, and the hierarchical relationships between participants in a meeting are played down through discouraging the advice giving.

Besides these findings themselves, we have noted that most (and maybe all) of these techniques and practices exist outside AA, but that these procedures have gained a specific, institutional meaning in this context. Among other things, we have noticed that second stories in AA are special in that they are occasioned by first stories which are sequentially far away (for a situated activity). AA members routinely refer to items produced a long time (from minutes to hours) earlier in the meeting. In this fashion, speakers use the institutional context in and for building their contributions. We have also observed the avoidance of the third position in AA (the tellers of the first stories do not respond to the second stories). This feature is a part of the maintenance and management of reciprocality and mutuality. AA members avoid competition and paternalistic relationships in which somebody would have the final say. This is also an aspect of members’ consideration for the integrity of others.

In terms of AA, this study demonstrates that even if AA meetings are not directly conversational occasions, they are still thoroughly interactional so that they are conventionally organized departures from ordinary talk. The methodical character of mutual help in AA has also made perspicuous the variability of members’ relationships in AA. This shows that the frequently stated views about AA as an extremely homogeneous cult or sect are premature (e.g. Antze, 1987; Trevino, 1992). On the other hand, we have found that the spoken contributions and their relations in AA meetings are finely ordered, recipient designed, and context-sensitive. In this respect, the study has demonstrated a level of orderliness that earlier ethnographic studies of AA have neglected or programmatically denied (e.g. Whitley, 1977; Denzin, 1987: 115).

From a CA point of view, this study has explicated some interactional properties of second stories. Second stories can be understood as conditionally relevant responses to first stories. But this study has also addressed the functions of second stories in a specific institutional context. In AA, second stories are contributions for mutual help, in which participants help each other by helping themselves through organizing their own experiences. Mutual help, thus, is an art of interpersonal exchange where relationships between the participants are strongly reciprocal. The analysis of second stories is a step toward understanding the interpersonal communication processes that take place in mutual help groups.
Appendix A

Extract 1) Segment from Mari’s opening turn in V3 “The last fateful thing” [V3Mari0990]

1 M: .hhhhhh > THEY TIE ME < EVEN to a chair, (.)
2 so that I wouldn’t be able to get a drink. (0.5)
3 .hhhhhh (. ) and then the (. ) last hhh (. )
4 .mth fateful, (. ) u:hh (. ) thing
5 which I now relate to you which is like the?, (. )
6 .hhh the most ho:rrible that has happened to me in my life:
7 .hhh and which today is for me the very ↑be:st, (.)
8 that has happened to me.
9 .hhh I’ve always said that .hhh erm
10 @I was y-know lu:cky@ (0.3)
11 when I was <↑really unlucky>. (0.3)
12 that not until [then was I lu:cky. (. )
13 A: [((coughing))
14 M: .hh so: well erm (. ) this husband of mine (. ) then got (. )
15 .hh an idea (. ) that (0.4) .mth he wants me to stay one weekend
16 sober. (0.3) .hhh and we’d in ↑Porvoo hhh (. )
17 such an island spot where we used to go.
18 .hhh (. ) always then uh (. ) over the weekends,
19 the kids were with us and?, (0.2) .hhhhhh hh
20 and so he had (0.4) decided that (. ) he takes me there?:?, (.)
21 and I may nt take any stuff with me. (0.5) mt.hhhhhhh
22 and (. ) I hhh too:ck (0.3) stuff (. )
23 I w- drank on the previous night already (. )
24 .hhhhhh and#:#: (. ) I don’t recall whethe:r I also took
25 those pills on top of it all .hhhh[hh bu:t (0.5) the only thing
26 A: [((coughing))
27 M: I recall from that incident was that,
28 .hhh when we went to that island
29 then (. ) my (. )#e# I said to my husband that?, (.)
30 @for god’s sake I’ve such a horrible hangover
31 that listen y-know I’ve bots with me@
32 .hhhhhh @ that le: t me have a drink for the hangover.@
33 (. ) ’e said that ↓NO (. )
34 ↑NOT UNTIL THE CAMP IS READY you don’t take a:nythin,
35 (. ) and I recall that in a moment of anger I got
36 the camp ready. (. ) and then I dug up (. )
37 those two bottles of vodka (. ) and (. ) then hhhh
38 I (. ) don’t know, (.) I really don’t know what has happened. (. )
39 .hhh bu: I woke up there (. ) on a cliff. (. ) and (. )
40 I’d beside me two empt y bottles of vodka. (0.5)
41 .hhhhhh (0.4) and I’d (0.5) <a clear knowledge >
that I was left alone. (1.0) I was left alone for good.

so... I keep on wondering about this when I woke up

but I didn’t remember a thing

nor have I remembered ever since.

running around the island and I saw

that our boat was missing. (1.0)

I awoke (0.3) then I went swimmin’

it was about one kilometer to the coast

on the way there then I:

it was lurched over

and I guessed that there had happened

osome accident. (1.5) uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh so:

the agony which struck my soul then:

so only one who’s been through the agony.

can know what it feels like.

I like

a horrible accident in my life,

and I think that for that reason...

(The narrator’s internal evaluation of the story continues, and then the story goes on about the consequences of the accident.)

Extract 2) Segment from Kalle’s opening turn in V2 “I did not understand what humility was” [V2Kalle1089]

K: //I’ve like afterwards realized that I was so::
damaged there in the drinking fields, I was so damaged
there in hospitals and everywhere that I’d been,

I simply couldn’t understand this AA: program. (0.6)

Pültsi said to me once when he left (.) uh:

let me out of his car so- (gulp) so he said to me that

try to find in your life humi::ility = h. (0.6)

I left the car, and he opened the door and shouted (.)

you don’t anyway understand what humi::ility is,

we in AA understand that it’s .hh an ability to learn and

a receptive mind to truth, (0.2)

hh shut the door and left with the car, hh but ’e might have

st::l opened the door of the car, hh and translated what

is a receptive mind to truth and an ability to learn,#

since I didn’t un::derstand these things,

I didn’t have a clue at all.

A: ((coughing))
Why on earth then a little over eleven years (0.4) mth ago (0.3) sober in AA hhh a day at a time. (1.2) hhh If somebody asked what happened then in comparison to the earlier times. (0.6) hhh So I can’t say even today what happened then (.) in comparison to that earlier. (0.4) hhhh < So:me:thing si:mply ha:ppene:d. > (3.0)

When a while ago I started- started this or ca-#uh# when I came here- here to this group, hhhh @or actually I’ve been all day to:day upset, and I’ve been@ ↑yesterday upset hhh and to:day I didn’t kno:w when I came here what I’ll say in this group. hhh I went alone there by the ↑wind:ow a moment ago, hhh I clasped my hands. (3.5) ((some interrupted inhalation sound))

And we:ll hhh (4.0)

A:--and

(2.0)

.mth hhhhh It tends to be a bit difficult to talk at times, hhhhh I clasped my hands [there a:nd-and-a:nd

B: [rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr]

(0.8)

↑I asked for humility to talk about myself (.) as honestly as I ca:n. (6.0) ((troubles telling continues, and becomes more emotional))//

Extract 3) Segment from Kalle’s opening turn in V2 “I had Blue Book in my pocket”
[V2Kalle1089]

//I was the ↑first- (.). first e:rm (2.0) period which I was here in AA, so I was eight months sober.

.hhh When I came here (0.5) then I bought (.) o:ur book recovery- tradi:ons and > recovery program <?,

.hhh I put it into my trousers’ back pocket .hh and I thought that I’ll keep it a year there, (0.2) and then after a year, when I’ll have my one-year anniversary I’ll .hhhhh bring out the book and say that @no wonder that the boy has been a year sober since the book has been a year <in my ba:ckpo:cke:t>. @ =

A: = heh heheh
12 K: .hhh I was workin’ in a †harbor, (0.8) .mth
13 Deekis and me †we were there at the same time and,
14 .hhhh always when I changed into †overa:lls in the morning
15 (. ) then I put the book there in the back pocket (. )
16 and in the †evening when I left †away then I put it again
17 in my jeans’ .hhh or whatever trousers I just †happened to wear,
18 so there. (. ) .hhh After eight months I was in a fruit ship there
19 at Turku and .hhhh <1: sli::p·ped > for one reason or another =
20 > I don’t recall why <1 slipped into †drinkin’ there,
21 .hhh I went and bought two bottles of vodka for the morning
22 shift and for the evening shift two bottles more and?,
23 .hhhh and eleven pm when they had to close the ship’s hold,
24 then they couldn’t leave me there, but I couldn’t get †u:p
25 alone from there, so they lifted me with one of those nets
26 .hhhh there- there to the wharf that?, .hhh afterwards
27 I’ve said that there came the Blue Book and then †me:
28 A: heh heh heh hehehe((couple of separate bursts of laughter))
29 K: And then I had such a period here in AA that,
30 (. ) I started coming in and going from here,
31 †and here I come again. .hhhhh//

Appendix B. Transcription symbols

The speakers’ names, and possibly some other details, have been changed in order
to secure the anonymity of the persons involved.

Transcription symbols and conventions of conversation analysis are used
throughout the extracts (see Atkinson and Heritage, 1984). The contributions com-
ing from the audience are identified with the speakership symbol A:, i.e., A: ((coughing)),
the time signal with B, the chair’s contribution with C, and other
speakers’ with the initial of the speaker’s name.

Extracts have been identified with the following code: [number of recording in
corpus][the name of the ratified floor holder][month and year of the recording], i.e.,
V3Pave0990: Vuori-group meeting Extract 3, in which a turn is allocated to Pave,
September 1990.

In order to save space, only the translations of original excerpts are shown here
(for original transcripts and discussion about translation from object language to
target language, see Arminen 1998, Arminen 1996). The analysis is based on the
originals, but can be followed with the translations.

Some additional symbols

@ @ animated voice
## wavering voice
rrrr bell
tttt applause
References


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