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**The History of 4th and 5th Step Groups:
An Interview with Dr. Angela Garcia**

William L. White

Introduction

A major chapter in the modern history of addiction recovery is the growing diversification of recovery mutual aid groups in the United States and worldwide. This trend encompasses the growing varieties of recovery experience within existing groups; the growth of religious, spiritual, and secular recovery support fellowships; and the emergence of culturally indigenous adaptations and alternatives to the major recovery mutual aid groups within communities of color. The latter include Grupo de Cuarto y Quinto Paso (CQ, 4th and 5th Step Groups), a mutual aid organization for Latinos that has been recently studied by Drs. Angela Garcia, Brian Anderson, and Keith Humphreys. I recently (March 2015) had the opportunity to interview Dr. Garcia, Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Stanford University, about the history and practices of CQ. Please join us in this informative conversation.

History of CQ

Bill White: Dr. Garcia, you and your colleagues (Brian Anderson and Keith Humphreys) have published two papers on a new recovery mutual aid group, Grupo de Cuarto y Quinto Paso (CQ, 4th and 5th Step Groups). Could you describe the purpose and origins of this group?

Dr. Angela Garcia: CQ started in Mexico in the early '90s as a cultural adaptation of a traditional Twelve-Step group. It was established by and for working class Mexicans from Mexico City and then spread across Mexico and Central America, and into the United States among Mexican and Central American immigrants, many of whom are undocumented. CQ groups are modeled on the Twelve Steps and Tradition of Alcoholics Anonymous, but they place great emphasis on the fourth and fifth steps, from which they draw their name. Some CQ groups adamantly differentiate themselves from AA, while others have a much closer allegiance to other Twelve-Step groups.

Bill White: So CQ groups would not be listed on AA meeting lists or be part of AA's service structure?

Dr. Angela Garcia: No. What really differentiates the CQ groups I've visited from AA is that not all CQ members identify as suffering from alcoholism. That is not a requirement for membership. CQ members span a variety of addictions and other emotional maladies. There are a number of people in groups that I have been following in the San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles that have addictions to crack cocaine, methamphetamine, or heroin and other members who identify as emotionally ill (*"enfermo emocional"* or *"neurotico"*). The emphasis is not on

what you've used, or for how long, but rather that you are in pain. The central point of identification is not addiction; it is emotional pain, which may lead to addiction, but not always. Also, it's a very inclusive program, with family and children oftentimes accompanying members to meetings. There are separate groups for adolescents as well.

Bill White: How did you and your co-authors discover and decide to study CQ groups?

Dr. Angela Garcia: It happened as a result of a related study I've been working on in Mexico City, which explores unregulated, informal addiction rehabilitation clinics called "*anexos*" (annexes) or "24 Hour Alcoholics Anonymous Groups. These are found in working class and very poor communities throughout Mexico, for whom there are limited healthcare options or other supports. They emerged as a mutual aid alternative to AA, and they often use forms of coercion to bring people into these residential settings. In the spiritually-oriented anexos that I was studying, residents often described participating in Fourth and Fifth Step groups, which at that time I had never heard of. So my colleagues and I began specifically asking about these groups.

Through our connections in Mexico City, we began spending time in 4th and 5th Step groups, and then, when I came back to the United States, I discovered groups operating here. The ones I discovered in the U.S. don't use the usual symbols we associate with AA, though sometimes they will use a slightly modified AA symbol. AA advocates sometimes referred to CQ as "pirate" groups and generally disapprove of them. They want to make sure people know that these are not AA groups. But within the 4th and 5th Step Group, there's great flexibility in the degree of identification with AA. Some will say, "Yes, we're AA," while others insist they are a 4th and 5th Step Group separate from AA. It can be very ambiguous.

Bill White: And how would you describe the organizational structure of CQ?

Dr. Angela Garcia: They're more organized today than they were when we started the study a few years ago. For instance, there is now an association that serves as something of an umbrella for all the 4th and 5th Step groups that subscribe to a shared ideology and shared practices. The past few years has witnessed the creation of CQ logos, CQ conferences (in Mexico and the United States), and CQ videos. In Mexico and the United States, there is a higher level of organization of the groups as they become more popular and offer a culturally distinct form of recovery support. What attracts growing numbers of people to CQ is one of the questions we are currently trying to answer in our studies.

Bill White: Have you discovered much about the founders or the early history of CQ?

Dr. Angela Garcia: We know that in 1991 there was a formalized split within an AA group in Mexico City. A couple of the members decided that what was missing from AA was a more rigorous spiritual component. This is interesting in light of some people who feel that AA is already too God-focused, too spiritual. But in this case, it was viewed as not spiritual enough. So, in 1991, there was the first "spiritual experience," or *experiencia espiritual*, as it's called. The two founders, although there's some disagreement about who the founders really are, took some members of this AA group to a little hacienda outside of Mexico City and they created this very

intensive, “spiritual experience” for those who attended. It was highly meaningful to the people that participated in it and that was the beginning of what became the 4th and 5th Step movement in Mexico.

Bill White: And when did they come to the United States?

Dr. Angela Garcia: The first CQ group in the US was founded in either 1992 or 1993 (there is some disagreement over this date) outside of Los Angeles. It’s difficult to reconstruct this history due to the lack of scholarly or group literature. They have the AA big book in these groups and sometimes will work from it, but their own pedagogy is evolving and communicated primarily through the groups themselves or via video or internet.

Growth of CQ Groups

Bill White: And what do we know about the growth of CQ groups to date?

Dr. Angela Garcia: There have been two bi-national conferences in the United States that bring together groups from U.S., Mexico, and a few from Central America, a testament to their growth. The first conference was in 2013 in Las Vegas, Nevada, with about 500 different groups represented. The second conference was in 2014 with approximately a thousand groups, with many more states represented (Note: The third conference will be held in Los Angeles in June 2015). Both of the conferences have thus far been on the West Coast, where CQ seems to be most heavily concentrated, but there are groups on the East Coast and in the Midwest, where there are sizable Mexican populations. We know little about potential regional differences between these groups. How does the population differ in Pennsylvania, for instance, versus California? I’ve been following groups in the Bay Area and Los Angeles, where members describe intense economic pressures and concerns about immigration. There are also a lot of PTSD-like symptoms described in the narratives of members who have recently migrated from Mexico--a lot of serious emotional distress, as well as drug use and alcoholism.

CQ Methods

Bill White: I’d like to explore some of the philosophy and methods of CQ. Could you talk more about the method of induction and the role the retreats play in the induction process?

Dr. Angela Garcia: In order to become a member, you have to attend seven preparatory meetings. These meetings are geared toward preparing the potential new member for the two- or three-day “spiritual experience,” which is the bedrock of the program. The spiritual experience is sometimes called an *escritura* (writing) and the participants of the preparatory meetings are called *escribientes* (writers). A coordinator leads the meetings and invites members to come and share their testimonies to the *escribientes*. These testimonies also describe the benefits of membership, like personal transformation, transcending pain, or no longer abusing drugs or alcohol. The preparatory meetings demonstrate the cathartic style testimony that characterizes the group. There’s also a lot of emphasis on what happens *after* the spiritual experience. The coordinators often say, “A lot of you people like to come do the experience, but then never come back to the meetings. We need you to do the experience before you can participate in the daily meetings, but we really want you to come back and attend these meetings.” They underscore the importance of long-term, consistent group membership and participation.

One of the things that I think is so appealing to the meetings is that they create a community of often highly marginalized people that lack access to resources or are separated from their families who may live in their country of origin. In the group, people, many of whom are likely undocumented, begin to make connections with others, and these connections become very meaningful. The seven preparatory meetings begin to establish these connections, but they also test the degree of commitment of those seeking support and group membership.

Bill White: And the preparatory meetings are different than the meetings that would follow the retreats.

Dr. Angela Garcia: Yes. The newcomers generally aren't allowed to speak during the preparatory meetings. They are asked to listen and reflect on what is being said to them, as well as reflect on the way it is being said to them.

Bill White: Are there meetings in both Spanish and English?

Dr. Angela Garcia: The groups in the Bay Area that we've been looking at are almost exclusively Spanish-speaking, but many of the members speak some English. There are also bilingual and even a few English-speaking groups, which are composed primarily of Mexican-American, non-Spanish speakers.

Bill White: What would distinguish CQ meetings from a traditional AA or NA meeting?

Dr. Angela Garcia: Like AA or NA, CQ opens with the coordinator reading the by-laws of the group, stating: "We are a Fourth and Fifth Step Group, which supports itself through its own contributions." But they go on to say, "the only requirement for being here (besides the going through the experience) is that you want to transcend the pain in your life and to stop suffering." CQ does not distinguish between alcoholism or other addiction to other drugs, and it includes people without addiction problems. There is also an explicit emphasis on transcending pain, versus getting clean and sober. There's also a strong religious sensibility. Most groups I've visited have framed pictures of Bill W and Dr. Bob on the wall. But, more importantly, there are pictures of Jesus Christ, crucifixes, sometimes even Holy Water, giving the groups a Church-like quality. A typical meeting begins with the Serenity Prayer and ends with the Catholic Our Father prayer.

CQ meetings are "closed" only in the sense that you have to have gone through the retreat experience to attend. As long as you've gone through that, you're welcome to attend any CQ meeting. When we began our study, we hadn't completed a spiritual experience and there were certain meetings that we couldn't observe, but after we had our experience (Garcia and Anderson) we've been welcomed to attend pretty much everything.

Bill White: What about the format of the meetings?

Dr. Angela Garcia: There is a coordinator, there are by-laws. Many meetings are held for two hours, but others may go on for a very long time, even as long as five hours. There'll be a primary speaker, or a visiting speaker from another group, who may spend one to two hours at the podium sharing deep personal histories. Members also go to the podium to share, and in a

similarly deep way. As an anthropologist, that's what I've found so interesting. The talks from the podium are more of a life history than a drug narrative. A lot of issues are described. Drug and alcohol use is often the least significant issue.

Bill White: Is there still an emphasis on abstinence and, for example, the use of sobriety dates?

Dr. Angela Garcia: Yes, but the approach to abstinence and clean living is to talk about your life, your resentments, and your emotional pain in the meetings. Addiction is linked to these, but the emphasis is on getting to these core issues—the source of pain one has experienced and the pain one has caused others, and to transcend this pain. The meetings have a very confessional quality, but confession is not something that takes place “privately” with a sponsor, and it's not always given freely. It's often solicited by the coordinator or sponsor and is shared with the entire group.

Bill White: And what about the expectation of how long a member should participate in the meetings?

Dr. Angela Garcia: Continued involvement is strongly encouraged, but groups recognize that many of their members live highly mobile, sometimes precarious, lives. They may not have steady housing or work or they have to do seasonal work. There is an understanding that life gets in the way of consistent participation, but it's definitely encouraged and it's facilitated by having groups in other places or having testimonies and member chat rooms available online. Everyone has a mobile phone and most of them have internet on their phone so the internet has become an important tool for continued participation.

Bill White: Are there sponsorship and rituals similar to other Twelve-Step groups?

Dr. Angela Garcia: There are, and they are very important. The sponsors are called *padrinos* or *madrinas*, which is the term also used in Spanish in Twelve-Step groups, and there are *ahijados* and *ahijadas*, which are the sponsees. This also comes from the Mexican-Catholic language of Godparenthood. The sponsors help facilitate the testimonies. They offer counsel privately (*apadrinamiento*) in person or by phone.

Bill White: Is there an emphasis on helping others within the group or larger areas of community service?

Dr. Angela Garcia: Yes. Absolutely. Service is very important. One aspect of service that's emphasized is to participate in meetings in order to be present for someone else. It's not about just having an experience and then disappearing, but actually becoming an active member and supporting others. Part of service is contributing money to pay the rent on meeting places, or helping out during spiritual experiences. Another very important component of helping includes sharing clothing, food, and other resources. One of the groups that I've been looking at has a donation bin where people can bring children's clothing or extra food. There is a real spirit of sharing within the groups.

Bill White: Is co-attendance in CQ groups and AA groups common?

Dr. Angela Garcia: Some of the people that we've talked to also have traveled for work or have lived in other places where there's no Fourth and Fifth Step groups so they've gone to AA, and then when they get back to a place where Fourth and Fifth Step groups are available, they go back to those. So, there's some movement in and between groups.

Bill White: What is the role of families and children in CQ groups?

Dr. Angela Garcia: Children will sometimes accompany a parent to a meeting. The child does not necessarily participate in the meeting but being there and absorbing the information raises the question of whether it would have a preventative benefit or any harmful effects. There are also separate meetings for adolescents and teenagers. Sometimes parents bring their children to the spiritual experience, but they are kept separate from the adults.

CQ Traditions

Bill White: How would you describe any differences between AA Traditions and how CQ groups operate organizationally?

Dr. Angela Garcia: By all appearances, CQ groups look similar to traditional AA meetings. Oftentimes, they will have the AA Big Book in Spanish and they'll turn to it at various times. The Serenity Prayer and AA Responsibility Declaration are often recited during meetings. AA references are common, and a lot of the members have long histories in AA. So, there's continuity between the groups, but there are also big differences.

Bill White: Are CQ groups financially self-supporting?

Dr. Angela Garcia: They are financially self-supporting. Groups are often well integrated into the surrounding community so, for instance, a small grocery store might donate stuff to the group such as overripe fruit or day old bread. So, there are donations, but not of money.

Bill White: And what about anonymity at the level of press? Is it similar to AA where people would only use first name and last initial of last name?

Dr. Angela Garcia: Generally, no. That is another distinction between AA and CQ. These groups tend to be very community-based and people know each other. They're not coming from various parts of the city into this meeting. They're likely coming from within a several block radius, walking or taking the bus to the meeting, and they know each other. This makes a difference in how members think about such issues as anonymity. Also, people record and post testimonies on the internet.

Bill White: Have the founders been interviewed using their full names at the level of press?

Dr. Angela Garcia: Yes, one of them has. He really wants people to know about these groups and so is often out doing public speaking and coming to the United States to give talks at conferences and other venues. He and his wife are both very public and there are newspaper articles about them in Mexico.

Emotional Intensity of CQ Groups

Bill White: In your article in *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly*, you raise concern by others about CQ methods and their emotional intensity. Could you elaborate on that?

Dr. Angela Garcia: Yes, we share some of these concerns, particularly if you are really emotionally unstable and are pressured to disclose emotionally traumatic experiences. For example, in one meeting, I observed a female sponsor trying to get another woman to talk about her sexually traumatic past, which she attributed to her promiscuity and subsequent “emotional sickness.” This was a woman with severe anxiety and panic attacks and she seemed quite frail to me. I worried that she might respond badly to being pressured to talk about her trauma. Also, during the spiritual experience, people are provided with little food and generally do not sleep for two days. This induces feelings of euphoria, but it can also be dangerous for people with underlying health disorders, like diabetes. I’m hoping that through this research and creating more ties with these groups that there will be certain kinds of adjustments to respond to the medical or emotional needs of the participants, and to avoid dangers that may be inherent in these methods. But this is difficult because part of the appeal, and part of the philosophy is that in order to have the needed cathartic experience, you have to reach a sort of emotional edge.

Among Mexican AA members and Mexican addiction clinicians that we interviewed, there have been allegations that some of the cathartic practices are crude and ineffective, and there have been warnings to the public against participating in these groups. You can see these warnings on the internet where people are warned that they might go psychotic or commit suicide. In the three years that we’ve been looking at these groups, we’ve found no evidence of this kind of response. Quite the opposite. CQ groups seem to be filling a real purpose in the lives of people that have few support options. I think we do these communities a disservice by saying that groups like CQ are dangerous, crude, and ineffective without doing the research that can rigorously define their potential value and risks.

Future Research

Bill White: What do you see as some of the important future research questions related to CQ that you hope you and others will be able to explore?

Dr. Angela Garcia: One is the role of spirituality in Latino recovery. The rise of CQ groups provides a perfect opportunity to explore this. Another is the use of technology for recovery among a highly mobile, precariously housed, often undocumented population. There have been studies that have suggested that Latinos don’t have access to the internet, but we see that they do and they’re increasingly utilizing the internet and YouTube and Facebook as a way to find and remain connected to groups and to each other. CQ participants have described to us feeling strength in knowing that there was this community that they could contact via their cell phone. We would also like to look more closely at the cathartic experience and its effects. And I would like to better understand the threshold of danger that people are inched toward during the experience. This is a potentially powerful experience that may include dangers we do not yet fully understand. I’m also really interested in trauma and addiction and the kinds of trauma that people in these groups tend to experience, which is the trauma of the drug war, the trauma of migration, and the trauma of living an undocumented life. The study of CQ provides a window

into the world of a highly marginalized community that has recovery needs and whose members are creating their own mechanisms of healing. I think that these groups can help other groups and other kinds of services retool themselves to make them more relevant and welcoming to this underserved population. That's part of what I hope this research will do.

Bill White: As an anthropologist, do you see CQ as the beginnings of what may be an indigenous recovery mutual aid movement rising out of Mexico and the American-Hispanic-Latino community?

Dr. Angela Garcia: Yes, within CQ there is a sense of pride that members feel, especially when they know that it comes from Mexico, from their own people. I haven't specifically asked this, but I imagine it feels like it's more organically theirs and that they can make it what they want it to be. This is definitely a movement by and for the people.

Bill White: Dr. Garcia, thank you for taking this time to share your experience researching Fourth and Fifth Step groups.

Dr. Garcia: Thank you, Bill

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Recommended Reading

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