

HISTORY

OF SOCIAL WORK

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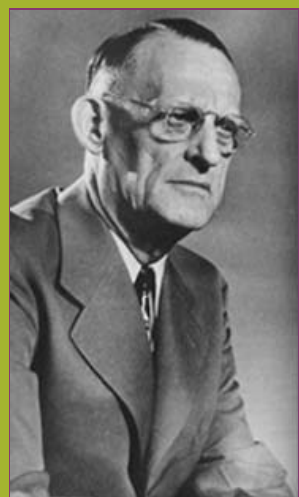
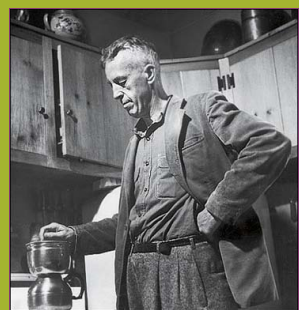
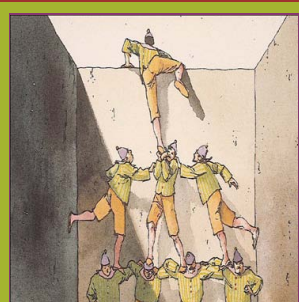
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1935 Alcoholics Anonymous

The emergence of self help groups



Robert Holbrook Smith graduated at the age of 21 as a medical doctor from the prestigious Dartmouth College in New Hampshire and his future looked bright. To complete his training, he enrolled at the Rush Medical School in Chicago. At that time, he started drinking, initially for the social effects, but soon the drinking became compulsive. Soon, it began to challenge his professional competence as a doctor. Smith realised it was time for a change and he moved to Akron in Ohio, where he settled as a surgeon and married his high school sweetheart. Unfortunately, his addiction to alcohol wasn't conquered and the consumption soon reached dangerous levels again. He didn't dare to start operating on a patient without having drunk a few glasses. In 1935 however he met Bill Wilson, a business man from New York who had faced the same struggle for many years. Bill and Robert were an immediate match. Bill Wilson wasn't only an ex-alcoholic; he was also a born-again Christian who had experienced a 'hot flash' in November 1934 when in hospital as a result of his severe drinking. According to his own account, he had exclaimed "I will do anything to get rid of this addiction. Everything! If there is a God, let Him give a sign now." After which he had seen a white flash of light.

With Bill Wilson as a witness, Robert Holbrook Smith drank his last alcohol (a glass of beer) on the 10th of June 1935. This is generally seen as the official start date for Alcoholics Anonymous. Smith and Wilson were both convinced that alcoholism could only be conquered by mutual support from peers. Additionally, this could only work if people shared their fight anonymously. First they set up a self help group in Akron, after which Wilson returned to New York where he established another group. Given the need for anonymity, they became known as Dr. Bob and Bill W.

The name Alcoholics Anonymous emerged after a book with that title (*Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How More Than One Hundred Men Have Recovered from Alcoholism*) was published in 1939 (known within the AA as 'The Big Book'). In 1941 the AA received a significant boost after journalist Jack Alexander wrote about their existence in the *Saturday Evening Post*. This boost was reinforced after the article *Maybe I can do it too* about AA participant Edward G. in *Reader's Digest* of October 1944. It was a summary of an article that had appeared previously in *Argosy*. The Reader's Digest version had a big impact as it appeared in several of the international editions of the magazine and generated a great deal of free publicity.

The AA was and still is by far the best-known self help group, but is far from being the only one. Soon a whole movement of informal care provision through a wide variety of self help groups emerged, organized locally through so-called 'clearing houses'. They covered (and still cover) topics related to health, mental health and social issues. Implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) these self help groups were a critique on the professionalism of caregivers, including social workers, and are thus related to the thinking of Ivan Illich (Disabling professions, 1977).

The Saturday Evening Post and Reader's Digest weren't the only ones to take notice of the emerging self help landscape. There was considerable support from policy with the [Alam Ata declaration](#) of the World Health Organization in 1978 and their slogan 'health for all by the year 2000'. Social research also took notice and supported self help with publications like *The strength in us* (Katz, 1976) and *Self-help in the human services* (Gartner, 1977).

Read more

- Leung, T. T. F. (2010), *Social work professionalism in self-help organizations*. International Social Work, 53(4), 474-488. (subscription needed to access full text)

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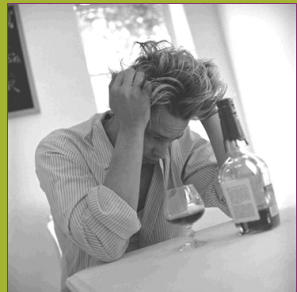
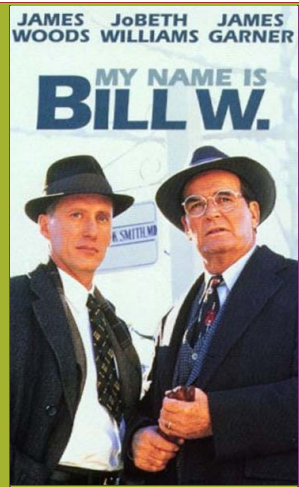
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This initiative also exists in Dutch, where it covers the history of social work in the Netherlands, in Flanders, and internationally.

See www.canonsociaalwerk.eu

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Additional information

- Katz, A., & Bender, E. (1976), *The strength in us, self-help groups in the modern world*. New York: New Viewpoints.
- Gartner, A., & Riessman, F. (1977), *Self-help in the human services*. San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass.

Links

- [The international website of Alcoholics Anonymous](#)

Study tasks

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