

The Reconstruction of Identity in the Process of Recovery from Substance Dependence

Claire Jaynes

Master of Arts student in Community-Based Counselling Psychology, Intern at the Counselling and Careers Development Unit, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, Private Bag X3, WITS, 2050, South Africa
jaynesc@hse.pg.wits.ac.za

Kenneth G. Wilson

Private Practice
kennethwilson@wol.co.za

ABSTRACT

The present study originally sought to collect personal narratives of recovery from substance (alcohol and drug) dependence without formal treatment (referred to as self-managed change). The collected narratives would then be analysed to assess how they reflect the identity processes and identity constructions of the participants. However, due to difficulty in obtaining a sample who evidenced recovery by means of self-managed change, this criterion was dropped. Thus the present study collected four personal recovery narratives (regardless of the means to recovery) and analysed these narratives to determine how they reflect the identity processes and identity (re)constructions that are constituent of recovery narratives. A narrative analysis yielded results that substantiate the findings of McIntosh and McKeganey (2000) that recovering addicts construct a non-addict identity for themselves. Following McIntosh and McKeganey (2000) the three key areas in which the recovering addicts' narratives of recovery could be seen to be constructing a non-addict identity for the individuals were: firstly, in relation to the reinterpretation of elements of their drug (or alcohol) using lifestyle; secondly, in relation to the reconstruction of their sense of self; and thirdly, in relation to the provision of convincing explanations for recovery. Narrative analysis also illuminated that *how* the participants told their stories communicated something about their identity processes and identity (re)constructions. Components of *how* the story was told relate to structure, lexical choice, repetition, figurative language, tense variation, victimic versus agentic plots, and other performative features of the narrative.

Keywords: addiction, identity; narrative analysis; non-addict identity; reconstruction of identity; recovery from substance dependence; recovery narratives; substance dependence;

Introduction

The aim of the present study was to explore the personal narratives of recovery provided by the research participants. The research aims to show how, as a crucial part of the recovery process, recovering addicts and alcoholics reconstruct a sense of self and a new non-addict identity.

It should be noted that the aims of the present study are concerned with the recovery process as perceived by the research participants. Thus the study is not concerned with objectively defined measures of whether the participants have ceased their alcohol and/or drug use, but rather acknowledges the participants' own definitions of whether they consider themselves to be in recovery.

The research aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What are the narratives of recovery from alcohol or drug dependence?
2. How do the narratives collected reflect the identity processes and identity constructions and/or reconstructions of the participants?

Narrative and Identity

Riessman (1993) states that the definitions of narrative range from the overly broad, where almost anything may be included, to the restrictive definitions of Labov (1972, as cited in Riessman, 1993), among others.

Bruner (1994, p.41, as cited in Polkinghorne, 1996) defines identity as "a complex mental edifice that one constructs by the use of a variety of mental processes". This study situates itself in the premise that identities are constructed and reconstructed through personal narratives. Riessman (1993, p.2) illustrates this point by use of a quotation by Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992, p.1):

How individuals recount their histories – what they emphasize and what they omit, their stance as protagonists or victims, the relationship the story establishes between the teller and the audience – all shape what individuals can claim of their own lives. Personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one's life; they are the means by which identities may be fashioned.

According to Giddens (1991, as cited in McIntosh & McKeganey, 2000), an individual's identity is not found in behaviour, nor in the reactions of others, but rather in the capacity to maintain a narrative of his or her biography.

Identity and recovery

Denzin's (1987) Six Theses of Recovery show how recovery from alcoholism, and it can be assumed drug dependence, is highly related to the *self* of the individual, and consequently his/her *identity*. The process of recovery from dependent drug use has been described in terms of "the management of a spoiled identity" (McIntosh & McKeganey, 2000). Biernacki (1986, as cited in McIntosh & McKeganey, 2000) believes that the decision to stop taking drugs is a result of the conflict and problems brought about by the clash between the user's addict identity and his/her other identities that are unrelated to drug use – such as those of partner, parent, employee. Thus the recovery process implies a realisation on the part of the addict that his or her damaged sense of self must be restored, along with the reawakening of the individual's old identity or the establishment of a completely new identity.

Narratives of recovery are used to construct a non-addict identity for the individual (McIntosh & McKeganey, 2000). Identity transformation is an integral part of recovery from addiction, and this identity reconstruction takes place within the recovery narratives. [Baker \(2000\) reviews the studies of Biernacki \(1986\) and Waldorf, Reinerman, and Murphy \(1992\) that made discoveries about identity transformations in the process of recovery. Biernacki contends that heroin addicts can and do recover, even without treatment, if they transform their identities to those 'ordinary' people. Similarly, Waldorf, Reinerman, and Murphy \(1992, as cited in Baker, 2000\) found that a share of conventional life, with its "ingredients of a 'normal' identity", acted as the ballast that allowed cocaine users to control their use or quit completely. They also reported that the user's investment in a sense of self was a motivating factor in avoiding abuse, returning to controlled use, or ceasing use altogether.](#)

However, McIntosh and McKeganey (2000) put forward that the identities constructed by addicts are not inherent to the recovery process, but are rather products of the socially constructed nature of the narratives. It is stressed that the "narratives did not necessarily arise

spontaneously in the addicts' own minds but may frequently have been developed in interaction with others, including in many instances, those working within the drug treatment industry" (McIntosh & McKeganey, 2000, p.1508).

Method

Respondents were eligible for the study if they considered themselves to have been in recovery for at least one year (Copeland, 1998). Due to difficulty in obtaining a sample, one respondent was included in the sample even though he considered himself to only have been in recovery for eight months at the time of the interview. The sample consisted of four participants (one male, three female). The participants were aged twenty-five, thirty-five, forty-five, and fifty-five years old. One participant was obtained by contacting a Johannesburg church and obtaining a referral, and the remaining three volunteer participants were recruited through print media advertisements in local Gauteng daily/weekly newspapers. The reimbursement of travel costs was declined by all but one participant.

The respondents were briefly screened telephonically at the time of the first telephone call to determine their perception of the severity of their alcohol or drug use, and the length of time they have been in recovery. Originally people responding to the advertisements were also screened to ascertain the absence of treatment via formal interventions or self-help group attendance for substance use problems, but this criterion was later dropped as already mentioned.

Individual interviews between the researcher and each participant took place at the University of Witwatersrand in a private room. One interview was held at the home of the researcher as requested by the respondent. Informed consent was obtained for the interview and the audiotaping of the interview. The confidentiality of participants was ensured. A one page demographic questionnaire was completed by each respondent at the start of the interview. The interviews ranged in duration from half an hour to two hours long at the discretion of the respondents. The interview schedule was semi-structured and open-ended. The respondents were provided with the interview schedule at the start of the interview to allow for transparency and to make the researcher's goals clear. Thereafter the respondents were only asked clarifying

questions or prompted if one of the interview questions as per the schedule was not answered in the course of the interview. The interview schedule included questions on life experience and family background, alcohol or drug use history, the participant's perception of their level of dependence, lifestyle, physical and psychological health, reasons for and factors influencing recovery, length and type of recovery, maintenance factors, barriers to treatment, and current alcohol and drug use patterns.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and then analysed by means of Riessmann's (1993) model of narrative analysis.

The construction of a non-addict identity

The narratives collected in this study provide support for the findings of McIntosh and McKeganey (2000) that the process of recovery from substance dependence involves the individuals constructing a non-addict identity for themselves. The three key areas identified by McIntosh and McKeganey (2000) in which the addicts' narratives of recovery could be seen to be constructing a non-addict identity for the individual were prominent themes in the narratives of the research participants. These three areas will now be looked at in turn with reference to the narratives of the participants.

1. Reinterpreting the addict lifestyle

In agreement with McIntosh and McKeganey (2000) it was found that an important part of the construction of a non-addict identity involves the individual reinterpreting a number of aspects of his or her drug or alcohol use in a negative light. A large portion of this process comprised of reinterpreting the effects of the substance from something that was exciting, stimulating, and wonderful, to something that had "little or nothing to commend it" (McIntosh & McKeganey, 2000).

One of the big things that helped me is realising what you really felt like as opposed to what you think you felt like. I like cocaine because it helps me to get really depressed. You know what I really like about this, I love worrying, and that's the one thing I do all

the time. It helps me to worry much much more. Originally the idea was to take some every night and go have a big party; and now, [I] look at a dot on the wall for a really long time. It's a completely different emotional experience. (John)

At the beginning, [when you start taking drugs] you get into such a wonderful state, you get so:: I don't even know how to explain it to you, you get into that zone and everything's beautiful, and then six months down the line there's none of that beauty, you're not feeling any of it. You're only using to make sure you don't get sick. (Janet)

From these extracts it is clear that the recovering addicts reinterpret the effects that drugs had on them. It is communicated that the pleasurable effects of drugs are restricted to the starting stage of their drug careers. At first drugs meant a 'big party' or a 'wonderful, beautiful state', then later it leaves one worried, depressed, staring at a dot on the wall, and only using 'not to feel sick'.

John however still makes references to the fun and good times of his addict lifestyle. It can be proposed that because John is at an earlier stage of recovery (eight months clean time inclusive of two relapses compared to the other participants' clean time ranging from fourteen months to up to seven years), he is still actively reconstructing a new sense of self and in many ways in straddling both identities of addict and non-addict. This is seen in how he still refers to his life as an addict in a positive light, portraying it as fun. For example John still sees it as a fun time when he had sold all of his furniture as result of his drug debts:

I'd sold all of my furniture, everything. It was a bit of a riot. For me it was like a big big joke, that was the big thing, it was an absolute hoot, and it was. (John).

Formatted

McIntosh and McKeganey (2000, p.1504) contend that the "reinterpretation of the effects of drug use from something positive to something negative was often couched in terms of the individual having to come to an awareness of the 'true' nature of the drug using lifestyle and its ability to distort reality". This is seen in John's words above, that cocaine really made him feel worried and depressed.

In addition to reinterpreting the experiences associated with the substance use, the recovery narratives of the participants also contained a reinterpretation of their relationships with other drug users.

Drug buddies are exactly that, drug buddies. You turn your back on drugs, and they run so fast you don't even see their dust. (Janet).

I always bought coke for everyone, no one ever bought for me. I had all these kind of hangers on. (John).

The addict lifestyle is also reinterpreted in terms of the toll it takes on the individual.

I've done a lot of destruction from all the years of drinking...I'm realising now that my physical, I've taken twenty years of a knock, so I'm trying to replace all that destruction, symptoms from all those years of abuse [of alcohol]. (Nicole).

Janet provides a description of the toll that drugs have taken on an old friend of hers. They began using together, but while Janet is now clean, her friend is worse off than ever. The horror of this description reminds Janet what she could have been like if she were still using:

The last time I saw her, she had lost all of her top teeth; had scurvy all across her stomach; and enormous boils coming out all over her breasts. She had festering sores all over her face (Janet).

Congruent with the findings of McIntosh and McKeganey (2000), it can be seen that by reinterpreting these aspects of the substance using lifestyle, that is the effects of the substances, their relationships with other users, and the rigours of maintaining their habit, the participants can be said to be distancing themselves from the world of substance dependence. McIntosh and McKeganey (2000) emphasise that creating this distance plays a pivotal role in the construction of a non-addict identity because it defines the addict lifestyle in a way that denies its appeal and

rejects its relevance to their sense of self. Thus the sense of self has to be reconstructed through the recovery narrative.

2. Reconstructing the sense of self

Nicole reconstructs her sense of self in terms of her Christianity. She sees herself as a child of God, and no longer blames herself for the ongoing abuse she endured as a child:

Realising I'm not the bad person, I didn't bring it on myself, it's a whole change of mindset. I don't have to self-destroy. I don't deserve it. I am loveable, I am worthy, God does love me...it was my whole journey with God, calling me out of myself, giving me a new identity, giving me a new self-worth (Nicole).

Nicole goes on to further differentiate who she used to be compared to who she is now:

My desire in life has changed. My wants in life have changed. I no longer want to be the party animal, I no longer want to escape reality, I want to embrace responsibility. I'm able to enjoy simple things. I'm able to just be, I was never able to just be. I could never be in my own body, in my own space. It was too haunting, too much for me. I needed to escape all the time. Now I'm able to be. (Nicole).

McIntosh and McKeganey (2000) remark that by making evaluative judgements about their past and confronting painful aspects of their lives as addicts, individuals are able to demonstrate that they are no longer the same people that they were when they were using drugs (or alcohol).

Rose talks about how she had to confront her painful past in the process of reconstructing her sense of self. She thus also shows how she is no longer the same person anymore:

It was very very hard. For all this time, it was a few years after I was completely sober, I actually had to face all those emotions I had put away. And I can't believe what a revelation it was. How stupid I felt that I couldn't see what my ex husband was doing, what my psychiatrist was doing to me....I now had to face all these terrible emotions that I had been

blocking out with alcohol, so, so painful. It was a great revelation. I changed completely, completely, completely! I can actually say no now. (Rose)

Janet declares herself a new person:

[I created] a whole new person, for sure. Childhood I vaguely remember because it was up unto eleven that there was very little normality there. And there was the whole drug binge of a person who, I don't recognise that person anymore. No, I think I'm a new person completely. Completely recreated myself. But still the same, if that makes sense. The essence is still the same.

Here Janet explains that she had to create a whole new identity for herself because she had no 'original core self' to return to because she started using drugs at such an early age (eleven) and thus never fully developed a proper sense of self. However, she still feels like the "essence" of her is still the same.

Janet is so secure in her new reconstruction of self that she is frustrated when others do not recognise her new self, but dwell on her old addict self. She narrates the following story to illustrate how her father doesn't recognise her new reconstructed sense of self:

And he (my father) comes upstairs and he's all (whispers) "you know, I just found out you guys better be very very careful because the guy downstairs is a police detective".
"Why would I have to be careful Dad?"
"No, I'm just telling you"
"Dad, I mean, come on. Four and a half years, going on for five years of my life now!"
You can go into our house, we don't even keep alcohol in our house. It's not like we even have booze in the house and my Dad's going (whispers again) "there's cops downstairs, gotta be careful, make sure everything's stashed away". He (the police detective) can come to my house tomorrow, the most he's gonna get out is Pampers (nappies for the baby).(Janet)

The recovering addicts reject their past identities as drug and alcohol using selves, differentiate between these two selves, but also talk about the future of their new reconstructed selves.

Rose reinforced her reconstructed sense of self by embarking on a future for herself where she would have the freedom to be her new confident, creative, assertive self.

I thought very hard and I thought if I could just give my experience to someone else and teach art. I don't know where I got the courage from maybe my Higher Power, but I took the bull by the horns and I went to a recreation centre and I started teaching. I had a series of disgusting jobs in-between and I thought well, I gotta do this. And look what I'm doing now. And I felt that this was my calling. I still feel it's my calling. I feel I am hopefully fulfilling my calling, which is the most wonderful feeling.

Janet is firmly focussed on the future of her new reconstructed sense of self, so much so it seems she sometimes lives in the future and not the present. For instance, she talks about her “babies” and her “children” in the plural even though her second child has yet to be born.

In the following extract John talks about plans to write a book about his experience with alcohol and drugs. However, he adds that maybe he will not be able to fulfil this plan because he still battles to think about some experiences fully. This reiterates the notion that because John is at an early stage of recovery, he is still actively reconstructing a new sense of self and in many ways is straddling both identities of addict and non-addict. John is still actively “wrestling with his mind” everyday to not return to taking cocaine. This is evident in much of his talk about new ways of thinking and cognitive strategies he uses to prevent himself from reverting back to his old ways. His narrative is also peppered with contradictions showing how he is still torn between his fading but still present addict identity and his forming non-addict identity.

You know I've got many plans, and books that are gonna be written and this and that. And I won't do any of them. Maybe I will, but for me I've got a big big problem thinking about it, and certain things that I battle to think about, and I don't really wanna think about.(John).

The construction or reconstruction of a sense of self is thus a crucial part of constructing a non-addict identity. However, even with a new reconstructed sense of self, recovering addicts claim to recovery

are continually open to challenge as seen in the above example of Janet's father still suspecting her of using illegal drugs when she has over four years of clean time. Thus recovering addicts feel compelled to provide convincing explanations for their recovery to give weight to their claim that they have changed (McIntosh & McKeganey, 2000).

3. Providing explanations for recovery

In providing convincing explanations of recovery to lend support to their claims of new reconstructed sense of self, all of the participants' recovery narratives included significant turning points (Koski-Jännes, 1998; McIntosh & McKeganey, 2000).

Rose explicitly defines her turning point, and even labels it as such. This may be because she is familiar with the language of AA. Rose had already attempted recovery twice before she experienced her turning point. Her past recovery attempts had been when she went to formal inpatient treatment at a clinic, and when she had gone to stay with her sister.

I still carried on drinking after I came home after staying with my sister. And one morning I woke up and I thought well, you've got no job, you've got no car, and this is not what I want from my life. I don't know it was a strange thing, they call it a higher power at Alcoholics Anonymous. I didn't know where to start, how to put the pieces together.[I thought] gotta phone Alcoholics Anonymous, which I did, which took tremendous courage. They came to see me that night. Great turning point was the guy who came to see me, said God does love alcoholics, that was such a shock to me. (Rose)

For the first time Janet decided to stop without being forced into it, and so this decisive moment marked the turning point for her.

My family pushed me into coming clean. My friends pushed me into coming clean. Other friends told me to give it up as a bad joke. And it never worked, until, the final decision was made by me and once I had made the decision that it was time, it was time. (Janet)

This decision may have ensured her initial recovery, but Janet says that meeting her husband, becoming a mother, and just generally growing up ensured the maintenance of her recovery. In the following extract Janet provides a convincing explanation for her recovery because she is now a mother.

Being a mom definitely changes things, definitely, definitely, definitely. Never in my wildest dreams, I could not imagine, cause I've never ever been stoned around my children. So I can't imagine trying to relate to my son whilst I'm not really there, you know. That freaks me out, I don't even drink because of it, which is fine.(Janet).

Limitations

The study was limited by time and financial constraints, as well as the small sample, which was not representative of the South African population, nor of the population of South Africa's recovering addicts and alcoholics. However, the aim of the study is not to make broad sweeping generalisations but rather to analyse the personal narratives of the participants. The recovery status of two participants was also unclear. The study may have been strengthened if participants had been in recovery for longer and without the aid of medication. However, at the outset it was stated that the study was not interested in objective methods of assessing whether the participants are abstaining from alcohol or drugs, such as urine testing and obtaining collateral information, but rather in the participants definitions of whether or not they consider themselves to be in recovery. By virtue of the fact that the participants responded to the advertisement, they considered themselves to in recovery.

Deleted: ¶
Formatted
Formatted

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore how the personal recovery narratives reflect the identity processes and identity constructions of the participants. A narrative analysis revealed that the narratives of recovery can be seen to comprise of all of the three areas defined by McIntosh and McKeganey (2000) that comprise the construction of a non-addict identity for the individual. These three key areas in which addicts' narratives can be said to be doing the work of constructing a non-addict for the individual are: firstly, in relation to their reinterpretation of the addict lifestyle; secondly, in relation to the reconstruction of a sense of self; and thirdly, in relation to the provision of

convincing explanations for their recovery. The recovering alcoholics did not evidence these areas in their narratives to as much of an extent as the recovering addicts.

A close look at how the narratives were told uncovered how the narrators use numerous linguistic and paralinguistic devices to construct and reconstruct a non-addict identity for themselves. The participants also used organizing metaphors to summarise their detailed narrative portraits, and constitute succinct versions of the addicted self. What was striking was that although the current study deals with the narratives of recovering addicts, the metaphors used by each of the participants relate to the addicted self rather than the recovering self. It can be postulated that this occurs because the narrative provided about when the respondents were active addicts is more painful and emotional than the narratives of recovery, and thus requires the use of metaphors as a means of expression.

The present study has provided support for the notion that identity reconstruction is an integral part of the process of recovery from substance dependence, and that moreover this is achieved through narrative via various devices.

Recommendations

It is recommended that future studies that wish to investigate the phenomenon of self-managed change take note of the difficulty in obtaining a sample and allow extra time and resources to recruit sample members. Rumpf, Bischof, Hapke, Meyer, & John (2000, p. 765), maintain that “media solicitation leads to a sample selection bias in research on natural recovery from alcohol dependence”. However, media solicitation remains a viable sampling strategy because the avenue of recruiting recovering addicts and alcoholics via treatment centres and self-help groups is not applicable when researching self-managed change. Snowball sampling may be recommended because individuals who evidence self-managed change may associate with others who have recovered by means of self-managed change before them. For example, in this study Janet, who recovered via self-managed change, spoke about two friends of hers who had recovered without treatment or self-help groups. The combination of media solicitation and snowball sampling may constitute a successful sampling strategy.

A recommendation for future research about the identity processes and constructions within the recovery process from substance dependence is to investigate more fully the differences between

the recovery narratives and hence identity processes of recovering alcoholics versus recovering drug addicts. Further, it is recommended that future research explore how identity processes and constructions differ according to how far into the recovery process the individual is. This could be looked at in terms of duration of sobriety /'clean time', how long they have been attempting recovery, or the degree of reduction of use of substances.

References

Baker, P.L. (2000). I didn't know: Discoveries and identity transformation of women addicts in treatment. Journal of Drug Issues, 30(4), 863-880.

Copeland, J. (1998). A qualitative study of self-managed change in substance dependence among women. Contemporary Drug Problems, 25(2), 321-345.

Denzin, N.K. (1987). The Recovering Alcoholic. Newbury Park: Sage.

Freedman, J. & Combs, G. (1996). Narrative therapy: The social construction of preferred realities. New York: W.W. Norton.

Green, D. & Kupferberg, I. (2000). Detailed and succinct self-portraits of addicts in broadcast stories. Discourse Studies, 2(3), 305-322.

Hsin-Chun Tsai, J. (2003). Contextualizing immigrants' lived experience: story of Taiwanese immigrants in the United States. Journal of Cultural Diversity, Fall 2003, 11p. Retrieved May 3, 2004 from http://findarticles.com/cf_dls/m0MJU/3_10/111734760/print.jhtml

Koski-Jännes, A. (1998). Turning points in addiction careers: five case studies. Journal of Substance Misuse, 3, 226-233.

McIntosh, J. & McKeganey, N. (2000). Addicts' narratives of recovery from drug use: constructing a non-addict identity. Social Science & Medicine, 50, 1501-1510.

Padgett, D.K. (1998). Qualitative Methods in Social Work Research: Challenges and Rewards. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Polkinghorne, D.E. (1996). Transformative Narratives: From Victimic to Agentic Life Plots. The American Journal of Occupational Therapy, 50(4), 299-305.

Riessman, C.K. (1993). Narrative Analysis. Qualitative Research Methods Series, No. 30. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Riessman, C.K. (2001). Analysis of personal narratives. To appear in J.F. Gubrium & J.A. Holstein (Eds), Handbook of Interviewing. Sage. Retrieved May 5, 2004 from www.uel.ac.uk/cnr/ries (website of University of East London's Centre for Narrative Research).

Rumpf, H-J, Bischof, G., Hapke, U., Meyer, C., & John, U. (2000). Studies on natural recovery from alcohol dependence: Sample selection bias by media solicitation. Addiction, *95*(5), 765-776.

Sobell, L.C., Ellingstad, T.P., & Sobell, M.B. (2000). Natural recovery from alcohol and drug problems: Methodological review of the research with suggestions for future directions. Addiction, *95*(5), 749-764.

Toolan, M.J. (1988). Narrative: a critical linguistic introduction. London: Routledge.

Woods, L., Priest, H., & Roberts, P. (2002). An overview of three different approaches to the interpretation of qualitative data. Part 2: practical illustrations. Nurse Researcher, *10*(1), 43-51.