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Exploring Spiritual Recovery Narratives of ‘Recovering Addicts’

Abstract

Narcotics Anonymous (NA) is a global, nonprofit, community-based organisation modeled on the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. Members of NA speak of themselves as being in ‘recovery’ from alcohol and other drug addiction. Recovery is achieved through working the twelve steps of NA, which lead to a spiritual awakening. The ensuing ‘spiritual recovery narrative’ is inextricably linked to achieving self-transformation from working through the twelve steps, and is linked to intrapsychic processes derived from the installation of hope for a better life. The testimonials of three experienced NA members were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to examine the production of spiritual recovery narrative accounts. The three themes explored are (1) reconstitution the drug using self; (2) transforming self through forgiveness and action; and (3) transforming self through spiritual embodiment. The analysis found that while participants self-transformation is part of a social construction based on the circulation of meta-narratives of NA, they also have individualized interpretations of spiritual recovery.

Key words: spirituality, recovery, addiction, interpretative phenomenological analysis, self-identity

CONFERENCE PAPER

BACKGROUND

The purpose of this paper is to explore how the spiritual recovery narrative is employed in accounts of self-transformation by three experienced members of Narcotics Anonymous (NA) Australia. NA is a global, nonprofit, community-based organisation in over sixty countries. One of the key understandings promoted in official NA literature is that members are ‘recovering’ from a disease of addiction:

It is our fellowship's collective experience and understanding that addiction is, in fact, a disease...Our experience with addiction is that when we accept that it is a disease over which we are powerless, such surrender provides a basis for recovery through the Twelve Steps.(NA World Services, 2011: para. 5)

As such, NA members identify as being addicts in the process of ‘recovery’ from drug addiction, the approach to recovery being “the therapeutic value of one addict helping another” (NA World Service Office Inc., 1988). Modeled from the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) program are the twelve steps, a set of guidelines outlining a practical approach to recovery. As a result of working these steps the 12th step promises a “spiritual awakening”. Indeed spirituality, as noted by Green et.al. (1998:326) is an important ingredient in working the 12 steps. Spirituality in NA is loosely defined as having honesty, open-mindedness and willingness to recover.

It is important to note that the NA concept of ‘recovery’ differs from biomedical understandings. Galanter (2007:265) notes that DSM criteria for substance use disorders positions recovery as a resolution of physical and mental symptoms of addiction, and the behaviourist model of stimulus-response locates recovery as observable, measureable responses to substance use. At

the other end of the continuum is the consumer-survivor movement which promotes recovery as breaking away from the disease, self-determination and self-actualisation (Frese, 1997:244).

While the NA program also promotes self-actualisation it is framed within a disease model. The assumption is the ‘recovering addict’ has a disease of addiction, and this ‘meta-narrative’ becomes a vehicle for creating meaning among NA members (Mullaney, 2006:184). The study explores the spiritual recovery narratives of three experienced NA members, and how the meta-narrative of spiritual recovery is employed by these members.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a small body of literature exploring spirituality and recovery in 12-step programs (e.g. Roth and Tran 2008; Spiegel 2005; Galanter 2007; Green et al 1998; Hart, 1999). Galanter says twelve step spiritual recovery emphasises the achievement of meaningful, positive experiences, as opposed to a biomedical focus on dysfunctional behaviours. Recovery then is a process of “moving toward a positive adaptation in life” (Galanter, 2007: 266). As part of moving toward this positive transformation an NA member employs practical tools such as prayer and meditation, forming conscious contact with a ‘Higher Power’. Literature has shown that having a belief in a higher power aids in drug addicted recovery (Roth and Tan, 2008:423). Galanter (2007:269) observes that the hallmarks of a ‘spiritual’ recovery are providing relief from disease, operating outside of conventional medicine, and subscribing to higher metaphysical powers. The linking of bodily awareness, emotional regulation and accepting a higher power are part of a narrative of spiritual embodiment (King, 2008).

Other sociological literature seeks to explain the formation of a recovering addict or former addict identity through processes of social interaction (e.g. Galanter, 2007; McIntosh and

McKeganey, 2000; Rafalovich, 1999). Based on interviews with recovering drug addicts, Rafalovich (1999:134) and McIntosh and McKeganey (2000:1505) have proposed a conceptual model depicting three segments of the recovering addict story: life before drugs, life during drug use, and life after recovery. McIntosh and McKeganey explored particularly how the fashioning of a 'non-addict' identity involved a narrative reinterpretation of the drug using life segment in a negative light (2000:1504). This narrative strategy serves to distance the addict from the world of illegal drugs, and is important to constructing a non-addict identity. McIntosh and McKeganey also note that an important part of narratives of recovery involved presenting the future as a means to reclaim control in life (2000:1506). McIntosh and McKeganey however studied only addicts in early stages of non NA recovery, including on methadone reduction programs. These addicts were looking to foster a 'non-addict' identity, whereas my study participants identify with having a lifelong disease of addiction.

This paper takes the view that narrative is certainly a key part of identity formation. According to Giddens (1991:52), self-identity formation is a function of reflexive awareness of the individual, something routinely created in the reflexive work of the individual. The act of storytelling not only helps constitute our own sense of self, but also influences the wider group narrative. In other words, our autobiographical 'self' constituted in dialogue (Reissman, 2008:29). This paper looks at how three experienced NA members undergo this reflexive awareness of self, and in telling their story through a spiritual recovery narrative come to see themselves as in a process of self-transformation.

METHODOLOGY

The experiences of three recovering addicts are explored in this paper using the methodological framework of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA is a qualitative approach,

increasingly used in studies of the subjective experience of illness, and is concerned with trying to understand how people make sense of their experience (Smith, J.A. 2009). IPA has a strong intellectual connection with narrative, which is an interpretative meaning making endeavour (Smith, J.A. et al 2009:196). This makes IPA particularly useful for exploring individual experiences of spiritual recovery. Small samples sizes are recommended for IPA analysis (Smith, J. et al 2009:49). While most IPA is conducted using in-depth interviews, other “rich, first person accounts” such as testimonials have also been used (Smith, J.A. 2009:56). When doing IPA analysis, a set of emergent themes are identified from the participant accounts, these being phrases from the data and more abstract concepts. The final process involves abstracting by linking connection in the emergent themes, and defining a superordinate theme.

The study is based on testimonials presented to a NA Australia regional conference from three experienced NA members with an average of 21 years abstinent from alcohol and other drugs. The three ‘participants’ are long standing, experienced members of NA, who were asked to share about their experience of working the twelve steps. The testimonials were transcribed verbatim, each one approximately 25 minutes in length. Consent to use the online testimonials was sought through the NA regional committee and participants each provided informed consent.

Pseudonyms have been used to ensure anonymity. By way of background, Marco (aged 46 years) is from a working class, non-English speaking background and is a small business proprietor; Belinda (aged 51 years) is from a middle class background and works fulltime; and Tom runs a small business and is from a middle class background.

It needs to be stated at the outset that this paper does not use a narrative analysis methodology. Rather, it is accepted that the testimonials form a narrative life story of addiction. Three superordinate themes which emerged from the IPA analysis are reported in this paper.

FINDINGS

Three themes to emerge from the participants spiritual recovery narrative are (1) transforming the self through reconstituting the drug using self; (2) transforming the self through forgiveness and making direct amends to other people; and (3) using prayer and meditation to form a conscious contact with a 'Higher Power' thereby transforming the self through spiritual embodiment.

Theme 1: From past to present: Reconstituting the self

The three participants all identified as 'recovering addicts' who had been transformed through working the spiritual twelve step program of NA. All three spoke negatively about their former drug using life, using words such as "tragedy" and "imprisonment" to construct a symbolic meaning of drug use as simultaneously tragic and confining. Another narrative thread positioned the drug using self as highly self-absorbed and egotistical. In the following account, Belinda indicates the extent of self interest she demonstrated as a drug user:

Blundering through life...trying to pretend I'd come from New York. I mean I was making a total fool of myself... it was all me, me, me. (Belinda)

All participants identified critical points in their drug using 'story' when they really wanted to change. For Marco this was a "desperation...to relieve the insanity" with insanity conceptualised as an abnormal level of self obsession.

Two participants, Marco and Tom identified role models of older, drug free members as offering hope for a better life. Marco's testimonial spoke of an underlying anxiety of knowing he was supposed to be somewhere else in life.

In short NA offered the hope for a better life they were seeking. For Tom for example, NA was a “doorway in the darkness”. Marco talks about instigating internal change through breaking with the past, while Tom talks about changing his identity from a “derelict, delinquent” to a person full of “hope and confidence”.

All of them experienced the need to redefine the self through recovery, to challenge their concept of themselves as a drug user. Belinda was once a “cool” user, or saw herself that way, but needed to expose the reality of being “a country bumpkin”. Belinda in particular paid considerable attention to self inquiry and discovery, and self-reflexivity as shown in this quote:

Because what I actually believe the steps are about... but what I actually believe the steps are about are ‘who I am’ and ‘what do I wanna do with my life?’. (Belinda)

For Belinda recovery is also a ‘journey’ leading to transformation of self. There is excitement in the ‘journey’ as she comes to know herself, and wonders what else will be revealed. All three accounts offer a clear transformational narrative.

Theme 2: Making direct amends and forgiving: Transforming self through action

What emerged from the three accounts was the importance of making amends to people harmed in active addiction, and learning forgiveness. There are three types of forgiveness: (1) Seeking forgiveness from another person for wrongdoings by the addict, (2) Seeking self-forgiveness, and (3) forgiving someone that has harmed you such as an abusive parent.

All three participants gave lengthy accounts of making direct amends to parents and others they had harmed. Making direct amends has become second nature to participants, Marco for example promptly making amends within 24 hours if he is wrong. Clearly, forgiveness is a process that requires action and humility.

Belinda gave a cautionary tale about making amends too early in recovery, and before she had properly come to 'know' herself. All participants stressed that the steps need to be worked chronologically, so the act of making amends comes from a place of self-forgiveness and relating to a 'Higher Power'. For Belinda self-forgiveness involved accepting the deep shame she felt about the futility of her life.

Participants also spoke of the need to forgive people that had harmed them, specifically family members. Tom spoke of growing up in an alcoholic family with "monsters" for parents. He notes: "there's been times in my recovery where I felt I shouldn't have to pay my parents back because I blame them for so much". Eventually he learnt to let go of the anger and forgive them, and at the same time to seek their forgiveness for his behaviour. Here the symbolic act of making amends enables self-transformation.

Theme 3: Prayer and meditation: Transforming self through spiritual embodiment

An important part of the spiritual recovery narrative is the transformation of self through forming a relationship with a 'higher power' or 'God'. This power is seen as positive, for example Marco notes:

It's something that works for me. It's something beyond myself. It's a positive power.

(Marco)

Participants learn to engage in spiritual rituals like prayer and meditation and spoke about the importance of these rituals for developing a relationship with a higher power as well as facilitating personal growth. Step 11 is about prayer and meditation to find conscious contact with God. Marco expressed some resistance to this, but found early that by saying the serenity

prayer over and over, it produced “incredible relief”. For example, Tom finds that prayer allows him to be authentic:

The deepest, darkest, dirtiest moments of my life have been shared with me and God, there together. (Tom)

In all three accounts, accepting a higher power will leads to a developing faith that all will be well. In the following account, Marco compares his former life of self-will with a life based on faith:

You know, there’s something very freeing about just praying for knowledge of my HP’s will for me and having the courage to carry that out, because my life before was all about doing what I want to do, when I want to do it, and really getting nowhere. There’s something humbling about that, like ‘I don’t have to be in charge’ and ‘I will get anything I need’. I will be looked after, I will have enough. (Marco)

What Marco expresses here are a strong sense of safety and security, of being looked after. Faith alleviates fear of the unknown. Belinda has also come to know that ‘God’ will allow her to live her dreams, so long as she is disciplined in her recovery. It was clear that all three participants are assiduous in their enactment of recovery based rituals such as daily prayer and meditation, and these actions become part of the arsenal for self-transformation.

DISCUSSION

Using the conceptual model of the segmented recovery story proposed by Rafalovich (1999) and McIntosh and McKeganey (2000) the accounts showed that the three participants used a recovery narrative to reconceptualise their drug using self as someone from whom they were now unrelated. Although referenced occasionally in stories about their parents, participants did

not speak at length about their life before drug use. They spoke in far more detail about the drug using segment of their life, seeing their former self as a deluded and vacuous. By contrast, the recovering self is constituted as complex, multifaceted beings, not the one dimensional 'junkie' they formerly identified with. These new selves are positioned positively as confident, self nurturing and a person of substance.

The analysis showed that each participant offers different narrative strategies to explain their self-transformation in recovery. Marco's self-transformation results from forming a relationship with a higher power which he calls 'God', and from seeking God's will. For Tom self-transformation occurs from coming to terms with his past and understanding his emotions.

Belinda's self-transformation emerges from an existential inquiry into self, of which the transformation outcome is coming to know herself intimately. An existential search for meaning has also been noted in a study of AA twelve step recovery (Hart, 1999). There is also in the narratives a pointing to spiritual recovery as part of a 'journey'. Belinda's account articulates her recovery as a 'journey' on several occasions. Interestingly, the 'journey' is not related to the drug using segment of life story, only in recovery does the journey begin. The journey is a social construction, which is communicated optimistically.

In line with Giddens concept of self-identity formation (1991:52), these experienced NA members have developed a new self identity through their reflexive awareness of self, and reconstitution of self through narrative reinvention. Furthermore, participants explain their life experiences through a spiritual recovery narrative. This narrative is used in place of a genetic or environmental explanatory framework, for example Marco attributes relief from the compulsion to use drugs to ritualized prayer rather than physiological processes. This understanding draws from a metaphysical paradigm, not a scientific paradigm.

The participant accounts draw heavily on culturally framed NA assumptions in such as being an ‘addict’ with a disease. The varying explanations of their addiction reinforce the NA organisational discourse that they powerless over their addiction, but responsible for their recovery. A common pattern of embedded assumptions have also been found in the accounts of A.A. members (C. Cain, 1991 cited in Reissman, 2008:68). It could be argued that these accounts reflect the ‘good story’, the better or idealized version of the self as a model of recovery.

Here, we can think of Goffman’s concept of impression management, with the individual needing to convey a version of their personal story in a positive light in order to maintain their status as an experienced member of the NA organization. The group identity is maintained through such regulated storytelling practices, and is one of the mechanism allowing members to learn to be a recovering addict. The spiritual recovery narrative as told by experienced members is part of constructing this identity for other NA members. Here Rafalovich (1999:132) notes that mutual disclosures of members foster a sense of group belonging, and individual presentation of a group narrative is being seen as generating identity transformation. Lastly, faith in a higher power and in the NA group produces a socially constructed version of self-transformation.

CONCLUSION

The study has found a meta-narrative of spiritual recovery in the NA organization, and life stories show how they have reconstituted themselves as separate to the drug using self, and now on a transformational recovery ‘journey’. All three participants have a strong belief in recovery, identify as unreservedly as an addict and have appropriated NA discourse. An implication of this

is that such accounts form part of, as much as they reflect, a circulating meta-narrative of spiritual recovery. While it has not been the scope of this paper to examine this global discourse, it is interesting to speculate the influence on the self-transformation of NA members worldwide. While a limitation of this study has been the possibility of hearing a 'good' version of NA recovery, the analysis has found individualized versions of the spiritual recovery story, with some experiencing spiritual recovery internally and others as spiritual embodiment. There is a possibility of different approaches to recovery from members of NA which will be explored in a wider study.

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