

Themes of Agency and Communion in Narratives of Recovery from Substance Use Disorder

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BACKGROUND

About 10% of the U.S. population is in recovery and narrative analysis of stories from people who identify as being in recovery is less often investigated. Themes of agency and communion are essential dimensions in personal narratives.

The current study analyzed 60 recovery narratives for themes of agency and communion, based on McAdams's (1996) framework and McCabe & Dinh's (2016) themes of ineffectiveness and alienation.

METHODS

1. Collected 60 pre-written recovery narratives from "Faces and Voices of Recovery" website.
2. Prompt asked participants to submit a story to "offer hope" and "demonstrate that recovery works".
3. Coded using McAdams's (1996) agency and communion and McCabe & Dinh's (2016) ineffectiveness and alienation frameworks.
4. 15% of narratives coded by two coders to estimate interrater reliability. There was sufficient agreement between both coders using Pearson's correlation.
5. Two-tailed correlations were performed between all themes and subthemes.

RESULTS

- Agency and communion had the strongest correlation, consistent with previous studies.
- Agency was the most common theme, particularly the subthemes self-mastery and achievement/responsibility.
- Caring/help was the most common communion theme.
- Negative self-mastery was the most common ineffectiveness theme.
- Negative love/friendship was the most common alienation theme.

Entering recovery may require individual motivation and reliance on social supports. People who sustain recovery often have insight into the suspected causes of their substance use and how substance use has negatively impacted their life.

Main Theme Correlations

Themes	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
1. Agency	-			
2. Communion	.71**	-		
3. Ineffectiveness	.68**	.55**	-	
4. Alienation	.32*	.22	.57**	-

*p<.05, two tailed. **p<.01, two-tailed

Prominence of Each Theme and Subtheme

Themes and Subthemes	Sum	M	SD	Range
Agency	390	6.5	5.23	1-36
Achievement/Responsibility	114	1.90	1.63	0-8
Status/Victory	65	1.08	1.08	0-5
Self-Mastery	131	2.18	2.49	0-14
Power/Impact	80	1.33	1.37	0-9
Communion	170	2.83	2.98	0-13
Love/Friendship	52	0.87	1.32	0-7
Dialogue	8	0.13	0.47	0-3
Caring/Help	80	1.33	1.50	0-6
Unity/Togetherness	30	0.50	0.85	0-3
Ineffectiveness	197	3.28	4.61	0-27
Negative	40	0.67	0.93	0-3
Achievement/Responsibility	29	0.48	0.79	0-3
Negative Status/Victory	79	1.32	2.35	0-13
Negative Self-Mastery	49	0.82	1.48	0-8
Alienation	59	0.98	1.50	0-7
Negative Love/Friendship	36	.60	1.05	0-5
Negative Dialogue	4	0.07	0.31	0-2
Negative Caring/Help	16	0.27	0.63	0-3
Negative Unity/Togetherness	3	0.05	0.29	0-2

DISCUSSION

The current study found that for individuals to start shifting from active substance use to recovery, they needed to acknowledge how substance use has negatively impacted their lives but take positive next steps to enter recovery.

Due to being in recovery, narrators described being more present in life and grateful for their lives. The insights typically involved feeling appreciative of living a sober life, even though it is not always easy.

AGENCY & COMMUNION

Positive Self-Mastery

"...my life is forever changed for the better because of my disease and the lessons I have learned in recovery. I am truly grateful to be in long term recovery and continue to be amazed at all the blessings."

Achievement/Responsibility

"After five years of sobriety my efforts to improve my life led me back to college. In six years, I was able to earn a Bachelor's in Sociology and a Masters in Counseling..."

Caring/Help

"And today I counsel individuals who are trapped in cycles of destruction. I belong to Al-Anon and CODA, and act as a volunteer for several arts organizations and non-profits that advocate for change."

INEFFECTIVENESS & ALIENATION

Negative Self-Mastery

"My use of opioids...quickly engulfed my life... I attempted recovery in 2001 and achieved several years clean... but as a health care provider... I had not dealt with the deep shame and guilt of my use, which festered like an abscess below the surface."

Negative Love/Friendship

"I've lost more than enough to that life. Friends, and more family than I can count..."