Abstract

Background: Narrative research shows that identity change is key to recovery from substance misuse. Theories have focused on either personal or social factors in this process. A framework encompassing *agency* and *communion* has been useful in understanding narratives in similar populations.

Objectives: The study proposes that substance misuse and recovery can be understood using an agency-communion framework.

Method: The Life As A Film Task (*LAAF*) and repertory grids were used to explore *agency* and *communion* in a sample of 32 participants.

Results: Smallest Space Analysis of *LAAF* items revealed regions according to *agency* and *communion*, reflecting four dominant narratives. Case examples indicated that *agency* and *communion* themes predicted a recovery identity, and an absence of themes predicted substance misuse. Analysis of repertory grids showed a fixed low agency-communion construct system in substance misuse cases, and a transformed high agency-communion construct system in recovery cases. Transformation from a low agency and communion substance-using identity towards a high agency and communion recovery identity was highlighted.

Conclusions: The results support an agency-communion model for understanding identity-transformative recovery.

Introduction

Narrative Theory and substance misuse

Narrative Theory provides a unique methodology for capturing individual processes. People develop a sense of identity from their personal stories (McAdams, 1988, 1993, 2006; Crossley, 2000; Presser, 2009). Pioneering research by Maruna (2001) showed the contrast between narratives of desistance and recidivism in offender populations. Abandoning crime came with changes in identity and a 'redemption script'. Past behaviour was disassociated from a non-offending identity characterised by control and hope. Active criminals showed a

contrasting 'contamination script' (Mauna, 2001; Burnett & Maruna, 2004; Maruna & Mann, 2006; Maruna & Thomas, 2008; Liem & Richardson, 2014).

A clear comparison between offender and substance misuse populations is identity change in either form of desistance (Best et al., 2016a). Exploring identity, McIntosh & McKeganey (2002) discovered that ex-drug users were dissociated from their past drug-using selves. Other research shows 'redemptive' storylines with themes of *personal growth* and *mastery* (Hanninen & Koski-Jannes, 1999; Blomqvist, 2002; Koski-Jannes, 2002), whereas active drug users reveal themes of *escape* and s*truggle* (Weegman, 2010), illustrating personal agency in rehabilitation.

Recent research highlights interpersonal processes (Demaeyer et al., 2009, 2011; Best et al., 2016b). Best et al. (2016b, 2017) argue that recovery occurs primarily through changes in social networks, proposing a Social Identity Model Of Recovery *(SIMOR)* (Best et al. 2016b).

Personal Construct Theory and substance misuse

Personal constructs research supports the narrative findings (Klion, 1993; Klion & Pfenninger, 1997; Burrell, 1999; Mallicki & Watts, 2007, Young, 2011). Examining recovery in alcoholics, Young (2011) showed how the success of Alcoholics Anonymous hinged on resolving identity dialectics, contending that interventions should focus on identity transformation. Similarly, Burrell & Jaffe (1999) argue that a failure of other approaches is an assumption of a fixed identity in the substance-using individual.

In a pivotal study, Ho-Yee (2002) investigated changes in drug users completing a rehabilitation programme. Interviewing 86 heroin addicts, Ho-Yee examined construct

categories across identity elements, finding a pronounced separation of the *Drug Self* from the *Actual Self* following the programme, and the *Actual Self's* convergence with the *Ideal Self.* The new image was a self-reliant person who wanted to connect with others, in contrast to being isolated and lacking confidence prior to the programme.

Agency and Communion

The above findings can be understood as components of *agency (control, empowerment)* and *communion (connectedness, engagement)* (McAdams, 1993, 1996). According to McAdams (1988, 1997, 2006), people strive for a balance between these themes in the development of identity.

Investigative Psychology has used this framework to understand offender behaviour, distinguishing dominant narratives according to *agency* and *communion* (Canter & Youngs, 2011; Youngs & Canter, 2012):

1. *High agency-communion:* the individual sees themselves as powerful and others as significant.

2. *Low agency-communion:* the individual sees themselves as impotent and has little concern for others.

3. *High agency-low communion:* the individual sees themselves as powerful, but other people are insignificant.

4. *Low agency-high communion:* the individual sees themselves as impotent, but others are significant to them.

The researchers used the Life As A Film Task *(LAAF)* to engage an often difficult to interview population, producing data rich material (Canter & Youngs, 2015; Youngs, Canter

& Carthy, 2016). Distinguishing offender narratives helps clarify motive, proving useful in police investigations (Youngs & Canter, 2012).

Considering the substance misuse literature, this framework offers a theoretical basis for research.

Study 1. Examining life narrative in people with substance misuse history

The study aims to establish the *LAAF* as a tool for capturing content relevant to substance misuse narratives. Then to distinguish dominant narratives arising from themes of *agency* and *communion* and examine how they reflect substance misuse and recovery. It develops previous research in proposing a framework inclusive of both personal and interpersonal processes.

Materials and Methods

Participants

Opportunity sampling gathered 32 participants, either active in substance misuse or with substance misuse history, comprising 23 males and 9 females. The largest ethnic group was Caucasians (n=31) and one Asian participant, with an age range of 29-60 and a mean age of 39.85. Twelve of the 32 participants reported abstinence, 9 of whom over 12 months abstinent. Nineteen of the participants reported current substance use. Eight of which reported non-problematic use. Four participants had a history of heroin misuse, 2 of cocaine misuse, 2 of amphetamine misuse, 1 of benzodiazepines misuse, and 2 of cannabis misuse. The remaining 21 participants had a history of polydrug use: crack cocaine and heroin misuse (n=9), heroin, alcohol, crack cocaine, and benzodiazepines (n=3), alcohol and heroin (n=2), alcohol and cocaine (n=2), heroin and amphetamine (n=2), benzodiazepines, heroin and amphetamine (n=2), and heroin, crack cocaine and gabapentinoids (n=1).

Materials

The *Life As Film Task (LAAF)* (Appendix 1) was used to collect narrative material (Canter & Youngs, 2015).

LAAF material was coded using the *LAAF Coding Framework* (Appendix 2) (Canter & Youngs, 2015).

Procedure

Prior to agreeing to take part, participants were given an information sheet detailing the nature of research (see Appendix 3) and signed a confidentiality document (see Appendix 4) once participation was agreed.

Interviews took place over video call and were recorded. Video call was preferred, since it offered convenience and the comfort of a familiar location.

Personal information and information relating to substance misuse history was collected (Appendix 5) and then the *LAAF* was completed.

A debrief was provided, giving opportunity for participants to ask questions. Signposting to local support services was given.

Recordings were transcribed and then deleted. The transcribed material was anonymised, with each participant being assigned a personal number, and kept in a secure, locked location.

Results

Transcripts were binary coded for items (1=presence, 0=absence). Forty-eight of the 123 items in the *LAAF Coding Framework* were chosen as representative. Items assessing content

specific to previous study populations (Canter & Young, 2015), or overlapping, were removed. Transcripts were coded by two independent raters. Cohen's kappa was used to assess agreement. A kappa coefficient of 0.72 was calculated, where a kappa calculation of 0.40 to 0.80 represents a moderate to good level of agreement (Altman, 1991).

The *Coding Framework* was chosen since it has been validated in similar populations (Canter & Youngs, 2015; Youngs, Canter, Carthy, 2016).

Smallest Space Analysis

The study introduces Smallest Space Analysis (*SSA*) to the field. It is a well-established multivariate procedure (Guttman & Lingoes, 1979) that has been used to identify structure in phenomena such as intelligence (Guttman & Levy, 1991), self-esteem (Dancer, 1985), and offence behaviour (Canter & Youngs, 2009, 2011, 2012). In Investigative Psychology, *SSA* and Facet Theory (Guttman, 1954; Canter, 1985) have been used to provide powerful radex models (Canter & Fritzon, 1998; Canter & Youngs, 2009, 2011, 2012). The findings are proposed in terms of Action Systems (Shye, 1985), where distinguishable dominant narratives predict behaviour (Canter & Youngs, 2009).

SSA enables meaningful measurement of complex systems with large numbers of variables (Shye, 1998). The *SSA* program allows relationships to be detected by computing association coefficients between all variables, which forms a spatial representation of points. The closer any two points are to each other on the output diagram the higher their associations, and the farther away any two points the lower their association (Guttman, 1954; Guttman & Lingoes, 1979). In this way regions of co-occurring variables are revealed, or distinguishable themes, highlighting different narrative structures. This allows the underlying system of behaviour to be revealed (Canter & Youngs, 2011, 2012).

The coefficient of alienation (*COA*) refers to the fit between the configuration and the co-occurrences of variables represented in the data matrix. A smaller *COA* indicates a better fit between the plot and the original matrix; however, the *COA* can be affected by the number of variables in a dataset, and other factors. It might be concluded that the strength of analysis lies with the explanatory power of the interpretation framework (Borg & Lingoes, 1987).

SSA of LAAF data

Figure 1 shows the distribution of 48 variables across the sample. The *SSA* diagram has a Guttman-Lingoes *COA* of 0.174, which, considering the large dataset, is a good fit between the Jaccard's coefficient of the variables and their corresponding distances in the configuration.

Insert Figure 1

Firstly, it can be said that the frequency and relevance of items to personal narratives attests to the validity of the *LAAF*.

Examining the modular facet, there are high frequency items making up the centre position, such as an incentive towards *sensory gain* (n=23). This occurs across a sizable chunk of the sample and is not greatly distinguishing, though it illustrates the unsurprising trend of individuals' prioritising substance intoxication at the expense of relationships with others. Another example, more illustrative of a recovery narrative, is *survivor.* The *survivor* represents an embattled but victorious self in a narrative of redemption. Towards the edges of the plot content more distinctive of narrative form is found.

The polar facet shows four thematic regions reflecting representations of *agency* and *communion* and four dominant narratives:

Low Agency-Communion (Avoidant Narrative)

This narrative is exemplified by a *contamination* script (n=18), *avoidant* coping style (n=9), *compulsion* (n=12), characterisation of the self as an *escapist* (n=12), a *sad* message (n=8) and tragic storyline (n=7).

Case 2 provides an example:

I just fall further into the trap… It would be a film about someone who started off having a laugh with his mates and trying things out, but then falling into a predicament and getting confused… You know, I had a lot of big ideas growing up and then suddenly they were all gone and I was on my own, drinking.

Low Communion-High Agency (Power Narrative).

The dominant *agency* narrative is characterised by *bravery* (n=11), self as *warrior* (n=10) and a *power gain* incentive (n=11). There is no illustration of *communion* in this region.

Case 16 illustrates many of the themes key to the *Power* narrative, such as *empowerment* and a *warrior* persona:

It'd be like Reservoir Dogs because of the way it turned out… I've got a bad reputation for violence. A lot of people are shit scared cos of it, and I've used it to my advantage

A *confrontational* behavioural style is used, where control is gained by force to fulfil a *power gain* incentive:

It would be about having to be tough and make necessary decisions to sort things out to get on in life.

This individual described having control over his drug use in a narrative of low *communion* and high self-sufficiency.

High Communion-Low Agency (Affiliation Narrative).

This narrative is represented by the elements *caregiver* (n=11), *lover* (n=8), and *social gain* (n=9), with no content pertaining to the *agency* theme.

Case 11 describes a narrative of personal powerlessness where salvation is found through *communion*:

… the film would be a journey of despair to accepting powerlessness… After that, finding hope with other addicts like me. Learning to trust, love… The film would end with me being lifted above the crowd staring into sunlight

This participant completed an opiate detox before a relationship breakdown precipitated relapse. Others in this category show a similar pattern of stunted progress with limitations of personal agency.

High Agency-Communion (Dominance Narrative).

This narrative is represented by a *redemption* script (n=16), *positive tone* (n=15), *self-mastery* (n=16), self-characterisation as *healer* (n=9) and *maker* (n=10), and *relationship success* (n=10).

An ex-benzodiazepine user captures personal agency in the process of identity-transformation:

Case 31: It would be a rags to riches kind of film.... A scared lonely girl from a poor family would battle through the horrors life threw at her to become an incredible grown woman.

A strong *communion* theme also develops in the transformation from an *escapist* through to a *redemption* identity, showing *self-mastery and unity*:

Then meeting a terribly controlling man who beat her when he couldn't get a fix…giving her pills to 'help take the pain away'.... ended up in hospital with a body full of bruises and broken ribs dependant on temazepam. This is where she met a policeman who would change her life forever. Then at 21 joining the Army. Gaining true friends and acceptance. Gaining more life experience and pride than most people could ever wish for. Serving in Afghanistan and Iraq, but mainly having the ability to engage and talk to anyone.

Considering the aims, the *LAAF* provides a useful tool, such that four regions can be distinguished, reflecting dominant narratives according to *agency* and *communion* themes. The case examples show how dominant narratives are reflected in individual stories. A process of transformation towards greater *agency* and *communion* in successful cases can be shown.

Study 2. Examining the personal construct systems of people with substance misuse history

Aims

Study 1 distinguished four dominant narratives. A previous report showed that the narrative categories (*Avoidance*, *Affiliation*, *Power*, and *Dominance)* reflected four groups, each being

associated with different outcomes: *Dominance* narratives predicted a strong recovery; *Avoidance* narratives predicted ongoing substance use; *Affiliation* and *Power* narratives predicted a moderate recovery profile (Rowlands, Youngs & Canter, under review). The aim of the present study is to build on the theoretical framework, showing that characteristic changes predict a recovery identity, and to address the limitations of the current models (Best et al, 2016b), demonstrating the intrinsic involvement of *agency* and *communion* processes in substance misuse and recovery. Further to Ho-Yee's (2002) work, the processes distinguishing personal construct systems and recovery profiles in substance misuse and recovery populations will be examined.

Methods and Materials

A repertory grid comprising 10 bipolar construct dimensions was used to examine agency and communion across past, present and ideal identity elements to capture identity changes (Appendix 6). The grid was designed to assess different aspects of agency and communion.

The construct dimensions: *Escapes from problems* vs *Confronts problems*, *Cannot trust myself* vs *Can trust myself*, *Have confused feelings* vs *Have control of feelings*, *Powerless over outcomes* vs *Can determine desirable outcomes*, and *Life in chaos* vs *In control* were chosen to represent agency, and the construct dimensions: *Alone* vs *Connected to others*, *Don't trust people* vs *Trusts people*, and *Cannot express my true self* vs *Can be myself with others*, were chosen to represent communion. The constructs: *A victim* vs *A survivor*, and *Things get worse* vs *Things change for the better* were included since they reflected narrative-discriminating items in the *LAAF* study.

A *Likert*-type scale was used to rate each construct from 1-7 (where high scores reflect the emergent pole) across five identity elements: *Before Drugs Self, Drug-Using Self, Current Self, Real Self,* and *Ideal Self*.

The sample comprised the same 32 participants. The substance-using status of the participants was unchanged.

Repertory grids were emailed to participants to complete in real time via video call interviews. This allowed the procedure to be standardised and any uncertainties about content to be resolved, and errors to be unlikely.

Following the procedure, a debrief was given, where participants were given opportunity to highlight any issues and information sign-posting local services was given.

Participants had been assigned to one of four groups according to dominant themes of *agency* and *communion*: *Avoidance Group* (n=7), *Affiliation Group* (n=4), *Power Group* (n=10), and *Dominance Group* (n=11) (See Rowlands, Youngs & Canter, under review).

Results

IDIOGRID was used to collate grid data and create average grids for each of the four groups. Single Value Decomposition *(SVD)* was used to preserve scale ratings, so that data and graphs were centred around the scale middle (Grice, 2004). The *SVD* plot represents scores on the constructs for each of the separate identity elements as a position in geometric space. In this way, differences in the personal construct systems can be examined across distinct identities (Grice, 2004).

Avoidance Group (Low Agency-Communion)

Figure 2 shows the *Avoidance Group*. As can be seen from the graph, the *Current Self* remains close to the *Drug-Using* and *Before Drugs Self*, with a low agency and communion personal construct system and a fixed identity. Participants in this group all remain active in substance misuse. Interestingly, the *Ideal Self* shows a high agency and communion construct system. This vision is the challenge for interventions.

Insert Figure 2

Affiliation Group (Low Agency-High Communion)

Figure 3 shows the *Affiliation Group*. The graph illustrates a *Current Self* and *Real Self* higher on communion constructs, such as *Connected to others* and *Can be myself with others*, and lower on agency constructs. In contrast to the *Avoidance Group*, there is a perceived identity change, illustrated by a *Real* and *Current Self* dissociated from the *Drugs-Using Self* and towards the *Ideal Self*.

Insert Figure 3

Power Group (High Agency-Low Communion)

Figure 4 shows the *Power Group*. It can be observed that the *Current* and *Real Self* show high agency constructs (*Can trust myself*, *Can determine desirable outcomes)*, highlighting an identity shift away from the *Drug-Using Self* and towards the *Ideal Self;* however, communion constructs (*Trusts people, Connected to others*) are scored lower.

Insert Figure 4

Dominance Group (High Agency-High Communion)

Figure 5 shows the *Dominance Group*. As can be observed, the *Current* and *Real Self* are positioned away from the *Drug-Using* and *Before Drugs Self* and towards the *Ideal Self* with high agency and communion personal construct systems, showing a transformed identity. All participants in the *Dominance Group* showed strong recovery outcomes (Rowlands, Youngs & Canter, under review).

Insert Figure 5

The findings further support an agency-communion model, demonstrating the process of identity transformation in recovery. The intrinsic involvement of both agency and communion processes is shown. A recognition of different personal construct systems in substance misuse populations is important in guiding interventions.

Discussion

Study 1 demonstrated that the *LAAF* captured themes relevant to substance misuse narratives. From *SSA*, regions emerged on the plot distinguishing four dominant narratives according to *agency* and *communion: Avoidance, Affiliation, Power,* and *Dominance,* reflecting research with offender populations (Canter & Youngs, 2009, 2011, 2015). Case examples were used to illustrate how a transforming identity can manifest in the *LAAF*. This process was most clear in *Dominance* narratives, depicting the development of both *agency* and *communion* themes in redemption storylines. In contrast, *Avoidance* narratives illustrated neither theme and a contamination plot. The results mirror those of Maruna (2001) with ex-offenders. The findings are strengthened by those of a previous study showing that the narratives represent four groups (Rowlands, Youngs & Canter, under review).

Study 2 builds on this, showing personal construct systems high in agency and communion predict a transformed identity, disassociated from a low agency and communion *Drug-Using Self*. In contrast, low agency and communion construct systems reflected proximity of the *Current* to the *Drug-Using Self*, and a fixed identity. Personal construct systems showing either a high agency *or* high communion identity illustrated some progression from the *Drug-Using Self* towards the *Ideal Self*, suggesting a partial recovery with some changes to identity. In sum, the journey of identity transformation in recovery was illustrated, contingent on the development of personal agency and communion with others. Further to previous research (Ho-Yee, 2002), two initial recovery pathways are highlighted, while showing the limitations of a singular focus and addressing some shortcomings of current models (Best et al., 2016b; Weegman, 2010; Koski-Jannes, 2002).

Participants at all stages of substance misuse and recovery were studied, allowing cross-section examination under the same conditions. Further, a diversity of substance use is represented. However, there are several limitations. The small sample size provides limitations of generalisability. Only nine females took part, which may gender bias results. Thirty-one of 32 participants were White British, making extrapolate of findings across ethnic groups difficult. No one under the age of 30 took part, yet younger populations exhibit different patterns of substance misuse (Measham et al. 2011). In addition, the *Affiliation Group* was underrepresented with only four participants satisfying criteria for inclusion, potentially confounding predictive power. Future research should address these shortcomings.

<u>Conclusions</u>

In conclusion, it can be stated that the process of identity transformation in recovery from substance misuse involves the development of personal agency and communion with others,

and that chronic substance misuse rests on a fixed identity characterised by low personal agency and communion with others, supporting an agency-communion model for understanding and predicting substance misuse and recovery.

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