

Heroic Villains: An Exploration of the Use of Narrative Plotlines and Emerging Identities within Recovery Stories of Former Substance Abusers

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Abstract : The purpose of the study was to develop a deeper understanding of how self-identity is negotiated and reconstructed by people in recovery from substance abuse. The approach draws on the notion that self-identity is constructed through stories. Specifically, dominant narratives of substance abuse involve the 'addict identity' in which the meaning of being an addict is constructed through social interaction and informed by broader social meanings of substance misuse, which are considered deviant. The addict is typically understood as out of control, weak and feckless. Users may unconsciously embody this addict identity which makes recovery less likely. Typical approaches to treatment employ the notion that recovery is much more likely when users change the way they think and feel about themselves by assembling a new identity. Recovery, therefore, involves a reconstruction of the self in a new light, which may mean rejecting a part of the self (the addict identity). One limitation is that previous research on this topic has been quantitative which, while useful, tells us little about how this process is best managed. Should one, for example, reject the past addict identity completely and move on to the new identity, or, is it more effective to accept the past identity and use this in the formation of the new non-user identity? The purpose of this research, then, is to explore how addicts in recovery have managed the transition between their past and current selves and whether this may inform therapeutic practice. Using a narrative approach, data were analyzed from five in-depth interviews with former addicts who had been abstinent for at least a year, and who were in some form of volunteering role at substance treatment services in the UK. Although participants identified with a previous 'addict identity,' and made efforts to disassociate themselves from this, they also recognized that acceptance was an important part of reconstructing their new identity. The participants' narratives used familiar plot lines to structure their stories, in which they positioned themselves as the heroes in their own stories, rather than as victim of circumstance. Instead of rejecting their former addict identity, which would mean rejecting a part of the self, participants used their experience in a reconstructive and restorative way. The findings suggest that encouraging people to tell their story and accept their addict identity are important factors in successful recovery.

Keywords : addiction, identity, narrative, recovery, substance abuse

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