

# **Agency and communion: Modelling identity transformation in recovery from substance misuse**

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## **Abstract**

**Background:** Research in the field of substance misuse shows that identity change is key to recovery. Theories typically focus on either personal or social factors in this process; however, a framework encompassing agency and communion has proved useful in understanding narratives in similar populations.

**Objectives:** The study proposes that agency and communion provide useful constructs through which to examine substance misuse and recovery.

**Method:** The Life as a Film (LAAF) and repertory grid analysis were used to explore themes of agency and communion in a sample of 32 participants.

**Results:** Smallest Space Analysis of LAAF content revealed four narrative structures according to agency and communion. Case examples indicated that themes of agency and communion related to a recovery identity and that deficits were associated with substance misuse. Repertory grid analysis illustrated a pattern of fixed low agency and communion constructs in cases of substance misuse and a transformed high agency-communion construct system in cases of recovery. Overall, transformation from a low agency and communion substance-using identity towards a high agency and communion recovery identity was shown.

**Conclusions:** The exploratory results highlight the centrality of agentic and communal growth in identity-transformative recovery from substance misuse.

## **Introduction**

The issue of substance misuse is an ongoing concern for individuals and society, broadly impacting users and communities (Bennett & Holloway, 2010; Winstock et al, 2017). Growing incidence of prescription drug dependency (Ostling et al., 2018) and novel psychoactive substances (Measham et al., 2011; Fattore & Weinstein, 2019) exacerbate the problem, presenting new access points for drug misuse. Thus, the imperative for better articulating processes underpinning substance misuse and those important to recovery is greater than ever.

### ***Narrative approach***

Narrative approaches to clinical issues are gaining currency (Crossley, 2000; Adler et al., 2015). Narratives offer a uniquely personal way to capture individual processes, since people form a sense of identity and understand who they are in terms of their stories (Bruner, 1987; McAdams, 1993).

There is some agreement in the literature that substance misuse represents a disorder of identity (Biernacki, 1986; Ng, 2002; Young, 2011; Best et al., 2016; McConnell & Snoek, 2018), and narrative approaches have offered powerful interpretations of identity changes in recovery (Hanninen & Koski-Jannes, 1999; McIntosh & McKeganey, 2002; Stone, 2016). Exploring narrative identity in ex-drug users, McIntosh & McKeganey (2002) showed that respondents had disassociated from their past drug-using and reformulated their identities into more positive ways of seeing themselves. In research examining story types in ex-addicts, Hanninen and Koski-Jannes (1999) highlighted several resolution narratives, including a personal growth story, an AA story, and a Co-dependence story, whereas case

studies of chronic substance users reveal themes of incongruity, escape and decline (Singer, 1997, 2001; Weegmann, 2010).

### ***Social identity***

Current theories emphasise the centrality of social processes in identity change (Frings & Albery, 2015; Best et al., 2016b). Best et al. (2016b, 2017) argue that recovery from substance misuse occurs primarily through social modelling via support networks, proposing a Social Identity Model of Recovery (*SIMOR*). According to this theory, recovery identities are achieved through a ‘socially negotiated transition’ within recovery communities (Best et al., 2016b).

A limitation to this model may be a reliance on fellowship communities, such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), where the primary ideological tenet is a resignation to personal powerlessness over ‘addiction’. This theoretical position may overemphasise community processes at the expense of potential for self-determinism (Lewis, 2017).

### ***Agentic identity***

Research by Stone (2016) adopted a narrative identity perspective in examining transformative processes in ex-drug using pregnant mothers, showing that attributions of personal agency facilitated the construction of a redemption script and the pursuit of prosocial goals, mirroring earlier research with alcohol users (Dunlop & Tracy, 2013) and Maruna’s (2001) findings with desisting offenders.

Stone’s study highlights agentic growth in transformative narratives; however, adherents of Attribution Theory contend that such self-attributions are context dependent, serving to reinforce the status quo to reduce dissonance. Thus, self-identification as ‘powerless’ over

substances serves to legitimise ‘using’, reinforcing the present identity, and vice versa (Eiser, 1982; Newham & Davies, 2007). This contention is rebuked by Dingle et al.’s (2015) prospective study revealing that identity shifts stimulated reductions in substance use, and Adler and colleagues research on psychotherapeutic outcomes where agentic growth preceded therapeutic progress (Adler, McAdams & Skalina, 2008; Adler, 2012; Adler et al., 2015).

Recently theorists have started to appreciate the need for models of substance misuse and recovery that recognise personal and relational processes in rehabilitation (Larsson, von Braun & Litt, 2013; Chen, 2018). Related personal constructs research supports this idea, showing personal and interpersonal changes in a study of 86 heroin addicts completing a rehabilitation programme. The study used repertory grid analysis to demonstrate disassociation of a ‘Drug Self’ from the ‘Actual Self’ in respondents, and a trend towards self-reliance and connecting with others (Ng, 2002).

### ***Agency and communion***

According to McAdams (1988, 1993), the formation and reformation of narrative identity relies on two shaping themes, those of agency and communion. The ideal identity in western culture sees a balance of these themes, relating to the dual pursuits power and intimacy (Singer, 2001). Agency and communion have been found central to growth processes in life transitions (McLean & McAdams, 2004), and have been useful in formulating models of positive changes mental health (Adler et al., 2015). In contrast, deficits in agency and communion have been shown to occur in presentations of poor mental health (Holms et al., 2018).

The contention that two dimensions underpin differences in psychological functioning goes back to Freud’s (1953) concept of love and work, while the agency and communion model of

human behaviour, specifically, has roots in the writing of Bakan (1966), who provided a biological argument for the theory, so the proposal of twin motivational mechanisms has emerged not only with respect to narrative research but across a breadth of psychological literature (see also Leary, 1957; Hermans, 1996; Mahony & Stasson, 2005).

The life narrative offers a means through which such identity-orientating themes can be contextualised in personal experiences. In this, Sarbin (1986) argued that narrative offered the primary psychological metaphor for life, being the way in which personal histories are reconstructed into meaningful and consequential sequences of events. According to Singer (2001), the life story approach offers the most phenomenologically enriched interpretation of human experience for researchers seeking to understand psychological problems, and thus may afford the clearest means of articulating the distinguishing features of successful rehabilitation versus chronic substance misuse.

Specifically, agency and communion models have been useful in understanding narrative processes in related populations, such mental health patients (Adler et al., 2015; Holms et al., 2018) and offenders (Canter & Youngs, 2011; Youngs & Canter, 2012). Canter and Youngs (2015) methodology for engaging populations with prohibited and unconventional lifestyles who experienced issues with the standard life story techniques used by McAdams (1993). Canter and colleagues designed the 'Life as a Film' (LAAF) for use with offenders. The technique addresses some of the shortcomings of standard methods in a deploying a projective technique through which to express the general essence of the life narrative in a dynamic format (Canter & Youngs, 2015; Youngs, Canter & Carthy, 2016).

This paper reports findings from two related studies. The first study uses the LAAF approach to explore personal narratives, reporting on an emerging conceptual framework of narrative structures according to combinations of agency and communion themes that corresponds with

film narratives at different stages of substance use and rehabilitation. The rationale comes from a disjointed literature overemphasising communal processes and a sampling bias towards individuals in recovery, rather than mixed populations (Litt et al., 2010; Beckwith et al., 2014; Best et al., 2017).

The study represents an effort to integrate findings into a broader narrative model, developing Singer's (1997) case studies and Hanninen and Koski-Jannes' (1999) research exploring narrative types. This follows methodological and theoretical advances in allied areas to promote powerful and practical predictive models of complex behaviour (Youngs & Canter, 2012; Canter & Youngs, 2015).

The second study applies the framework to repertory grid analysis, hypothesising a transformation to high agency and communion constructs with the emergence of a recovery identity, revealing specific construct dimensions important to the rehabilitation process, building on Ng's (2002) findings and highlighting focus points for treatment interventions.

### **Study 1. Life narratives of individuals with substance misuse history**

The study aims to establish the LAAF as a useful tool for distinguishing agency and communion themes central to identity processes illustrated in life narratives of individuals active or in recovery from substance misuse.

## **Methods**

### ***Participants***

An opportunity sample was recruited from associates and then snowballing, gathering a sample of 32 participants, comprising 23 males and 9 females. As with other exploratory research using similar methods, the small sample suffices for the identification of trends which can be further investigated in future studies with larger samples (Singer, 1997; Canter, 2004; Porter & Alison, 2005). Thirty-one participants were of Caucasian ethnicity with one Asian participant. The age range was 29-60 and a mean age of 39.85. Thirteen participants reported abstinence and identified as being in recovery. Nineteen participants reported current substance use, though 8 reported non-problematic use and identified as being in recovery. Eleven participants reported problematic substance misuse, in most cases involving poly-substances (n=9). A diversity of substance misuse history was represented in the sample, with most reporting history of poly-substance misuse (n=21), the most prevalent being combined heroin and crack cocaine use (n=9).

### ***Materials***

The 'Life as a Film' (LAAF) method was used to elicit life narrative material. The LAAF invites participants to imagine their life as a film and answer questions concerning plot, characters and events (i.e., 'If your life were to be made into a film, what type of film would it be?' 'What would happen?' 'Who would the main characters be?' – see Appendix 1) and has been used to engage hard to reach populations, deriving data-rich material (Canter & Youngs, 2015; Youngs, Canter, Carthy, 2016).

Narratives were coded using the LAAF Coding Framework (Canter & Youngs, 2015 - Appendix 2). This thematic dictionary draws together findings across the breadth of narrative enquiry, on agency and communion, redemption and contamination (Maruna, 2001; McAdams, 2001), imagoes (McAdams, 1993), narrative forms (Frye, 1957) and incentives (Bandura, 1986). For a more detailed description of the LAAF and LAAF Coding Framework, see Canter & Youngs, 2015).

### ***Procedure***

An information sheet was given to participants prior to interviews, detailing the research topic and a confidentiality document was signed, which outlined anonymity, information storage and sharing protocol. Interviews took place over video call and were recorded. Video call allowed for the convenience and the comfort of a familiar location. Demographic information and substance use history was collected (Appendix 3) and then the LAAF interview was completed. Following which, a debrief was provided. Recordings were transcribed verbatim and then erased. Transcribed material was anonymised, and each participant assigned a case number. Documents were stored in a secure, locked location.

### ***Coding***

LAAF accounts were binary coded for items (1=presence, 0=absence) by two independent raters. Cohen's kappa was used to assess internal consistency, and a coefficient of 0.72 was calculated, representing a good level of agreement (Altman, 1991). Forty-eight variables from the LAAF Coding Framework were considered representative of the content system. Items

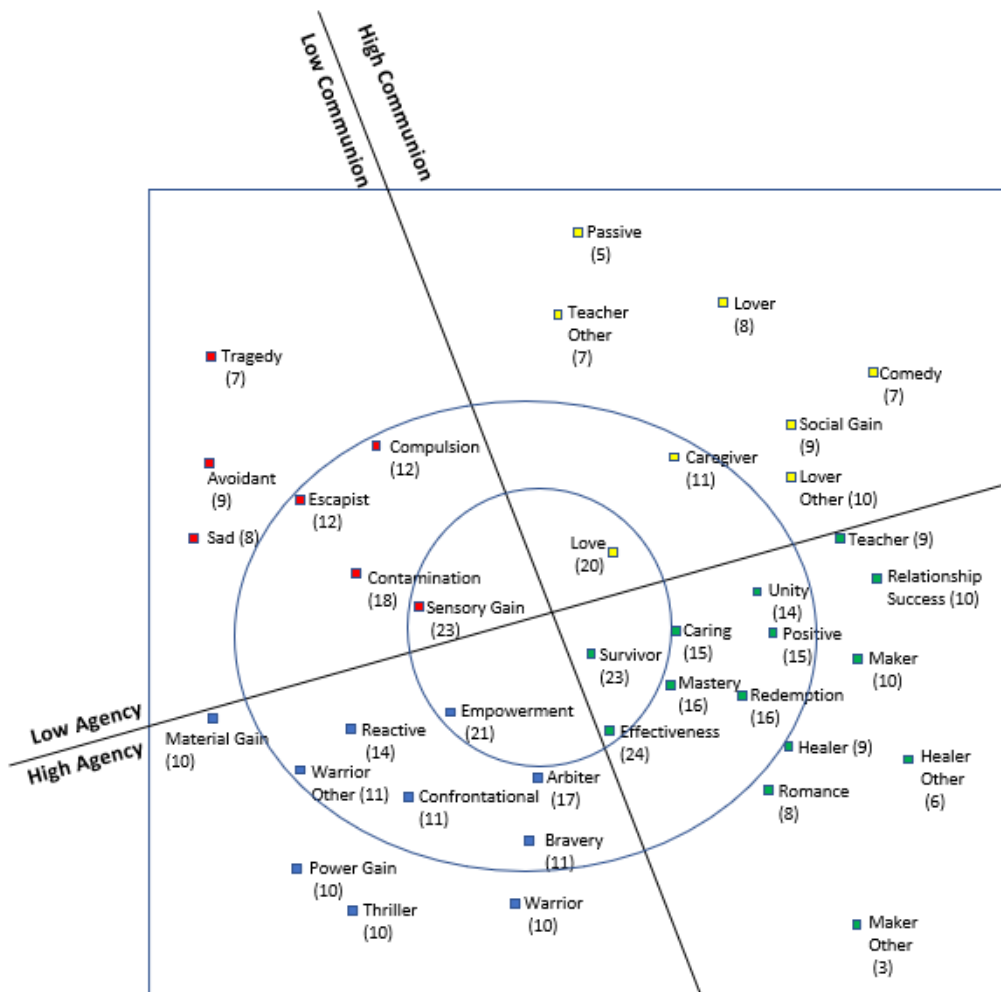


assessing content specific to previous study populations (Canter & Youngs, 2015), or overlapping, were removed.

## **Results**

### *Smallest Space Analysis*

The research uses Smallest Space Analysis (SSA) to explore underlying structures in the narrative material. SSA is a nonparametric multidimensional scaling method through which intercorrelations among a set of variables are represented in geometric space (Guttman, 1968). Distances between points on the SSA diagram correspond to the correlations among those items. The emerging patterns reveal components of the study content (Guttman & Greenbaum, 1998; Shye, 1998). SSA has been used to identify structure in complex behaviour systems, such as intelligence (Guttman & Lingo, 1979; Guttman & Levy, 1991) and offence behaviour (Canter & Fritzon, 1998; Canter & Youngs, 2009, 2011, 2012). For a more detailed description of SSA, see Guttman and Greenbaum (1998).



**Figure 1. Three dimensional SSA diagram representing 48 LAAF variables across the 32 cases with modular and polar facet interpretation. COA 0.174.**

The above SSA showcases the frequency and relevance of items in organising narrative content and attests to the utility of the LAAF technique for examining life narratives in the target population. A coefficient of alienation reading of 0.174 represents an acceptable level of fit between the coefficients of variables and their representation in the geometric configuration. The three-dimensional resolution was considered to better represent the pattern of relationships among items than the two-dimensional resolution.

Facet Theory (FT) is used to interpret the LAAF content. FT is a systematic approach to research design and data analysis, apt for studying complex behavioural systems (Guttman,

1954; Canter, 1985). FT allows for multidimensional data analysis that is grounded in and guided according to a precise theoretical framework (Shye, 1998). Regions are demarcated on the SSA diagram according to the contiguity of variables (Youngs & Canter, 2012) and different conceptual facets of the content (Shye, 1995).

In this dataset, the polar facet is used to intersect the diagram into pie-like sections according to agency and communion theme combinations in the film accounts. Four regions are revealed, reflecting four distinct narrative structures, or domains: *Agency*, *Communion*, *Agency and Communion*, and *neither Agency nor Communion*. The elements within each region are conceptually related to one another (Empowerment, Warrior, Bravery, Thriller), and can be further interpreted according to the modular facet.

Where the polar facet demarcates regions on the diagram according to theme domains, the modular facet (concentric circles emanating from a central point) represents the concept of dramatic intensity in LAAF accounts. For example, where ‘Sensory Gain’ is common to film content among the sample, an ‘Escapist’ identity represents a more dramatic narrative presentation of the low agency and communion theme. An ‘Avoidant’ behavioural style is still more discerning of type. In the contrasting narrative construct, the ‘Survivor’ protagonist is a common dramatic presentation, whereas ‘Self-Mastery’ is a more intense reflection of the high agency/communion narrative identity.

The conceptual structure revealed by the SSA has good face validity, considering McAdams’ findings in effective individuals (McAdams, 1988, 1993; McAdams et al., 1996; McLean & McAdams, 2004) and offender research (Youngs & Canter, 2012; Canter & Youngs, 2015). The plot helps to make sense of disparate findings highlighting agentic, communal or joint themes, and therefore may provide a useful model for exploring narrative processes among cases and how they reflect addiction and recovery identities.

### *Case studies*

While the above conceptual model offers a framework for discriminating narrative structures, case studies provide a useful way of illustrating how the domains are represented in individual stories.

#### *High communion domain.*

The following example showcases a dramatic presentation of the high communion theme (Social Gain, Passivity) in portraying personal powerlessness, where tragedy is averted in accepting help from others, and salvation is found through the power of community:

*Case 11: 'The film would be a journey of despair to accepting powerlessness... finding hope with other addicts like me. Learning to trust, love... The film would end with me being lifted above the crowd.'*

The LAAF depicts an exclusively communal pathway to achieving change. This participant completed an opiate detox before a relationship conflict precipitated relapse. A pattern of stunted progress is frequently highlighted in dominant communion narratives, where limitations of personal agency serve as a weak link under conditions of stress.

#### *High agency domain*

A contrasting LAAF is presented with the dominant agency theme, where empowerment is achieved through a brave warrior persona:

*Case 16: 'It'd be like Reservoir Dogs... I've got a bad reputation for violence. A lot of people are shit scared...and I've used it to my advantage...It would be about having to be tough and make necessary decisions to sort things out to get on in life.'*

A confrontational behavioural style is depicted, where control is attained through force to fulfil a power gain motive. With equal stymie to full recovery, this individual described having control over his drug use in a low communion story that permits destructive behaviour towards himself and others.

#### *Combined agency and communion domain*

Characterising the high agency and communion narrative, this ex-benzodiazepine user's film plot showcases a powerful communion sequence in the transformation from an escapist through to a redemptive identity, illustrating self-mastery and unity in a romantic tale of triumph through struggle:

*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.... Meeting a terribly controlling man who beat her when he couldn't get a fix...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...but mainly having the ability to engage and talk to anyone.'*

### *Low agency and communion domain*

Contrasting with the above story, this tragic LAAF indicates neither agency nor communion in a story of compulsive escape with intractable substance misuse:

*Case 2: 'I just fall further into the trap...\_It would be a film about someone who started off having a laugh with his mates...but then falling into a predicament... 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.'*

The above case examples illustrate how individual stories reflect the four narrative domains, and how themes of agency and communion associate with substance use or rehabilitative progress, where a process of identity reconstruction towards greater agency and communion is highlighted in successful outcomes.

## **Study 2. Personal constructs of individuals with a history of substance misuse**

### **Aims**

The objective of the present study is to expand on patterns detected in Study 1 to show how a process of evolving agency and communion illustrates the journey towards a recovery identity, addressing imperatives to recognise twin processes in the advance to rehabilitation from substance misuse (Koski-Jannes, 2002; Weegmann, 2010; Larsson et al., 2013; Chen, 2018).

### **Methods and materials**

A repertory grid composed of 10 bipolar construct dimensions was used to examine agency and communion between past, present and ideal identity elements to illustrate identity changes in the advance to recovery (Appendix 4).

The constructs: '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 representative of agency, and the constructs: '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 representative of communion. The constructs: 'A victim' vs 'A survivor', and 'Things get worse' vs 'Things change for the better' were included as they were discriminating variables in the LAAF study.

Participants scored themselves on the constructs over five identity elements: Before Drugs Self, Drug-Using Self, Current Self, Real Self, and Ideal Self. A Likert-type scale, scoring from 1-7 was used, in which higher scores referred to the emergent pole.

Repertory grids were completed live during a six-month follow-up interview, which allowed any questions about content to be summarily addressed.

The same 32 participants took part in the study. No changes in substance use were reported.

### *Narrative groups*

Following the conceptual framework revealed in Study 1, a simple content analysis of LAAF transcripts allowed cases to be assigned to one of four groups according to the illustration of agency and communion elements in their film narratives: Dominance, Affiliation, Power, and Avoidance. Description of each of the three representative elements in LAAF responses was given a score of '1', for a total potential theme score of '3', and grand total of '6' (see Table 1).

Case	Agency Theme Total	Communion Theme Total	Combined Themes Total	Recovery Inventory Total	Narrative Group
1	0	0	0	2	<b>Avoidance</b> Low Agency Low Communion
2	0	0	0	1	
3	0	1	1	0	
4	1	0	1	2	
5	0	1	1	2	
6	0	1	1	2	
7	1	1	2	2	
8	0	3	3	4	
9	1	3	4	4	
10	0	3	3	7	
11	1	3	4	7	
12	3	0	3	9	<b>Power</b> High Agency Low Communion
13	2	1	3	6	
14	3	0	3	8	
15	2	1	3	4	
16	3	0	3	5	
17	2	1	3	9	
18	2	1	3	5	
19	2	1	3	6	
20	3	1	4	5	
21	3	1	4	7	
22	2	2	4	12	
23	3	3	6	11	
24	3	3	6	12	
25	3	3	6	12	
26	3	3	6	12	
27	3	3	6	12	
28	3	3	6	12	
29	3	3	6	10	
30	3	3	6	12	
31	3	3	6	12	
32	3	3	6	10	

Table 1: showing agency/communion themes and Recovery Inventory scores across cases

### Analysis

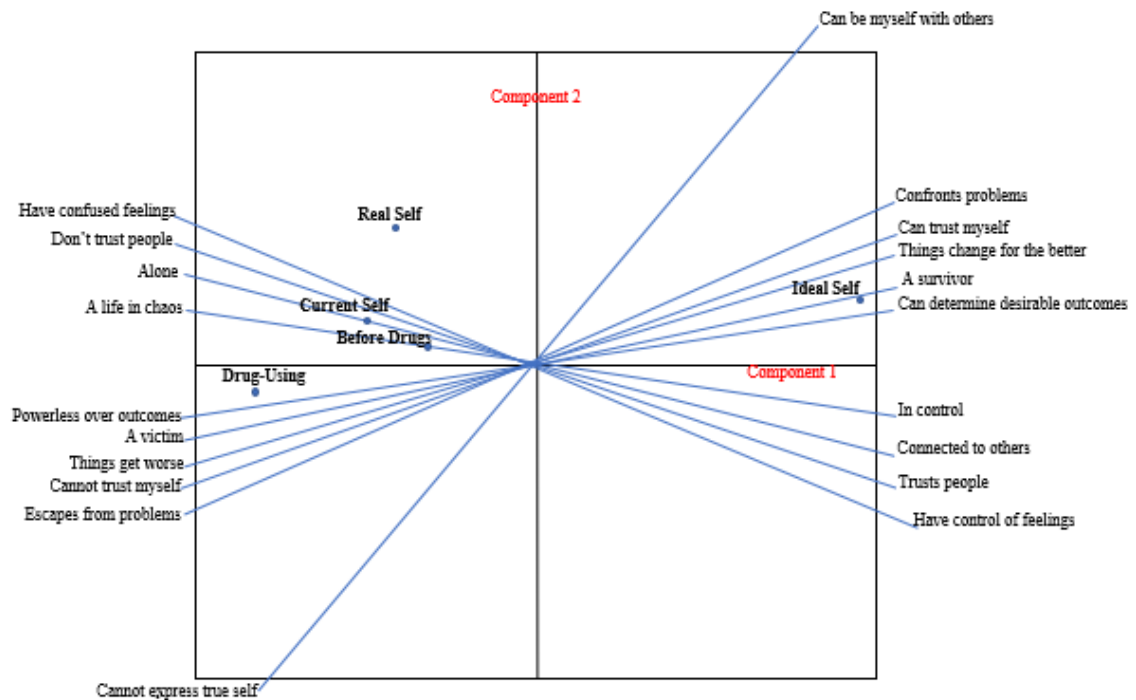


The IDIOGRID package was used to create average grids for each of the four groups. Single Value Decomposition (SVD) preserved scale ratings, so that data and diagrams were centred around the scale middle (Grice, 2004). The SVD diagram represents scores on the constructs for each identity element as a position in geometric space, such that differences in the personal constructs can be examined across the distinct identities (Grice, 2004).

## Results

### *Avoidance Group (Low Agency-Communion)*

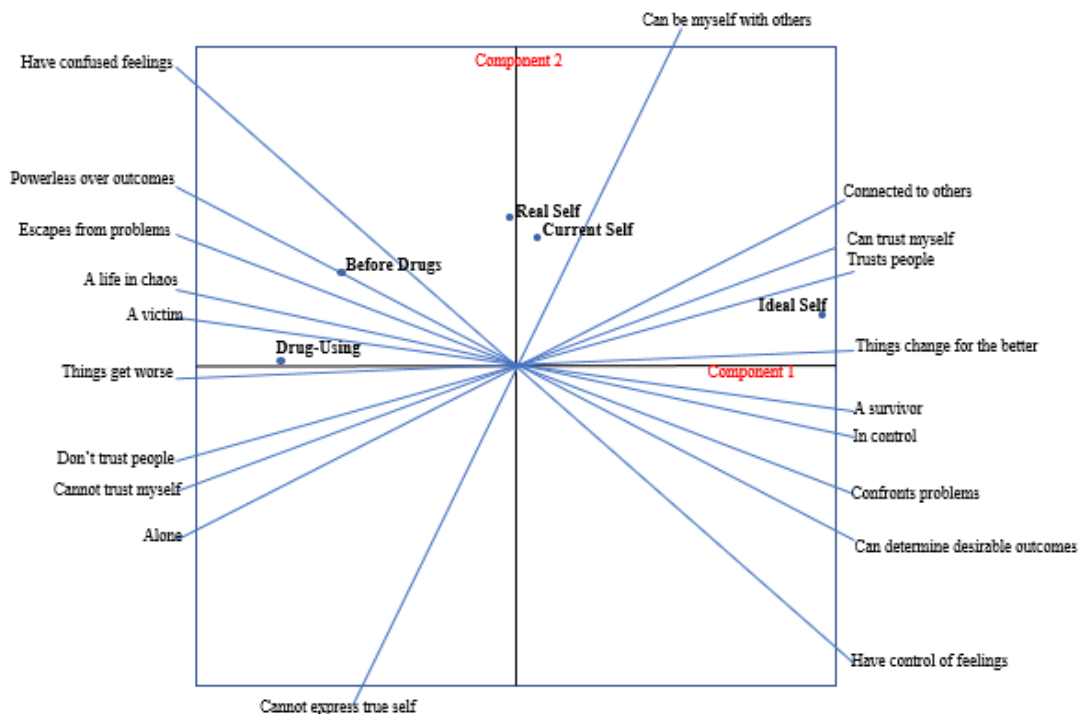
Figure 2 depicts the Avoidance Group, where the ‘Current Self’ is proximate to the ‘Drug-Using’ and ‘Before Drugs Self’, illustrating a fixed identity with a low agency and communion construct system and a fixed identity. Participants in this group all remain active in substance misuse.



**Figure 2. SVD graph showing the relationship between identity elements and personal constructs in the Avoidance Group.**

***Affiliation Group (Low Agency-High Communion)***

Figure 3 shows the Affiliation Group. Here, the ‘Current Self’ and ‘Real Self’ score higher on communion constructs: ‘Connected to others’, ‘Can be myself with others’, and is disassociated from the ‘Drug-Using Self’ on these measures, illustrating a perceived identity change towards the ‘ideal’, contrasting with the Avoidance presentation. However, lower scores can be observed on agentic constructs, which align more with previous identity modes. Observing Table 1, this construct system is associated with moderate scores on a recovery inventory, suggesting that the current identity presents barriers to full rehabilitation.

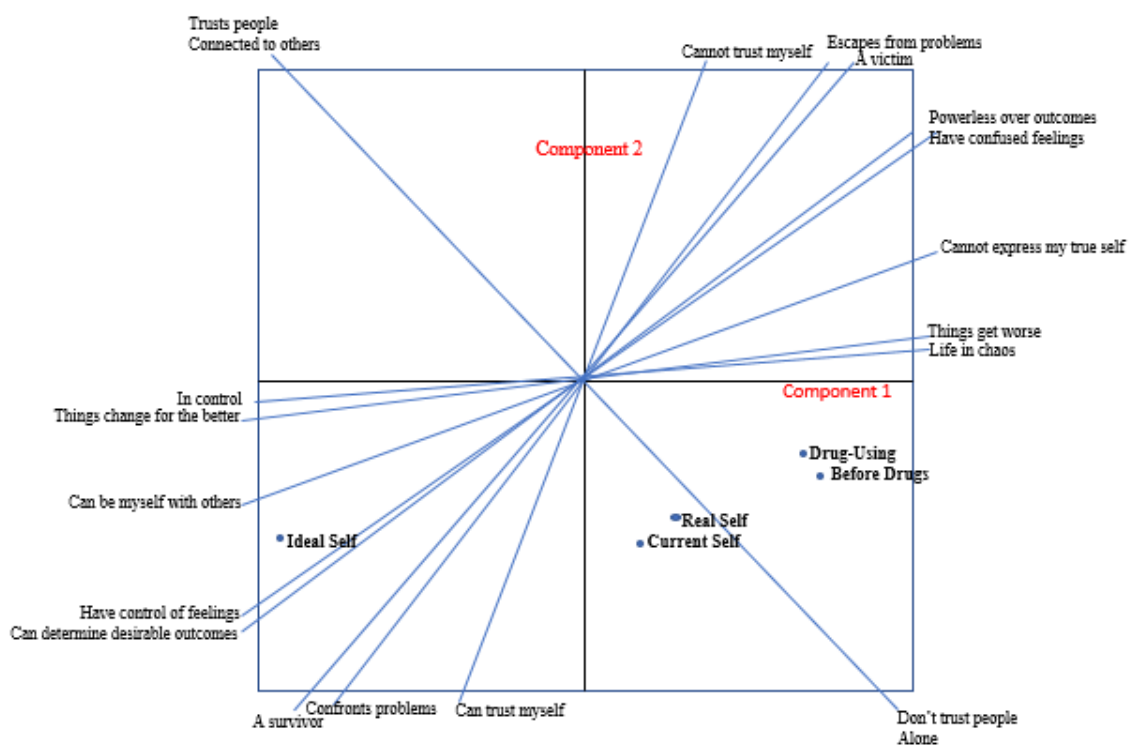


**Figure 3. SVD graph showing the relationship between identity elements and personal constructs in the Affiliation Group.**

**Power Group (High Agency-Low Communion)**

Figure 4 shows the Power Group, where the ‘Current’ and ‘Real Self’ depict agentic personal constructs, highlighting an identity shift away from the ‘Drug-Using Self’ and towards the ‘Ideal Self’ on these measures. However, contrasting with the Affiliation Group, constructs pertaining to communion score lower. Similar recovery inventory scores can be observed as with the Affiliation Group, suggesting equal but contrasting impediments to full rehabilitation in the Power Group.

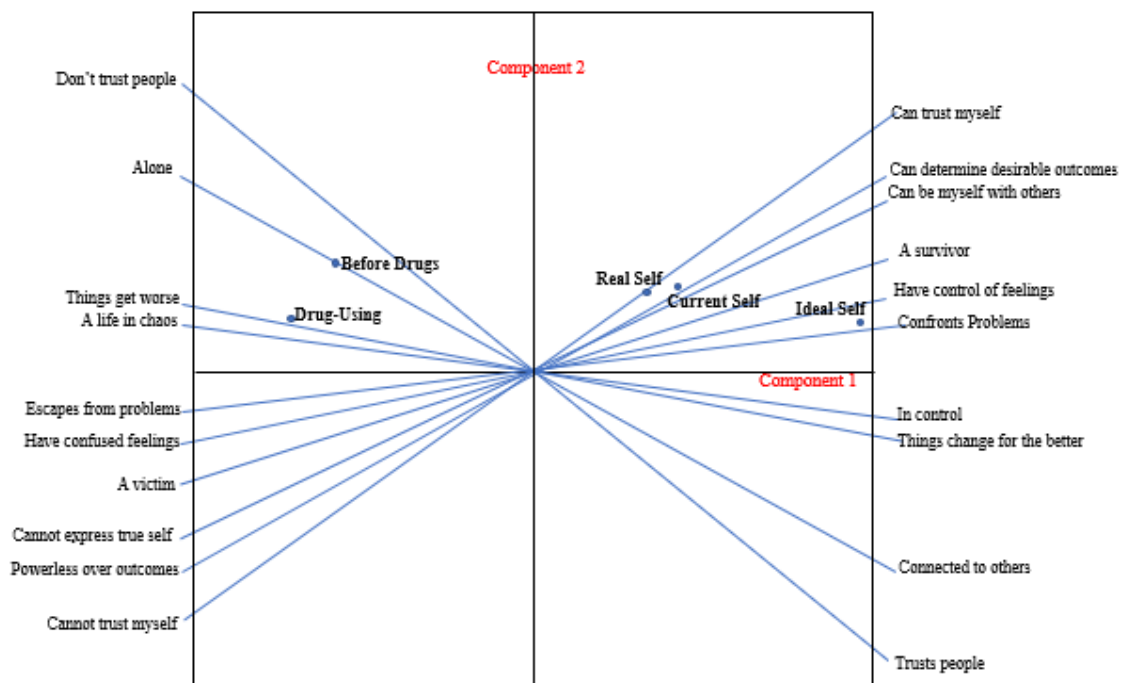
**Figure 4. SVD graph showing the relationship between identity elements and personal constructs in the Power Group.**



**Figure 4. SVD graph showing the relationship between identity elements and personal constructs in the Power Group.**

***Dominance Group (High Agency-High Communion)***

Figure 5 shows the Dominance Group. In this diagram the ‘Current’ and ‘Real Self’ are disassociated from the ‘Drug-Using’ and ‘Before Drugs Self’, gravitating towards the ‘ideal’ on both agentic and communal constructs, illustrating a fully transformed identity which is matched with high scores on the recovery inventory (Table 1).



***Figure 5. SVD graph showing the relationship between identity elements and personal constructs in the Dominance Group.***

The results offer further support to the agency-communion model, demonstrating twin processes in identity-transformative recovery. Illustration of these developmental processes is important in guiding interventions.

## **Discussion**

Study 1 demonstrated that the LAAF method elicits themes relevant to stories of substance misuse. SSA revealed regions distinguishing four narratives according to themes of agency and communion. Examples were used to illustrate how the four narratives were reflected among film narratives, suggesting distinct groups. Cases examples implicated agency and communion in transformations to a recovery identity. The process was clearest where both agency and communion featured in redemption storylines and was reflected with high scores on a recovery inventory across the high agency/communion group (Dominance). Identity changes, though less transformative, were illustrated in dominant agency (Power) or communion (Affiliation) cases, and reflected less severe substance-related issues, while low agency/communion (Avoidance) LAAF narratives described stories of non-recovery.

The findings support a framework that recognises twin processes at work in the construction of a new identities (McAdams, 2001; Larsson et al., 2013; Chen, 2018), incorporating themes of agency and communion to elucidate rehabilitation paths and barriers to change, which begins to address gaps in a substance misuse literature emphasising communal processes and focussing only on individuals in recovery.

The LAAF format provides an engaging method through which key life story material can be communicated in a sensitive study population, eliciting identity shaping themes in the context of an unfolding drama, providing a phenomenological validity and contextual richness less apparent with other methods.

Findings from Study 2 expand on the LAAF study, illustrating an agentic and communal transformation of identity in cases of recovery. In other words, construct systems high on agency and communion highlight a transformed identity disassociated from a previous low agency/communion ‘Drug-Using Self’. In contrast, low agency/communion construct

systems reflected the fixed identity of a current ‘Drug-Using Self’. Cases showing dominant agency constructs illustrated transition from the ‘Drug-Using Self’ towards the ‘Ideal Self’ these constructs but a more fixed patterns on communion constructs, whereas communion-dominant construct systems show the reverse trend, showcasing limited identity changes tallying up with incomplete recovery profiles. The study expands Ng’s (2002) work, illustrating components of two pathways to change, while highlighting the greater strength of a combined focus, further addressing limitations of current models (Best et al., 2016b). This recognition of twin processes allows for easier identification of treatment needs.

Results are strengthened by the maintenance of outcomes at 6-month follow up, supporting the agency and communion model. Retention of all participants at follow up interview also supports the data collection methods, suggesting a high level of engagement and avoids the confounding impact of study dropouts.

First-person accounts from substance-using and recovered individuals offers the research richness and diversity missing from the literature. The use of multi-dimensional scaling and repertory grids gives structure to these personal accounts that enables the construction of a theoretical framework fitting with outcomes.

The findings make a valuable contribution to our understanding of the role of identity in substance misuse and those elements which are most influential in nourishing positive change and recovery.

A limitation of the research is its reliance on a small sample, though this allows for a more in-depth analysis and follows previous exploratory research with similar-sized populations that have prompted larger studies. Certain sample strengths can also be observed with the inclusion of a cross-section of substance users and those in rehabilitation, and the diversity of substance issues represented. Importantly, the observed gender imbalance reflects wider

demographic disparity of sexes reporting substance use issues. In summary, the strong preliminary findings illustrated by our study justifies the efforts of future research with larger study populations.

## **Conclusions**

In conclusion, identity transformation in recovery was found to involve twin processes of agency and communion, while cases of chronic substance misuse show a fixed identity, characterised by low agency and communion. This pattern was observed in film narratives and personal construct systems, substantiating the findings of this small-scale exploratory study. The results support an agency-communion model for understanding substance misuse and recovery.

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