

Recovery: A Journey of Self-Transformation

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30th September 2010

Who are you?

Are you the same person as you were yesterday?

How about a year ago? Two years?

Am I the same Stephen Bamber as I was aged 16?

What's different? What's changed? What elements of our self-identity have remained the same?

The cluster of questions that orbit around the concepts of self and self-identity are acutely significant when considering addiction recovery. The shift towards long-term thinking taking place from top-to-bottom throughout the UK's treatment ecosystem provides a valuable opportunity to creatively re-vision our understanding in fresh, unconventional ways (although there is a modest body of literature on addiction and identity, there is little on recovery and identity). Positing recovery as a journey of self-transformation is an approach that can help stimulate innovation and foster new understanding. It is particularly congruent with the conceptual foundations of mainstream recovery thought, which emphasise empowerment, individualisation and long-term, holistic change. The addict self is a particularly well-defined subjectivity (experience of ones own self) that has developed over the past 200-300 years, evolving into a distinct variety of the deviant identities formed in opposition to the normative post-Enlightenment ideal of the autonomous, self-determining individual able exercise restraint and self-control; regulating their behaviour without disturbing the delicate balance of the social contract.¹

The modern "addict-self" (reified temporarily as the Problem Drug User, or PDU) refers to a genus of non-productive individuals who require particular kinds of moral, medical, and juridical interventions in order to subjugate, analyse, control and ultimately reform them into economically productive individuals capable of maintaining the levels of self-control demanded by advanced liberal societies. In this sense recovery is simply an extension of a governmental logic that seeks to maximise the productive and consumptive efficiency of the populace.²

¹Harry Gene Levine, "The Discovery of Addiction: Changing Conceptions of Habitual Drunkenness in America", *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 39:1, 1978, pp. 143-173. Cf. Jessica Warner, "'Resolv'd to Drink No More': Addiction as a Preindustrial Concept", *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 55:6, 1994, pp. 685-691 and Roy Porter, "The Drinking Man's Disease: The 'Pre-History' of Alcoholism in Georgian Britain", *British Journal of Addiction*, 80, 1985, pp. 385-396

²Stephen Bamber, "Rethinking community: addiction, recovery and globalisation", 12th International EWODOR Symposium, University of Stirling, October 2009. Available <http://www.theartoflifeitself.org/articles_and_papers/Rethinking_Community_Stephen_Bamber.pdf>

For those tied to this addict identity and the cultures and discourses that produce them, the journey of recovery represents a profound reclamation, or transformation of the self. As Alexandre Laudet -friend of the Recovery Academy and distinguished scholar - observes of the Pathways Project: "A recurrent theme was that recovery is [the process of] regaining an identity (a self) lost to addiction".³

We may quibble over definitions and competing accounts of recovery yet there appears to be a theoretical subtext running through all expositions of recovery: we sacrifice an old self and lay claim to a new self in the making.

We tend to assume we have stable, enduring, self-identity, yet the continuity of this can be disputed. The journey of recovery from addiction is an exquisite example of how individual selves can, and do, change over time. Although we sense there is some connection with the person we are today and the person we were when living in the chaotic tempest of full-blown addiction, it is difficult to isolate and identify the elements that connect or separate these two diametrically opposed ways of life.

We have memories of course, and external fixed points that re-enforce our sense of self: our living space, our habits and proclivities, our commitments, our community, family and friends: in short, our way of life. We find ourselves reflected in other people and places as much as we do in the mirror of our own self-awareness. The greater the difference in our relationship between these exterior sources of the self - the wider the gap between addiction as a way of life and recovery as a way of life - the greater our chance of solidifying recovery into a concrete mode of being capable of propelling us safely through the fragmented and ephemeral territories of 21st century life.

Translating the abstract sphere of recovery identity theory into meaningful guidelines for practice is no easy task. However, viewing recovery from the perspective of identity transformation opens up valuable new ways of thinking about the initiation and sustainment of recovery in groups, communities and individuals. For example, recognising, as pioneers in the field of natural recovery did, that re-situating the self in new social contexts hastens and supports the construction of a non-addict identity, we immediately see the value of identifying and demarcating the boundaries of local recovery cultures and orientating ourselves towards them.

Perhaps the most notable benefit of an identity-transformation approach is it allows us to move beyond the weary dualism of medical and moral accounts of addiction and recovery. Focusing not on the perceived rights and wrongs of particular decisions or behaviors, but instead taking a long-term view in terms of the choices we have with respect to our identity. Rather than asking, "What should I do?" we can engage with the much more profound question: "*Who do I want to become?*"

³Alexandre Laudet, "What does recovery mean to you? Lessons from the recovery experience for research and practice", *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment*, 33:3, 2007, pp. 243-256.