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Substance Use, Misuse and Recovery Through Collaborative Autoethnography

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Abstract

- 4 undergraduate research assistants (UGRAs) reflect on their participation on a dissertation study, *Substance Use, Misusing, Recovery Identity Formation Among College Students*.
- Baseline concept maps and interviews between the primary investigator (PI) and UGRAs were transcribed then coded.
- The UGRAs participated in a collaborative autoethnography (CAE) to reflect on their own experiences with substance misuse and recovery.
- Insights contribute towards understanding how community shapes students understanding of complex concepts such as substance misuse and recovery.
- We aim to provide meaningful insight into how substance use, and misuse can be internalized amongst college students and how an acquisition of a recovery identity can help redefine previous notions of substance use.

Introduction

- Substance use is a staple of the college experience for most students.
- Students are often surrounded by opportunities for substance use; students are surrounded by flyers for parties, involved in Greek life, or have friends who may ask to go out to a bar or club.
- Support services for students who wish to seek help for substance misuse are few and far between.
- An integral issue in offering support for students on a college campus arises when these students begin to ask themselves "What does substance recovery mean? What does it look like? Can there be different kinds of recovery?."
- Issues defining exactly what 'recovery' entails leaves us with a blurry vision of how best to shape support services for college students.

Methods

Autoethnography (AE)

- AE requires the researcher to record their own personal experiences that connect to broader cultural experiences (Gant, Cheatham, Di Vito, et al., 2019).
- Researchers retroactively analyze these experiences by combining storytelling methods seen in autobiographies and detailed descriptions of cultures seen in ethnographies.
- Researchers record their personal epiphanies that may stem from their participation in a community and analyze these epiphanies, comparing them to existing research.
- An advantage of this method is that it allows members within communities to record their personal experiences which can allow for understanding commonalities and themes within culture that an observer would not be able to access.

Collaborative Autoethnography (CAE)

- CAE involves two or more authors sharing their personal experiences and analyze them together. This can expand the scope of autoethnography when the power of knowledge is granted to historically marginalized groups.
- This method allows disparaged communities to author their own research and provide in-group context that researchers outside that group would be unable to.
- Pertaining to this poster specifically, our experiences and analysis of them is valuable because we are active members of the recovery community that come from diverse backgrounds.

Approaches to Coding

Michael

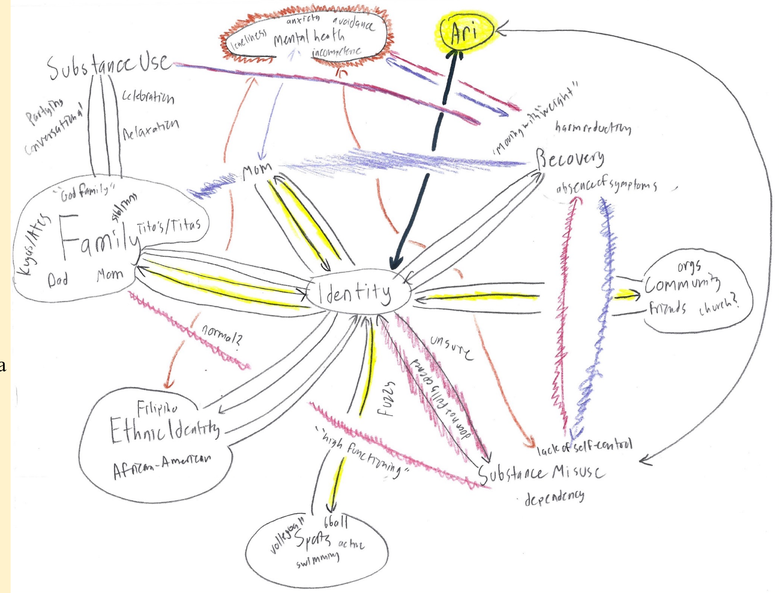
- Approached coding by type of transcript
- Began by transcribing intake interview and intake concept maps
- Then transcribed walking interviews and walking concept maps
- Purpose of this method was to examine themes between transcript types and see how substance use, misuse and recovery were represented
- I keep memos on each set of transcripts noted and marked which ones stood out

Daniel

- Approached coding by participant.
- I began by coding one participant's intake concept map, followed by their transcribed intake interview, follow-up concept map, and finally ended with the transcribed walking interview.
- I wanted to follow participant's development through the research study. Noting how descriptions of recovery, substance use, and substance misuse change throughout their time in the program. I connected these ideas and changes by writing memos for each participant.

Elisabeth

- It was common to see variation in language, specifically the words "clean", abstinent and sober. They were often used interchangeably, although each having varying meanings.
- Engagement with LIFT encouraged the use of proper terminology, offering clear definitions of abstinence and sobriety, as observed in the follow up concept maps.
- Stigmas may have indirectly encouraged recovery, as participants did not want to associate with
- There are individual approaches to recovery, with each participant having their own definition of recovery, such as what relapse might look to them.



Findings

Michael

- Interactions with LIFT lead participants to adopt more nuanced scripts surrounding substance use, misuse and recovery
- Involvement in LIFT also lead to adoption of a recovery identity, present in the follow up concept maps
- Environment influenced whether participants engaged in substance use or not
- Stigmas surrounding recovery inhibited participants from adopting a recovery identity

Daniel

- It was common that those who shared 2nd hand experiences with substance misuse struggled to divorce the two concepts of abstinence and sobriety.
- Those who have had 1st hand experiences provided more nuance in their comparisons of the concepts.
- Focusing on recovery, another trend was the comparison of the degree in which participants describe the benefits of recovery before and after they took active recovery protocols.
- Baseline maps consistently showed a relatively short list of descriptions and benefits.
- Follow-up maps as well as post maps showed a larger lists of benefits and a more nuanced description of recovery.

Elisabeth

- Identity transformations can look like turning misuse/addiction into healthy habits. For example, going to the gym instead of using
- Substance misuse is normalized. Underage drinking is almost encouraged.
- Party culture creates an in/out group dynamic, which may pressure people into substance use, as opposed to being in the outgroup.
- Negative stigmas may indirectly influence recovery. Participants did not want to be associated with negative stigmas. For example, being labeled "stoner" or "nic fiend".

Personal Findings

Michael

- Becoming more involved with LIFT lead to a personal adoption of a recovery identity
- LIFT exposed me to a more nuanced definition of recovery
- Being in a "recovery community" motivated me to actively pursue recovery
- Recovery is not only related to my relationship with substances, but also my relationships with my mental health and people important to me

Daniel

- How my perceptions of substance use, misuse, and recovery changed as well as how I define sobriety and abstinence.
- Being a part of the LIFT community allowed for a better understanding of these nuanced concepts
- Stigmas restrained me from revealing details about personal substance use, collegiate recovery programs lift these stigmas.

Elisabeth

- I have found other addictions in my life separate from substance use.
- I realized I have problematic usage with drugs I thought I initially had a positive relationship with.
- Stigmas about substance users made me hesitant to admit I was misusing.
- I learned the clear differences between the definitions of sobriety and abstinence.. It doesn't mean being abstinent all together
- Engagement with LIFT, helped me find a support group to hold me accountable.
- Engagement with LIFT provided a pathway into recovery.

Discussion

1. Identity Continuum Explaining how the continuum of substance using, misusing, and recovery identities may be experienced by college students who engage in various ways with CRPs.

- Recovery is an individualized process, specific to the person.
- The continuum of use, misuse, and recovery is a non-linear process

2. Concept maps as a tool for helping students navigate their experiences with substance use, misuse, and recovery within the context of the college experience.

- Concepts maps are useful as a tool to help students navigate their relationships with substance use, misuse, and recovery
- Concept maps allow the student to map their identity of use/misuse/recovery freely, in the manner that they understand the concepts

3. Honoring individual recovery is an effective way to expand the definition of recovery resulting in more inclusive communities.

- Recovery is commonly defined as abstinence from use; however, this crude definition of recovery can be exclusive towards individuals who are in different parts of the recovery continuum.
- Broadening the definition of recovery creates a more inclusive community, where multiple pathways of recovery are honored
- Inclusive recovery communities help encourage students to adopt a recovery identity
- Interaction with LIFT lead people to question the difference abstinence and sobriety

References

Gant, V., Cheatham, L., Di Vito, H., Offei, E., Williams, G., & Yatosenge, N. (2019) Social work through collaborative autoethnography, Social Work Education, 38:6, 707-720, DOI: 10.1080/02615479.2019.1570109