

Christianity in Narratives of Recovery from Substance Abuse

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Abstract This article focuses on the different roles and expressions the Christian faith has been given in narratives of recovery from substance abuse. The article is intended to advance discussion about the spiritual and religious aspects of recovery by introducing a narrative point of view. Four different story types are presented, each expressing a unique relationship between sobriety and the Christian faith: (1) “Third Time Lucky,” (2) “First Be Rid of Wickedness, Then Be Rid of Holiness,” (3) “A License to Live,” and (4) “Out of the Blue.” In the first story type, only the third conversion effected a permanent change. In the second, gaining and maintaining sobriety happened in two phases. In the third story type, the major achievement was accepting oneself. And in the fourth, a complete change took place surprisingly and suddenly. The findings show how the Christian faith can contribute to recovery in various ways and that no specific type of Christian faith is universally helpful. Faith appeared in many forms, even within the same narrative. This study is part of a larger research project based on qualitative data collected in 2010 in Finland. The data consists of in-depth interviews of 21 former substance abusers.

Keywords Recovery · Substance abuse · Narrative · Christian faith · Religiousness · Spirituality

Background

The relationship between religious experience and sobriety has attracted both practical and academic interest for more than a century (Shorkey and Windsor 2010), and the growth of the Alcoholic Anonymous (AA) movement has underlined the importance of spirituality in recovery for decades (Bliss 2007; Miller and Kurtz 1994). Additionally, policies in favor of faith-based organizations in the United States have aroused questions about the role of faith in the field of recovery (Grettenberger et al. 2006; Windsor and Shorkey 2010).

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Thus, academic interest in the relationship between religion, spirituality, faith, and recovery from substance abuse has been growing in the last two decades. A number of studies have been published (e.g., Cook 2004; Gorsuch 1995; Jarusiewicz 2000; Miller 1998; Miller et al. 2008; Robinson et al. 2003;), as well as a few reviews (Bliss 2007; Borrás et al. 2010; Chitwood et al. 2008; Geppert et al. 2007; Stoltzfus 2007). Key findings include the notions that higher levels of religiosity and spirituality are associated with a decreased risk of substance use and that spirituality can play an important role in recovery, although not the only role. Despite these important findings, some researchers have argued that little is known and that research has only begun (Geppert et al. 2007), that empirical data are limited and methodologically weak (Zanis and Cnaan 2006), and that no agreement has been reached on theoretical explanations (Stoltzfus 2007; Timmons 2010) or basic concepts, such as what is meant when “spirituality” is discussed (Bliss 2007). There seems to be a need for further research on spirituality and recovery.

What researchers actually mean when discussing spirituality and religiosity in relation to recovery has remained somewhat obscure. Many researchers have struggled to define such key concepts as “spirituality” and “religiosity,” attempting to clarify them, distinguish them from each other, and find ways to measure them and their relationship to recovery (Brown et al. 2006; Chitwood et al. 2008; Cook 2004; Miller and Pogenschutz 2007). Klingemann and colleagues asked clients to draw a picture of spirituality (Klingemann et al. 2013) to clarify how former abusers themselves understand the concept. The intense and ongoing discussion about how to talk about religious and spiritual issues, which is also a topic of debate among specialists, religious scientists, and theologians (e.g., Smith 1964; McGuire 2008), underlines the need to understand what is meant by “spirituality” and “religiousness.” In order to avoid dwelling on conceptual definitions of religion and spirituality, the idea of lived religion (McGuire 2008) and the individual’s own interpretation of his/her faith and beliefs are taken as starting points for this study. Thus, this study focuses on religious individuals, not religion (Comstock 2004).

Quite reasonably, the studies on spirituality, religiousness, and recovery have mainly focused on treatment units, which provide a functional research environment enabling follow-up studies (e.g., Williamson and Hood 2012). However, focusing on treatment units and their clients has been seen as a limitation to the understanding of the phenomenon (e.g., McCoy et al. 2005; Neff and MacMaster 2005; Neff et al. 2006). In line with this, some researchers have noticed that much of the literature dealing with spirituality and recovery is AA centered (Bliss 2007; Geppert et al. 2007), which also limits the perspective. On the other hand, spontaneous recovery is generally known to be surprisingly common (e.g., Blomqvist 1996; Cunningham et al. 2005). This suggests that the relationship between spirituality, religiousness, and recovery should be targeted outside treatment and AA. There might be a need to focus research on how spirituality and religiousness are present in spontaneous recovery.

The narrative approach to recovery (e.g., Hänninen and Koski-Jännes 1999) provides one way of enriching research on the phenomenon. The narrative approach helps the recovery process to be viewed in a holistic way, relating recovery to the entire life course and enabling the research participants themselves to define the issues essential to recovery. Thus, the narrative approach and the first-person account it provides may result in new insights on spirituality, religiousness, and recovery. One key factor is that autobiographical narratives allow research subjects to express multiple and contradictory experiences and selves (Wortham 2001), which is otherwise not easily achieved but is significant when talking about substance

abuse, recovery, spirituality, and religiousness. Of course, the truth, reliability, and validity of narrative research may differ from those of quantitative research, but being different does not mean being wrong or irrelevant (Riessman 2008). As stated originally by Jerome Bruner (1986) and repeated by many ever since (e.g., MacAdams 1993), the logico-scientific mode of thought providing universality is not the only choice for anyone thinking or researching, but another way, that of narratives, can provide us with verisimilitude or lifelikeness.

The narrative approach has been applied to recovery studies in various ways. Some studies have focused on various paths out of different dependencies such as alcohol, drugs, and nicotine (Koski-Jännes and Turner 1999), others on AA stories describing the help of twelve-step programs and peer support (Steffen 1997; Weegmann and Piwowoz-Hjort 2009). The help provided by spirituality, faith, or religion has appeared in a number of previous studies on narratives of recovery, but that help has remained unanalyzed (Blomqvist 1996; Jacobson 2001; Koski-Jännes and Turner 1999; Weegmann 2004). Alternative narratives of recovery are needed to cast light on those paths to recovery that are not yet well known (Weegmann 2004).

Hence, this article examines the role of the Christian faith in narratives of recovery from substance abuse. “Christian faith” is understood, in accordance with the lived religion tradition, in the sense expressed by the research participants. “Recovery,” in turn, is understood as a comprehensive process from the misuse of substances to the sober life, including its medical, psychological, personal, social, spiritual, and religious aspects, as interpreted by the research participants.

Understanding recovery as a lengthy process with many and varying turns and experiences, many of which take place outside any treatment or peer groups, can help enhance our understanding of spirituality, religion, and recovery. Discussing recovery in a comprehensive way draws attention not only to psychopathology or behavioral psychology but to the identity processes that recovery from substance abuse often requires (Koski-Jännes 2002; see also Galanter 2007). A long-term perspective enables focusing on both gaining and maintaining sobriety.

This qualitative and retrospective study focuses on the relationship between faith and sobriety in the lengthy process of gaining and maintaining sobriety. As a part of a larger research project, this article focuses on the aspect of recovery narratives regarding the Christian faith in recovery. The question to be answered is in what different ways the Christian faith has helped in the process of recovery from substance abuse.

I begin by reviewing my research methods. I then propose four different story types. In the first story type, only the third conversion effected a permanent change. In the second, gaining and maintaining sobriety happened in two phases. In the third story type, the major achievement was accepting oneself. And in the fourth, a complete change took place surprisingly and suddenly. The findings show how the Christian faith can contribute to recovery in various ways and that no specific type of Christian faith is universally helpful. I conclude with a discussion on the relationship between those faith stories and the processes of recovery.

Material and methods

This article is part of a larger research project on the Christian faith and recovery. The research is qualitative in nature because it focuses on individual experiences and interpretations to examine variations in this relationship.

Participants

The sample consisted of 21 individuals. The age of the interviewees ranged from less than 30 to almost 70, the majority being between 50 and 60 years of age. At the time of the interviews, all were Protestant Christians, some belonging to the Lutheran church, which is predominant in Finland, and most to the Pentecostal and Free Church denominations, which are known to actively work in the field of substance abuse. Many had changed denominations, mainly from the Lutheranism of their childhood to the Pentecostal Church or the Free Church. Some reported attending activities of more than one denomination, and a couple underlined the difficulty of finding a denomination that fit their needs. Thus, it is difficult to report the exact religious affiliations of the interviewees. The intensity of their faith had varied over their life course from practically none to very committed. It is worth noting that none had been an active believer throughout his/her life, and some had been non-believers most of their lives.

The research is based on qualitative interviews of 21 individuals who met the following criteria: they had all had serious problems with substance abuse, they had recovered at least three years before being interviewed, they had in some way taken advantage of the Christian faith in their recovery, and they attended the interviews voluntarily. Informed consent was obtained from all of the participants included in the study. The participants themselves judged whether they met the criteria. The details of their life stories were not compared to facts from other sources, so it is impossible to evaluate, for instance, the seriousness of their abuse or any diagnostic criteria they might have met. In the light of their retrospective narratives, it seems justified to call them former heavy abusers with a severe alcohol problem and, in many cases, a drug problem as well. Experiences of homelessness and imprisonment were common. Some had spent years in prison because of serious crimes such as manslaughter. Recovery meant starting and managing a new life after years of abuse with serious social, health, and financial consequences. Recovery was not limited to quitting their substance abuse, but included re-establishing relationships; reordering their use of time; learning to cope with everyday skills, obstacles and burdens; and managing their finances (Borras et al. 2010). All save one had become teetotalers, which is common for those with severe problems (Cunningham et al. 2004).

The interviewees were reached with the help of faith-based organizations (FBO) and the use of snowballing, with interviewees suggesting another individual to interview. Twenty FBOs were sent an email asking them to help find interviewees, to consider whether they knew suitable individuals, and to enquire about the willingness of those individuals to attend an interview. The FBOs were chosen from all corners of Finland so as to avoid the influence of any individual organization or treatment center.

The sample was strongly male dominated; it included only three women. The interviewees were suggested by the FBOs or other interviewees, so the gender imbalance may in some way reflect the target group. It is generally known that men abuse substances more than women, especially in older generations, which has been well documented in Finland (Kuussaari et al. 2014; Mäkelä et al. 2010). In the light of this data, gender did not appear to play a decisive role; there seemed not to be any “female story” because the three women represented three different story types. Of course, the small sample size and especially the notably low number of women involved makes it impossible to say anything about the role gender might play in the relation between faith and recovery.

Procedure

Naturally, knowledge of the actual circumstances is strongly limited in retrospective interviews. As the intention of the research is to study the relationship between the Christian faith and recovery, the interviews were, however, carefully designed to provide a comprehensive picture that would reveal the original events and experiences as much as possible (Squire 2008). The focus here is more on the “told” than on the “telling” (Riessman 2008), that is, on what the interviewees told me about their life course than on how the telling took place. I assumed that the interviewee had previously told others about his/her recovery and that many had given testimonies in peer groups, in religious services, or as volunteers in prisons, treatment units, or drop-in centers. Since an individual life story is always composed also by others (e.g., White and Epston 1990; Whitebrook 2001), what William Lowell Randall insightfully calls the “outside-in story” (Randall 2014), there is a notable risk of melding the individual life course and “learned genres,” as Cain (1991) has described regarding AA. Therefore, to avoid stereotyped stories that would reflect more the typical forms of narrative in given congregations or peer groups than the actual events, I designed a study with varied interviewing methods.

First of all, each of the 21 participants was interviewed twice. This gave me the possibility to listen to the first interview before the second and hence further discuss issues that remained unclear (see Atkinson 2002; Squire 2008). Second, both interviews consisted of two parts, which enabled approaching the topic in four different ways. In the first interview, each person was first asked to tell the story of his/her life, not only the story of recovery, to create a comprehensive picture and to avoid the possibly often-repeated recovery story. The length of the life stories varied widely, ranging from about five minutes to almost an hour, the average length being about 20 min. This variation obviously reveals more about the differences in the participants’ capability to narrate than about the life stories as such, but it draws attention to the importance of collecting data in varied ways—telling one’s life story is not easy for everyone. The life story was followed by clarifying questions in order to invite sharing and encourage a fuller narrative (Chase 1995) and to draw out more specific details (Riessman 2008). This second part of the first interview lasted in most cases longer than the first and uncovered vital information about faith and recovery. The first interview lasted altogether from about 40 min to about 1 h and 50 min, the average being 1 h and 15 min. Most interviews took place in the offices of those FBOs that had helped find the interviewees, but some were held in the homes of the interviewees, two in a hotel, and one at my own home.

At the end of the first interview, the interviewees were given “homework”; they were asked to recall some quotations and songs that had been important in their recovery. The meaning of those quotations and songs were then discussed as the first part of the second interview. Additionally, eight prompts dealing with Christian faith and sobriety were presented, and the interviewees were asked to comment on them. Using prompts helps to stimulate discussion and encourage the interviewee to comment on controversial and sensitive topics without the interviewer directly asking about them or expressing any opinion about them. The use of prompts helps to distance the interviewer and his/her possible presuppositions (for more about using prompts, see Pyysiäinen and Vesala 2013). The prompts included (originally in Finnish, here translated into English): (1) God gets the credit for my sobriety; (2) Because I am a Christian, I can differentiate between right and wrong; (3) My way of believing is true, and other ways of believing are untrue; (4) My success is a result of my faith; (5) I define my faith independently; (6) God influences my actions; (7) Other people have been important to my

sobriety; and (8) My faith is only one way of comprehending God. The first part of the second interview lasted from 15 to 54 min and the second part from 15 to 47 min; altogether, the second interviews lasted from 31 min to 1 h and 34 min, the average being 56 min. The themes of the second interview will be discussed in more detail in forthcoming articles, but they were also part of the analysis here.

Interviewing each individual twice, asking clarifying questions, and asking them to recall quotations and songs and comment on the prompts helped me to obtain a comprehensive picture of the relationship between the Christian faith and recovery in the lives of these individuals. The varied interview methods helped to obtain a complete picture of each interviewee's life course and to portray religion and spirituality as lived experiences (Atkinson 2002) and thus to relate their stories to the lived religion tradition.

Method of analysis

All the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Mishler's (1991) analogy between a transcript and a photograph describes a transcript as only imitating or mimicking the authentic interview, like a photo imitates its object, and likewise I preferred to repeatedly both listen to and read the interviews to obtain a complete picture of the data at hand. The interviews were first analyzed as units instead of fragmented thematic categories, as is commonplace in narrative analysis (Riessman 2008). The data is rich and can and will be analyzed in various ways. This article focuses on a narrative analysis of the data.

The reasons for applying narrative analysis relate to the nature of the relationship between the Christian faith and recovery from substance abuse. The relationship seems to develop, change over the course of time, and manifest itself in a variety of ways even within one life story. Narrative analysis helps reveal this kind of process. Narrative analysis, in contrast to the analysis of narratives, means the collection of descriptions of events and happenings, followed by their synthesis by means of a plot into a story (see Polkinghorne 1995). In narrative analysis, all available data can be used, not only narratives, which in this study means applying both parts of both interviews. The process of forming stories, the narrative analysis, resembles what is called the hermeneutic circle, where the researcher reads and analyses the data, moving from parts to the whole and back. The process is slow and proceeds through trial and error and intuition and revision until the essential part, the plot, is found.

The process of analysis included the following phases. First, I listened to the recorded interviews and read the transcriptions of both interviews of each individual to become familiar with the data. Secondly, I took notes on each individual narrative, which meant using details from both interviews, not only from the narrative interview. The intention of the notes was to clarify the process of recovery and the way the Christian faith was related to it, which comprised the basic story line of each life course. Thirdly, I categorized the narratives (Riessman 2008) according to how they presented the relationship between the Christian faith and the process of gaining and maintaining sobriety. This means both how faith influenced abuse or sobriety and how sobriety had an effect on faith. All save one of the 21 interviewees were easily categorized into one of the four groups of stories; one life story was too chaotic to structure at all. What unites the stories in each group is the way faith relates to recovery. The external factors, from childhood to adulthood, from prison to hospital, vary within each story type. Fourth, I re-examined the data in order to confirm whether the categories were consistent with the data and whether each individual was placed in the correct category. Fifth, I named the four categories and formed four respective story types. The story types were formed by

merging elements from different participants and thus creating a composite story, which has been called “told from multiple tellings” (Hänninen and Koski-Jännes 1999; Mishler 1995). This means that each story type presents a story that incorporates ingredients from the elements categorized into that given group but is as such a creation by the researcher. Such a composite story enables both clarifying the idea of the story line and introducing representative details and illustrative quotations.

Findings

The analysis resulted in four story types, which are presented here. All start from substance abuse and end with permanent sobriety (see Fig. 1). In each case, the very general story line and the number of research participants placed in the given group are introduced in the first section. The text then proceeds to present a composite story resulting from multiple tellings (Hänninen and Koski-Jännes 1999; Mishler 1995), with excerpts from some of the interviews. It is thus a generalized story, and the protagonist of the composite story was created by the researcher. The protagonist is referred to as “she” in story types one and three, and as “he” in story types two and four. This does not, however, relate to gender balance, but is merely a technical choice to make text less complex than necessary. The last paragraph related to each story summarizes the most significant point.

The first story type: “Third Time Lucky”

The main character of the first story type lived through a lengthy process of recovery that took years, even decades. She attempted to gain sobriety several times with the help of the Christian faith. She had encountered Christianity on different occasions throughout the years but could not attain adherence to it. She converted several times, once in childhood and a second time while drinking heavily or taking drugs, both without permanent effect. The third time effected a change (see Fig. 1). Therefore, this story type is called “Third Time Lucky.” Four research participants were placed in this group.

The story begins in childhood or adolescence. She had an unstable childhood. Bad habits were part of everyday life. She had, however, an isolated encounter with Christianity when she, for instance, attended a summer camp organized by a local Pentecostal congregation with a neighbor child. At that camp, she felt good and safe, loved and emotionally affected. During the camp, she converted and promised to follow Jesus. When she came back to the chaotic home, the faith process was interrupted. Life continued without Jesus despite her promises.

At the age of 12, I was at camp and found God. Before that I had a drinking binge... There was my first revival. They asked if anyone wants to turn to Jesus. I saw an on/off device, Jesus–Satan. No question, I take Jesus. I felt regenerated [followed by] immense joy and peace. After the camp I went home. I lasted a couple of weeks. My mates were shouting, “The pastor is coming and giving a blessing.” I did not get any support, not from my parents or from anyone. I went back to drinking. (Person 11)

Her drinking and taking drugs increased and became a full-time habit. Another event occurred, however; she attended, for example, a Christian treatment program. There, she took

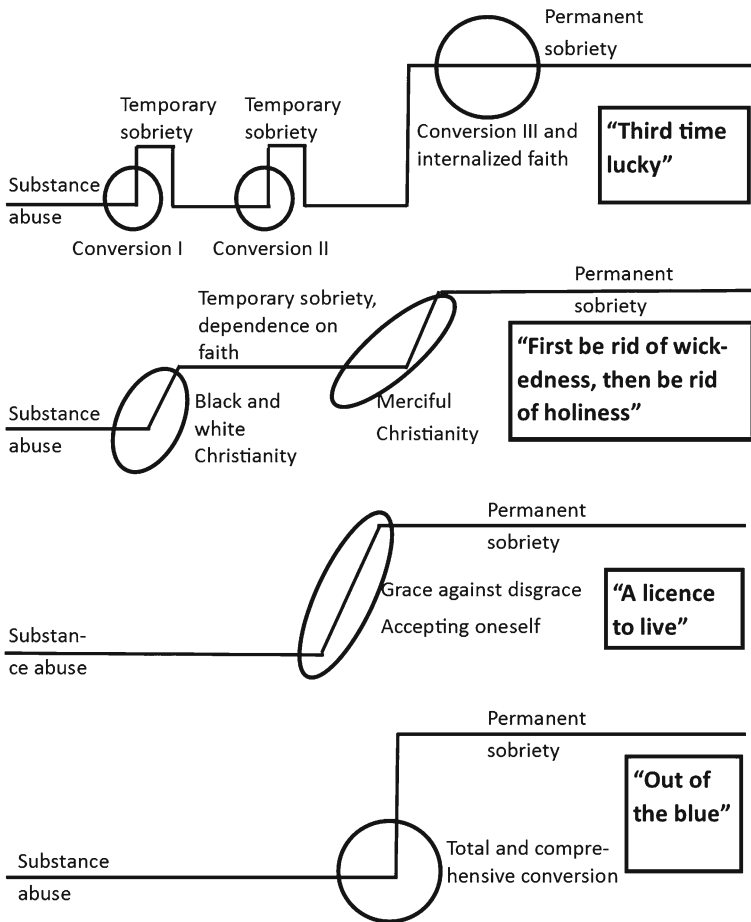


Fig. 1 Four story types reflecting the process of moving from substance abuse to permanent sobriety

part in devotional services, read the Bible and prayed, and managed to quit her substance abuse. She then converted. At home after the treatment program, her faith faded, and her previous habits returned. The failure to maintain her faith and sobriety made the situation even worse: she felt that she had missed her opportunity and was doomed to misery.

I attended inpatient treatment. There I knelt down at the altar and asked and prayed for mercy. I was rather disappointed when nothing happened. From there it started, even the last hindrance disappeared.... I took a suicidal turn. Although I had decided to follow Jesus I chose the opposite.... Then I thought I had been abandoned. I drank in an insane way. (Person 16)

A third opportunity did arise, however. Something, an accident, an imprisonment, or a treatment period, made her consider deeper questions. Her habit of drinking or taking drugs came to an end, and this was followed by a third conversion. Gaining sobriety preceded the conversion, not vice versa. She made the decision to commit herself to Christ with a sober mind. Converting enabled her to maintain sobriety, which previously had failed.

Some see the light first and get sober then, but for me it happened vice versa. I first got my head clear. I realized that it is the only option.... I attended screening tests [in prison].... I also stopped taking medicine for an emotional disorder.... Finally... [after a year of sobriety] I was ready to give my life to Jesus. I said, now I am completely here and available. The change started soon; the following morning, my mates asked what had happened. I used to look angry but now hatred had disappeared and been replaced by joy. (Person 13)

She tried to transform with the help of a new identity offered by a group of Christians. Her need to change was immense, and unusual circumstances at camps or in-patient treatment programs seemed to offer an opportunity. Her problem lay in how to make a Christian identity her own. At least when seen retrospectively, her will to become sober and a true believer was long-lasting. Despite the previous attempts, however, the concepts of “I” and “true Christian believer” did not seem to match. There was too huge a gap between the self-concept and the image of a Christian.

The Christianity at the camp or the treatment program was too difficult to obtain. It seemed to belong to good and immaculate people. Only her realization that she did not have to already be good and that her autobiography was not an obstacle to becoming a believer bridged the gap. After many years, she found a way to interpret the Christian identity in her own terms. What was essential was that she was allowed to be a Christian as she was. Her faith was not questioned, and she was not forced to obey rigid congregational rules. She was not asked to witness about her faith but was given space and support.

I joined right away in my fragile faith a community, where there were no qualifications or demands, not concerning my knowledge of the Bible, of my faith. I did not have to prove anything. I was accepted as I was, which was very important for me. (Person 16)

This is the story of an individual trying to quit substance abuse with the help of Christianity but not managing to do so until she eventually comprehends that she does not have to become a different person to be a Christian. The social models that she had earlier tried to imitate only widened the gap between what she was and what she thought she should be. Finding her own way of being a Christian followed her sobriety and helped to maintain it; the sobriety became permanent. There was no need for a fourth conversion.

The second story type: “First Be Rid of Wickedness, Then Be Rid of Holiness”

The protagonist of the second story type first gained and years later managed to maintain sobriety. His process consisted of two phases, both of which were necessary to reach permanent sobriety (see Fig. 1). First, he quit abusing substances and became a truly committed and strict Christian. Later, after a number of years, he found a more merciful version of Christianity and distanced himself from the strictness of his first sober years. Since there were two challenges, first the liberation from substance abuse and then from an uncompromising interpretation of Christianity, this story type is entitled “First Be Rid of Wickedness, Then Be Rid of Holiness.”¹ Seven research participants were placed in this group.

¹ This is a quote from an interviewee (Person 4). The English translation loses the rhyme of the original Finnish quote. In Finnish, “wickedness” is “paha” and “holiness” is “pyhä,” which makes the expression (“Ensin eroon pahasta, sitten pyhästä”) both informative and poetic.

The recovery process starts from a turning point that took place after years of abuse. He both converted to Christianity and achieved sobriety, not necessarily on the same day but during the same episode. He became a sober Christian person—a sober, very strict Christian person! Having spent years drinking or taking drugs and, often, being involved in crime, he now went to the other extreme. He became the most committed Christian, absolutely knowing what is right. He obeyed God, read the Bible, and lived what he read. All others were to obey God as well, so he told them how to behave. The former addict would tell other abusers that they were disobeying God. He joined a group of Christians to pray, preach, and proselytize. His worldview was black and white. He had moved from dependence on substances to dependence on faith and a congregation (on substitute dependencies, see Vaillant 1988).

Fight against sin, no cursing, strictly sticking to rules. I opposed everything that belonged to my previous life.... I went to the smoking place and heard them saying that the mad man is coming... I saw wrong things done and told them not to do them.... I did not have any love whatsoever but hate against sin.... I really stuck to the rules in the beginning. It was for my best. (Person 10)

I was merciless, severe, more demanding towards Christians. I allowed almost nothing. I had fragile boundaries myself, and I was looking for safer boundaries. In the peer group we had definitive rules: one hangover and you are out. I kept looking at other believers from the outside thinking I could judge their faith. Standards were high. (Person 4)

After those early black and white years, it was vital to mature into the second phase. Otherwise, such unquestioning strictness would have led him, a recovering addict, to burn out and relapse. The first uncompromising years were a necessary phase for overcoming wickedness. To be able to continue living, however, he also had to rid himself of holiness.

The second phase started a few years after the first due to an important event, such as a relapse or new responsibilities, or just due to maturation. He realized that there were different kinds of opinions, all of which were partly justified. His comprehension of God also changed. He no longer saw God as a strict ruler demanding slavish obedience but as a merciful omnipotent Father, whose substance resembled love more than morality. Meanwhile, his relationship to the fellowship of Christians changed. He was not to obey local Christian teaching but to believe and practice Christianity according to his own understanding. Freeing himself from the grip of holiness, a slow process often taking years, was the second phase essential to maintaining sobriety.

Relapse was a process that changed everything. I was no longer judging.... My own conception of spirituality changed. Do we really understand the deep meaning of faith or are they only phrases that we learn? From then on it was more like philosophical pondering, not always like it has been taught. I separated from the congregation, started to look for answers from everyday life. (Person 3)

I guess it took like two and a half or three years, I suppose it is linked to attending the board of a local NGO to help others. I realized I could not preach rules but needed grace. A merciful point of view emerged from the practical work and also from the Bible. But as long as I had been reading it and living by myself, I focused

on rules and spiritual law.... My role on a board and working collectively taught me that commanding is not the way and that one cannot always be right. Others also have good opinions and right opinions and together we find the best way. It is enriching and not distressing to realize that I do not always have to be and I cannot always be right about each issue. (Person 2)

He first stuck tightly to the Bible and local congregations, which helped him turn over a new leaf. Thereafter, forming his own interpretation of Christianity was vital in order to become free not only from substance abuse but also from human religious traditions. Becoming free from social norms was, however, far from easy. It could require leaving the congregation and moving to another area. Freedom was thus achieved, but the price was high. Finding the courage to break the bondage was, however, crucial.

In each congregation there are traditions that are followed.... If you accept them, you are accepted. But if you do not, you are somehow excluded, you do not belong to the community.... Jesus wants us become free from those traditions, from the ways in which the Bible is interpreted and from such spiritual slavery.... I was first a certain way in the congregation for 10 to 15 years. I acted like the others and embraced that culture and kept sitting on the pew. Then eventually I started to realize that this is not the faith we have been called to.... Gradually I started to change, and now I feel I act as I wish.... I need not please anyone. (Person 20)

Two years ago I dared leave the community, which was also my employer. We moved to a new town and I got a new job. It was a huge step towards humanity. My new colleagues were not believers. I was not able to just quote the Bible. I have gained normality.... [Previously] I only negotiated with substance abusers or former abusers who had converted to Christianity.... Once I moved and changed jobs, the picture changed. I could see how normal human beings are living.... For 3 to 4 years, I kept planning on leaving but did not dare to. Finally, I did. It was a good change for me and my family.... It took courage to step outside those circles. I was very lonely. But it was a good change. (Person 8)

This story type underlines that converting to Christianity and becoming sober is not necessarily a final solution. The first phase is not always followed by the second, and some return to substance abuse. These seven research participants all underlined that the first phase alone is not a permanent solution, since living according to strict rules is too demanding in the long run. Entering the second phase was difficult and frightening but vital in order to maintain sobriety and to prevent a return to abuse.

The third story type: “A License to Live”

The central character of the third story type felt ashamed. She was unable to accept herself. The reasons for this were many: a traumatic childhood, bullying, sexual abuse. She started drinking and/or taking drugs to escape from dissatisfaction. The Christian faith eventually helped her to conquer shame. She learned to see the world and especially herself from a new, accepting angle. Therefore, the story type is called “A License to Live.” The change did not happen at once, but it was rapid and was in most cases not interpreted religiously but as a kind of insight (see Fig. 1). Seven research participants were placed in this group.

In the beginning of her story, certain life conditions, processes, or a single event led her to abuse substances. Although her story is about shame and getting rid of that shame, she did not feel any shame when drinking or taking drugs, not even in the interview years later. She spoke about running and hiding and about feeling bad and unaccepted but did not mention shame, which she clearly was speaking about. This is typical of shame, an emotion not widely discussed, recognized, or treated (e.g., Katz 1999; Scheff and Retzinger 2000).

Bullying at school started early. It has influenced many aspects of my life. I was good at school. I had to try to please teachers.... The bullying lasted my entire time in school, it did not end even in high school. I shut myself away.... I moved to another part of the country... there I started to drink. I had no friends. I worked hard and drank daily. (Person 21)

What helped her deal with shame was receiving permission to exist. The role of other people and their support was fundamental in this process. She was able to name those important persons, for example, a treatment group, a peer group, a congregation, certain professionals, or lay individuals. It was not God but other people who helped her to see clearly. By expressing “you are good” or “you are like any of us” or “you have opportunities in life,” these people helped her conquer shame.

God remained in the backstage, but God was there. The people who helped were the ones who conveyed the gospel or encouraged her to pray. It was not these people alone but also the message they carried that helped her accept herself. God’s grace conquered shame. Nevertheless, God and grace needed those accepting, encouraging, and loving people.

The camps [organized by Lutheran congregations for addicted people] were good, nothing was forced. The deacon was good, he let us discuss and potter around. We were all sober, with clean clothes and sheets. We went to sauna. Somebody cared.... I was somehow touched. God or a higher power came out, something that had been hidden although that was present already in childhood. The unknown started to interest me. Everyone has their own life, every person under the sky is a human, all humans are equal. There are no scales of values or degrees or ranks. The pain because of alcohol eased. (Person 5)

It was God, not Jesus, she was talking about. Praying to God provided an inner peace, which helped her maintain sobriety. She was not eagerly reading the Bible, was not necessarily even familiar with it, and was not converting others. Not surprisingly, the only two individuals in the sample with meaningful experiences within AA belong to this group. The concepts of God as almighty and omnipotent and of spirituality that concentrates on individual prayer are typical of both her story and stories within AA (Weegmann 2004).

Well, I believe in providence and believe before anything in myself that the power is somehow in me, that I have received it from somewhere.... I believe that God is always with me and in me, and so I do not have such a need to go to a church, for instance. I do visit services with pleasure, but I do not have any need to go. (Person 7)

The core of the story is that she accepted herself. Escaping herself made it difficult to belong: she even drank alone. She was a loner. What happened, eventually, was a rapid process in which she learned to accept himself. The question was not about being accepted but about accepting herself. Despite the importance of other people, these are truly stories centered on the self. She was able to share her new concepts with peers but had no intention of trying to influence anyone. If asked, she would tell her story, but she was not a preacher.

She differed strikingly from the individuals in the other story types regarding one prompt in the second interview. I asked each participant to comment on the prompt, “My way of believing is true and other ways of believing are untrue.” The arguments varied overall, but she stood out from the rest by declaring the question meaningless: she, or all of the individuals within this story type, did not speculate on the ways that other people believe, saying instead that believing is an individual issue.

Well, the way I believe is true, it is my way, but I don't say that other ways are wrong. Everybody may, I guess, choose freely. (Person 15)

This story type is about how she learns to accept herself, rid herself of shame, and concentrate on herself. Inner peace was a major achievement. Christianity, especially the gospel of grace, often via other people, helped her to accept herself and live her life without substance abuse. She spoke about God, prayer, and inner peace, not about Jesus, the Bible and the evangelization of others.

The fourth story type: “Out of the Blue”

The protagonist of the fourth story type suddenly experienced an event that changed his whole life in a moment. The change was total: he never drank again; he never relapsed; he never attended any treatment, therapy, or peer group. A whole new life began at that very special moment (see Fig. 1). The fourth story type is called “Out of the Blue.” This kind of process, which seems easy, is very rare. Only two research participants told a story like this.

When the recovery story begins, he was tired of drinking, living in very poor physical health, and being dirty and filthy. There was nothing good left. Then, surprisingly, someone encouraged him to attend a religious meeting. Not at all a regular visitor, he was familiar with the place, however, because of previously receiving aid there. He went to the meeting and suddenly felt as if God were touching him. It was not only a mental but a physical experience, with a heavy weight dropping from his shoulders and a strange feeling of freedom and redemption overtaking him. From that moment on, life was totally different.

I woke up at a building site. I had slept under an oil drum and was completely oily. I was on my way to a local pub when a young believer came along [and said], “Let Him save you from that misery, come to a meeting.”... I was physically and mentally totally exhausted, in poor shape. I went, since I had promised, I went, luckily I went... [I was] as dirty and untidy as ever. [They asked], “Is there anyone, who would like to give his/her life to Jesus?” I was ready. They prayed for me. I felt liberated. I am God's child, free from all of these.... The feeling of liberation, I sensed it clearly, that craving was taken away. The bottles and cigarettes in my pocket, I threw them away. (Person 6)

Even if someone had shot me, nothing would have mattered.... I was living in an alkie's camp. We had three shelters there. One fellow [from the congregation] took the trouble to visit us regularly. I had been to spiritual meetings, always drunk and sitting in the back.... Once I went sober, I saw the light. All that shit fell off, a new life began.... I went to be prayed for, immediately there was such a certainty.... I had a horrible amount of medicine for mental and sleeping problems. I could leave everything at once. (Person 9)

Miller and C’de Baca (2001) have described what they call “quantum change” experiences in which epiphanies and sudden insights transform ordinary lives. I find it justified to use this term for these changes. Three points in them are remarkable: first, the preceding life story had no hint of a coming transformation. Second, the change occurred surprisingly and unintentionally; it was not a choice, and the individual was not looking for a change. And third, the change took place in a moment; no subsequent growth was needed; maintaining sobriety was not a question; and the previous life was not a problem, since the feelings of guilt and shame had disappeared.

He needed some support to get on his feet, to achieve proper health and the ability to work. Fellow Christians were important in that process, but only in that way; in these stories it is emphasized that in becoming sober, no help from other people was needed. Strikingly, the tellers of all three other story types answered positively when asked whether other people had been important in their recovery, but he denied the importance of human help. It was solely God who helped.

I would say that human beings had nothing to do with my becoming sober.... Nothing helped or changed anything. I was only helped by Jesus. (Person 6)

He has been living the ordinary life of a working man now for more than ten years. Transformation, once experienced, seems to be permanent.

Thank God, I have not needed to take a single drink, nor smoked a single cigarette. I believe that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, liberated me from everything, liberated me from my sins, which I committed as much as I could, all kinds of things. (Person 9)

He suddenly noticed that his very self had altered. Without actually even knowing much about the Christian identity that he strongly felt was his and which he only later learned to express in words, he was positive that this was his new identity. Being a committed Christian was his new identity based on an experience so intense that no words were needed. Nothing in his faith or conscience has changed ever since. He immediately became what he was meant to be.

This story introduces a recovery process that is very simple. Quitting abuse happened in a moment and all of a sudden. His previous life course did not hint about the forthcoming quantum change, which turned out to be both immediate, total, and permanent.

Discussion

When analyzing research on psychological treatments for addiction, Jim Orford (2008) suggests that changes should be made to previous practices. What has been unsatisfactory, according to Orford, was the inability to integrate research on unaided change, the use of inappropriate time-scales for the change process, the failure to take the system or social network view, and the lack of the patient’s view. He calls for studying change processes instead of named techniques and for studying those change processes within broader, longer-acting systems, of which treatment is only a part. Additionally, he recommends acknowledging a variety of sources and underlines the importance of qualitative research (Orford 2008). This study has tried to contribute to answering these needs. I have studied Christian faith and recovery as a lengthy process from the first-person perspective while taking the social environment and non-professional aid and unaided recovery into account.

The relationship between Christian faith and recovery, understood as the process of gaining and maintaining sobriety, appeared to be versatile in this study. Four different kinds of story types were found, each representing a different relationship. The story types are presented in Fig. 1. Each line represents a story type, starting from substance abuse and ending in permanent sobriety. The points at which Christianity had an important effect are marked with circles and ovals. A circle refers to a sudden effect, such as conversion, and an oval to a long-lasting influence.

The concepts of sudden conversion and gradual conversion bring to mind the terminology used by William James over 100 years ago (James 1902/1982). This study both highlights the presence of sudden and gradual conversions and underlines the importance of not seeing them as two exclusive options or the only options. In line with what Williamson and Hood (2013) have stated about multiple sudden conversions and a gradual conversion within a single life course, this study also stresses the diversity of conversions. In these stories, some became sober through conversion, but more often the individual converted only after becoming sober, if conversion as such is even a good concept. As Lewis Rambo (1993; see also 2010) has stated, “Conversion is what a group says it is.” Similar to conversion, the other key issue of this research, recovery, can happen suddenly or through a gradual process. Previous research has suggested that recovery is usually a lengthy process (Öjesjö 2004), and, in the light of these data, this seems to be true also when talking about recovery with the help of the Christian faith.

These stories underline the diversity of ways Christian faith and recovery can be interrelated and may thus widen the perspective on the topic. The definition and type of faiths varied among the interviewees, even within the same life story. What helped in one phase was different from what helped in another. The faith itself was not always helpful and sometimes even provided another area for failure and disappointment. In many cases, the storyteller’s spirituality, religiousness, or faith was not easily differentiated from that of individuals in close proximity, fellow Christians, or the members of the congregation or FBO. Faith was not solely a spiritual matter but very much a social matter, as well.

For some, Christianity was an inner peace granted by a heavenly Master. For others, the Christian faith was received through a mysterious experience and became the foundation of their entire life. Some found it unattainable at first but eventually made it their own. The Christian faith and groups of believers were seen as being perfect, almost as saints, as an idealized model with which one could transform one’s whole life in a moment. Only when Christianity was understood as a faith of the broken and sinful did it appear attainable. Still, there were some whose Christianity was at first uncompromising and gradually became more tolerant. For them, two different kinds of Christian faith were essential in their recovery. First, an unconditional faith helped them to quit substance abuse, and then the more merciful and broadminded faith enabled them to maintain sobriety.

This study reveals one crucial point, namely, that in the majority of cases a sufficient length of time after gaining sobriety is needed for a successful recovery, although this is limited to the study participants and cannot be generalized. This, of course, raises a question for future research. Two examples from this study may clarify the question. In the “Third Time Lucky” group, the results would have been very different had those individuals been examined after their second, not their final, conversion. And in the “First Be Rid of Wickedness, Then Be Rid of Holiness” group, the relationship between faith and sobriety would have been seen entirely differently during the first years of sobriety before the second phase. The previous case would suggest that Christianity did not help at all in maintaining sobriety; the latter would suggest that what Christianity can offer is nothing but another dependence on uncompromising faith.

Undoubtedly, both results are partially correct since there surely are individuals who never reach the third conversion or the second phase. However, future research could better answer this question.

In summary, no single, specific type of “Christian faith” helped the people who participated in the study, but various kinds of Christian faith were found to be supportive. Faith, spirituality, and religiousness are to be seen as an ongoing process, not as a static state. Focusing on lived religion (McGuire 2008) and religious narratives (Comstock 2004) supports the understanding of recovery as a lengthy process with many phases and of the relationship between faith and recovery as a mutual transformation.

Limitations

The limitations are obvious: the sample is small, strongly male dominated, and includes only individuals whose relationship to Christianity was positive at the time of interviewing. The discussion was strictly restricted to positive relations between Christian faith and recovery, although the data reveal many critical viewpoints from earlier phases of the lives of the interviewees. The data consists of retrospective interviews, which cannot be fact checked to determine the level of the substance abuse or the individual’s diagnostic criteria. Hence, it is only possible to focus on experiences and interpretations as they appear years later. Recovery is a multidimensional process with a number of effective components. The interviewees were aware of the focus of the research on Christian faith and recovery, which obviously influenced their interpretation of what happened and may have led them to overemphasize the role of faith at the expense of other factors. Although these limitations were avoided as much as possible when designing the research project, they could not be eliminated entirely. The results cannot be generalized to all who gain sobriety in relation to religious experience since it is possible that they are true only for the study participants.

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