NEGOTIATING IDENTITY CREATION THROUGH PERSONAL NARRATIVE IN A CHRISTIAN RECOVERY GROUP

by

JAMES N. DUNNING

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of The University of Texas at Arlington in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN COMMUNICATION

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON

May 2013
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank those instrumental in guiding my research: the members of my thesis committee at The University of Texas at Arlington, Dr. Andrew Clark, Dr. Charla Markham Shaw, and Dr. Brian Horton. Also, Dr. Tom Christie (UT Arlington), Michael Agee (Southwest Adventist College), and Dr. Matthew Thatcher (Arkansas State University) contributed with suggestions that helped me in the organization of my research.

I would like to thank the members of the Celebrate Recovery group from which research data was gained. They allowed me to probe aspects of their recovery journey and provided me with quality feedback over the life of this project.

Finally, I would like to thank my family, Nancy and Evelyn, for their commitment and sacrifices in helping me reach my academic goal and secure my master’s degree with the completion of this thesis.

May 6, 2013
Negotiating Identity Creation Through Personal Narrative in a Christian Recovery Group

James N. Dunning, M.A.

The University of Texas at Arlington, 2013

Supervising Professor: Dr. Andrew Clark

Alcohol and substance abuse affects 23 million Americans each year and nearly 5 million seek treatment through mutual help recovery groups. Similar to Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Celebrate Recovery (CR) is a mutual help recovery group with an emphasis on Christian identity. This study builds on previous research surrounding AA and examines how group members within CR utilize personal narrative to establish and cultivate their individual identities. Historically, Twelve Step programs such as AA and CR enable individuals to foster new identities as members admit wrongdoings and trust in their higher power to repair character flaws. Group members take turns sharing their stories, offering past experiences and current struggles to others who may find similarities in their own stories. Central to these programs is the idea that offering evaluative, personal narratives in front of the group will initiate and build upon an individual’s recovery process. This research is unique as few scholars reviewing mutual help recovery groups have had open access to individuals in CR. This study examines the ways in which individuals use their personal narratives to shape or manage an identity within the group as well as how those narratives reinforce the group’s recovery messages.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .................................................................................................................................................. iii
ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................................................................................ iv
LIST OF TABLES ................................................................................................................................................................... vii

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Identity</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative Identity</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual Help Recovery Groups</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnographic Observation</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Interviews</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textual Analysis</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triangulation and Member-Checking</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. RESULTS</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textual Analysis</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Interviews</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Narrative</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. DISCUSSION</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Comparison of Large Group Meeting Formats Between AA and CR</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

In a large room, a mutual help recovery group member stands before the audience and
begins to share his or her personal narrative, or testimony. The room is quiet and all eyes are
set on the individual behind the podium. The speaker introduces himself or herself by first
name, then begins his or her story. The narrator’s journey toward and through recovery is
retold in subdued tones; the testimony is sprinkled with tragic memories, self-deprecating
humor, painful insight, and tearful conclusions. Over the course of the testimony, the speaker
will read from a prepared script or thumb through notecards. He or she will talk of fear and
hope, of pain and joy, of highs and lows, of wrong turns and redemption.

As he or she speaks, an identity is mutually shaped through the narrative in the mind of
the speaker and in the minds of the audience (Fisher, 1987). The speaker offers glimpses of
his or her identity at every turn – through the position taken within the narrative, through the
recognizable speech codes and speech acts offered, and through the story line and narrative
style. This identity is presented by the speaker through his or her words and accepted through
the subsequent interpretation of those words by members of the audience. As such, the
speaker’s identity is rooted in the shared characteristics of the group (Tajfel, 1981) — a group of
people recovering from addiction and compulsive behaviors.

Alcohol and substance abuse affects millions of Americans each year and many seek
treatment through mutual help groups and rehabilitation centers. More than half of those living
in the United States (aged 12 or older) report being current drinkers of alcohol and nearly 17
million of those users admit to heavy drinking, or more than two drinks per day (SAMHSA,
2010). In 2010, marijuana was the most commonly used illicit drug, with more than 17 million
users, and nine million more Americans admitted to using narcotics other than marijuana
The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2010) estimates that nearly 80,000 deaths occur each year due to excessive alcohol consumption, making alcohol abuse the sixth most prevalent cause of death in the United States and the third leading cause of preventable death. While nearly two million people have entered one of 11,000 alcohol and substance abuse treatment facilities in the U.S., studies show that 2.3 million abusers seek treatment in a mutual help recovery group (SAMHSA, 2010; National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2006).

Alcoholics Anonymous and Celebrate Recovery

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is one of the most recognized mutual help recovery groups in the U.S. (Wright, 1997). Formed in Akron, Ohio, in 1935, AA counts more than 2 million members in 114,000 autonomous groups in over 170 countries (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2012). Designed as a support group for alcoholics, the organization endeavors to provide a place for individuals to discuss common problems and recovery solutions. Through regular meetings, Alcoholics Anonymous (2012) encourages its members to “stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety” (np). The primary communication agent in these meetings is the individual recovery stories of its members, which is a hallmark of the program’s Twelve Steps and organizational culture (Witmer, 1997).

There are several types of mutual help recovery groups including those that are non-spiritualized, those that are spiritualized, and those that are hyper-spiritualized (Brown, et. al., 2006). Non-spiritualized mutual help recovery groups such as Rational Recovery are groups that do not subscribe to a theology nor the concept of a higher power (Brown, et. al., 2006). AA is an example of a spiritualized, mutual help recovery group, a polytheist organization that utilizes the acknowledgment of a higher power in its texts and organizational messaging. It fosters the notion that group members do not struggle alone, but are aided by unseen forces in their journey to overcoming alcoholism (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2012). Though the organization has firm roots in the Judeo-Christian beliefs of its founders, AA members are encouraged to
seek out a personal definition of their higher power. As such, not all members agree on a single theology or deity (Wright, 1997).

According to Brown et. al. (2006), Celebrate Recovery (CR) is a hyper-spiritualized group. CR is a Christian version of AA that specifically names Jesus Christ as the higher power for group members. The program began in 1993 at Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California, as an alternative to AA and is self-classified as “a Bible-based recovery program” (Celebrate Recovery, 2013, np). CR is offered at more than 19,000 churches in the U.S. and its materials have been translated into 23 languages. According to national organizers, more than 1 million Americans have been through the program’s twelve-step studies (Celebrate Recovery, 2013).

One difference between CR and AA can be found in Step 2 of Celebrate Recovery’s modified Twelve Steps (see Appendix A). It focuses those seeking recovery on this point: “We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity” (Celebrate Recovery, 2012a). In AA, group members are allowed to assign their higher power whatever identity they choose, and the dialogue within the group meetings include pluralistic viewpoints, which can occasionally create tension (Thatcher, 2011). In CR, the higher power is defined as Jesus Christ or God, the central figure in the Christian faith and Holy Bible. This identification of the higher power is clearly stated in the organization’s materials and often a primary reason why members self-report their choice in attending CR group meetings over other mutual help recovery groups (Celebrate Recovery, 2013).

The CR materials expand on AA’s Twelve Steps with the addition of New Testament Scripture (see Appendix A) and a set of eight recovery principles based on Christian doctrine (see Appendix B). In contrast to AA, CR also expands its reach by offering support and services for alcoholics, substance abusers, adulterers, co-dependents, and individuals struggling with sexual abuse or sexual issues through gender- and issue-based small groups
and one-on-one crisis counseling. Also, CR provides materials (i.e., brochures and study guides) that address addictions beyond alcoholism.

Both AA and CR share a similar organizational structure, including regular group meetings led by volunteers, mentoring relationships, and opportunities for newcomers and members alike to talk about their struggles and successes with the group. The CR program deviates from standard AA meetings by hosting a large group meeting for all attendees, offering a teaching or testimony by a single volunteer, before breaking into smaller, gender- or issue-based groups. This large group meeting is an introductory point for newcomers and those leading the meeting offer an overview of the program and the curriculum, including member success stories. Following the large group meetings, all attendees are invited to participate in smaller group sessions, a discussion format that is also typical of many AA meetings. At CR, the small group meetings are divided by gender and specific addictions or compulsive behaviors, and members and newcomers alike have opportunities to vocalize their struggles and successes.

Table 1.1 Comparison of Large Group Meeting Formats Between AA and CR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alcoholics Anonymous</th>
<th>Celebrate Recovery</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Welcome</td>
<td>Welcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serenity Prayer</td>
<td>Worship (2-3 songs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting Purpose Statement</td>
<td>Recitation of Modified Twelve Steps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading from AA’s Big Book</td>
<td>or Eight Recovery Principles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgement of Newcomers, Visitors</td>
<td>Introduction of Speaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction of Speaker</td>
<td>Testimony or Teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching/Testimony/Open Discussion</td>
<td>Meeting Purpose Statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Announcements</td>
<td>Announcements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closing</td>
<td>Closing/Serenity Prayer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The introductions of speakers in both mutual help recovery group meetings also have many similarities – and one striking difference. In both groups, a member stands at the front of the room to identify himself or herself by name, adds a self-assigned label, then waits for the group response. The group commonly responds with "Hi" and the member’s name. The member pauses during this time, then continues once the group has finished its response. In the opening, the self-assigned label claimed by each speaker varies greatly between AA and
CR. In AA, the speaker (through either cultural history or a personal belief) claims a label of *alcoholic*, a term that is standard in most participant introductions. An alcoholic is anyone who engages in excessive consumption or compulsive consumption of alcoholic beverages (Merriam-Webster, 2012). The term alcoholic is synonymous with *drunk*, and fits the image of a fall-down, hapless, out-of-control individual stumbling through bars or social parties, unable to stop or sober up. The term alcoholic, to the uninitiated, may present a negative position in the speaker’s introduction, an admission of past sins and embarrassing behavior.

In CR, however, the self-assigned label (again, through either group tradition or individual intent) takes a different path. Routinely, speakers will refer to themselves as a *grateful believer* or *believer*. In a Christian mutual help group such as CR, this positive positioning seems appropriate. In this setting, members focus on their faith and belief in their higher power (Jesus Christ) and differentiate themselves from other mutual help groups by identifying with terms that underscore this faith. *Grateful* is defined as one “appreciative of benefits received” or “pleased by reason of comfort supplied of discomfort alleviated” (Merriam-Webster, 2012, np). A *believer* is one who holds an opinion or “a firm conviction as to the goodness, efficacy, or ability of something” (Merriam-Webster, 2012). The phrase *grateful believer* also suggests group members are forward-looking in their positioning or identifying with elements beyond their immediate control.

Additionally, CR members will often offer a reason (or reasons) for their compulsive behaviors, acknowledging past sins and presenting the root cause of those sins in a short summary. For example, a speaker may begin his narrative in this way: “Hi. My name is X, and I’m a grateful believer who struggles with control issues and a fear of abandonment manifested through alcoholism and anger issues.” In this way, speakers present not only a quick glimpse at their past sins and justify their inclusion in the group, but also position themselves as knowledgeable of the issues directly associated with their compulsions. This introduction also reinforces specific aspects of the CR’s modified *Twelve Step* text and group messages.
It may be argued that this subtle difference in speaker openings is simply a matter of purpose and organizational directive: AA is designed for those struggling with alcoholism, while CR has expanded its mission to include a wide range of compulsive behaviors (from narcotics use to sexual addiction to co-dependency). CR members may limit their self-assigned labels if alcoholism were the only vice addressed. Those in AA may refer to themselves as grateful alcoholics, pointing directly to the addiction issue they are working to overcome. But for newcomers and observers, the difference in introductions is noticeable: one identity associates with a darker past or present struggle, the other with a present solution or hopeful future. While this difference may not be absolute, the CR opening represents a significant shift from an individual’s immediate circumstance and emphasizes a desired recovery outcome.

This current study moves beyond previous research surrounding AA and adds to the body of work on mutual help recovery group communication by examining how group members within CR utilize personal narrative to establish and cultivate their individual identities. Historically, twelve step programs such as AA and CR enable individuals to foster a new identity as members admit wrongdoings and trust in their higher power to repair their character flaws (Brown, et. al., 2006). Group members take turns sharing their stories, offering past experiences and current struggles to others who may find similarities in their own stories. Central to these programs is the idea that offering self-evaluative, personal narratives in front of the group will initiate and build upon an individual’s recovery process (O’Halloran, 2005).

This study examines the relationship of personal narrative and identity construction within CR. Through ethnographic observation and individual member interviews, the study explores how member testimonies or personal narratives delivered in the large group meeting establish or reinforce member identities within the group. By utilizing the unique organizational perspective of CR, its members, and its culture, this study adds to the existing body of knowledge on the use of personal narrative. It also provides insight into an understudied element of mutual help recovery groups.
The next chapter reviews the research literature about narrative and identity, examining various components of social identity and how identity is constructed through narrative. The chapter also addresses previously published narrative- and identity-related research on AA and the limited research on CR. The chapter concludes with the study's research questions.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews the current literature on identity, social identity, and narrative, and suggests the role of narrative (as it relates to identity) is two-fold: that stories connect the individual to a group and lead that individual down a path of self-discovery. This chapter also provides an overview of previous literature on Alcoholics Anonymous and CR, and highlights gaps in the current literature regarding CR. Finally, after reviewing the pertinent literature, the research questions guiding the study are presented.

Identity

Since its first recorded use in 1570, the definition of identity — synonymous with sameness and oneness — has evolved slowly over time. Not simply a personal possession, the notion of identity as presentation of self has been explored through Enlightenment rationalism and idealism, Romantic concepts of self-fulfillment and improvement, a psychoanalysis of self and socialization, and finally a post-modern view on self-evaluation and consumerism (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). Descartes argued the concept of identity as self-mastery through reason and cognition; Locke emphasized that knowledge derives from observation, and identities are formed through experience and the objective, reflexive capacity of the mind. This dialectic approach led many scholars to consider identity as the projection of self (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). The Romantic notion of identity moved further inward, focusing on self-discourse and identity through mutual help methodologies. This concept of the self — made, then revised over time — would remerge in the work of post-modern scholars. At the turn of the twentieth century, Freud’s work on identity took shape in the original concept of psychoanalysis and the connection of individuals to a social group. The impact of others on self, either in isolation or as an ongoing occurrence, propelled the notion of identity even further.
Burke (1950) developed the theory of identification and Goffman (1959) combined the social nature of individuals with an inherent need for self-evaluation and self-reflection. These theorists paved the way an expanded look at identity, including social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981) and self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987).

Synthesizing centuries of previous research on the subject, Ricoeur (1991) posits two major uses of the concept of identity: identity as sameness and identity as self. In considering identity as sameness, this French philosopher argues two points. First, two occurrences, or names, of one thing do not result in two different things. This concept of sense and reference was first suggested by Friedrich Ludwig Gottlob Frege in his 1892 paper Über Sinn und Bedeutung, in which the German mathematician and philosopher argued that a term's reference is the object it refers to and its sense is the way in which it refers to that object (Wiggins, 1984). Ricoeur’s (1991) second point is that the “extreme resemblance” of two things may result in one substituted for another. When Babe Ruth is referred to as the “Sultan of Swat” in a sports magazine, readers are not expecting a new baseball player to be introduced in the article. Instead, Ruth fans accept the nickname for their beloved athlete and understand the label as part of the Hall of Famer’s identity. Conversely, two distinct species of arachnid will likely elicit a cry of “Spider!” and initiate the same fatalistic action. Considering identity as self, Ricoeur (1991) suggests this concept as “uninterrupted continuity in the development of a being between the first and last stage of its evolution” (p. 74). Self and same intersect at a single point – permanence over time – and the question of who we are grows distinct from the question of what we are in our efforts to define concepts such as identification (Ricoeur, 1991). The implication is that identity is multi-faceted and complex as well as dependent upon external factors.

According to Burke (1950), identification is the manner in which individuals build common ground and resolve differences through their belief in shared needs. Identification may also reflect the symbolic relationship of individuals to larger causes. Additionally, identity as
social location, a construct that took root in the birth of sociology and sociolinguistics 
scholarship, sees the self defined through membership or identification with a group or groups 
(Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). In a mutual help recovery group, participants collaborate on an 
identity (both individual and collective) through shared experiences and interpretations of their 
actions and histories.

Self-discrepancy theory posits identity as consistent of three domains: actual self, ideal 
self, and ought self. According to Higgins (1987), the actual self is an individual's self-concept, 
or one's perception of one's own attributes. The ideal self is what the individual aspires to be, 
as the individual is motivated by the presence or absence of positive outcomes (Higgins, 1987). 
The ought self is a representation of the attributes an individual (or another person) believes he 
or she should posses, and motivation to obtain this version of self is often based on the 
presence or absence of negative outcomes. Higgins (1987) suggests that as an individual 
seeks to acquire and retain a positive identity, he or she must consider the various points of 
view, or standpoints, maintained by the individual (i.e., self) and significant others. This 
motivation is based on the desire to have others see us as we see ourselves; the condition is 
based on roles and masks representative of our desired self (Goffman, 1959). Goffman (1967) 
suggests a person’s positive social value, or face, is claimed by expected verbal and nonverbal 
acts, or line; those who fail to keep his or her face consistent with the line (either internally or 
externally), must work to maintain face and re-establish or secure his or her identity.

This effort to save face is not only a component of self-discrepancy theory, it is the 
foundations of image repair theory (Benoit, 1995), a theory that has been significant in a media-
rich environment over the past twenty years. In this theoretical framework, individuals work to 
repair their image through various actions: denial, evading responsibility, reducing 
offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. In a mutual help recovery group, the 
speaker offering his or her testimony or personal narrative may be viewed as attempting to 
“save face” and repair his or her image as it connects to work, home, and general society. To
this extent, recovery participation could be viewed as an attempt at image repair or image regeneration.

Of course, the individual may not be able to “save face” if the original face or identity is unknown. The question of “Who am I?” might be answered in three idioms – biological identity, psychology, and cultural and social identity (Carbaugh, 1996). The biological identity is tied to our genetic makeup, from our blood type to our sexual, racial, and ethnic composition. The individual has little to no influence over this identity. The individual psychology is impacted by an individual’s internal traits and disposition, as well as the internal traits of the group with which that individual associates. The individual may choose to hold a positive or a negative outlook for his or her future and adopt such identifying labels as optimist or pessimist. Finally, the cultural and social identity is influenced by the qualities or features of the group that members may or may not accept, and the ways in which those members are orientated culturally or structured socially into society (Carbaugh, 1996).

**Social Identity**

Considering the ramifications of internalizing individual identity in the context of social identity, the question of “Who am I?” hinges, in part, on the location (in space and time) of the individual, those with the individual, and what the individual is able to do in that particular scene, especially with the people and resources present (Carbaugh, 1996). In other words, the more appropriate question is “Who am I where I am at this very moment?” The formulation of identity as a *social location* readdresses the definition of self to include membership or identification within a particular group or groups (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). Ismael (2007) suggests an individual’s self-locating thoughts inspire specific actions that help the individual to navigate between mental and physical worlds. These actions may have a direct impact on how an individual connects or interactions with his or her social environment. Group labels, such as *students*, *black*, or *blue collar*, accompany the formation of these social identities and provide
variables in which social behavior and linguistic usage may be measured (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006).

Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981) explores the concepts of *ingroup* and *outgroup* and presents a view of interpreting the actions of individuals based on group engagement. Individuals belonging to an *ingroup* view others (or outsiders) as the *outgroup* (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). Tajfel (1981) explored how a fundamental part of socialization is the formation and categorization of groups – “cognitive” entities that are “meaningful to an individual at a particular point in time” (p. 254). The introduction of values that differentiate an individual’s group with others – the *us* versus *them* paradigm – leads to social identity.

According to Tajfel (1981), social identity is “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (p. 255). This concept of self, in normal fashion, bears out the foundation of an individual’s social behavior – a behavior consistent with certain aspects of several groups in which the individual associates. Within this framework, Tajfel (1981) posits several assumptions:

- An individual will remain with a group or seek additional groups if they contribute to the positive aspect of his or her social identity;
- An individual will leave a group if it conflicts with his or her personal values and self-image;
- An individual who is unable to leave the group may change his or her interpretation of unwelcomed group features or accept the group as is and engage in social action toward desired change;
- Within a society, all groups live in the midst of other groups.

In an effort to maintain an established social identity, individuals may employ social comparison to distinguish their positively valued elements from other groups. Group members may view themselves as *superior* and others as *inferior*, they may fashion *secure* and *insecure* identities.
The efforts to control this psychological group distinctiveness may coalesce into a single effort by the individual to establish and maintain his or her social identity (Tajfel, 1981).

An individual’s social identity is not fixed, however. Membership loyalties are continuously revised according to historical and local circumstances (de Fina, 2006). The manners in which individuals relate to social groups, as well as the meanings given to social categories, change over time and in different social contexts. As such, an individual’s self-concept is a by-product of social changes (Oyserman, 2004). Motivated by a fundamental need for positive self-esteem, the individual defines and re-defines his or her self-concept through the influence of social forces, by moderating outcomes, and by framing experience and action: “What we remember, how we remember it, and the sense we make of our experience are each importantly shaped by our self-concepts” (Oyserman, 2004, p. 7). These self-concepts form the basis for ideologies, and present a compelling reason to better understand the constitution, function and communication of identities within social groups (de Fina, 2006).

In a mutual help recovery group, identity is vital to group membership – individuals must admit they are alcoholics in order to gain acceptance from others. But construction and presentation of one’s identity is a process in constant development as individuals consider their personal narratives, the narratives and identities presented by others, and ongoing interactions within the group (de Fina, 2006). This self-presentation is a universally and fundamentally human activity and at the core of identity creation within a group (Philipsen, 1992). Before exploring how narrative influences the creation of an identity, one must first explore the basic tenets of narrative.

Narrative

Humans are natural storytellers, and narratives enable individuals to understand the actions of others across communities, cultures, time, and place (Fisher, 1987). These narratives, whether written or oral, enable an individual to understand the action of others, to recognize the symbolic words and/or deeds that hold meaning for those who live, create, or
interpret them. According to Fisher (1987), “symbols are created and communicated ultimately as stories meant to give order to human experience” (p. 63). By telling stories, narrators are able not only to represent social worlds and to evaluate them, but also to establish themselves as members of particular groups (de Fina, 2006). Benwell and Stokoe (2006) write that these individuals may “recall, recount, and reflect on their lives” in a concentrated effort to “make sense” of their past, present, and future (p. 130).

Fisher (1987) spends considerable time exploring the nuance and nature of narrative as a primary means of human communication. Since humans are “rhetorical beings,” we are prone to utilizing symbolic actions in an effort to gain knowledge, make sense of our lives, and pursue truth. This communicative act is tested for coherence, truthfulness, and reliability (Fisher, 1987). Fisher (1987) suggests a narrative’s probability, or the way it “hangs together,” is evaluated by three coherent means: argumentative or structural, material, and characterlogical. The audience is tasked with testing these coherent elements of the narrative to understand the actions of others and formulate the appropriate logic and knowledge in which to accept or reject the narrative. This narrative form, Markham Shaw (1997) adds, enables the narrator to offer a presentation of self and “bring coherence to experiences, memories, and thoughts” (p. 315).

A narrative consists of several fundamental elements: characters, setting, action, and a narrator. Sometimes the narrator, or storyteller, may exist as a primary or secondary character in the narrative; other times, the narrator may simply play the role of observer, detailing the actions and attitudes of others. Most narrative structures include establishing a scene or setting for a story, posing a problem to be resolved, offering resolution, then closing off the story (Gumperz, 1982). Beyond this basic structure, a narrator’s perspective, context, speech codes and speech acts serve as vital elements to a narrative’s function.

Personal narratives may also be called “self narratives,” which Beran and Unoka (2005) loosely defined as “an individual’s account of the relationship among self-relevant events across time” (p. 151). Within these narratives, the individual offers a “narrator’s position” or narrative
perspective (NP) that frames the story’s basic elements, such as time, place of action, and characters. In a novel, the writer may shift the NP among various characters, describing events and action from various viewpoints to advance the story or message. In a personal narrative, the NP may also be re-positioned as the individual recounts a sequence of events across time. Individuals may employ embedded narratives – stories with the speaker as the main character or a minor figure – in an effort to map a secondary narrative to a primary one or replace it altogether (Beran & Unoka, 2005). Conjuring scenes from the past, the narrator may change the NP by offering evaluation (thereby presenting a secondary narrative) and use present-tense verbs. Here, the narrator may switch from being a central character in the narration to performing the role of omniscient observer. As Beran and Unoka (2005) point out, this shift in the NP offers “a new direction to the construction of self-narrative by determining which autobiographical episodes are available for the storyteller from the new perspective” (p. 163). However, revisiting past events in a new context presents a danger: details and conversations can be exploited as the narrator leaves out certain details or emphasizes others to underscore his or her point (Gunther, 2005). Narratives can be decontextualized from the original context and recontextualized to emphasize a new communicative context. Without intending to, the narrator’s interpretation, evaluation, and affective stance may present significant modifications to the contextual framing of the narrative (Gunther, 2005). Consequently, audiences are presented with an evaluative narrative and rarely an accurate, unfiltered narrative.

When an individual offers a personal narrative within a group, the narrative typically contains elaborate coding principles designed to enhance communication through cultural symbols and concepts (Philipsen, 1992). According to Philipsen (1992) a coding principle “is a rule governing what to say and how to say it in a particular context” (p. 101). Cultural symbols and concepts are group-specific images, words or phrases, or other utterances. They enable a speaker to use novel and diverse linguistics to communicate intent; to emphasize personal meanings; and to adapt to an audience. As the speaker endeavors to communicate meaning to
his or her audience, the speaker may utilize restricted coding principles, relying on shared context and understanding with the group (Philipsen, 1992). These restricted codes—a narrow range of syntactic options or alternatives an individual uses to organize meaning in his or her speech—are often generated through the formation of social relationships, particularly those relations based upon a set of “closely shared identifications, self consciously held by its members” (Bernstein, 1964, p. 57). Philipsen (1992) presents four basic principles for speech codes: distinctiveness, wherein a distinctive code of communication resides within a distinctive culture or group; substances, wherein the speech codes implicate a culturally distinctive psychology, sociology, and rhetoric; significance, or interlocutions that constitute the meanings of communicative acts; and integration, wherein terms, themes, and rules of the culture are woven into speaking. These speech codes enable the audience to connect to the cultural meaning of the individual’s narrative, to understand what is, and what is not, being said.

Gumperz (1982) offers three perspectives present during spoken language episodes: language usage, inferencing, and evaluation. Recurrent speech and verbal accentuation patterns often reflect relevant aspects of a shared history between the narrator and the group; these speech acts serve to establish a line of communication. In the course of the narrative, the speaker and the listener will consider and arrive at mutual interpretations. Finally, the speaker and the listener may create an evaluation perspective by reflexively addressing the social action that forms in the ongoing spoken language episode. Variations in audience, context, and setting may impact communicative choices in delivering a personal narrative. But to produce truly effective narratives, Gumperz (1982) says, “narrators must go beyond mere storytelling. They must show the relevance of their story, usually highlighting aspects of their experience that would attract positive evaluation” (p. 130). Often times, more than a good story is offered in the course of a personal narrative; the individual also introduces his or her narrative identity, and that narrative identity must be relevant to the group and the overarching group message or narrative in order for the individual to confirm his or her identity within the group.
Narrative Identity

According to Ricoeur (1991), a narrative identity is “an identity to which a human being has access thanks to the mediation of the narrative function” (p. 73). In most cases, a narrative has a dichotomous function for the individual: connecting to a group and engaging in self-discovery. Personal experiences provide the individual with narratives that are both referential and evaluative (O’Halloran, 2005). Through these dual outcomes, individuals create an identity that holds a common, shared representation and relates to specific action or reaction. De Fina (2006) adds that through storytelling, “narrators are able not only to represent social worlds and to evaluate them, but also establish themselves as members of particular groups” (p. 352).

A salient component of narrative is how it connects the individual to a group: “We equate life to the story or stories we tell about it” (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 77). An individual's narrative identity exists at the core of this connection, serving to establish inclusion within the group through the sharing of same traits, experiences, and expectations. Creating and presenting a narrative identity is a continual process as individuals build and negotiate their sense of belonging through the narrative (de Fina, 2006).

These narratives may also provide the individual with an opportunity for reflection and self-evaluation. According to Ricoeur (1991), “the self does not know itself immediately, but only indirectly” (p. 80) through the acknowledgement of cultural signs and symbols that are present in a personal narrative. On a path of self-discovery, an individual may uncover pieces of his or her identity as he or she engages in storytelling with others. This self-presentation is often the result of an internal desire for an identity that corresponds with the group, as well as external demands by others (Markham Shaw, 1997) – in particular, expectations from group members that the narrative identity presented will fall in line with the group identity. Ultimately, individuals not only desire to be seen in a certain light, they will adopt the appropriate position and cultural language in order to be presented that way to his or her audience.
Within the narrative form, positions are an important element in the creation of the narrative identity. A position is any role or label that a speaker may offer, adopt, or resist in the course of presenting a narrative (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). Like roles, these positions have specific functions within the narrative and enable the audience to connect with the narrator and establish a mutually agreeable framework for interpreting the narrative. A speaker’s position will often establish pre-existing norms and knowledge for the group in which the position is used. This positioning may happen in the present or in the past, as an eyewitness or as a reporter with salient details (Carbaugh, 1996). The audience understands through the speaker’s position how he or she is supposed to act, how the narrative will follow a specific path, and in what way the narrative identity may be accepted and elaborated (Carbaugh, 1996; Harré, 2008).

The construction of an individual’s narrative identity is influenced by illocutionary force, or the specific speech codes or speech acts included in the narrative. This may be done explicitly or subtly through intonation, inferences, and cultural symbols, forms, and meanings (Carbaugh, 1996). A speaker’s intention may be present in the illocutionary force of an utterance, a way of verbally asserting oneself to reinforce a particular point or suggesting a promise or warning to the audience. These speech codes may be an established set of rules or terms that reflects the distinct cultural aspects of the group and shape the communication conduct of the individuals (Philipsen, 1992). As a personal narrative is presented to an audience, individuals will often utilize features of their cultural and social selves and enact speech codes to qualify their discursive meaning: “The same verbal formula, gesture, flag or whatever, may have a variety of meanings depending on who is using it, where and for what” (Harré, 2008).

A final element of narrative identity creation is story lines. Each episode of human interaction is often influenced by one or more story lines – those strains of narrative that may not be apparent to those participating in the episode (Harré, 2008). Rooted in narratology, this
construct implicates the autobiographical nature and perspective of the speaker, offering some insight to how, why, when, and to whom a personal story is shared. Story lines add another level of meaningfulness to the narrative by allowing the narrator to convey a particular perspective, preferably one in which the audience can readily identify. These story lines also enable the narrator to negotiate his or her sense of belonging and identity from within the narrative itself (de Fina, 2006). This identity negotiation through personal narrative is commonplace among individuals in a mutual help recovery group (Witmer, 1997).

**Mutual Help Recovery Groups**

The current breadth of research knowledge on mutual help recovery groups focuses primarily on Alcoholics Anonymous and that group’s long-standing organizational processes, including recovery management (VanLear, 2006; White, 2008; Saaristo, 2009), social networks (Campbell & Kelley, 2006), group therapy (Becker, 2005), conflict management (O’Halloran, 2005), and turn-taking (Witmer, 1997). Others have used AA to explore the use of spirituality in recovery (Crandell Goodier & Eisenberg, 2006; Zylstra, 2006; Delaney, Forcehimes, Campbell & Smith, 2009), shared ideologies (Wright, 1997), and spiritual pluralism (Thatcher, 2011).

Jodlowski, et. al. (2007), utilized an online support group to explore the ways in which narrative created identity and division among a community of addicts. In this study, the researchers analyzed illness narratives of group members and the reaction generated from those narratives. Using Burke’s (1950) theory of identification, the study’s results confirmed that individuals engaged in storytelling mutually shape a common identity. This identification may lead audience members to accept or reject a speaker’s personal narrative, creating harmony or division among the group. In particular, the study found that participants who shared story commonalities with the speaker were more inclined to support that individual, fostering community among those living in various parts of the country (Jodlowski, et. al., 2007).

Jodlowski, et. al. (2007) also revealed how the narrative function of self discovery is prevalent in a mutual help recovery group. In the study, a participant used his personal
narrative to “reconsider life, both current and future” (p. 24). Additional studies on AA or similar mutual help recovery groups have noted that member stories shared before a group or one-on-one nearly always consist of personal experiences – experiences unique to the speaker – designed to convey an idea or message specific to recovery (eg. Witmer, 1997; Wright, 1997; VanLear, 2006; Thatcher, 2011). Speakers are encouraged to avoid points of view and interpretations that suggest an evaluation perspective from anything other than the speaker (O’Halloran, 2005). Recovery stories often focus on the evaluative aspects of why the story is being told and how the speakers see themselves in his or her stories (O’Halloran, 2005).

Celebrate Recovery’s organizational distinction from other mutual help recovery groups, as well as its explicit use of personal narrative in nearly every stage of the recovery process, warrants further review. To date, little research has used CR as a backdrop in exploring the human condition and the communication process in a mutual help recovery group setting. Previous scholarship on CR is limited to the fields of psychology and substance abuse treatment. Apart from a passing reference to CR in a study about AA (Brown, et.al., 2006), only one recent study has centered on CR members specifically (Brown, et.al., 2013). In the study, more than 100 CR participants from Houston-area churches were given a cross-sectional survey. Researchers examined the connection between self-efficacy and spirituality, reaching the conclusion that “spirituality is a significant component of the variability in confidence to resist substance abuse” (Brown, et. al., 2013, p. 111). The study did not, however, conclude if spirituality was the leading influence on sobriety or reports of participant confidence in the recovery program.

In mutual help recovery group meetings, the personal narrative is the primary communicative device with which members create their identity (Witmer, 1997). In Celebrate Recovery meetings, weekly teachings and testimonies reinforce the recovery messages presented by the organization and its group members, thereby solidifying a social identity for members as well. These identities are mutually shaped through in-group communication and
the self-presentation of personal testimony. In order to better understand the distinctive qualities of CR and its members, this research study utilizes Ricoeur’s (1991) narrative identity functions as a theoretical framework in examining how group members utilize personal narratives. Moving beyond the definition of personal narratives, the first research question addresses the why and how a personal narrative is used:

RQ 1: What is the role of personal narrative in recovery?

The question endeavors to further define the concept of personal narrative within the context of a mutual help recovery group. Assuming de Fina’s (2006) notion that narratives enable an individual to create social worlds and group membership is correct, the next step is to consider the ways in which group members utilize such narratives in identity creation. Since the definition of identity is so heavily dependent on the perception of the self and others (Tajfel, 1981), the second research question considers the ways in which an individual’s identity might be shaped through these personal narratives:

RQ 2: How do individuals in a mutual help recovery group perceive the impact of personal narratives on their recovery identities?

In order to answer these questions the qualitative methods of ethnographic observation, individual group member interviews, and thematic analysis of organizational texts are used. In the next chapter each method is reviewed and the methodology used for the study is described. The chapter concludes with a brief look at minor methodologies enacted to establish credibility and reliability of the study’s findings.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

In conducting this study, research data was collected through ethnographic observations as well as individual interviews with a select group of Celebrate Recovery members. Interview questions were compiled from a thematic analysis of organizational texts and messaging. This same thematic analysis was used to review participant interview transcripts.

Ethnographic Observation

Initial data for this study was gathered through the researcher’s own ethnographic observations and field notes taken during and immediately following weekly Celebrate Recovery meeting over an eight-month period. Weekly, large-group Celebrate Recovery meetings typically entail an introduction from a volunteer master of ceremony, 12 to 15 minutes of praise and worship music, 18 to 20 minutes of teaching or testimony from a volunteer speaker (usually a CR group member), and closing remarks and announcements from the MC. Following the large group meeting, CR members split into smaller, gender- and issues-based groups. For the past two years, the researcher has volunteered as a CR group’s full-time worship coordinator, leading worship music at the start of each meeting. The researcher has also been involved in the planning and execution of meetings. The researcher has infrequently attended these smaller group meetings; as such, all ethnographic observations in the study will come from the large group meetings.

Ethnographic observation offers the researcher an opportunity to provide empirical analysis of cultural phenomena. In studying cultures and people, communication scholars may employ ethnography as a method to describe and interpret what is observable. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) state that ethnography provides “a holistic description of a culture’s material
existence and meaning systems and depicts how its members achieve, maintain, and change their status” (p.134-135). A disadvantage to this method is the lack of objectivity by an observer who is committed to one interpretation and unwilling to consider alternatives. However, the advantages to this process are tremendous; through immersion, communication scholars may answer “why” or “how come” questions related to a multitude of human communication practices and offer unique insight that can enhance qualitative scholarship. Researchers engaged in participant observation can more fully describe and interpret the “observable relationships between social practices and systems of meanings” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 134) than other available methods.

**Individual Interviews**

A large portion of the data for this study was gathered through individual interviews of Celebrate Recovery members. This methodology provides a number of benefits for an exploratory study such as this one. In-depth interviews provide both descriptive and analytic data that can offer the most accurate insight into the minds of the study participants (McCracken, 1988). The data collected provides the researcher with rich details and information unattainable through simple observation. For example, asking what an individual was thinking when he or she heard a nearby explosion is different than making assumptions based on body language, speech, or other observable reactions. As McCracken (1988) notes, the interviews present a unique opportunity to “glimpse the complicated character, organization and logic of culture” (p. 17). The interviews, combined with a textual analysis of available material and texts, provide significant insight into how members within the organization not only utilize personal narrative to form identity within the group and establish a connection, but also how newcomers are encouraged to do the same.

While interviews are effective in providing the desired data, this methodology is not without some internal weaknesses, chief among them time constraints for both researcher and participant. McCracken (1988) suggests that participants (as well as graduate student
researchers) lead lives that are hectic, segmented, and private, which makes data collection
difficult and can lead to reliability concerns. Time scarcity limits the amount of time researchers
can spend on study design and questions. Time scarcity limits the effectiveness of the interview
method, since even the most dedicated participant can’t devote enough time to provide a
complete, fully nuanced response to each research question. And the most dedicated
researcher does not have the time to immerse himself or herself completely into the world of the
participant (McCracken, 1988). However, given this researcher’s background and ongoing
relationship with group members, individual interviews (instead of focus groups or long-term
observation) offer the most ideal method in acquiring the desired data. Also, the anonymity
already enjoyed by members of this group and understood by the researcher was retained
throughout the interview process, ensuring levels of comfort and reliability for all participants.
Interviews were digitally recorded and all audio files and transcripts were saved in a locked
cabinet according to UT Arlington’s Institutional Review Board protocol.

The researcher recruited participants in person before or after a meeting, or through
email. Per a request from the organization’s leadership, only those group members who had
completed a twelve-step study were invited to participate. Leaders voiced concerns that
newcomers might receive conflicting messages about the organization’s commitment to
confidentiality and anonymity if recruited for the study. This limited the scope of the study to
only those individuals who were full-time members of the organization and, therefore, fully
indoctrinated into the organizational culture. Future studies may benefit from interviewing
newcomers or visitors who have not yet been reinforced with organizational messages.
Fourteen participants were selected: nine men and five women, ranging in age from 30-67. All
but two participants had given their personal testimony in front of the large group in the past
three years. A description of each of the participants is included in the next chapter.

Participants were interviewed either at their homes or at the church where the
Celebrate Recovery meeting is held each week. One interview was conducted at the
researcher’s home. All interviews took place during January 2013. Each interview was conducted in a quiet, distraction-free room. The participant and the researcher sat across from one another at a table and a digital voice recorder was placed between them. At the start of each interview, participants were presented with volunteer consent forms approved by UT Arlington’s Institutional Review Board and offered a summary of the research project. Once the consent form was signed, the interview began. The research asked for general biographical information (i.e., age, job description) before addressing the interview questions. Interview lengths ranged from 16 minutes to 43 minutes; most interviews were completed within 25 minutes. The researcher went through the list of interview questions (see Appendix E) and asked additional questions for clarification as needed. At the end of each interview, participants had an opportunity to comment on the research topic or questions.

Textual Analysis

To prepare for the interview process, a textual analysis was conducted using specific texts offered during the organization’s weekly large group meeting. These texts were the modified Twelve Steps, Celebrate Recovery’s Eight Recovery Principles, the Serenity Prayer, and the script used by the master of ceremonies tasked with leading the group meeting (see Appendixes A-D). This inductive analysis revealed existing themes within the organization’s communication and these themes, in turn, were used in the formation of interview questions. Owen’s thematic analysis (1984) considers the ways in which people use discourse to interpret their relationships. These may be active or passive relationships, newly formed or nearly ended relationships. By examining the available discourse, researchers may identify themes within those relationship interpretations, and determine how participants receive an understanding of their present relationships through specific uses of the identified themes (Owen, 1984).

Following Owen’s framework, the analysis accounted for recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. Recurrence is defined by Owen (1984) as the same thread of meaning appearing in two or more parts of a report despite different words or phrases. For example, Principle One
of the Eight Recovery Principles includes the phrases “I am powerless” and “my life is unmanageable” to stress the notion, through recurrence, that the individual is not in control of his or her addictions and compulsive behaviors. This is different than repetition, which accounts for the explicit and repeated use of the same word or phrase. An example of repetition may be found in the MC script: the word “struggle” and its various forms are mentioned four times. Coding for forcefulness takes note of any underlined, bold, italicized words or phrases that offer an emphasis within the text (Owen, 1984). Such analytic coding allows for the development of concepts as well as identification of any common threads, or themes, that run through the data (Richards & Morse, 2007). By applying this qualitative coding technique, researchers are often able to make the analysis “manageable” and move the data from “messy to organized” (Richards & Morse, 2007).

The results of analyzing the themes of the organizational texts were used to create 14 questions for study participants. These questions solicited participant definition and use of testimony or personal narrative within the large group setting, as well as thoughts on how a given testimony might impact those within the group. Most questions were open-ended and encouraged participants to explore the reasons behind the establishment and use of testimonies within the program’s large group meeting.

Owen’s thematic analysis (1984) was also used to analyze the transcribed interviews and gather data necessary to answer the study’s research question(s). A limitation to using this analysis method on transcribed interviews is the lack of available evidence to signify forcefulness (i.e., bold or italic text). However, the transcription includes exclamation points or words in ALL CAPS that were spoken with marked forcefulness or emphasis during the interview. Interviews were transcribed within 10 days of the recording, and transcriptions were presented in a standard question-and-answer format. Efforts to transcribe participant responses verbatim include noting pauses or changes in thoughts mid-sentence with an ellipse or long dash. Quotation marks were used to note where a participant began speaking in the
third person or quoted CR materials. Utilizing Owen’s process, the researcher highlighted recurrence and repetition within each interview to determine which themes and common answers best address the research issues.

**Triangulation and Member-Checking**

The inclusion of ethnographic observation, individual interviews, and textual analysis completes this study’s methodological triangulation. Triangulation in research has its roots in surveying, wherein a surveyor will use a series of triangles to map out an area. In such fashion, a social scientist needs to approach his or her research from various standpoints in order to truly answer the research questions with enhanced confidence (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). In order to establish validity — research findings that accurately reflect the situation and are supported by the evidence — researchers may employ one of five types of triangulation: data triangulation, investigator triangulation, theory triangulation, methodological triangulation, and environmental triangulation (Guion, Diehl & McDonald, 2002). Given the limitations of time and geography, the researcher elected to use methodological triangulation to strengthen the study’s validity and reliability. In this study, reliability was achieved testing research findings from individual interviews and textual analysis with ethnographic observations.

A final component of this study’s methodology included a process for establishing credibility. Following guidelines from Baxter & Babbie (2004) and Carlson (2010), initial research findings were shared with group organizers through the member-checking process to establish credibility. These early conclusions were also shared with select interview participants after the data collection and data analysis stages are completed. The use of member checking is an effort to ensure accuracy of the research data and not verification of the research interpretation. Research results were drawn independently of participant feedback and the member-checking process.

The next chapter addresses the research results, including thematic analysis of the organizational text and interview transcripts as well as ethnographic observations.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This chapter analyzes the research data collected for this study. The first step was conducting a thematic textual analysis, using Owen’s framework, of selected texts from CR organizational materials. The results of this textual analysis led to the formation of individual interview questions, the answers for which will also be reviewed using Owen’s thematic analysis. Finally, the researcher’s own ethnographic observations of the CR large group meetings are included.

When newcomers to a Celebrate Recovery meeting first arrive, they are often greeted by a volunteer group member, asked to write first names on name-tags, and handed a meeting bulletin or announcement sheet. As they make their way into the meeting room commons, they pass a resource table, and are often encouraged by volunteers to take a program pamphlet or flyer. Beyond the personal interaction with group members, newcomers are also introduced to the program’s mission and philosophy through organizational texts. When the newcomer returns the following week, or months later, and joins a step study group, additional materials (i.e., workbooks, mutual help recovery program books) are handed out. These texts serve to outline the organizational goals and orient newcomers to program guidelines.

Textual Analysis

For this study, four representative texts were selected: the modified Twelve Steps, Celebrate Recovery’s Eight Recovery Principles, the Serenity Prayer, and the script used by the master of ceremonies tasked with leading the group meeting. At each meeting, a different volunteer leader serves as the master of ceremonies and reads from the same script (see Appendix C). After a brief introduction to open the meeting and 10-13 minutes of praise and worship music, the MC leads the group in reciting either the modified Twelve Steps (see
Appendix A) or CR’s Eight Recovery Principles (see Appendix B). (These texts are presented alternately for each meeting.) To close the large group meeting, the MC leads the group in recitation of the Serenity Prayer (see Appendix D). These texts are presented frequently at the meetings, and clearly serve as representation of the organizational messaging offered to newcomers and as a foundation of cultural meaning for group members. An analysis of these texts revealed five major themes. These themes suggest group members

1. have a shared faith in God and Jesus Christ,
2. share common struggles,
3. are powerless,
4. recognize and accept their negative identity traits, and
5. are willing to move forward with positive, purposeful action into recovery.

A shared faith in God and Jesus Christ

As the large group leader opens the meeting, a priority emphasis is placed on the Christian faith and the belief in God and Jesus Christ. The master of ceremonies will read from the meeting script, announcing that the purpose of the “Christ-centered” CR meeting is for members to offer hope to one another while “celebrating God’s healing power” in their lives (Celebrate Recovery, 2012b, np). The modified Twelve Steps recited toward the beginning of each meeting includes references to spiritual acts and experiences, prayer and meditation, and the desire to improve one’s “conscious contact with God” (Celebrate Recovery, 2012a, np). Christian literature and concepts are interwoven throughout the group’s messages and the speaker’s teaching or testimony: Biblical verses have been added to the modified Twelve Steps (which has been borrowed from AA materials) and the group’s Eight Recovery Principles cite verses and phrases from the Beatitudes, a set of teachings from Jesus found in the Gospel of Matthew (Celebrate Recovery, 2004). The meeting closes with a group recitation of Serenity Prayer by Reinhold Niebuhr (1951), which invokes God’s name, draws parallels to Jesus, and makes allusions to Heaven.
**Sharing common struggles**

The second theme to emerge from an analytical review of the organizational text is the acknowledgement that all of the group members *struggle* with their addictions and compulsions in various ways and at various times. Newcomers will hear the word *struggle* at least four times as the master of ceremonies reads from his or her script, the leader emphasizing that those in attendance may be struggling, but they “do not struggle alone” (Celebrate Recovery, 2012b, np). This definition of a *community of strugglers* is re-emphasized repeatedly through member teachings, testimonies, and public comments during quarterly “open mic” sessions. This concept is reinforced in the *Eight Recovery Principles* as members read “my life is unmanageable” (Celebrate Recovery, 2004, np) as well as in Step 12 of the modified *Twelve Steps* where the Biblical passage cited suggests members should be support one another, yet remain cautious to persisting temptations or struggles: “If someone is caught in a sin you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted” (Celebrate Recovery, 2012a, np).

**Powerless**

The third theme is best illustrated through passages in the *Serenity Prayer* that talk about uncontrollable circumstances. The prayer contains the phrases “things I cannot change” and a world “not as I would have it” (Niebuhr, 1951, np). This clearly underscores the notion of powerlessness. Repeatedly, this text, and the others that were analyzed, encourage members to acknowledge their lack of self-control or circumstance-control and “do what God requires” (Celebrate Recovery, 2004, np) by relinquishing control of their lives to their higher power. Here, group members embrace a mantle of powerlessness, and collectively acknowledge deficiencies in their character as an initial step in the recovery process: “We admitted we were powerless over our addictions and compulsive behaviors” (Celebrate Recovery, 2012a).

**Negative identity traits**
Recognition and acceptance of negative identity traits is the fourth theme that came from the textual analysis of the organizational materials. The modified Twelve Steps and the Eight Recovery Principles emphasizes these traits repeatedly: “sinful nature,” “defects of character,” “shortcomings,” and “faults” (Celebrate Recovery, 2004, 2012a). Group members are reminded that they have been unable to make correct decisions in the past, that they have harmed others or have been tempted and committed “sins” (Celebrate Recovery, 2012a). They are prompted to admit “the exact nature of our wrongs” and ask God to “remove all our shortcomings” (Celebrate Recovery, 2012a). Members enrolled in the organization’s step study are expected to make a “searching and fearless moral inventory” (Celebrate Recovery, 2012a, np) or a list of past offenses committed that may have caused physical, emotional, or mental harm to others. In the leader’s script, the audience is informed that the meeting is “a safe place” and that newcomers may find “acceptance without judgment” (Celebrate Recovery, 2012b, np), suggesting that those seeking help may first acknowledge their past or present negative behavior or attitude, then move with purposeful action toward recovery without fear of condemnation or rejection.

Positive purposeful action

The fifth theme in the organizational materials is one of positive, forward-looking, purposeful action. The materials encourage members to move beyond the recognition and acceptance of negative identity traits toward restoration and forgiveness through the application of positive evaluations and action: “voluntarily submit to any and all changes God wants” (Celebrate Recovery, 2004). Members are asked to examine and evaluate their relationships, to “humbly ask” for forgiveness, to confess to past and future sins, to make amends, to purposefully seek “contact” with their higher power, to “practice these principles,” and to “carry this message” to others (Celebrate Recovery, 2004, 2012a). At this turning point, the recovery group member moves from addressing negative behavior to corrective action and making incremental changes, as the Serenity Prayer suggests, “living one day at a time; enjoying one
moment at a time” (Niebuhr, 1951, np). Ultimately, the textual messages suggest, those who follow the actions outlined can achieve peace and serenity, moving forward with their lives.

Individual Interviews

Following the textual analysis, a set of fourteen interview questions was designed to answer the research questions. These questions (see Appendix E) were informed by both the themes discovered during analysis of selected organizational text (see above) as well as the review of previous literature on identity creation and the use of personal narrative (see Chapter 2). Member participants were not asked to elaborate on the organizational messages; rather, those themes informed the researcher to contextual cues and cultural messages that may have appeared during interviews and provided a point of reference for the interviewer and the study participant. Instead, the theoretical framework derived from the literature review formed the basis of the interview questions as participants were asked how they defined the role of testimony in a CR meeting, how sharing a story formed a connection with group members, and how preparing for those testimonies may have induced a state of self-discovery and reflection. Participants were also asked to offer an explanation for the use and purpose of testimonies in the CR meeting as well as how personal stories in a lesson might differ from historical or fictional anecdotes.

Participants were recruited in person before and after the CR large group meeting. Only those who had given their personal testimony or were planning on doing so in the coming year were selected. (This was a special request made by the organization and its impact on the findings will be considered in the next chapter.) In an effort to maintain the anonymity and confidentiality of group members, pseudonyms were assigned by the researcher to each study participant. The fourteen research participants included:

- Ruth, a 50-year-old mother of three, who has been in CR for more than three years. She has not yet given her full testimony but has included parts of her testimony in various lessons she has taught during the large group meeting.
• Joseph, a 59-year-old male former law enforcement officer, who has been a volunteer leader in the CR group for more than five years. At the time of his interview for this study, he was preparing his testimony and scheduled to give it a few weeks later.

• Matthew, a 38-year-old male real estate broker, who joined CR in the past year. He has been through a step study and is leading a second one. He has not yet given his testimony in the large group meeting.

• Andrew, a 63-year-old male healthcare administrator, who is the former director of the CR group that served as the basis for this study. He has given his testimony several times.

• Hannah, a female television executive in her mid-30s, who has not yet given her testimony in the large group meeting despite attending and volunteering each week for the past four years.

• Daniel, a 58-year-old male real estate executive, who is one of the founding members of this CR group and has given his testimony several times at CR and in the Sunday morning service at his home church.

• Leah, a 60-year-old female accountant and real estate executive, who does recovery full-time: leading step studies, giving her testimony at recovery-related events, and writing materials for recovery classes and groups.

• Luke, a 53-year-old male executive in the senior living industry, who has been a part of CR for nearly eight years and has given his testimony twice.

• Phillip, a 58-year-old male, who is a former middle school teacher and former chemical dependency counselor, and joined this CR group less than two years ago. He has given his testimony once.

• David, a 51-year-old male pastor, who joined CR three years ago and has offered parts of his testimony in teachings he gives two or three times a year.
• Saul, a 67-year-old male retiree who previously worked in commercial real estate, who has been a part of various recovery groups for the past fifteen years. He has been a part of this recovery group for the past ten years and has given his testimony twice.

• Esther, a 67-year-old female former teacher, who has been with this CR group for nearly a decade and has given her testimony three times.

• Claire, a 32-year-old female event coordinator and children’s counselor, who has been in the CR group for three years and has given her testimony once.

• Mark, a 30-year-old male, who works in marketing communication and has given his testimony once in the three years he has been in CR.

**Personal Narrative**

As previously stated, the primary communication device within a mutual help recovery group is the personal narrative, or testimony (Witmer, 1997). Regardless of addiction or issues, recovery group members regularly share their stories individually, in small groups, or in front of large audiences. In CR, this communicative device is regulated; group members are recruited, then scheduled to give their vetted testimonies throughout the year. (Group members are provided a suggested outline and asked to share their written testimony with their mentor or sponsor before presenting the testimony in front of the large group.) Analysis of the research data reveals that testimonies are an integral part of the recovery process, fostering discussion and reflection, engaging group members in self-discovery, connecting individuals with group principles, and serving as the preferred communication method at all levels of human activity within the organization.

*RQ 1: What is the role of personal narrative in recovery?*

According to the analysis of the interviews, the role of personal narrative in CR serves several functions:

• it presents an honest and transparent life story of the individual speaker;
it addresses the stages (i.e., brokenness, denial, struggles) of an individual’s recovery progress;

it encourages newcomers and members to continue on their own paths toward recovery;

it allows members to give back to the group;

it reinforces organizational messages;

and it enhances teachings and lessons from the modified *Twelve Steps* and *Eight Recovery Principles*.

The interviewees viewed member testimonies as the lifeblood of the group: "I think the thing about recovery that makes it successful is the personal stories," said Hannah. Testimonies not only remind members of the progress an individual has made in his or her recovery journey, but they also offer newcomers and visitors a glimpse of what may come.

An honest and transparent life story

One thread that ran through all of the interviews is the understanding that a testimony is a truthful life story that examines the personal experiences of the individual. Testimonies are evaluative, and allow the speaker to examine his or her past with present-day knowledge. Testimonies highlight the negative experiences of the individual, detailing harmful addictions or embarrassing compulsive behaviors.

HANNAH: It is my story, meaning that it focuses on me, and how I perceive my life, see change in my life, or express events that have happened in my life. … It’s going to involve me talking about my life emotionally, physically, and spiritually.

Joseph said the individual giving the testimony must be honest, transparent, and complete in telling what his or her life was like before recovery:

JOSEPH: You have to be honest and tell them the truth about what really happened and why you believe you’re the way you are.
Phillip echoed that idea, adding, “If somebody doesn’t get to their core issue, I think people realize it’s more of a song and dance than it is speaking from the gut and heart.”

For Leah, the definition of testimony is impacted by her belief in a higher power.

LEAH: I think of a testimony as someone’s personal experience of what they saw, heard and experience, relative to God’s working in their life.

*Stages of recovery progress*

Members of CR are encouraged to evaluate their life choices or past circumstances and display a willingness to admit failure; to be, as Daniel phrases it, “vulnerable about your personal struggles.” Testimonies often address the work an individual has done to enter in and work through recovery as well as any positive outlooks the individual may have adopted as a result of recovery.

LEAH: It’s about sharing our own brokenness and stories of our failures, our woundedness, our struggles. Then, within the context of those, how they actually experience the supernatural power of God to heal them, restore them, cleanse them, forgive them.”

Phillip succinctly summarizes the essential parts of a CR member testimony: “What it [life] was like, what happened, and what it’s like now.” These three parts – which can be labeled Before, During, and After recovery stages – form the core narrative participants have used for their own testimonies or have heard through other member testimonies. Andrew said he sees brokenness, denial and struggle in each of those stages.

ANDREW: They [member testimonies] need to describe pretty much a state of brokenness, something that needs to be fixed, the person’s attempt to fix those things themselves, and the recognition that only God can fix those things. And then, the good effects of them allowing God to fix those things.

In describing the first component of the testimony, participants repeatedly mentioned the word “brokenness” and stressed the need for thorough evaluation of the individual’s pre-
recovery state. In the words of Luke, the Before Stage, for many of those in recovery, represents “how I got to be to the point where I knew I needed something outside of myself to stay alive.” It may be the point where many members hit rock bottom with their addictions or compulsive behaviors. Those offering their testimony may quickly sum up this part of their life or go into great detail. The emphasis, participants said, is to examine what the individual's life was like before considering or entering into a recovery program.

ANDREW: My favorite saying is the only way to get to humility is through humiliation. You have to demonstrate a fair amount of brokenness.

The second component of the testimony is the During Stage, the events and circumstances that brought the individual to recovery. Here, many participants used the term “denial” to highlight a change in personal perspective:

LUKE: What caused me to come out of denial and enter into a recovery program … and then what were my experiences like in the recovery program.

The During Stage is an important part of the testimony. It highlights aspects of the CR program that attracted the individual, thoughts on initial challenges the individual faced in making lifestyle changes or working through the Twelve Steps, and reinforces the organizational messages. Ruth said when she is in the audience, she takes note of when the individual makes the decision to enter into recovery: “I’m listening for the point where they go, ‘A-ha!’ and then they change.” Saul said detailing these struggles is important in a member testimony.

SAUL: The hurdles, the challenges of life... There are tests in our life, and how we deal with them is part of who we are and our story to tell.

A third component of the testimony’s core narrative is the aftermath of choosing recovery and how the individual has benefitted from that choice. Speakers may spend some time at this stage describing the program tools that have worked for him or her and/or giving the audience a recovery progress update. At the After Stage, testimonies are often infused with
program-specific slogans like “It works if you work it” or “One day at a time.” Specifically, the individual addresses the changes in his or her life that have garnered the most personal benefit.

HANNAH: [It is about] how I’ve seen change and growth, any tools I’ve gained with the program. What used to define me is no longer the definition; now the change is.

Joseph said the After Stage was a part of a member testimony that he listened for the most.

JOSEPH: The glory in the testimony is to hear the positivity that comes out of what CR has done for you. And you really shouldn’t give your testimony until you’ve accomplished that.

Encouraging others

Participants did not agree unanimously which element or stage was most essential. Some felt no testimony was complete without a full, honest disclosure of an individual’s past. Others insisted a testimony’s success rest in showcasing how the program worked and how an individual’s success could be credited to the intervention of a higher power. All participants, however, agreed those giving a testimony should be sincere and address the hopeful elements of recovery to encourage those in the audience that may be struggling with addictions and compulsive behaviors.

HANNAH: Hope and change is super-important. You can’t talk about one without the other. But I think the hope is the most important part of it. … I think the hope has to be [evident in the testimony] if I’m going to continue to… keep coming back and listening, to not feel defeated.

Saul said every time he gives his testimony he hopes those listening will benefit.

SAUL: Testimony is telling a story, and hoping for a result, the result being, ‘This is what my experience has been and I hope you can gain something from it.’

Matthew said individuals who focus on what worked in recovery has, in his mind, the most successful testimonies.
MATTHEW: You have a choice when you get up there and do your testimony. What do you want to cover? The real stuff or the stuff that’s just, like, you know, almost meaningless. When you’ve got people up there and they just touch on the soft and fuzzy things, I don’t think you’re gonna make that big of an impact.

For the audience, the benefits of hearing a member testimony can be varied. Mark said testimonies often remind those in attendance that they do not struggle alone and that there is hope for the future. A recurring message in the CR texts and member comments is the notion of community, that individuals may embrace a social identity of a group of individuals in recovery. Member testimonies can serve as inspirational messages for newcomers and veterans alike; one individual’s story can be a reminder of another’s own narrative.

JOSEPH: When you finally realize you’re not the only individual suffering with this malady, [that] there [are] others that have had the very same thing, that’s therapeutic. You can let it go, and go, ‘Okay, if he can do it, I can do it.’

Several interviewees commented on how the personal experiences presented serve as encouragement to individuals seeking tangible solutions to personal problems.

ANDREW: The purpose is to keep the people who are basically lost coming back.

There’s hope. If you keep on doing this, things will begin to change for you.

Regardless of where they see the testimony portion fall within their recovery journey, the study participants agreed that offering a testimony was vital for not only themselves but for others. Testimonies spur personal growth and inspire others to take the necessary steps on their own journeys, they said.

MARK: It’s good for the group to hear people’s stories. For me, it forced me to think through my story… to really look back and reflect on how far I’ve come. And it was really encouraging.

*Giving back to the group*
Beyond the personal benefits, some interviewees voiced a desire to "give back" to fellow recovery group members who had supported them in the early stages of their recovery. For these participants, taking serious the testimony component was an important step in their recovery journey. As one woman said during an open mic session, "I cannot continue in my recovery unless I share it with someone."

For Claire, her testimony was a way to repay others in the group who inspired her through their testimonies.

CLAIRE: Part of it is all these people who I've known and come to know and are an important part of my story, and I so appreciate hearing their story. I wanted them to know me that way. To know all the history. And to be able to say how much CR had meant to me. How much they had meant to me, how much they had impacted me.

And, as Leah commented, many in the audience are aware of this reciprocation and welcome the testimonies.

LEAH: To hear and be a part of where God is moving in people's lives is a wonderful blessing. And to have them share that gift with me just gives me so much joy and so much hope in my own life.

Reinforcing organizational messages

In addition to encouraging one another and giving back to the group through the presentation of life stories, members as reinforce organizational messages in their testimonies. Each week, a testimony or a teaching is presented in the large group meeting. (Once a quarter, this particular CR group uses the speaking portion of the meeting as an "open mic" session, allowing anyone in attendance to stand before the group and offer spontaneous testimony. These speakers are asked to keep their personal narrative to less than three minutes.) The public testimony functions on various levels for two subjects: the individual speaker and the audience.
Members who engaged in writing and delivering their personal narrative also experience a noticeable stage of self-discovery, participants said. The testimony not only offers the individual a chance to consider what brought him or her to recovery and how he or she is working through those issues, but also how his or her identity is shaped within the context of the group.

DAVID: You are trying to connect the dots of your own story, not simply for others, but in connecting the dots of your own story, you’re helping make sense of your own life. And where there is this kind of thread other people can connect also.

In the large group meeting, the public testimony serves to orientate newcomers in the audience to the recovery message and program principles. Members are shown “living out” their recovery and modeling appropriate recovery behavior. Testimonies offer a historical account of a member’s life, “framed within recovery language,” said Hannah. The objective of the testimony is to offer newcomers an example of an individual who has progressed through the recovery program.

*Enhancing lessons*

In addition to offering personal narratives by members in the large group meetings, CR also presents lessons (based on the modified *Twelve Steps* and the *Eight Recovery Principles*) taught by group volunteers. These lessons are more structured, culled from CR leader guides and supplemental materials, and usually accompanied by a slide presentation that reinforces the lesson’s main points. Teachers include veteran group members and host church staff ministers; most have previous teaching experience. Teachers are asked to include personal stories in their lessons – a “mini-testimony” as Esther called it – in order to enable the audience to better connect with the topic.

ESTHER: I think it’s more impactful because it’s like a mini-testimony. It’s like what you’d share in the small group, but it’s applying to that, to make it our own, to make those lessons more our own.
Hannah said the personal testimonies in the teachings – shorter vignettes that offer a snapshot of the speaker’s life or recovery process as it relates to the lesson material – also help those in the audience to see how elements of the program are working in the lives of the teachers.

HANNAH: You are hearing from the people who are there. You see them every week. They’re not just figureheads. They’re actually living it and breathing it. When they’re willing to talk about it, it demystifies several things about the program.

For this CR group, the element of personal narrative is mandated in all lessons. Teachers are asked to “illustrate it with your life,” as Ruth says, to personalize the academic thesis of the lesson.

DAVID: When we give instruction, we say, ‘make it personal.’ I believe that is the most effective way to communicate.

Saul admitted he is often disappointed if the speaker only focuses on the academic part of the lesson; for him, he is looking for “this is what happened to me” in order to connect to the speaker’s message. Participants agreed that including personal stories within a lesson “humanizes” the lesson topic and makes more of an impact on the audience.

PHILLIP: I think it’s to bring the human touch to it for people, so it’s not just some generic lecture, you know, that it’s real people trying to change their lives.

Leah, who has experience teaching at CR and giving her own testimony in front various women’s groups, said the lessons can be more effective if the speaker switches from “you need this” to “we need this.”

LEAH: I can relate to you. I’ve experienced the same level of brokenness and similar struggle. I know what it’s like to be hurting; I know what it’s like to be afraid.

Some participants believe the use of a personal narrative within the lesson also establishes credibility for the speaker and claims the audience’s attention. Claire said a
A speaker including his or her own experience can be a “powerful” tool in effectively communicating “the truth and how [they] have been impacted by it.” Mark agreed.

MARK: It’s much harder to communicate [credibility] without that person telling why they are ‘I know about this particular stuff because I had these life experiences that have given me a reason to know about this or that forced me to deal with my own stuff and this is a big help.’

Using a personal illustration as it relates to the lesson topic is more effective than including a historical vignette or fictional narrative, participants said. David, who has spent the past 30 years in a preaching or teaching role, said personal experience connects the audience with the message more effectively than a story told by a speaker who is several times removed from the original source. Participants suggest the source of the story may be more important than the details or overall thesis of the story. As Andrew said, “it’s not just a story; here’s the person it happened to. There’s a reality to it.”

Personal narratives in lessons also underscore the program’s emphasis on community and recognition that members are not alone in their journey. By including their personal experiences, Ruth says, those teaching a lesson can admit if the step or principle in the lesson has worked.

RUTH: You’re admitting that it really works, or that it really didn’t work. There’s something that no one can argue with because you said this is how it happened, this what God has done in my life. … Somehow, it gives credence to this is the way it is.

Participants agree that just as a connection is made with those offering a testimony only, a connection may also be made with those teaching a lesson. It is a dynamic that fosters understanding and recognition of issues within the audience, and reminds newcomers and members alike that there is little difference, recovery-wise, between those speaking and those listening. As Esther said, “When someone [admits something personal] in the lesson and says, ‘like when I,’ yeah, that’s instructive and opens someone else up to say, ‘I did that.’”
RQ 1 provided an understanding of how CR members view the role of personal narrative or testimony within the group. RQ 2 addresses the ways in which this testimony may or may not have an impact on the recovery identities of the group members.

**RQ 2: How do individuals in a mutual help recovery group perceive the impact of personal narratives on their recovery identities?**

In CR, a member testimony is viewed as a significant event in an individual’s recovery progress and precipitates relationship changes within the group. Many of the people interviewed said testimonies force an acknowledgement of an undesired past and reinforce an individual’s social identity as a member of a mutual help recovery group. They also reported testimonies helped individuals solidify an identity connection with the group. As such, three themes emerged during the interviews as members considered the impact of their testimonies:

1. Preparation for a testimony forces the individual to consider and qualify his or her identity as it relates to recovery.
2. Presenting a testimony before the large group reinforces an individual’s recovery identity.
3. With a public testimony, individuals finalize their membership with the “in-group.”

**Preparation forces identity consideration**

One of the perceived ways a personal narrative impacts an individual’s recovery identity is the process by which that individual decides on a narrative position. As noted in Chapter 2, Beran and Unoka (2005) and Harré (2008) posit that this position is formed as the individual decides which facts to include or omit in his or her testimony, and how he or she overcomes personal challenges in actually initiating this semi-public performance. Most CR members begin their first testimony preparation in a similar fashion: They are given an outline to follow from CR organizational materials. They are presented with suggestions on what to talk about, how to talk about it, and how to organize their thoughts. They are instructed to give their
testimony in under 20 minutes. Beyond these initial instructions, participants said they have taken very different paths in preparing for their testimony.

Some participants viewed past events with a present-day lens. Stories of addictive behavior or personal failures were told from a narrative frame of recovery. Details were interpreted and then recontextualized if they were relevant to the master narrative of the testimony. The narrative focus was on the individual speaker and the reasons why they were in recovery.

ANDREW: Most of us think of stories and bits and pieces. And even though it’s our own story, until we’re forced to look at the big picture, I’m not sure we do that very well. … I had to take a bird’s eye view in order to see and feel the goodness of being on the path [to recovery].

Other participants prepared for their testimony by focusing on recovery and post-recovery events, zeroing in on the ways in which recovery has worked for them. Esther said she begins working on her testimony by asking the following questions: “What’s really important? What will touch people most or explain me best? What formed my life, what happened to me?” Participants said they are drawn to considering the lessons they have learned and how they can communicate that knowledge to the audience.

Daniel said each time he prepares for a testimony he discovers new lessons that sometimes reveal an undiscovered element of his personal identity.

DANIEL: What I try to bring in my testimony are the lessons that God has taught. You know, that doesn’t ever stop. When God’s working on [my] issues, I share those stories in my testimony. Both the origin of my issue, how it presented itself, and the circumstances that God used to get my attention to make me aware there was a different way.

CR leaders ask all members to write out their testimony before presenting it before the group. This action serves two functions: It allows the speaker to better organize his or her
thoughts on a printed page and enables a mentor or organizational leader to review and edit the testimony. Few testimonies are offered spontaneously, and having a prepared script not only gives those speakers who are nervous the opportunity to simply read their testimonies and avoid eye-contact with the audience but also keeps the speakers from “going off the reservation,” says Andrew, a group leader, and avoid making an unnecessary comment or gaffe. For some participants writing out a testimony is the most practical way to ensure coherency, organizing narrative events chronologically or topically.

Philipp said he imagined writing letters to various family members and friends, describing “where I was in life and what went on and everything.” He then organized those letters into his testimony. Claire said she started out listing the “major highs and lows” of her childhood and early adulthood chronologically before reworking her story topically and expounding on what she learned and how she changed and how those past events related to her recovery.

The narrative position may also be impacted by the perception of a negative reaction from the audience, some interviewees said. Interviewees cited a fear of exposing their secrets as a reason they may have delayed in giving their testimony immediately following a completed step-study course.

DANIEL: Most of the things that people have the biggest struggle with is sharing publicly their private sins. There’s just a real stigma around that in our society. That you’ll be rejected and that’s kind of what we were raised with. We feel a lot of shame because of our stuff, and therefore, we like to keep it quiet. We’re not supposed to talk about that stuff.

Mark added sharing such personal information is “scary. It’s a very intimidating thing to be, sort of, open and honest.”

Apart from revealing very negative elements of an individual’s character and personal history, a “fear of being judged” is often prevalent in the minds of speakers, according to
Joseph. Speakers may be motivated to change or omit certain details of their narrative based on assumptions of audience reaction.

JOSEPH: If you think that the crowd that you’re standing before thinks one way of you and you’re about to expose all the real stuff about you, your fear is that the perception of you is going to change. … That may stop you, or that may influence what you share.

Leah admitted her fears dictated what she shared and to whom early on in her recovery journey – how much of her recovery identity she was willing to share to others.

LEAH: I think there was a time where I was really controlled by fear, fear of rejection, and fear of abandonment. I was very careful about who my audience was and how much I was willing to share. But now I am pretty comfortable with who I am.

Achieving such a level of personal acceptance is one by-product of presenting a testimony, interviewees said. Some interviewees described public presenting his or her recovery identity as an emotional release, a “freeing” feeling that surfaced. Terms like “cathartic,” “therapeutic,” and “letting go” were used as those interviewed talk about the immediate impact of giving a testimony. Daniel said the testimony serves to enable members to reinforce their recovery identity through this act of release.

DANIEL: People need to find their voice. I think the testimony process is an important part of finding their voice. After they’ve given their testimony, they feel some degree of freedom to be who they were created to be and can express themselves without as much fear of rejection and failure and all those things.

Reinforcing a recovery identity

A second perceived impact of personal narratives on recovery identities focused on the individual achievement of presenting a testimony before the group. Typically, those who have completed the 12-step study or have been in the recovery program for a few years are asked to give their testimony before the group. For many, this testimony is a mile-marker, or, as Phillip called it, “a rite of passage.” It is in this instance that many individuals, for the first time, can
publicly admit before a large group that “I am a grateful believer who struggles with…” or “I am an alcoholic.” Most interviewees said the testimony caps an individual’s journey into recovery, through the twelve steps, and his or her arrival at an indefinable stage. In essence, this act reinforces the individual’s recovery identity.

MATTHEW: Step 12 is all about giving back. [Giving one’s testimony] is like an unspoken notch on your belt. It’s like, ‘Oh yeah, that guy’s been there.’

For David, the member testimony is “the most practical and powerful way” for others to see how that individual has progressed through the twelve steps and made it to this recovery stage. Testimonies often give an audience insight into the successes and failures of those making their way through the program. “Any time there’s a testimony,” said Ruth, “you get a peek behind the curtain at what life is like.” Hannah said many members view the presentation of a testimony as a natural extension of the final step in the 12-step program.

HANNAH: For the person giving it, it’s the twelfth step. It’s giving back and being willing to tell others what you’ve experienced. … It’s putting that 12-step program into practice.

Andrew, however, warns that the testimony should not be seen as an initiation or an endpoint in the recovery journey.

ANDREW: This is almost like the last step. But, in fact, that concept kind of scares me because I do believe that recovery is a lifelong process. So if you think you’re done, that’s maybe a mistake.

**Finalizing membership**

Interviewees addressed a third perceived impact on their recovery identities, agreeing that the public testimony also finalizes, for the individual, membership in the mutual help recovery group. Those interviewed said they felt closer to the audience once they had presented their testimony. Conversely, as audience members, interviewees said they often feel closer to the individual offering a testimony. This “closeness” or connection manifests in feelings of affirmation, camaraderie, and intimacy.
ANDREW: It would be hard not to feel closer to that person after they’ve been transparent with their life. I think we’ve all learned that the more open we are, the closer we are to other people. Here’s someone who comes up and confesses, now you know better who they are. How could you not be closer?

Daniel said many in the audience who have previously given their testimony react positively whenever a member offers his or her testimony for the first time.

DANIEL: In almost every case, people are very appreciative of what someone has done, and no matter what people get out of it, the people in the audience affirm the person because they know what a personal struggle it was. They’ve usually been through it … and they know how hard it is to get up there [and] deal with their own fears around the issue.”

The testimony also re-orientates the audience’s perspective of the individual. “It just gives you a totally different perspective and empathy and bonding because you can share in the hardship that they’ve had,” said Saul. “You respect them more for what they’re dealing with.”

This connection often initiates a relationship or status change for the individual within the group. Interviewees who have shared their testimonies reported not only stronger feelings and friendship toward group members, but also gained awareness of sponsorship and leadership opportunities within the group. (A by-product of publicly standing before the group is the attraction newer members have toward veteran recovery members and a desire to form a mentor-mentee relationship. Several participants said immediately following their testimony they were approached by new group members and asked to serve as a sponsor.) Some participants said they experienced emotional and physical changes after delivering a testimony; all agreed the testimony allows the individual to more clearly define his or her identity as it relates to the group and the recovery program and show others his or her “true self.”

“If you always knew me as a person with clothes on, and now you know me as a naked person, there’s gonna be a relationship change,” said David. He continued:
DAVID: For bad or good. A relationship change may be you can’t handle me anymore. The relationship change may be you feel the need to fix me. … And some people deeply cared for me in a way that, apart from all the other stories I’ve told, for them it unlocked the door to care. And they could see me as human.

The testimony also enables the individual to develop or strengthen relationships across gender lines. In CR, all members come together for the large group meeting, then break into small groups based on gender or issues. Step studies are created for men or women and typically last an entire year. (Members will meet weekly to work through the 12-step program and organizational materials.) Since much of the personal stories and struggles are shared in these smaller group meetings, knowledge of member issues is limited. Phillip said he was nervous to talk about past sexual indiscretions in front of the co-ed audience during his first testimony. The audience response, however, eased his fears and enabled him to feel more connected to the group. “After I gave my testimony, there were some women I had not even really ever talked to prior, they came up and told me how much they appreciated my testimony,” he said. “Once I did the testimony I felt more a part of [the CR group].”

The role of personal narratives in a mutual help recovery group like CR enables individuals to address their life story and the different stages of their recovery journey. These narratives encourage those considering a recovery program and reinforce the organizational messages. As group members present their testimonies, recovery identities are formed and reinforced, and membership within the group is finalized.

The next chapter will address the researcher’s conclusions formed as a result of analyzing the research data. It will address the ways in which the information presented in this study might be applied, and it will address limitations and future research considerations in light of the topic and research participants.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The stories we tell connect us to a group and lead us down a path of self-discovery.

Research by Burke (1950), Goffman (1959), Tajfel (1981), and Fisher (1987) laid the foundation for Ricoeur’s (1991) assessment of narrative functions within the framework of identity. While other scholars take divergent paths on the role of personal narrative and the process by which a narrative identity is formed, scholars such as Higgins (1987), Carbaugh (1996), Oyserman (2004), and de Fina (2006) agree that one outcome of presenting a personal narrative is the creation of social identity. Utilizing social and cultural surroundings, individuals create an identity for themselves, as well as for those around them.

But how do the stories shared in a mutual help recovery group connect us to a group? Through analysis of the research data, the answer to this question can be found in the themes from RQ 2 and the ways in which group members perceive an impact of personal narrative on their recovery identities. The testimonies not only represent the social world of recovery and offer an evaluation of that world, but members establish themselves as part of a recovery group through the presentation of their personal narratives (de Fina, 2006). Those members who have presented their testimony reported feeling more included in the group, that they could be open and honest about who they are or what they have struggled with, and that they can continue in their recovery relationships unguarded. As Hannah shared, “There’s something about hearing someone give their testimony that you just automatically feel closer to them; that you can approach them and talk to them more. They’ve made themselves more available, if you will." The fear of judgment or loss of respect is all but gone once the testimony is given, and members feel their recovery journey has reached a checkpoint now that they have confessed their sins to God, to themselves, and to others.
In CR, member testimonies enable the individual to publicly present himself or herself as one in recovery. For the group members, listening to a member testimony is to share in the ongoing story of that individual’s life, and there is celebration and thanksgiving for the testimony itself. At times, the audience is as emotional during a testimony as the one giving it, and there is an expanded sense of community – a community of believers who do not struggle alone – as yet another group member has reached this significant stage in his or her recovery journey. Interviewees repeatedly said they are listening for the ways in which recovery worked for the speaker – either to reinforce a component of their own recovery journey or to discover a new element (i.e., slogan or practice) to incorporate into their daily routine. In this way, the story of the speaker may remind the listener of his or her own story and further the connection that each shares in the recovery identity.

Esther, who admits she enjoys discovering new slogans to apply to her recovery life, said, at times, she doesn’t feel as if her testimony matches up with those shared by others in the group. She has never been addicted to drugs or alcohol, never masked her inner pain with extramarital affairs. Her testimony centers on her relationships with her family and her anguish over troubled children. Esther said that when she gives her testimony, many in the group approach her afterward and admit they struggle with similar issues of co-dependency. This feedback confirms and acknowledges her struggles as well as provides her with a sense of belonging in the recovery group. “It does count, what I have to share,” she said. “Even though mine [her testimony] is not dramatic, it does matter, it does count. And I felt known. And I’m still okay.”

From the moment a member begins a testimony, he or she utilizes culturally specific speech codes – the kind Bernstein (1964) and Philipsen (1992) suggest are necessary to communicate meaning within a social group. In the opening, a CR member presents his or herself as a believer or grateful believer, a part of the cultural vocabulary often used to identify oneself as a Christian. The speaker continues, describing his or her addictions or compulsive
behaviors, and further establishes his or her identity within the framework of recovery. As the testimony continues, the speaker reinforces his or her recovery identity with an evaluative narrative that includes personal details relevant to the issue of recovery – a communication choice that moves the speaker “beyond mere storytelling,” as Gumperz (1982) said, and into an arena in which personal experiences are presented to gain “positive evaluation” (p. 130) within the group.

At the same time, those in the audience may evaluate testimonies for truthfulness and reliability. Fisher (1987) said listeners often require the appropriate structure or relevant material in order to fully accept the speaker’s narrative. Interviewees said ideal testimonies are those that follow the anatomy of a testimony – the Before, During, and After Stages discussed in Chapter 4 – and give the audience insight into the various stages of an individual’s recovery journey. Both Mark and Phillip indicated speakers who did not display the appropriate amount of honesty or humility in their testimonies were viewed as, at least in their minds, individuals who had not fully embraced the recovery program.

Of course, perception is not the only constraint speakers may face. In the case of a mutual help recovery group, the conversation is usually one-sided as audience members refrain from commenting on the individual’s personal narrative as it is presented. This practice carries over into the small group sessions following the large group meetings: members are asked to refrain from “cross-talk” or offering feedback on an individual’s issue or story. In the large group meeting, testimonies are limited to 20 minutes, and several interviewees admitted the time constraint often posed their biggest challenge in organizing their testimonies.

If these testimonies connect individuals with the group through the establishment or the reinforcement of a recovery identity, then how do these stories lead us down a path of self-discovery? This leads us to the role of personal narratives in a mutual help recovery group discussed in the analysis of RQ 1. In CR, member testimonies work like meta-narratives, wherein speakers are allowed to add editorial comments as they present their life stories and
the different stages of their recovery journeys. In fact, members are strongly encouraged to engage in an evaluative process that puts their personal narrative into a perspective (or narrative position) that directly relates to recovery and the CR organizational messages. For Leah, a testimony is “a good reminder for me about where I’ve been and where God has taken me and what my life looked like when I was trying to do it on my own, and what a mess I made of my life, and what my life is like today and how He’s restored me.” The testimonies also serve as “success stories” for the organization and encourage newcomers to further consider joining the recovery program.

For most of people, in recovery or out, this process of narrative evaluation enables them to better interpret the events of their pasts and get to the core reason why they may feel certain fears or emotions when talking about those events. For example, an adult female might cite her father’s inability to say “I love you” as the reason why she doubts her own worthiness or has an inability to connect emotionally with others. The danger in this process, however, is that hindsight is limited to one individual and the interpretation behind the motivations or desires of others in past events may be flawed. It could be that the woman’s father loved her tremendously and never said the words because his father never said them to him; the woman’s father might have showed her how much he loved her through small gestures and signs that she has, years later, simply forgotten.

In CR, developing a testimony forces the individual to evaluate his or her past and consider all the reasons why things happened the way they happened and how those things impacted the individual he or she became. This is an important function within CR that requires an individual to view his or her life story through a lens established by the Christian organization. As David said, “The purpose of the testimonies [is] that you share how your life has been changed. It’s not trying to say that your life has been in anyway perfect, but it’s part of giving hope and giving people a sense of here’s what God can do.” Connecting the dots from an individual’s negative past to a positive, hope-filled future is paramount to CR member
testimonies. Right or wrong, these stories enable the individual to put words to feelings, emotions, and memories that have previously been unspeakable. The stories also encourage others to continue in their own recovery journeys.

Implications

This study reinforces previously held conclusions about the role of personal narratives at individual and organizational levels. Narratives enable an individual to understand others (Fisher, 1987), to establish membership within a group (de Fina, 2006), to better understand his or her past (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006), and to offer a presentation of self (Higgins, 1987). As discussed in Chapter 4, member testimonies serve an evaluative function for individuals in recovery and reinforce organizational messages to those in the recovery group audience. The stories shared are designed to emphasis the grace and help of a recovery group member’s higher power (Jesus Christ) and de-emphasis any individual effort to progress through recovery. The audience is able to form an identity with the individual speaker based on the testimony components presented, the narrative position, and the shared experiences detailed or alluded to in the testimony. These outcomes reinforce the ways in which personal narrative is used in human communication: to provide an individual, through personal experiences, with referential and evaluative narratives (O’Halloran, 2005). This concept would suggest that the more we talk about ourselves, the more we consider the reasons behind our actions and the actions of others, the clearer the picture of our identity becomes.

The study also reinforces the role of personal narrative in mutual help recovery groups, specifically its function in a hyper-spiritualized group like CR. These narratives remind those in recovery or suffering from addictions or other illnesses that they are not alone in their struggle. Since there is little research published on CR, this study breaks ground in providing a glimpse into an operational element of the organization. However, apart from the name and the hyper-spiritualized components of the group, there may be little difference in the way members utilize personal narrative in AA and CR. Certainly scholarship on AA has included review of member
turn-taking (Witmer, 1997), the role of storytelling in a recovery group setting (Jodlowski, et. al., 2007), and the ways in which identity is formed (Campbell & Kelley, 2006). Though scholarship has centered on the spiritual identities formed by AA members, to date no one has examined the ways in which identity is shaped and reinforced in a spiritually oriented recovery group like CR. Organizers of mutual help recovery groups, substance abuse treatment centers, and outpatient programs may benefit from review of this study and the affirmation that, regardless of setting, people, and topics, personal narratives offer positive outcomes: to connect us with a group and lead us down a path of self-discovery.

Limitations

This study had several limitations, including time constraints, limited access to all types of CR group members, and a limitation to only one CR group. All interviews were conducted between January 3, 2013, and January 30, 2013. Nine of the fourteen interviews were conducted at the location where the weekly CR meeting is held. These interviews were also scheduled before the meeting began and the researcher acknowledges an approaching start time and scheduling multiple interviews may have hastened the answers of the individuals or any clarification or follow-up questions. At the request of the CR leadership, the participant pool was limited to only those CR group members who had been in the program for at least one year and had finished a step study. There was a concern that including newcomers in the study would discourage those individuals from returning or break unwritten rules of confidentiality and anonymity. Consequently, only those who had prolonged exposure to organizational messages were interviewed and this fact may account for why so many participants shared a similar viewpoint on the use of testimony and its role in the recovery program.

Additionally, the participant pool was limited to only one CR group. It is quite possible other CR groups do not utilize member testimonies in the same fashion or have developed different speech codes or narrative positions in which to establish and reinforce member identities. However, given that CR groups across the country share the same organizational
texts and materials from the national office, it is unlikely messages shared locally or in individual
groups differ greatly. This CR group was selected because it is one of the largest groups in
North Texas, and participants came from various socio-economic backgrounds and served in a
variety of roles within the program.

One may argue limitations in the researcher’s selection of specific methodologies. Given the exploratory nature of the study, individual interviews promised the most revealing insight into member perspectives on testimonies and the use of personal narrative in the recovery meeting. Similar answers may have been gathered through focus groups or surveys; however, these methodologies have their own set of limitations. Surveys often do not allow participants to expand on their answers and focus group discussion may have bolstered the opinions of some and limited the opinions of others. Individual interviews enabled the researcher to assess whether initial assumptions were accurate; further investigation may utilize other data-collecting methods now that a better understanding of the culture and organizational communication has been established. Finally, ethnographic observation may be a detriment to a study if the researcher is unwavering in his or her opinion and desired outcome regardless of the results of the research data. However, methodological triangulation enabled the research data to be reviewed and interpreted with validity and credibility.

Future Research

Future research should focus on expanding this study to include a greater number of participants, a look at confessional language and its inclusion in member testimonies, and a compare/contrast analysis of the use of personal narrative in AA and CR. It is possible that CR testimonies do not function differently from confessions heard by a Catholic priest or by members at an AA meeting. Future considerations may include expanding the breadth of the research.

Findings offered in this study might also serve as the basis for a longitudinal research project that examines the success rates of individuals in various recovery programs and notes
the degree of difference, if any, between those programs. An initial question might be, “Is CR more successful in helping an individual sustain his or her recovery and avoid relapse longer than AA?” What is it about how CR organizationally frames recovery that appeals and works for so many? Could other religious or social groups adopt a similar approach to recovery and achieve the same level of success for its members? Or is the specific theological doctrine of CR limited in scope and application?

Finally, portions of this study may suggest the re-orientation of an individual’s Christian identity in U.S. churches, specifically those individuals who embrace the brokenness of the past and the forgiveness found in following a higher power. The incorporation of recovery messages and principles may move congregations from rote Scripture memory and liturgical tradition to compassionately engaging in relationships with those inside and outside the church body and a celebration of individuals who have overcome character defects. However, expanding the boundaries of the recovery message or recovery work beyond addiction and compulsive behaviors may very well dilute the impact of these messages and fail to address the original reasons why CR was created.

For many people, the CR program gives those struggling with addiction or compulsive behavior the opportunity to share their stories with others, to evaluate their past, and to find hope in a brighter future. Much of this happens during member testimonies or in small groups; the speaker and the listener are both reminded of what works and what is promised in recovery. Through personal narrative, mutual help recovery group members connect with each other and take the time to reflect on their own life stories. These discoveries or interpretations are then shared with others in the group and the cycle is repeated. The process is indicative of meaningful human communication and represents a fundamental component of what makes recovery successful for millions of Americans each day.
APPENDIX A

12 STEPS with BIBLICAL BACKUP
Step 1: We admitted we were powerless over our addictions and compulsive behaviors.
I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. (Romans 7:18 NIV)

Step 2: We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose. (Philippians 2:13 NIV)

Step 3: We took a decision to turn our life and will over to the care of God.
Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - this is your spiritual act of worship. (Romans 12:1 NIV)

Step 4: We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the Lord. (Lamentations 3:40 NIV)

Step 5: We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being, the exact nature of our wrongs.
Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. (James 5:16 NIV)

Step 6: We were entirely ready to have God remove all our defects of character.
Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up. (James 4:10 NIV)

Step 7: We humbly ask Him to remove all our shortcomings.
If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9 NIV)

Step 8: We made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.
Do to others as you would have them do to you. (Luke 6:31 NIV)

Step 9: We made direct amends to such people whenever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5:23-24 NIV)

Step 10: We continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.
So if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall. (1 Corinthians 10:12 NIV)

Step 11: We sought, through prayer and meditation, to improve our conscious contact with God, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and power to carry that out.
Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly. (Colossians 3:16 NIV)

Step 12: Having had a spiritual experience as the result of these steps, we pledged to carry this message to others, and practice these principles in all our affairs.
Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. (Galatians 6:1 NIV)
APPENDIX B

CELEBRATE RECOVERY’S EIGHT RECOVERY PRINCIPLES
The Road to Recovery
Based on the Beatitudes

Realize I’m not God; I admit that I am powerless to control my tendency to do the wrong thing and that my life is unmanageable. (Step 1)
“Happy are those who know that they are spiritually poor.”

Earnestly believe that God exists, that I matter to Him and that He has the power to help me recover. (Step 2)
“Happy are those how mourn, for they shall be comforted.”

Consciously choose to commit all my life and will to Christ’s care and control. (Step 3)
“Happy are the meek.”

Openly examine and confess my faults to myself, to God, and to someone I trust. (Steps 4 and 5)
“Happy are the pure in heart.”

Voluntarily submit to any and all changes God wants to make in my life and humbly ask Him to remove my character defects. (Steps 6 and 7)
“Happy are those whose greatest desire is to do what God requires”

Evaluate all my relationships. Offer forgiveness to those who have hurt me and make amends for harm I’ve done to others when possible, except when to do so would harm them or others. (Steps 8 and 9)
“Happy are the merciful.”
“Happy are the peacemakers”

Reserve a time with God for self-examination, Bible reading, and prayer in order to know God and His will for my life and to gain the power to follow His will. (Steps 10 and 11)

Yield myself to God to be used to bring this Good News to others, both by my example and my words. (Step 12)
“Happy are those who are persecuted because they do what God requires.”
APPENDIX C

CELEBRATE RECOVERY MASTER AGENDA (LEADER SCRIPT)
[Date of Meeting] – AGENDA

6:58 Opening Song Praise (Road to Recovery) – Song Plays

7:00 Welcome to Celebrate Recovery – MC

Encourage attendees to come on in and silence cell phones. Hi my name is [Name]. I am a believer struggling with [Struggle]. Welcome to Celebrate Recovery. If you are a newcomer we are so glad you are here. We will have a newcomer group at the end of our large group time to tell you more about Celebrate Recovery here at Northwest Bible and to answer your questions.

7:02 – 7:15 Praise Time (2 Songs)

We start our large group meeting by focusing on a higher power Jesus Christ in Praise. [Praise Leader Name] is going to lead us tonight.

7:15 – 7:20 Introduction

It is our desire for this to be a “Room of Grace” – a place where you will find unconditional love and acceptance without judgment; a safe and confidential place for anyone who is hurting, confused, struggling and looking for some peace and sanity in their life.

The purpose of Celebrate Recovery Northwest is to offer hope to fellow strugglers while celebrating God’s healing power in our lives through the application of a Christ-centered 12 Step Recovery Program and the 8 Recovery principles.

A. Please join me as we recite the 12 steps
B. Introduction of Teaching –

Each week we have a teaching or a testimony to help us see what it is like to live in the truth found in one or more of the 12 Steps or 8 Recovery Principles.

7:20 – 7:40 Teaching / Testimony

7:40 – 7:45 Confidentiality and Anonymity

Confidentiality and anonymity are essential elements to the establishment of this as a “Safe Place.” So, remember that who you see here and what is shared here, stays here. If you see someone outside of CR you know from [name of church] not CR. Know that each week we will hear from people with different struggles, some you may connect with more than others. Regardless, each week we connect with the fact that we do not struggle alone.

Offering / Announcements

As a ministry of [name of church], we are subject to our Board of Elders and desire to be self-supporting. Every Thursday night we pass the basket and ask for a voluntary offering of a $1 from our regular attendees. If you are a guest please let it pass you by. The donations received are used to allow us to have free childcare, defray material expenses and support worship. If you are led to give more than $1, it will be greatly appreciated.
A. Open Share Group Leaders – Be sure and pick up the guidelines and notes for your groups on the back table. The room assignments for open share time are noted on the projector above.
B. Step Studies – Sign Up Sheets for men’s and women’s step studies are at the Resource table.
C. Volunteers – A volunteer sign up sheet is also at the Resource table. Please sign up and serve somewhere here at CR.
D. Prayer – The prayer team meets every Thursday night before CR at 6:40pm. It’s an open group, so, please join them if you’d like.
E. Recovery Counselor – [Name of volunteer] is our crisis counselor this week.
F. Newcomers: Come up front to meet the leaders. (Make sure the leaders are up front so you can point them out.)
G. Serenity Prayer – Lead in group recitation of Serenity Prayer.
APPENDIX D

SERENITY PRAYER
God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference. Living one day at a time; Enjoying one moment at a time; Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace; Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it; Trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to His Will; That I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with Him Forever in the next. Amen.

--Reinhold Niebuhr
APPENDIX E

PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
1. How do you define “testimony”?
2. Describe how you prepare for your testimony.
3. What are the essential parts of a testimony?
4. Why give a testimony in front of others?
5. Describe any challenges, obstacles, etc. in giving a testimony.
6. What parts of your testimony do you feel are important?
7. What is the objective of a public testimony in the large group meetings?
8. Why do you think a public testimony is a part of the recovery program?
9. How do you decide what to share in your testimony?
10. How does sharing your story connect you to the group?
11. How does testimony impact the group? Is there an impact?
12. Did your involvement or relationship with the group change once you gave your testimony for the first time?
13. When teaching a lesson, why include personal testimony or stories?
14. How is a personal story more impactful or different than sharing someone else’s story or using a fictitious illustration?
REFERENCES


Celebrate Recovery. (2012b). Large group meeting leader’s script.


James N. Dunning is the Communications Coordinator for the College of Liberal Arts at UT Arlington and a 10-year veteran of the newspaper industry. His research work on image repair and identity creation in mutual help recovery groups has been presented at several conferences, including "New Voices, New Perspectives Student Conference" at the University of North Texas, the Texas Speech Communication Association's 2012 convention in San Antonio, Texas, and the Annual Celebration of Excellence by Students (ACES) at UT Arlington. In the coming years, James plans to pursue a Ph.D. in communication, with a research emphasis on Christian identity and religious communication.