

Doing Family while in Recovery from Opiate Addiction

Mădălina Alamă, PhD (University of Nevada Reno)
madalinalama@yahoo.com

Positionality statement

This article grew from my interest in what I perceived to be a major concern for the people in the opiate recovery community: the relationship between self and others during the processes of recovery, and the centrality of one family's support and love during the healing process.

For many families experiencing opiate use, recovery from opiate addiction is an opportunity to start doing family and build lives that go beyond survival. To understand how individuals in opiate recovery do life and the role their families play in the recovery process, I conducted fieldwork at *Life*, a Nevadan organization providing care for people in opiate recovery. I found that during recovery, life became worth living, happiness meant feeling connected and purposeful, and many people in recovery were able to achieve this via connection with their significant others.

Between 2018 and 2020, I engaged in daily participant observation at *Life*, joining in almost every activity at the site except individuals' therapy sessions. I spent time chatting informally with recoverees and caregivers and took detailed notes at the end of each day. The focal point of my inquiry was families, thus a great opportunity for observation and rapport building was *Life's* Family Support Program (FSP), a 14-week program of weekly meetings guided by addiction counselors and tailored to support the recoverees' interaction needs with their significant others. During each of the three 14-week programs I joined, I participated in counselor-guided group sessions focused on family-doing for recoverees and their loved ones. Each session opened with a dinner together. It was here that I first met and befriended Hailey, Mick, and their three young children. We initially connected while talking about spicy foods. It struck me that they were very protective of their children, always talking about and happy to be with their four children, yet very friendly to me. We grew closer over our appreciation of spices in foods and care-taking of small children. They often spoke of their family as being their main purpose in life.

There is a flourishing body of work on the good life, sense of purpose and happiness regarding people's values, moral engagements, and well-being (Fassin 2007; Fisher 2014; Lambek 2016; Robbins 2013; Stasch 2009; Throop 2016; Zigon 2014). Within this line of inquiry, there is a focus on exploring the multitude of ways people build lives individually and collectively to cultivate what they consider valuable and desirable, thus conducive to a good life (Corsin Jimenez 2008; Mathews and Izquierdo 2009; Walker and Kavedzija 2016).

This body of work has not specifically focused on people in recovery from opiate addiction and on how they envisage good lives. Thus, I explore doing family in the context of recovering from addiction and focus on one family's particularly difficult moment to reveal that doing family is an ongoing process. I also underline that for this young family, happiness is not a fleeting feeling of pleasant affect, but an orientation towards self and others, an enduring mode of being connected to their loved ones, and thus essential to maintaining a sense of purpose (Throop 2009). The article underscores that people in recovery from addiction may create good and happy environments through doing family.

“You don't exist!”

Mick and Hailey were dining at Life with three of their children, aged eight, two, and four months. Less than a year before, Hailey had sought support in managing her use of opiates. Now the couple had bought their first house together and planned on marrying. Between the two of them, they had four children, and Mick's son, Matt, was the only one living away. At the time Matt was born, both Mick and his former partner were struggling with active addiction, thus the child had always been in the care of his maternal grandparents. By his own description, during his years of active addiction Mick's family was undone. Now, Mick and Hailey spoke on several occasions about their common wish to “complete” their family. They wanted their four children under the same roof and were excited to have a spacious house they felt would accommodate the entire family. After several attempts, Mick had recently reconnected with Matt through FaceTime conversations. He was surprised to find that he did not seem to exist in Matt's mind. Mick relayed that during their conversations, Matt looked him in the eye and repeated: “You don't exist!”.

This young family had been facing uncertain times, loneliness, and addiction before they sought assistance managing their substance use, and they now found themselves facing more uncertainty about forming a connection with Matt. They seemed overwhelmed at the idea they might not have their entire family together yet were aware that a relationship with the estranged boy would take years to build. Throughout our many conversations, they reiterated that for them, a good life included doing family by means of parenting together their four children. Despite their almost palpable sadness, they spoke of ways to arrange visits with Matt, to give him opportunities to know everyone in the family and to have everyone know him, and to reassure him that he was loved and would be loved and supported for the rest of his life, should he allow that. Family re/building was going to be a challenge, and Hailey and Mick were ready for it. In this context, happiness consisted of a willingness to work through reconnecting with Matt and an acceptance of his vulnerabilities. This family's entire orientation to life is an outstanding illustration of what Jackson names happiness as positive attunement, a condition marked by the constant interplay of insufficiency and discontinuity between who one is and who one might become (Jackson 2011).

Together, Hailey and Nick had been creating a sense of purpose through trying to become a ‘complete’ family and building the resilience needed to engage in this arduous work. Theirs was a condition of positive attunement to the world around them: they had the well-defined goal of bringing their family together, the awareness of how insufficient their efforts had proved to be, and the energy, flexibility, and joy to adjust their efforts in hopes of becoming parents to all of their children. Thus, for this young family in recovery from opiate addiction, happiness, or positive attunement, meant discovering a sense of purpose rooted in their robust feelings of deep connectivity to each other and their children, and capability to work constantly to fulfill that purpose.

Conclusion

Recovery from opiate addiction is inextricably and deeply connected with the search for happiness and a sense of purpose, and it is linked with one’s relationships with significant others. In the context of recovery from addiction to opiates, family doing and undoing are essential, ongoing processes that are often intertwined with each other. In their quest for a good life, Hailey and Mick do the arduous work of exploring the connection between family, vulnerability, love, and recovery from addiction.

During my 2018-2020 period of fieldwork, I witnessed how, in their efforts to re/build their lives, people recovering from opiate addiction engage deeply, intensely, and wholeheartedly with the world around them. They re/visit familial relations and re/connect with family with whom they had no to little contact during periods of active addiction, and they do so from a place of awakening to the world and becoming attuned to it. If we are to accept that happiness is more than a fleeting feeling, but an enduring attachment to self, others and the world, a keen orientation to the world (Jackson 1998; Throop 2009), then there is a lot to learn from Hailey and Mick about doing family and finding happiness. As Hailey explained: “The kid just needs to see he is loved here, this is a good home, and we’ll figure it out.”

What could be more life-affirming than this family’s decision to show their estranged child that they exist for him?

Note

All the names used above are pseudonyms.

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Author Biography

Mădălina Alamă is a cultural anthropologist whose dissertation fieldwork focused on the seeming contradiction between recovery from opiate addiction and building meaningful, purpose-filled lives. She explores Northern Nevadan women's efforts to create good lives, their relationships with their addiction, and the process of receiving care for opioid addiction from a non-governmental organization. Her work builds on and connects anthropological literature on the good life, gender, care, and NGOs.

Author contact: Mădălina Alamă, PhD (University of Nevada Reno),
madalinalama@yahoo.com

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