

“Obviously, I Kept it Slightly Vague”: An Analysis of How Recovering Alcoholics Disclose
Their Alcoholic Identity to a Romantic Partner

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to understand how recovering alcoholics manage stigma and conduct facework when disclosing their alcoholic identity to a romantic partner. While studies analyzing other contexts, including the workplace and parties, show topic avoidance as a successful approach to alcoholic disclosure, topic avoidance does not work in romantic relationships due to the need for a higher level of intimacy. Therefore, recovering alcoholics must approach the disclosure in a way that both maintains privacy, to minimize stigma and illustrates honesty, to increase intimacy. To better understand how alcoholics manage this tension when disclosing, this study utilized Craig and Tracy's (1995) Grounded Practical Theory (GPT) and conducted a discourse analysis of thirteen semi-structured interviews that focused on how participants constructed disclosure as problematic, their stigma management strategies, and ultimately, their underlying beliefs about good disclosure. The three ideal practices of "good" disclosure, established from participants' construction of disclosure, are to be vague, casual and confident. Vagueness in disclosure involves omitting the negative aspects of one's alcoholic identity and past. To be casual, participants include subtle wording and allow the disclosure to arise naturally in the conversation. Lastly, confidence in disclosure includes a direct style, self-assured non-verbals and a firm tone. Overall, using Grounded Practical Theory, this study identifies participants' ideals about discursive strategies that save face through managing particularly stigmatized identities. In conclusion, the ideals described in this study provide recovering alcoholics with successful disclosure practices that can be used to manage the tension between privacy and honesty when disclosing their alcoholic identity to a romantic partner.

Keywords: alcoholic, stigma, facework, disclosure, romantic relationships, grounded practical theory

Chapter 1: Literature Review & Rationale

Introduction

The aim of this study is to better understand the process that a recovering alcoholic undergoes when disclosing their alcoholic identity to a romantic partner. The stigma associated with the alcoholic identity makes it problematic for recovering alcoholics to navigate certain situations while maintaining a positive identity. Unfortunately, individuals who recognize that they have a problem, fear that their identity will be damaged after disclosure, and many newly sober individuals relapse because they are not equipped with the tools to manage the stigma associated with their disease (Romo, Dinsmore & Watterson, 2016). Disclosure of an alcoholic identity is a crucial component in recovery, and can help an addict to maintain sobriety; however, it can be an agonizing task.

Disclosure can be complicated because a recovering alcoholic's identity is concealable. Therefore, they are presented with the option to disclose or to avoid disclosure. This is a stressful proposition for recovering alcoholics because their preferred identity may be threatened by both revealing their alcoholic identity and keeping that identity hidden. When alcoholics do disclose their identities, they could be stigmatized for being an alcoholic but, if they hide their identity and it is discovered by a romantic partner, they could also be stigmatized for not being honest. Using Goffman's (1963; 1955) concepts of stigma, face and facework, this study examines how recovering alcoholics disclose their alcoholic identity to their romantic partner. Additionally, this study evaluates how recovering alcoholics manage stigma in the disclosure process and the facework they conduct in order to achieve valued identities in a dating environment. While studies analyzing other contexts, including the workplace, show topic avoidance as a successful approach to alcoholic disclosure; topic avoidance does not work in romantic relationships due to the need for a certain level of intimacy. Therefore, it was

imperative to examine the facework that participants conducted in order to better understand how participants achieved their preferred identity and managed stigma in an environment that carries the added pressure of the desire to be accepted by their new romantic partner.

I use Craig and Tracy's (1995) Grounded Practical Theory to investigate how recovering alcoholics manage the tension between maintaining privacy and honesty. Through semi-structured interviews, I first note how participants constructed disclosure of an alcoholic identity as a problematic communicative event. Next, I identify several techniques that participants used to manage these problems and to protect their desired identity in a dating setting. Lastly, I provide several ideal disclosure practices shared by research participants who successfully disclosed their alcoholic identity to a romantic partner. These ideal practices include the importance of vagueness and the benefits of a casual and confident approach to the disclosure process. Ultimately, these underlying beliefs of good disclosure were constructed from a combination of the data from each interview and represent several general practices of a successful disclosure.

In this study, I first use prior literature to expand on the concepts of identity, stigma, alcoholism, facework and disclosure. I provide several research questions I used as a basis for my study. Next, I outline the interview process through which I collected my data and I address how I used qualitative coding and discourse analysis to analyze the interviews. Through six excerpts from participant interviews, I outline participants' construction of disclosure. From this analysis of the way that participants manage stigma and conduct facework, I present the situated ideals of "good" disclosure and address how they contribute to previous literature. Lastly, I reveal the limitations of the study and provide possible avenues for further research.

Identity and Interaction

This study examines how recovering alcoholics construct identity through communication practices. This is an important because the negative perception of the alcoholic identity can significantly impact the way recovering alcoholics disclose this identity. According to Tracy and Robles (2013), identities are best thought of as stable features that are present prior to the start of an interaction. In turn, those identities then shape the interaction. Tracy and Robles also note that, “identity work refers to the process through which talk makes available to participants and observers who the people doing the talk must be” (p. 7). Identity-work is a two-way process; talk both shapes a person’s identity and the speakers’ identities shape the interaction.

Kitzinger and Mandelbaum (2013) argue that the words a speaker chooses, ultimately, manages and constructs their identity. Specifically, certain words can present someone as a co-member of a particular group or an expert in a specific field. For example, by using words such as alcoholic, sober or AA, recovering alcoholics present themselves as members of the sober community and further construct their identities. Ultimately, the way a recovering alcoholic speaks, including the words they choose to use, shapes their identity, which, in turn, affects how others perceive them. Specifically, a recovering alcoholic’s experiences and background can influence how they interpret meaning, as well as impact how they respond and interact with their peers.

The ways that people construct their identities are often not subconscious. People intentionally do and say certain things in order to manage the way their peers view them. This desired identity, also called face, is defined by Goffman (1955) as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular

contact” (p. 5). Face, or a desired identity, is simply the way that individuals wish to be seen by their peers. There are several types of face that represent characteristics people desire to be associated with. Tracy and Robles (2013) note that positive face focuses on the desire to be seen as competent and likeable, whereas negative face stresses the importance of avoiding imposition and gaining respect. Additionally, Domenici and Littlejohn (2006) argue that there are three types of face that emerge in most conversations: autonomy face, fellowship face and competence face. Autonomy face is the desire to be independent, fellowship face is the desire to connect with others and competence face is the desire to be respected.

However, one does not always achieve their desired identity or face. Tracy and Robles (2013) argue that the face that an individual achieves, depends on what their conversational partner does. Therefore, face is an accomplishment and it is constructed through both partners’ conversational moves. An individual can threaten their conversational partner’s face and in response, one must conduct facework. Goffman (1955) noted that, “by facework, I mean to designate the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face. Facework serves to counteract ‘incidents’ -that is, events whose effective symbolic implications threaten face” (p. 12). Domenici and Littlejohn (2006) note that an individual can manage the threat with excuses, explanations, apologies, denials, agreement, regret, counter-complaining, and ignoring. Moreover, the facework an individual performs further shapes that individual’s identity. Ultimately, because of the negative connotations of alcoholism, former problem drinkers must be acutely aware of how they are presenting their desired self-image.

Stigma and the Alcoholic Identity

One reason that communicating an alcoholic identity can be face threatening is because it is a highly stigmatized identity, and this can negatively shape a communicative interaction.

Goffman (1963) states that people often understand alcoholism as a blemish of character and see alcoholics as weak-willed individuals. Moreover, the stigma associated with alcoholism can present former problem drinkers as being inferior to their peers. Although there is prior research that proves that alcoholism is partially linked to genetics (Edenberg & Foroud, 2013), society still views alcoholism as a defect and places much of the blame on the individual. Romo (2012) argues that because abstaining from alcohol is seen as defying societal norms, non-drinkers are stigmatized individuals. This form of social deviance can make others feel uncomfortable, which may then result in social isolation. Additionally, Romo, Dinsmore and Watterson (2016) argue that recovering alcoholics may experience greater stigma because they can be negatively judged for abstaining from alcohol as well as for their alcoholic past.

Alcoholics are stigmatized at all stages of the disease. On the one hand, there is immense stigma, particularly on alcoholics still active in their disease. Society labels active alcoholics as weak because they cannot control their excessive drinking behaviors. On the other hand, stigma is also placed on alcoholics who do find help and get sober. For example, in a study done by Romo (2012) examining how college students manage their non-drinking identity, they found that participants were stigmatized for abstaining from alcohol in the college environment and labeled as antisocial. Students who abstained from drinking were even mocked and socially shamed simply because they were seen as contradicting the university's drinking norms. Ultimately, drinking is a significant element of modern American society and those who do not drink can be perceived as peculiar and, in turn, may be ostracized by their peers.

Former problem drinkers generally assume that people think less of them because of their alcoholic identity (Romo et al., 2016). The stigma attached to alcoholism may elicit people to act negatively towards recovering alcoholics. According to Romo et al. (2016), the majority of

their participants could recount a time at a social event where they were mocked or viewed differently because they were alcoholics. This stigma can be extremely damaging for recovering alcoholics. Clair, Beatty and Maclean (2005) reported that “being stigmatized is harmful for targeted individuals because it leads to stereotyping, status loss and discrimination” (p. 81). Ultimately, the stigmatization has serious consequences in many areas of a recovering alcoholic’s life. An example is the Romo, Dinsmore, Connolly and Davis (2015) study of how professionals manage alcoholic stigma in a workplace setting with clients, coworkers and other professionals. The study found that participants believed that they were viewed and treated differently because of their abstinence from alcohol. Some participants even mentioned that they thought that their alcoholic identity negatively affected their success and advancement in the workplace.

Alcoholism is often categorized as one of the more unstable mental illnesses because of the real threat of relapse. Alcoholics Anonymous (2001) notes that an individual cannot be cured of alcoholism and there is no pill to fix the issue. Alcoholism is an illness, which must be constantly be monitored. According to an international survey, alcohol-dependent individuals were ranked as more dangerous and unpredictable than those with schizophrenia and depression (Schomerus et al., 2011). Similarly, Romo et al. (2016) cite Lublin (2006) who argues “candor about alcoholism is more dangerous than openness about other health conditions, as employers are reluctant to risk hiring former problem drinker” (p. 337). Alcoholism can be an unpredictable disease, which can prevent others from getting close to active alcoholics, as well as to recovering alcoholics.

Stereotypes about alcoholics can create a boundary between recovering alcoholics and normal drinkers. Romo (2012) observed that there was a clear divide between sober students and

students who drank. Sober students noted that they felt like social outcasts and thought that their alcoholism made it very difficult to connect with their peers who drank alcohol. Mackert, Mabry, Hubbard, Grahovac, and Holleran Steiker (2014) argue that, “when stigma is enacted, an individual’s attitude toward a particular stigmatized condition (e.g., alcohol or drug addiction) is based largely on stereotypes and labeling, which often create an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ view of individuals affected by the condition” (p. 275). This “us” versus “them” mentality is highly problematic for alcoholics who wish to connect with their peers who drink alcohol. In addition, this boundary between normal drinkers and alcoholics can make it difficult for the recovering alcoholic to communicate their identity, which may cause them to distance themselves from normal drinkers.

The alcoholic stigma and the objective to achieve a certain identity may prompt recovering alcoholics to alter their behavior at social events. A recovering alcoholic can threaten their own face and preferred identity because of some sense of shame or self-disappointment (Domenici & Littlejohn, 2006). The shame can cause an alcoholic to act differently and this may negatively affect how others view them. Romo et al. (2016) shares that, many participants noted being “hypersensitive” that other people had noticed that they were not drinking and they had become “super self-conscious” about their alcoholic identity (p. 339). In many cases, recovering alcoholics start to actually believe the negative comments made about their identity. Romo et al. (2016) also note that, “participants likely reported felt stigma because they had internalized this deviant, non drinking trait” (p. 339). Ultimately, the internalized beliefs about the alcoholic identity and the threat of status loss can make it difficult for recovering alcoholics to disclose their identity to another person.

The stigma encircling alcoholism causes former problem drinkers to value their alcoholic identity as private and to disclose their personal information very cautiously. As Romo et al. (2015) note, participants did not actively bring up their non-drinking status. However, when directly asked, participants rarely lied. Furthermore, decisions about what to reveal and what to keep private are guided by privacy rules (Petronio, 2002). People follow privacy rules, which are determined by cultural criteria, and this includes establishing what is socially acceptable to reveal in certain places. For example, only in rare cases would it be socially acceptable to share an intimate detail about oneself with the grocery store clerk or the gas station attendant. Additionally, Petronio argues that people own their personal information and create metaphorical boundaries around this information. In order to avoid the risks of disclosure including a threat to one's desired identity, recovering alcoholics are often guarded about who they let into their metaphorical boundary.

Managing the Tension Between Honesty and Privacy

Recovering alcoholics have to manage a desire to keep their alcoholic identity private and a desire to be honest when disclosing this identity in romantic relationships. According to Derlega, Winstead, Mathews and Braitman (2008), privacy and disclosure are in tension with one another. There is often a struggle between keeping intimate details private and the desire to share information in a way that can support a sense of closeness. Additionally, individuals aspire for both positive face and negative face. The desire for a positive face refers to the need to be liked and the desire for a negative face refers to the need to be left alone and to maintain privacy (Tracy & Robles, 2013). Individuals want to be honest because there is a strong aspiration for connection. However, individuals also have a desire for privacy, which is especially important for alcoholics because it allows them to avoid the stigma of their identity. These tensions can be

problematic when a recovering alcoholic is forced to decide whether or not to disclose their identity. If an alcoholic chooses privacy, he or she can simply avoid disclosure.

Topic avoidance. Former problem drinkers can use topic avoidance to manage the stigma of their alcoholic identity. Prior research on disclosure of an alcoholic identity has reported that many of the participants simply avoided disclosure due to the pressure and the risks involved (Romo et al., 2016; Romo et al., 2015). Many people who abstain from alcohol avoid disclosure in bar settings by dodging questions and assimilating, by passing as a drinker (Romo et al., 2015). By holding a non-alcoholic drink which could pass as a cocktail, non-drinkers felt they could fit into the situation and they would be safe from disclosing their alcoholic identity. One participant noted that she was “fine” if she was holding a cup, as if she was only comfortable if she was protected from people finding out about her sobriety (Romo, 2012, p. 679). Professionals at work-related parties observed that even when they were holding a visibly non-alcoholic drink such as a bottle of water, it served as a crutch that shielded them from having to deny drinks or being forced to explain their abstinence (Romo et al., 2015).

Recovering alcoholics were purposefully vague when attempting to conceal their non-drinking status (Romo, 2012). They only shared what they needed to at the time, for example, to refuse a drink or to protect their sobriety. Romo et al. (2016) noted that many participants avoided the issue by offering a reason that implied that they didn’t abstain from alcohol all the time. Additionally, Romo et al. (2015) noted that many research participants avoided drinking in an “off the record” kind of way. They would refuse a drink by saying “I’m good” or “No thanks” instead of saying “I don’t drink” so that they could conceal their non-drinking status (p. 100). Moreover, many recovering alcoholics refused drinks by providing a false excuse such as having to wake up early, training for an athletic event, being on a diet or taking particular

medication (Romo, 2012). Professionals avoided disclosure because they feared that if they were open about their sobriety, their co-workers and clients would feel awkward. To avoid this, they provided excuses or mentioned health reasons to make their drinking peers feel more comfortable and to protect themselves from stigma (Romo et al., 2015). Other participants used humor to respond to questions about their abstinence from alcohol. Humor was a non-confrontational way to be honest about why they weren't drinking, while also avoiding the seriousness and awkwardness of discussing alcoholic identity (Romo et al., 2016). In these situations and relationships, topic avoidance was a successful solution to managing the stigma of the alcoholic identity.

Although prior research has shown that it is possible to avoid disclosing an alcoholic identity in many settings such as the workplace, bars and parties (Romo, 2012; Romo et al., 2016; Romo et al., 2015), romantic relationships require a level of intimacy that, at some point, must include disclosure of the alcoholic identity. Alcoholism is a concealable identity and therefore individuals could possibly get by without telling their romantic partner, yet they often do not choose that option. Goffman (1963) argues:

Even where an individual could keep an inapparent stigma secret, he will find that intimate relations with others, ratified in our society by mutual confession of invisible failings, cause him either to admit his situation to the intimate or to feel guilty not doing so. (p. 74)

Additionally, in a romantic relationship, topic avoidance could produce many problems including a lack of trust and a lack of intimacy (Pearson, Child, & Carmon, 2011). Therefore, keeping one's alcoholic identity a secret could be detrimental to the romantic relationship.

Self-disclosure. Self-disclosure is crucial in creating and maintaining a foundational base of trust in a satisfying and healthy romantic relationship. Maatta and Usiautti (2013) define self-disclosure as a process whereby someone makes him or herself more familiar with their conversational partner. Specifically, disclosure is a speech act in which one conversational partner provides the other partner with personal information that goes further than small talk and tends to be deeper and more meaningful in nature. Many times, when someone shares something personal about themselves, their conversational partner will reciprocate and share something personal as well (Sprecher & Treger, 2015). This can be particularly beneficial during the first stages of dating when the goal of the social interaction is to mutually connect with one another. Ultimately, people in close relationships felt a need and a desire to disclose in order to establish, maintain and nourish a relationship centered on trust (Derlega et al., 2008).

Couples understand that being open and honest with one another can strengthen their relationship and create intimacy. Pearson et al. (2011) define intimacy as “an individual’s perception of the overall closeness and bonding to his or her relational partner” (p. 362). Relational intimacy is directly linked to communication and, therefore, when a romantic partner shares feelings and personal information with their partner, perceptions of relational intimacy increase. Thus, intimacy in a romantic relationship depends on open and honest communication. Additionally, Pearson et al. (2011) noted that perceptions of intimacy may determine individuals’ perceptions of relational quality. Couples often measure their relational satisfaction with a certain level of intimacy that can be influenced by self-disclosure. Although self-disclosure is not the only element necessary to achieve intimacy in a relationship, it must occur in order for a satisfying level of intimacy to emerge.

Risks of disclosing an alcoholic identity. While disclosure of personal information can be challenging for everyone in romantic relationships, disclosure is particularly daunting for former problem drinkers due to the stigmatized nature of their identity. Therefore, recovering alcoholics are careful when choosing with whom to disclose their identity. Alcoholics Anonymous (2001) recognizes that communication and disclosure are necessary to maintain sobriety. When an individual enters into sobriety, they must disclose to their friends and family that alcohol “disagrees” with them. This communication practice is necessary so that peers close to the recovering alcoholic can help to keep him or her accountable. However, even though Alcoholics Anonymous recommends that a newly sober individual disclose to friends and family, it is still completely up to the recovering alcoholic to decide with whom and when to disclose. One major factor that impacts the decision of whether to disclose or conceal an alcoholic identity, is trust. Romo et al. (2016) found that participants would only disclose when they felt they could trust someone to co-own their alcoholic identity. However, most non-drinking individuals consider their sobriety to be a factor that their close peers should know. Romo et al. (2016) observed that many of their research participants noted that they would disclose their alcoholic identity in order to build a relationship with someone. Therefore, disclosure would be very beneficial in the early stages of a romantic relationship when each partner is attempting to connect with one another and assist in building a foundation for the relationship.

Another challenge for alcoholics is to determine when and how to disclose their problem with alcohol. This is particularly important because alcoholism is an invisible stigmatized identity. The decision-making process one undergoes before disclosing, is often an emotional strain on members of invisible stigmatized identities, which Goffman (1963) defines as a

“failing” that is not readily visible. For example, someone who is in a wheelchair possesses a visible stigmatized identity, but someone who is an alcoholic, would fall under the invisible category. Clair, Beatty and Maclean (2005) observe that past scholars consider individuals with invisible stigma as better off because they can avoid social reactions of others. However, they fail to consider the issues that an invisible stigmatized individual must address prior to the interaction. For example, the invisible stigmatized individual can face psychological issues as they decide how to manage their stigma in public. Goffman (1963) illustrates that the stressful thought process associated with disclosure, stating “to display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie and in each case, to whom, how, when, and where” (p. 42). Invisible stigmatized individuals can feel like they are hiding something if they keep quiet but also might not know when, or even if, it is appropriate to share their identity.

Recovering alcoholics must be careful how to disclose because disclosure could affect their own preferred identity and the relationship itself (Romo, 2012). Recovering alcoholics may worry that the disclosure of their alcoholic identity could change the nature of the relationship and they fear that their partner will feel uncomfortable around them. According to Romo et al. (2016), the former problem drinkers stressed that they did not want their peers to feel they had to change their behavior or to feel that they could not drink around them. When disclosing, a recovering alcoholic must be cautious to ensure that their partner knows that they do not need to alter their behavior or drinking habits. Ultimately, in a healthy romantic relationship, it is necessary that the partner is comfortable with their sober partner’s abstinence from alcohol.

A recovering alcoholic not only has to manage their own preferred identity but, they must also protect their partner from possible stigma. Family, friends and acquaintances of people with mental illnesses such as alcoholism, may be treated differently because of stigma by association

(Goffman, 1963). Generally, people associated with stigmatized individuals shoulder some burden and shame. This includes those who are close to an alcoholic in recovery. Nieweglowski and Sheehan (2017) argue that people who date individuals with a mental illnesses such as alcohol dependency, will ultimately adopt a stigma similar to their stigmatized partner. Dating someone with a mental illness, like alcoholism, creates a unique circumstance for the romantic partner because he or she must navigate unfamiliar struggles that they have not had to manage before. In many cases, just as stigmatized individuals feel ostracized, romantic partners of stigmatized individuals will also feel socially isolated. Therefore, the romantic partner may be hesitant to enter into a relationship with a former problem drinker. Consequently, this study aims to better understand the stigma that both the recovering alcoholic and the romantic partner must manage.

From previous research, it is clear that the stigma associated with alcoholism can affect interactions, disclosure and relationships (Goffman, 1963; Mackert et al., 2014; Romo et al., 2015; Romo et al., 2016). Recovering alcoholics must manage this stigma in order to protect their preferred identity. While some disclosure strategies mentioned in previous research are useful in a romantic relationship, many are not (Romo et al., 2016; Romo, 2012). This is due to the desire and necessity to reach a high level of intimacy in a romantic relationship (Pearson et al., 2011). Therefore, I examine the different strategies recovering alcoholics use in order to both build an intimate relationship and protect their preferred identity in the early stages of a romantic relationship.

I use Craig and Tracy's (1995) Grounded Practical Theory to highlight these strategies and provide constructive proposals for managing stigma in the disclosure of an alcoholic identity in romantic relationships. Craig and Tracy (2014) note that Grounded Practical Theory is a

“problem oriented approach to theorizing communication practices, GPT is especially interested in practices in which the role of communication is not only important but presents complex problems that engage reflection on norms and values” (p. 230). Disclosure of an alcoholic identity has proven to be important in long-term healthy relationships (Derlega et al., 2008; Romo et al., 2016), but this communication practice can create complex issues due to the stigmatized nature of the alcoholic identity. Therefore, Grounded Practical Theory was the best theory for this study, due to the problem oriented and practical nature of this approach. In particular, GPT was a crucial framework for this study because I was able to suggest general recommendations, which came directly from the words and actions of the participants. Ultimately, this approach provides a framework for successful disclosure in order to minimize threats to one’s preferred identity.

Grounded Practical Theory has been successfully used as a framework for numerous studies (Craig & Tracy, 2014). For example, GPT has been used to study communication problems in a variety of contexts, including 911 calls (Tracy & Anderson, 1999; Tracy & Tracy, 1998), crisis negotiation (Agne, 2007; Agne & Tracy, 2001), psychic healing sessions (Agne, 2010), and public meetings (Dimock, 2010; Tracy & Ashcraft, 2001; Tracy & Durfy, 2007). Because GPT has shown to be a successful framework for many contexts, it will be useful in this study as well. While GPT has been utilized in a wide range of focuses, it has not been used to examine disclosure in romantic relationships. Ultimately, this unique way of viewing disclosure will provide a new perspective of the communicative problem. By adding to the various questions that GPT explores, a new way that the theory can be utilized is established.

According to Craig and Tracy (2014), GPT reconstructs participants’ communication at three interrelated conceptual levels: the problem level, the technical level and the philosophical

level. At the problem level, I address the tensions and dilemmas that are present in the disclosure of an alcoholic identity. At the technical level, I identify common strategies used by recovering alcoholics to avoid face threats and manage their preferred identity in the disclosure process. Lastly, at the philosophical level, I will uncover situated ideals of ‘good’ disclosure that recovering alcoholics hold and abide by when disclosing their alcoholic identity. Craig and Tracy (2014) note that “situated ideals are the beliefs, usually somewhat inchoate and often contested, that participants hold about how they ought to act within a practice” (p. 232). These situated ideals are reconstructed through an examination of the critiques of disclosure provided by the interviewees. The three research questions for this study correspond with the three levels of Grounded Practical Theory in order to better understand how the participants construct disclosure, and to uncover their perceptions of ‘good’ practices when disclosing an alcoholic identity in romantic relationships.

Research question one: How do recovering alcoholics construct disclosure of an alcoholic identity as a problematic communicative event?

Research question two: What techniques do participants use to manage the stigma of their alcoholic identity when disclosing?

Research question three: What are some of the situated ideals that can be seen in disclosure of an alcoholic identity in romantic relationships?

Chapter 2: Methods

In this chapter, I provide a rationale for the methods I used. I explain how data was collected from semi-constructed interviews. I include details of the participants and note my own positionality in relation to this research project. Next, I discuss the procedure and ethics involved with my study. Finally, an overview of the analysis process will set up the framework for the next chapter.

Rationale

For this study, I employed a qualitative interview research method and I conducted thirteen interviews. The interview process allowed me to gain an in-depth understanding of the thought process of my participants. To do this, I needed to be able to ask for information about participants' past experiences disclosing an alcoholic identity in romantic relationships. Furthermore, interviews allowed for a one-on-one interaction where it was possible for participants to recount, justify, explain and expand on past experiences and the choices they made in the disclosure process (Tracy, 2013). Lastly, the specific communicative act that I studied is a very personal moment for romantic partners and happens only once at the beginning of relationships. Therefore, it would have been challenging to observe through participant observation.

More specifically, I conducted semi-structured interviews, which were ideal due to the topic of this study. Each interview had a similar structure, but the flexibility allowed for participants to expand on the topics they related to the most. This structure was necessary because if I had asked formal questions, I could have unintentionally directed participant content (Dewalt & Dewalt, 2002). Additionally, allowing the participants to bring up the topics most salient to them created a better understanding of their position towards their alcoholic identity

and their disclosure. Also, the unstructured nature of the interview gave me the flexibility to follow up on certain factors that the participant included in their responses. In conclusion, the unstructured format protected participants' privacy because they were able to refrain from sharing information that they felt uneasy about and to, instead, focus on the information they felt comfortable revealing.

Some of the major criticisms of interviews are that participants may forget their actions in the past or they may lie during the interview (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). While it is possible that participants could forget or lie about information, disclosure of an alcoholic identity is a unique communicative process because of the stigma involved. Recovering alcoholics often carefully plan and strategize what they will say in the disclosure process; thus, making it highly likely that they would be able to accurately recall and recount this information. Moreover, there is little incentive for participants to lie about their disclosure and, therefore, I believe the participants provided truthful information.

Procedures

Ethics. Before I conducted any research, the International Review Board for Human Research approved this study. At the beginning of the interviews, I gave each participant an informed consent sheet, which they were asked to read carefully and they were encouraged to ask questions if there was any confusion about the study. I thoroughly answered all questions to ensure that all participants knew exactly what they would be asked to do. I also outlined the risks and made sure participants were aware of them. Although very minimal, risks included discomfort from sharing personal information and there was a slight risk of emotional trauma resurfacing from past experiences. I repeatedly emphasized that the study was optional, participants could back out of the study at any point, and they had the option to decline to answer

any question. Lastly, I asked the participants to give verbal consent in order to maintain confidentiality due to the sensitive nature of the topic.

Recruitment process. After the study was approved, I began the participant recruitment process. I recruited participants using a snowball sampling method, in which I contacted several of my close peers in the recovery community and, after I interviewed them, I asked them to refer other people they knew who fit the criteria for the study (Tracy, 2013). Snowball sampling was the best recruitment approach for this study, because this study aimed to make claims about disclosure that applied, specifically to the recovering alcoholic community. Thus, snowball sampling allowed me to effectively gather participants that matched the rather narrow criteria for participation. Additionally, due to alcoholic stigma, the alcoholic community is tightknit and trusting of one another, which made snowball sampling a successful approach because participants were referred to the study by peers that they trusted. An email seeking participation was sent out and included a short description of the study, necessary requirements, and the length of the interview. The email also emphasized that participation in the study was completely voluntary and there would be no judgment if the individual decided not to participate. Once the participant agreed to be part of the study, a time and place was chosen.

Interview process. Thirteen people were interviewed over a one-month time span. The interviews took place face-to-face in both Texas and Colorado with the exception of one interview, which was conducted via Skype. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed at a later time. Prior to the interview, permission was given from each participant to audio record responses. Moreover, in order to protect the confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms were given to each individual and all data was kept on a password-protected computer. Each interview lasted roughly one hour and began with demographic questions, as

well as basic questions about the participant's sobriety. Next, to set up the interview as a casual conversation, I simply asked participants to talk about disclosure of their alcoholic identity in romantic relationships. However, if participants were not initially forthcoming, I provided a series of follow up questions asking about past experiences of disclosure, which are attached in Appendix A.

Participants

Requirements for eligibility included at least one year of sobriety, experience disclosing an alcoholic identity to a romantic partner, and participants had to be twenty-one years or older. Participants had a variety of sobriety time ranging from one year to ten years. The participants were all young adults ranging from twenty-one to thirty years old and were from various areas of the United States. There were six male and seven female participants. Lastly, the study included participants of different races, ethnicities, religions, and sexual orientations.

Positionality. It is important to note that my identities impacted the data as much as the research participants' identities. While many quantitative scholars believe that it is important to remain as unbiased as possible in research, remaining unbiased is not completely possible in qualitative research. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge "a focus on how does who I am, who I have been, who I think I am, and how I feel affect data collection and analysis" (Pillow, 2003, p. 176). My identities affected how I conducted and presented the data and this likely impacted my findings. Therefore, it is important to make note of this information.

One aspect of my identity that had a significant impact on my research is that I, myself, am a former problem drinker. I chose this topic because disclosure of my alcoholic identity has been the source of some anxiety for me in the past, and I wanted to see if other recovering alcoholics faced similar problems. Additionally, I wanted to examine techniques that recovering

alcoholics use during disclosure to find out if there was an ideal way to disclose an alcoholic identity.

My identity as an alcoholic shaped my research in several ways. On one hand, it created easy access to members of the sobriety community. I am a well-respected member of the sobriety community in both Texas and Colorado. I was able to bypass the process of gaining research participants' trust because they knew that I was sober and I would not judge them for their alcoholic identity. Additionally, participants were comfortable with me, and this motivated them to be more open with me and to candidly share personal information that they might not have shared with an outsider. On the other hand, being open with participants about my alcoholic identity presented some challenges. For example, I could have been too close to the topic and it is possible that I didn't notice some factors that an outsider would have seen. Moreover, since participants knew that I was sober, they could have left out pertinent information that they suspected I already knew. For example, during the interviews, there were times when participants used jargon without explanation because they likely assumed that I already knew about specific topics. To address these challenges, I tried my best to ask naive questions and to ask participants to explain jargon.

Another aspect of my identity the relevance of which became apparent during the study was my age. All interviewees were under the age of thirty, thus my identity as a twenty-one year old was very helpful during the interviews. Because we shared a common bond in terms of our age range, participants tended to be extremely transparent with me. They revealed intimate details about their romantic lives and past experiences of disclosure. It was clear that they were comfortable during the interviews because they told me very personal information about casual and sexual relationships. Participants likely would not have shared this detailed information

about sexual encounters with an older interviewer. Therefore, my age was beneficial in gathering raw and unfiltered data.

Analysis: Qualitative Coding and Discourse Analysis

To analyze the data, I first conducted qualitative coding, which Tracy (2013) defines as “the active process of identifying, labeling, and systemizing data as belonging to or representing some type of phenomenon” (p. 202). I examined each of the transcribed interviews line-by-line and searched for repetition in participants’ construction of general problems and solutions in disclosure. Once I established the broad problems and solutions of disclosure, I chose six excerpts from different interviews that represented those themes. Next, I conducted a discourse analysis of those excerpts.

I used discourse analysis to better understand the role of facework and identity construction within the strategies participants used when disclosing. More specifically, I looked at how the strategies that the participants used helped them to achieve their preferred identity when disclosing their alcoholic identity to a romantic partner. According to Gee (2014), “discourse analysis is the study of language at use in the world, not just to say things, but also to do things” (p. 1). In this study, I use discourse analysis to examine how people find ways to construct their understanding of disclosure and illustrate the role of facework and stigma management in disclosure. Moreover, Gee (2014) notes that discourse analysis focuses on details of language. Therefore, I examined the transcribed interviews to search for details in the language and looked for specific discursive practices as outlined by Tracy & Robles (2013), including speech acts and person-referencing.

To examine how people understood disclosure, I analyzed speech acts that participants named when referencing disclosure. According to Tracy (2013), “speech acts name utterances in

terms of their purposes” (p. 15). The examination of speech acts was very beneficial for my study because observing “speech acts” that participants name helps to provide insight into how they discuss, understand, and evaluate different methods of disclosing. Furthermore, the analysis of speech acts was crucial in understanding how participants conducted facework and constructed their identity as well as what they aimed to accomplish with regard to their alcoholic disclosure in romantic relationships. For example, participants evaluated different speech acts referencing disclosure through phrases such as, “I told him too early” and “I put it all out there.” From this, I was able to gather that participants viewed timing as important in the disclosure process and participants conducted facework by planning the timeline of the disclosure. Ultimately, when I examined the participants’ disclosure stories, I looked for speech acts they utilized and I was then better able to understand how participants conducted facework when they disclosed their alcoholic identity.

To examine how the identities of participants were made relevant when they talked about disclosure, I looked at the forms of person-referencing they used. Tracy (2013) notes that person-referencing refers to the ways in which individuals build their own identities as well as how they construct their peers’ identities. The terms that individuals select to describe themselves constructs their identities in a certain way. This provided an understanding of how participants viewed their alcoholic identity, as well as how they viewed their partners’ identities. Ultimately, it was important to look at person-referencing practices in this study because it provided insight into the impact that the participants’ identity construction had on the disclosure process. For example, one participant used the person-reference, “former drinker” and he constructed this identity as important to him by noting that “he has been a part of that community before.” This identity as a former member of the drinking community, shaped his disclosure

because he made sure to include statements such as “I don’t drink anymore” and “I blacked out too much” in order to associate himself with the youth culture.

Ultimately, the examination of both speech acts and person-referencing practices helped to better understand the relationship between participants’ identities and the ways they discuss and evaluate different speech acts referencing disclosure. The ways that participants constructed identities and discussed disclosure provided information regarding “good” and “bad” approaches of disclosure. For example, participants used the person-reference “normal drinker” and constructed their partner’s identity as someone who “would not understand.” This identity that the recovering alcoholic constructed for their partner, in turn, affects the way they do the speech act of disclosing. Specifically, because their partners were “normal drinkers” participants felt the need to use a disclaimer such as, “just letting you know” as an attempt to do facework and manage stigma. The examples I present below illustrate a variety of strategies that participants used to conduct facework and to manage the problem of disclosing an alcoholic identity.

Chapter 3: Findings

The following section includes six excerpts from participant interviews, which were chosen as representatives of the major themes found in the initial coding process. An analysis of each excerpt will illustrate how the participants established disclosure as problematic and will examine how the strategies they construct help to address those problems. Once the participant's construction of disclosure is outlined, their facework and stigma management strategies will be identified. Although all of the participants discussed disclosure in comparable ways, they prioritize different goals and approaches throughout their construction of disclosure. First, there will be an analysis of three examples that focus on how participants construct themselves as valuable and trustworthy partners in long-term romantic relationships. These examples mostly highlight strategies participants use to manage stigma associated with negative stereotypes of alcoholics. Next, there will be an analysis of three additional examples that focus on how participants construct their identity as normal college students in casual romantic relationships. These examples generally address the strategies participants use to position themselves as less deviant from among their college-aged peers. Ultimately, both groups of participants aim to construct a positive identity. However, due to the differing types of romantic relationships in each group, they have different definitions of a positive identity and different end goals in their disclosure. Overall, each participant provides a unique perspective and approach that ultimately point to several general underlying beliefs about 'good' disclosure, which will be addressed in the next chapter.

Example 1: "I was really nervous about telling him"

Maddie, a twenty-one year old, with several years of sobriety, constructs alcoholic disclosure in romantic relationships as particularly problematic because of the additional fear of

disclosing to someone that she finds attractive. To manage this problem and to achieve an identity as a stable partner, she addresses the need for the contrasting techniques of indirectness, or the use of subtle and ambiguous statements, and directness, or the use of clear and straightforward statements (Tracy and Robles, 2013). In this excerpt, Maddie discusses a past experience of disclosure, reflecting on the fear she experienced before she went on a first date.

When asked how she felt before disclosing to a romantic partner, Maddie stated:

1 I was really nervous and trying to figure out how I should say it, and when I should say it.
2 And I was like, 'Oh, is he gonna think this is weird? Is he gonna be like, why don't you
3 drink? That's stupid.' I don't know. I was really nervous about telling him because it wasn't
4 somebody that I want to be friends with. If it was somebody that I want to be friends with,
5 then I wouldn't be as nervous for sure. But, if it's somebody that I wanted to continue
6 talking to, and have a relationship with possibly, or see where it went, then it's definitely
7 more nerve-racking. I think when you're attracted to the person, it's already more nerve
8 wracking in general to talk to them. And then when you have to express this thing that
9 you've struggled with; for me, the past six or seven years, and you have to just come out and
10 say it because it's such a prominent thing in the culture that we live in. It's very nerve-
11 racking because you don't know how they're gonna react. If you want it to work out, and it's
12 potential to where it makes things not work out, it makes you not want to talk about it, or
13 you want to make it as casual as you can so that it seems like it's not a big deal. Like I said,
14 people are scared of emotions, and if you come out and act like it's this really big deal, and
15 that it's like, 'I can't do a lot of things because I'm always stressed about being an alcoholic,'
16 and that kind of stuff, then that could potentially push them away and not want to get to
17 know you anymore. And so, with friendships it's easier because you're not really attracted to
18 that person in that kind of way, and so if it doesn't work out then it's like not that big of a
19 deal. But romantically it hurts more if they push you away because of something in your
20 life that you aren't in control over, but that they think you should be in control ...Like they
21 think that you are in control over it, and that you should be able to control this thing, but it's
22 something that you aren't in control over, and then it's just really frustrating. It's just a very
23 complicated subject and it has a lot that you have to think about that goes along with it.

Maddie notes that the added fear which occurs during disclosure in romantic relationships, results in the necessity of preparation. First, Maddie constructs disclosure as a form of communication that requires specific words ("how I should say it") and timing ("when I should say it.") Learning how to disclose properly is important because she does not want her potential romantic partner to assign her the stigmatized identities of being "weird" or "stupid"

(lines 2 and 3). In addition to constructing disclosure as a planned communicative interaction, Maddie observes that her approach to disclosure is specific to the type of relationship. For example, Maddie would not be scared to disclose if she wanted to be “friends” with someone. However, she would be very nervous during the disclosure if she wanted to pursue a “romantic relationship” with the person. She constructs disclosure as particularly risky when she discloses to a romantic partner because, when romantic attraction is involved, the interaction is “already more nerve-wracking in general” and the added pressure of disclosing something “you’ve struggled with,” exacerbates the uneasiness of the situation (lines 7-9). Maddie further constructs disclosure as a challenging task by emphasizing the impact of cultural norms on her choices regarding disclosure (line 10). She notes that one solution to disclosure that she feels she must use due to the prominent nature of alcohol in society, is to “come out and say it” and to straightforwardly disclose at the beginning of a relationship. She further addresses the “nerve racking” nature of the disclosure process by noting that, “you don’t know how they’re gonna react” (line 11).

Maddie conducts facework to achieve an identity as a person in control through the use of specific words and preparation in the timing of her disclosure. The use of specific words shapes how one views their conversational partner (Kitzinger & Mandelbaum, 2013). Therefore, Maddie is very cautious when deciding what words to include in her disclosure. Moreover, by considering word choice and timing, Maddie conducts identity-work and attempts to prevent her partner from seeing her as “weird” or “stupid.” She is also particularly conscientious when she conducts identity-work with a romantic partner because the attraction involved results in an added desire to achieve a positive identity. Lastly, she observes that cultural norms can boost the status of alcohol, which can make her abstinence from alcohol especially deviant. This forces

Maddie to conduct facework to make her alcoholic identity less deviant, which she does through techniques such as using a direct approach. Directness can help to make the alcoholic identity less deviant because the identity becomes less secretive, making it seem less serious.

Maddie then discusses and evaluates several different ways of disclosing to others. She first states that since disclosure can stop a relationship from “working out,” it makes her “not want to talk about it” (lines 11-12). However, she proceeds to address one strategy, which reduces some of the anxiety of disclosure, which is to disclose in a “casual” way that seems “not like a big deal” (lines 12-14). When talking about this solution, Maddie constructs a stigmatized identity of someone who discloses incorrectly. She observes that a person who is serious about disclosure and “acts like it's this really big deal”, would make other people “nervous” because “people are scared of emotions”(line 14). She positions this form of disclosing as a ‘bad’ form of disclosing by saying it would “push people away” (line 16).

Maddie further establishes disclosure as problematic by noting that her alcoholic identity is an aspect of herself that she is not “in control over” (line 20). She observes that this is challenging because if her romantic partner rejects her, it “hurts more” because she cannot change this aspect of herself. Moreover, she notes that many people think that she “should be able to control” her alcoholic identity when, in reality, that is not the case (line 21). Goffman (1963) observed that alcoholics are often labeled as weak-willed individuals and they are stigmatized for their lack of control. This is evident with Maddie, as she further constructs the misunderstanding people have of alcoholism, noting that her peers stigmatize her because they think that her alcoholic identity is something that she should be able to change.

Maddie stresses that there are right and wrong approaches to disclosure and some strategies reduce the judgment from the romantic partner and others increase the judgment.

Specifically, she notes that some techniques are useful in achieving an identity as a stable partner and others can make achieving this identity difficult. In romantic relationships, Maddie is particularly mindful of the techniques she uses and the facework she conducts because it “hurts more” when a romantic partner “pushes” her away because of her alcoholic identity.

Additionally, Maddie conducts facework in order to manage the tension between wanting to be direct due to the prominent presence of alcohol in society, and wanting to be indirect to censor emotions and to keep the disclosure casual. This strategy aligns with Tracy and Robles’ (2013) claim that a direct style is often seen as being honest and non-manipulative, whereas an indirect style can be used to create rapport or to protect the speaker. Ultimately, each approach helps her to accomplish different identities. She uses a direct approach to disclosure in order to construct her identity as an honest partner but, she also uses an indirect approach to protect herself from possible stigma and to moderate alarm from her romantic partner.

Example 2: “Obviously, I kept it slightly vague”

The next example also addresses direct and indirect approaches to disclosure. However, unlike Maddie who uses an indirect approach to censor emotions, Emily, a twenty-two year old college student, uses an indirect approach to exclude parts of her alcoholic past. Additionally, Emily advocates against a direct approach noting that, instead, it is important to “package” the disclosure in a casual way. In this excerpt, Emily first discussed her experience with her last long-term boyfriend and reflected on the different experience she had with the man she dated before him. Emily mentioned that she “eventually opened up” to her long term boyfriend which prompted the question: “you said you opened up and gave him more details, did you keep it vague when you guys were first dating?” Emily replied by discussing disclosure in general and then proceeded to discuss her experience specifically disclosing to romantic partners:

- 1 Emily But if it's like a romantic partner ... obviously, I kept it slightly vague towards the
2 beginning so I wasn't like freaking him out, and being like, 'Hey, I used to be a
3 drunk and I made all these stupid mistakes.' And even as the relationship went on I
4 never disclosed anything about what I had done in the past because I knew that
5 some of those things, he wouldn't understand them. But, yeah I mean I opened up
6 in ways that I told him what I went through, and where I went for treatment, and
7 how that was, and basically how I got better. But, definitely avoided things that
8 happened while I was drinking just because they didn't reflect who I was, and I
9 guess I didn't want him to think of me badly because of what I used to be.
- 10 Grace You said that on the first date you didn't let him in on everything because you didn't
11 want to freak him out. Why do you think that information would freak him out?
- 12 Emily Well, I think that's a good example of the guy I had been talking to before him,
13 Collin. I kind of just put everything out there right away, and told him about things
14 that I had been struggling with, that comes with alcoholism, and I guess I felt like I
15 could talk to him, and it just all came out, and after that I saw that he did get freaked
16 out. So, that was the first time I realized that you have to phrase certain things in
17 certain ways so that normal people can understand, because most people who aren't
18 sober simply don't understand what certain things entail and mean. And so you
19 kind of have to just package it in a way that is casual and makes it look like you
20 have your shit together so they're not freaked out about this alcoholic. Along with
21 that, no one really uses the term alcoholic in college, and so if you were to flat out
22 say you're an alcoholic, and you went to rehab, and you used to be a drunk, you
23 know you give them all those details right away? It makes sense as to why it would
24 scare someone a little, or freak them out. Make them not want to date you because
25 they don't want to deal with all of your past because you have a lot going on.

Emily begins by discussing a solution that helps her manage a portion of the stigma associated with her alcoholic identity. She notes that one technique is to keep the disclosure “slightly vague” in order to avoid “freaking” her romantic partner out (lines 1-2). Furthermore, Emily observed that she used this technique throughout her relationship with her boyfriend. However, once the relationship had fully formed, she was no longer vague about the alcoholic identity itself but, rather the things she did in her past (lines 3-4). She provided her boyfriend with positive aspects of her alcoholism that involved how she “got better” but left out the negative details from her drinking experiences (lines 7-8). Additionally, Emily establishes disclosure as problematic since she has to avoid parts of her past because she “didn't want him to think of me badly because of what I used to be” and “he wouldn't understand.”

Emily evaluates being “vague” as a positive way to disclose because it helps to maintain her relationship with her boyfriend, while stopping him from “freaking out.” By censoring the details of who she used to be and of her past, Emily is conducting facework in order to be perceived as a good person. Not only does Emily conduct facework at the beginning of the relationship, she also continues to use this technique to manage her identity as a valuable person throughout her long-term romantic relationship. Ultimately, in her disclosure, she focuses on the positive and the beneficial change she has made in her life with regards to her sobriety in order to shift the focus away from her past and the negative image of alcoholism.

Next, Emily provides an example of an experience when she was not vague and “put everything out there right away,” which resulted in her romantic partner “freaking out” (lines 13-15). She emphasizes that it is difficult to know how a romantic partner will react to an alcoholic identity and, therefore, disclosure can be very risky for the recovering alcoholic. To solve this problem, Emily points out that “you have to phrase certain things in certain ways so that normal people can understand” (lines 16-17). Emily constructs “normal people” as a separate identity from “recovering alcoholics” and discusses one problem with disclosure as a misunderstanding between these two groups of people.

Specifically, Emily notes that in order to keep her romantic partner from “freaking out,” she has to “package” the disclosure “in a way that is casual” (line 19). Similar to Maddie, Emily also touches on the importance of appearing to be in control, noting that during the disclosure, it is important to make it look like you “have your shit together” (lines 19-20). One way to “package” the disclosure in a casual way, is to avoid the word “alcoholic.” She establishes disclosure with the word “alcoholic” as problematic because college students are not familiar with alcoholism (line 21). Moreover, she acknowledges that she understands why her romantic

partners would “freak out” if she were to “put everything out there right away” or to “flat out say” she is an “alcoholic and went to rehab” (lines 21-23). By stating this, she further emphasizes a technique which encourages the need for disclosure to be indirect and vague. Lastly, Emily constructs disclosure of her alcoholic identity as troublesome because there is a fear that her romantic partner will not want to date her because he would not “want to deal with all of your past because you have a lot going on” (line 25).

From her past experiences, Emily has learned how to use the most successful techniques when disclosing. By staying vague and making the disclosure casual, she is conducting facework in order to be seen as a person that “has her shit together.” Additionally, she does facework to shape her identity as low-maintenance because she fears that her romantic partner will not want to date her because of her past. Moreover, when she packages the disclosure in a certain way, she is able to pick and choose the parts of her alcoholic identity that will help her to accomplish a positive identity. This facework is crucial in achieving her own identity in the relationship, but Emily also conducts facework for her romantic partner. She includes and excludes parts of her identity to avoid “freaking out” her romantic partner and to keep him calm. She wants her boyfriend to be comfortable and by excluding certain parts of her identity and by “packaging” her disclosure in a casual way, she helps to manage his stigma by association (Goffman, 1963). Ultimately, Emily attempts to minimize her partner’s stigma and reduces the seriousness of her alcoholic identity by using a vague approach in which she avoids the word “alcoholic” and focuses on the positive aspects of her identity.

Example 3: “Evidence of a healthy track record”

Austin, a twenty-seven year old graduate student, constructs disclosure as challenging because of society’s negative perceptions and stereotypes of alcoholism. He observes that one technique that can be used to manage these stereotypes is to provide evidence of success. Austin

first reflected on his experience disclosing as a newly sober twenty-one year old and continues by discussing his experience after obtaining a significant amount of time in sobriety:

- 1 Austin The first girl I dated in recovery, I just didn't do anything. I had a shitty job and
 2 lived in a shitty apartment. Later on, it's like, okay, you're doing well studying a
 3 hard thing. It's not like I'm like, some lost twenty-one year old. I'm not as worried
 4 about the potential for being seen as a dumbass, right? I feel like the fact that I've
 5 built a successful life allows me to be more confident in that identification. I have
 6 other credentials to back up the fact that I'm doing well at being a human.
- 7 Grace So, when you say that you have other credentials to backup the fact that you're
 8 doing well, are you saying that your alcoholic identity is a negative credential?
- 9 Austin No but there's certainly the concern that you are going to have someone with a
 10 really negative preconceived notion of alcoholism whether it's through media,
 11 movies or maybe they have a family member or a friend or an acquaintance that is
 12 in need of recovery or is an alcoholic, but not one who's doing well. Who's really
 13 fucking their life up. Then you don't want to be like, 'Oh yeah, I'm a recovering
 14 alcoholic.' Their mental association is you with this person that they've seen only
 15 being unsuccessful. That's the risk you run is that you're going to get someone who
 16 has a negative preconceived notion of the word 'alcoholism'. They're not going to
 17 understand the whole recovery aspect. Then you're going to say that you're an
 18 alcoholic and they're like, 'Oh, this person's obviously a lying cheating asshole.'
 19 Whereas, if you've already been successful, you have evidence of a healthy track
 20 record for a couple years, they're not worried about you. I already know that you
 21 think that I'm doing okay at being a human, to use my own language. I'm not super
 22 worried about you, I'm not super worried about the word 'alcoholic' overwriting
 23 everything else that you know about me.

Austin observes that success can outweigh negative perceptions of alcoholism. He begins by discussing his time in early sobriety and his first girlfriend in recovery noting that, "I just didn't do anything" (line 1). He constructs one problem of disclosure as the fear that once he opens up about his alcoholic identity, he will be seen as a "dumbass", but he notes that his success allows him to manage this problem (lines 4-5). Specifically, when he started "doing well" and studying a "hard thing", he became less worried about being seen as a "dumbass." He observes that his success in other areas of his life allows him to be more confident in his

identification as an alcoholic (line 5). Ultimately, his other credentials allow him to reinforce the fact that he is “doing well at being a human” (line 6).

Next, Austin establishes another problem with disclosure as the risk that the romantic partner will have negative preconceived notions about alcoholism (line 10). These negative preconceived notions about alcoholism, which often emanate from the media and movies, create a misunderstanding of alcoholism, making disclosure a daunting task. Austin further constructs the problem by noting that when one discloses, their romantic partner may have a mental association with an alcoholic they know. This is an issue because, for many people, their mental association with an alcoholic is usually of an active alcoholic who is not doing well and “who's really fucking their life up”, instead of those alcoholics in recovery (lines 11-13). Therefore, Austin notes that he is wary to come out and say, “oh yeah, I'm a recovering alcoholic” (lines 13-14). He further establishes this problem regarding the risk of judgment, by observing that individuals with negative preconceived notions of the word “alcoholism” will not understand the “whole recovery aspect” (line 17). Additionally, Austin notes that if his romantic partner hears the word “alcoholic” she might assume that he is “obviously a lying cheating asshole” (line 18).

Austin observes that this issue of misunderstanding and judgment can be managed by including “evidence of a healthy track record” in the disclosure (line 19). He also notes that one technique he uses, is to first make sure that his romantic partner is aware of the successful aspects of himself in order to assure that the word “alcoholic” will not override everything else about himself (lines 22-23). Moreover, he points out that if his romantic partner can see the successful side of him, then she will not be as “worried” about him after she finds out about his alcoholic identity. Therefore, part of the solution involves waiting a short period of time before disclosing, to allow for the romantic partner to see his “healthy track record.”

Austin conducts facework when he highlights the achievements and the more favorable aspects of himself to ensure that his romantic partner has more information than just the alcoholic identity before forming a judgment. In addition, Austin constructs his identity as a productive member of society by providing his romantic partner with “evidence of a healthy track record” and by using his success thus far to make his romantic partner more comfortable accepting his alcoholic identity. If she can see that Austin is in a good place as a graduate student and that he has changed his life, then he is less worried about the word “alcoholic” clouding everything else that she knows about him. Therefore, Austin is able to better construct his identity as a valuable partner if he waits until he has an established relationship before he discloses, allowing the positive and successful aspects of himself to supersede his alcoholic past. Ultimately, Austin is able to reduce much of the stigma associated with his alcoholic identity by focusing on his more favorable qualities and by waiting to disclose.

Example 4: “I’m not Mormon or anything”

While the previous examples focused on achieving an identity as a valuable and trustworthy partner in long-term relationships, the next three examples focus on maintaining an identity as a normal college student in casual relationships. Many participants, specifically those in long-term romantic relationships, like Maddie, noted that disclosure was problematic because they feared that when they disclosed, their romantic partner would associate them with the reckless behavior alcoholics engage in before getting sober. However, some participants, particularly those in casual romantic relationships, including Jason, a twenty-three year old college student, constructs disclosure as problematic because of the fear that he will be associated with people that have never had a drink. He addresses why this association is problematic and provides several techniques to manage the problem. When asked, “How do you

usually phrase the disclosure on dates?” Jason replied with a general observation of his disclosure in romantic relationships, stating:

1 It depends on the romantic partner, but I just say like ‘I just blackout a lot or I just don’t
 2 drink,’ but, this is actually important, I tell them ‘I don’t drink anymore.’ Because I want
 3 them to know that I used to drink and I’m not like a Mormon or anything...haha. Um, in my
 4 own mind, I have stigma against people that have never drank and people that used to drink
 5 but just don’t anymore, for no reason. I feel like if I have that stigma, then other people do
 6 too, and it also shows that because I have had a drink it shows that I have had drunk
 7 experiences. I have been a part of that community and I do know what it is about, so I think
 8 that word ‘anymore’ is really important. But that is probably less often than not. Like this,
 9 ‘Oh you don’t drink?’ and then I’m like ‘yeah, I just don’t drink anymore. Yeah, I used to
 10 but I just found out that I cannot handle it and I blackout too much and I just had to stop.’
 11 Then they will be like ‘Cool, good for you’ and then I just kind of brush it off.
*((lines 12-15 where Jason talks about an experience disclosing his alcoholic identity at
 work has been omitted))*.
 16 Same with romantic relationships, I make sure to go about it in a casual way, because if you
 17 are serious about it then they will take it as a serious matter. It is all about how you present
 18 it and I make it sound like no big deal. You can’t use serious words like alcoholic, ‘cause
 19 that makes it worse. If I get a vibe from the person that I can trust them, then I will use that
 20 word. If they are someone who can actually understand and if they are kinda therapeutic
 21 then I would. But, usually I just say ‘I don’t drink, because when I do I just blackout and
 22 cannot handle it.’

First, Jason acknowledges that he approaches disclosure in different ways depending on the romantic partner. However, he notes that one general technique he uses when disclosing, is to use the phrase “I don’t drink anymore” (line 2). The inclusion of the word “anymore” in his disclosure is a valuable solution in which he is able to avoid the stigma held by people who never drank such as Mormons, members of a religious group that abides by strict rules including abstinence from alcohol (line 3). Additionally, he argues that the word “anymore” is important because it signals to his romantic partner that he has been a part of the drinking community and does “know what it is about” (line 7).

Jason is conducting facework when he includes the word “anymore” in his disclosure because he is reducing the stigma of his alcoholic identity by separating himself from people who have never been drinkers, such as Mormons. Moreover, by using the word “anymore”, he

constructs his identity as a former drinker, which is important because, by establishing himself as a former member of this community, he becomes less deviant. Additionally, the emphasis that he has been a member of the drinking community reduces the “us” versus “them” mentality that can occur between normal drinkers and recovering alcoholics (Mackert et al., 2014). Jason is able to manage this disconnection with his romantic partners by establishing that he previously had a connection to the drinking community. Specifically, he is still able to connect with his romantic partners on past drinking experiences and by making this clear, he is able to reduce the division between the two of them. Furthermore, when disclosing, Jason uses the word “blackout” which is a term used in youth culture that refers to a state of extreme intoxication, emphasizing the memory loss involved with heavy drinking. This term is commonly used among youth and college students in order to associate themselves with the drinking community. Therefore, by including the word “blackout,” Jason further stresses that he was once an integral part of the drinking community. He is conducting facework in order to achieve his preferred identity as a former drinker and, more importantly, making it clear that he can still relate to his romantic partner.

Similar to Emily, Jason also uses a casual approach and formats the disclosure in a particular way. However, Emily defines casual as avoiding aspects of her alcoholic past, whereas Jason defines a casual approach as presenting his alcoholic identity in a subtle way. Jason states that it is necessary “to go about it in a casual way” and to make his alcoholic identity “no big deal.” He constructs disclosure as problematic if the romantic partner “takes it as a serious matter” because it is important for the topic to remain causal. He states, “it is all about how you present it” and he provides techniques for keeping the disclosure casual, which includes removing certain words and replacing them with others (line 17). For example, he includes

causal phrases such as, “I just don’t drink” and “I cannot handle it.” Comparable to Emily, Jason also notes that “you can’t use serious words like alcoholic” and he emphasizes that avoiding the word, “alcoholic” keeps the disclosure casual (lines 18-19). However, he mentions that if he feels that he can really trust his romantic partner, he might use the word, but they must be “someone who can actually understand” (line 20). Trust proved to be a great factor in disclosure among many of the participants, and this can be seen when Jason acknowledges that he approaches the disclosure differently, depending on trust or lack of it.

When Jason uses informal language in the disclosure, he is managing the stigma of his alcoholic identity and conducting facework by treating it as if it is a small detail of his identity. Through the use of casual wording, he is able to reduce the gravity of the disclosure and, therefore, he reduces some of the negativity and stigma associated with his alcoholic identity. He is able to construct his alcoholic identity as “no big deal” and he can stress that the identity will have little impact on his romantic partner. Moreover, when Jason presents his alcoholic identity as “no big deal,” he conducts facework for his romantic partner and manages his partner’s stigma by association (Goffman, 1963). Many other participants also emphasized the importance of remaining casual during disclosure to keep the romantic partner calm and to help reduce their romantic partners’ stigma.

Example 5: “We can joke about it”

Maggie, a twenty-two year old with one year of sobriety, establishes humor as one technique she uses when disclosing her alcoholic identity. She has found that humor successfully manages her deviant status as a non-drinker in college. In this excerpt, Maggie discusses disclosure in casual romantic relationships and reflects on experiences where she disclosed in bars and other casual social settings. When asked why she used humor when

disclosing her alcoholic identity and if it helps her during the disclosure process, Maggie responded, saying:

1 Yeah. It helps. And I think it also makes the other person comfortable, too. Like, ‘I’m not
2 unloading this baggage onto you. I’m just letting you know that this is a thing and we can
3 joke about it, you know?’ So, I’ve been out multiple times with one person and they’ve
4 offered me a drink a couple of different times because they’ve just forgotten; because it’s just
5 part of their vernacular. And so, like, that gives permission in that situation for that person
6 to joke about it. Like, I’ll be over at his house or something and he’ll be like: ‘Would you
7 like me to ...’you know, and it’s like, and then I’ll make a joke, like, ‘No, I’ll just go on a
8 bender tonight,’ or something like that. Like, give that other person permission to joke
9 about it, because it’s not, it’s not a serious relationship. It’s not something that I’m putting on
10 you. It’s just something to be aware of.

Maggie observes that disclosure can be particularly problematic as a college student and, therefore, she emphasizes the benefits of humor. She first notes that humor is a crucial technique in the disclosure process because it alleviates some of the awkwardness that can arise during disclosure (line 1). Furthermore, she mentions that humor reduces some of the pressure that the romantic partner may feel and she points out that it can eliminate the impression that she is “unloading this baggage” onto her partner (line 2). Maggie also uses casual language such as, “I’m just letting you know this is a thing” in order to reduce the severity of the topic. Specifically, the phrase “just letting you know” is a disclaimer, which is a device that is used to prevent others from assigning negative identities to oneself (Tracy & Robles, 2013). She also portrays her alcoholic identity as something that they can “joke about”, making the disclosure much more relaxed (line 3).

Next, Maggie constructs disclosure as problematic because drinking in a college culture is very prevalent. She points this out by mentioning that she has had several experiences after meeting someone at a bar, or during the early stages of a casual relationship, where the romantic partner had forgotten that she was in recovery (line 4). They consistently offered her a drink, even after she disclosed her sobriety and she notes that talking about drinking, is just part of

youth “vernacular” (line 5). Maggie establishes the significant presence of alcohol in casual romantic relationships, but she is able to manage this problem by employing humor.

Specifically, she is able to make the situation more lighthearted by using self-deprecating phrases such as, “No, I’ll just go on a bender tonight” (lines 7-8). Lastly, Maggie points out that humor can assure her romantic partner that her alcoholism is “not something that I’m putting on you. It’s just something to be aware of” (lines 9-10).

Maggie conducts facework for both herself and her partner through humor. Similar to other participants, including Maddie and Jason, Maggie acknowledges that it is important for the romantic partner to feel comfortable and therefore, the recovering alcoholic often conducts facework for their romantic partner (Nieweglowski & Sheehan, 2017). When Maggie uses humor as a technique, she conducts facework and suppresses some of the negative connotations of alcoholism that might be threatening to the romantic relationship. In particular, through humor and phrases such as “it’s not something I’m putting on you,” Maggie attempts to manage a “negative face” threat, stressing that she will not impose on her romantic partner (Tracy & Robles, 2013). When she successfully manages a “negative face” threat, she constructs her identity as independent.

Additionally, when Maggie uses humor, she constructs her identity as a fun person and a typical college student. Humor helps her to achieve this identity because it deflects some of the attention off of the alcoholic identity itself and this can help both partners to feel more at ease. Specifically, she is able to shift the topic from her alcoholic identity and focus on other aspects of her identity. Lastly, similar to other participants, including Maddie and Jason, Maggie also uses a casual approach to achieve a positive identity. However, unlike Maddie and Jason, Maggie uses a casual approach because of the non-committal nature of the relationships she has

in college. When she utilizes a casual approach with humor, she is able to reassure her romantic partner that even though she is disclosing a personal aspect of herself, she is still aware of the boundaries of their non-committal relationship.

Example 6: “It is like a multiple-choice test”

Tucker, a twenty-five year old graduate student with five years of sobriety, constructs disclosure as problematic noting that the sobriety community encourages recovering alcoholics to remain quiet about their alcoholic identity. However, he observes that it is important to disclose and he utilizes confidence and preparation in order to achieve an identity as a normal college student and to position himself as less deviant in the collegiate atmosphere. When asked what he usually says when he discloses, he stated:

1 I just say ‘I just do not drink because I don't want to and because if I do, I will blackout’ and
2 they see it as like ‘good for you - I have a friend that cannot handle that and I really respect
3 that.’ I know it sounds like I am tooting my own horn or putting myself on a pedestal but it
4 is just the reality, I have been congratulated for that over anything else I have disclosed
5 about myself and it kinda sucks that AA is like ‘you’ve gotta keep it a secret and if you tell
6 people, they will freak out.’ It makes sense because before I stopped drinking I would not
7 have wanted to get into a relationship with someone who didn’t drink, but that was because I
8 was an alcoholic. No one gives a shit; no one fucking cares and if they do, then that's on
9 them and I think people just need to get to that place where they can see that is on the other
10 person. I mean, in the times it has come up, I felt like I should just say it because it does not
11 matter. Like if they bring up drinking instead of like pumping them up and saying ‘yeah,
12 let’s get fucked up,’ I just say like ‘just letting you know I don’t drink but I still go to bars.’
13 In person though, it doesn't come up until it comes up. Like tomorrow night, I am going to
14 this hockey game with this guy and likely there will not be a moment where we will be
15 drinking unless he wants to get a beer at the game. And this is like I am already planning
16 what I will say, either tomorrow I will not tell him because it will not come up, or if he
17 wants to get me a beer then I will just say ‘no thank you, I just don’t drink.’ It is almost like
18 the equivalent of those books you read, like choose your path. It is like a multiple-choice
19 test and the situation is the question and you have all of these responses that you have been
20 saving up from past experiences. And there are options A through E and you see which one
21 best fits the situation and you choose that one. But it is like for me when I have A through E
22 possible responses and I have them in my head and they are always there I mean like not
23 always, but when I am going on a date, I start to like refresh myself it subconsciously arises.

Tucker first provides an example of a phrase he uses during his disclosure and he notes that he usually says, “I just do not drink because I don't want to and because if I do, I will blackout” (line, 1). Similar to Jason, Tucker mentions that when he drinks he “blacks out,” associating himself with youth culture and the drinking community. Furthermore, the phrases that Tucker provided use informal language and are passive because they do not mention his alcoholism directly. Instead, Tucker uses reasoning such as “blacking out too much” in order to normalize his alcoholism and become less deviant to the collegiate community. Additionally, when Tucker states that he does not drink because he does not want to, he is highlighting his sobriety as a choice (line 1). These phrases are techniques that Tucker uses when disclosing, and he stressed the success of these techniques by stating that, when he discloses, he receives positive responses, such as congratulations and respect (lines 3-4).

Tucker constructs one problem of disclosure as the secretive nature of the alcoholic community, including AA, which urges recovering alcoholics to keep their alcoholic identity a secret because people will “freak out” (lines 5-6). He further constructs this problem by recognizing that prior to his sobriety, he would not have wanted to get into a relationship with someone who did not drink, but he also recognized that he only felt this way because he was in a state of active alcoholism (lines 6-8). Prior to recovery, a recovering alcoholic's life revolves around alcohol and this relationship with alcohol is the only one they know. Recovering alcoholics think that others will feel the same way, but in reality, that is just not the case, as Tucker pointed out by saying “no one fucking cares” (line 8).

Similar to many other participants, including Emily, who fears that she will “freak out” her partner, Tucker shares comparable fears that he will not achieve a positive identity. However, Tucker handles these fears uniquely from other participants and he provides a reason

why the alcoholic should not be nervous about disclosure. Tucker observes that in order to manage the fear of rejection from normal drinkers, one must recognize that if the romantic partner does not accept their alcoholic identity then, “that is on the other person” (lines 9-10). Instead of focusing on his own identity and the faults his romantic partner may find in him, he looks at the partner’s identity and notes that, actually, they are flawed if they cannot accept his alcoholic identity. Moreover, Tucker establishes his confidence in his sobriety by stating that he discloses “because it does not matter” (line 11). This confidence is revealed in the techniques that Tucker utilizes, including a direct approach.

Tucker recognizes the importance of approaching disclosure in a direct way, noting that when disclosing, one should “just say it” (line 11). Instead of letting his partner think that he drinks and “pumping him up,” saying things like “yeah, let’s get fucked up,” he notes that a direct and honest approach allows for clarity from the start of the relationship and conveys confidence. Tracy and Robles (2013) argue that a direct style results in a clearer message, and this openness portrays Tucker as confident about his alcoholic identity. However, Tucker also uses a more subtle approach, noting that in the past he has said, “just letting you know I don’t drink, but I still go to bars” (lines 12-13). Similar to Maggie, Tucker also uses disclaimers such as, “just letting you know” in his disclosure to maintain a nonchalant interaction. Additionally, Tucker stresses the relaxed nature of his approach when he mentions that his sobriety “doesn’t come up until it comes up” (line, 13). Tracy and Robles (2013) argue that, “how people design and sequence their turns of talk and respond to others’ initiations, implicate important personal identities” (p. 134). When Tucker allows the disclosure to flow naturally in the conversation, picking up on turn-taking cues, he is able to make the disclosure casual and, in turn, he constructs his character as confident about his alcoholic identity.

Tucker conducts facework and constructs his identity as confident and assured towards his sobriety in order to reduce the gravity of his alcoholic identity, thus managing some of the stigma. For example, when Tucker emphasizes the problematic nature of suppressing one's alcoholic identity, he establishes himself as accepting of his sobriety. Similar to Maddie and Emily, Tucker notes the importance of appearing to be in control. For example, when he states that he does not drink because he does not want to, Tucker constructs his identity as someone who is in control of his drinking habits versus the typical image of an alcoholic, which is associated with a lack of control. Lastly, this emphasis of sobriety as a choice, is one way in which Tucker can reduce the intimidating aspect of the alcoholic identity and achieve his preferred identity as a normal college student.

Additionally, Tucker conducts identity-work to associate himself with his college-aged peers. For example, by including the phrase "I still go to the bars," Tucker is able to shape his identity as youthful and fun. He is attempting to portray his image as a typical student who is embracing the collegiate social lifestyle, thus constructing his identity as less deviant to the college norms. Lastly, when Tucker uses disclaimers and passive phrases, he shapes the disclosure in a casual way, which helps him to achieve his preferred identity as confident in his recovery.

Comparable to Emily, who mentions, "packaging" the disclosure in a certain way, Tucker acknowledges that one of the most powerful strategies for his disclosure, is preparation. He includes an example of this strategy by discussing the mental preparation that he experienced prior to his date the following evening (line 15). He mentions that there are several situations that could occur during the date and he noted that his sobriety would either not come up or his date would offer him a drink, to which he would reply, saying "No thank you, I just don't drink"

(lines 16-17). In order to prevent an uncomfortable situation, Tucker refers to a set of “A through E responses” that he has accumulated from past experiences of disclosure (lines 20- 21). The “A through E” responses are gathered from trial and error based on responses from romantic partners after disclosure. Therefore, during the interaction with his romantic partner, he refers to the “A through E responses” and chooses the one that best fits the situation.

Tucker conducts facework by having these successful responses ready in order to manage a potentially awkward situation. Of course, there is no way to concretely predict how a romantic partner will respond to the disclosure of an alcoholic identity. However, by using techniques that have had positive results in the past, Tucker is able to shape and frame the disclosure in a way that would likely be accepted by the conversational partner. Ultimately, when Tucker chooses specific words and phrasing in the disclosure, he is conducting facework in hopes that these “A through E responses” will help him to achieve his preferred identity as a normal college student.

Chapter 4: Discussion

Rationale

This study addresses a gap in previous research on alcoholic disclosure by demonstrating how recovering alcoholics disclose their alcoholic identity in romantic relationships. Specifically, this study is significant because disclosure in romantic relationships has different qualities than disclosure in other types of relationships. Findings from previous studies examining disclosure in the workplace (Romo et al., 2015) and, in college (Romo, 2012), indicate that topic avoidance is a successful way to manage the stigma associated with an alcoholic identity in many types of relationships. However, topic avoidance is not a useful strategy in romantic relationships because the increased desire for intimacy in romantic relationships requires participants to disclose important aspects of their identity, such as being an alcoholic. Consequently, recovering alcoholics in romantic relationships must conduct facework to manage the tension between privacy and honesty. Management of this tension is necessary to both minimize the alcoholic stigma and to foster a relationship with intimacy. Therefore, this study aims to move beyond the previously noted strategy of topic avoidance to present some useful techniques for managing the tension between honesty and privacy when disclosing in romantic relationships. To do so, I interviewed participants about their disclosure experiences. Participants were able to provide detailed accounts of effective and ineffective forms of disclosure. This is because the heightened desire to achieve a positive identity in romantic relationships results in extensive planning.

Disclosure of stigmatized identities has been examined in many different contexts including, disclosing one's sexuality (Collins & Callahan, 2012; Griffith & Hebl, 2002), disclosing an AIDS diagnosis (Waldron & Miller, 1998), and disclosing mental health issues (Tarber & Frostholm, 2014). This study is an addition to prior research and establishes a new

context to understand the disclosure of stigmatized identities. Specifically, the findings from this study add to a broader understanding of how stigmatized groups make sense of their identities and how they manage the stigma associated with their identity. Additionally, the unique aim of this study to use participants' own words to establish "good" and "bad" forms of disclosure, provides a unique contribution to the broader discussion of disclosure of stigmatized identities.

Summary of findings

The findings in this study present numerous ways that recovering alcoholics construct disclosure of their alcoholic identity as problematic and notes the strategies that participants utilized to address these problems. Overall, participants constructed disclosure as problematic because there is a general misconception about alcoholism, which often portrays alcoholics as destructive, high maintenance, and unstable. Moreover, the general misjudgment of the alcoholic identity, visible in the media and in real life experiences of the participants, resulted in a fear of rejection in many of the participants. The negative perceptions of alcoholism also caused participants to fear that they might not achieve positive identities such as normal, trustworthy, and stable in the romantic relationship. However, participants did address several strategies they use to manage the disclosure dilemma. From the strategies mentioned during the interview process, three situated ideals were constructed for use in the disclosure of an alcoholic identity.

The situated ideals in this study aim to provide useful approaches to disclosure that have been established through the examination of the data. More specifically, the situated ideals were created from common successful forms of facework that were found across the participant interviews. These effective forms of facework were established through both the general problems and solutions found in the initial coding process, as well as through the discourse analysis. These ideals, established by the participants, present "good" approaches to disclosing

an alcoholic identity in romantic relationships. The first situated ideal is that the disclosure must be vague. The second situated ideal for employing disclosure is that the disclosure must be casual. Finally, the last situated ideal maintains that the recovering alcoholic must be confident during the disclosure. These three situated ideals should be used in combination in order to successfully disclose an alcoholic identity in a way that saves face and reduces stigma in a romantic relationship. Below, I discuss each ideal in more detail and as I do so, I address how they contribute to past research on the management of the tension between privacy and honesty, stigma, facework and stigma by association.

Results and Previous Research

Be vague. The first situated ideal for the disclosure of an alcoholic identity is to be vague. This situated ideal was formed from the examination of multiple interviews in which vagueness was highlighted as a successful strategy to both maintain one's preferred identity and to reduce stigma. This situated ideal focuses on the exclusion and inclusion of certain aspects of the alcoholic identity. In particular, participants are able to choose which aspects of their alcoholic identity that they want to keep to themselves, and which aspects they are willing to share in order to develop intimacy with their partner. For example, in a vague approach to disclosure, alcoholics can consciously include vocabulary that assumes the least amount of stigma such as "I just don't drink" or "I'm sober." Additionally, participants exclude certain words in the disclosure, such as "alcoholic," "addict," "rehab," and other details from their alcoholic past because it could "freak out" or intimidate their romantic partner.

It is important to note that this strategy differs from the vagueness in topic avoidance mentioned in previous research (Romo et al., 2015, Romo et al., 2016). This is because participants in those studies did not disclose. Instead, they used phrases such as "I'm good" or "I

have to wake up early” to imply that they are abstaining from alcohol only on that particular occasion. However, in this study, vagueness in disclosure can be defined as removing certain aspects of one’s alcoholic past. Participants still disclose their alcoholic identity, but they control which parts of their identity to include.

Through vagueness, participants can both minimize the alcoholic stigma that Goffman (1963) addressed and manage this tension between privacy and honesty in romantic relationships noted in prior research (Derlega et al., 2008). This vague situated ideal is a successful strategy to manage this tension because it acts as a compromise between honesty and privacy. Additionally, Goffman (1955) establishes that through facework, people do and say certain things to manage a preferred identity. Specifically, participants use facework to manage this tension between privacy and honesty. To maintain their privacy and reduce stigma, the recovering alcoholic can conceal negative aspects of their alcoholic identity from their romantic partner. However, participants are still able to maintain honesty because they share certain aspects of their alcoholic identity with their partner. This is important because honesty is crucial in a healthy and intimate romantic relationship.

In addition to managing one’s own stigma, the use of vagueness in disclosure helps to manage stigma by association, which was presented in prior literature (Goffman, 1963). When the recovering alcoholic excludes negative aspects of the alcoholic identity, they are able to portray their alcoholic identity in a positive light. When the recovering alcoholic’s identity is defined and perceived in a more favorable way, the romantic partner will be more likely to assume that favorable identity, thus minimizing the stigma by association.

Be casual. The second situated ideal is to be casual. Many participants explicitly emphasized the importance of a casual approach to disclosure because it was vital in helping

them to make the disclosure as comfortable as possible for both people. In the interviews, participants showed their awareness of normal forms of turn taking and adjacency pairs in the disclosure. Specifically, this can be seen when participants discussed how they only bring up their alcoholic identity in response to a question or if the topic of alcohol comes up, instead of bringing it up as a separate topic. For example, one participant noted that “it doesn't come up until it comes up,” and he waits until his partner asks to buy him a drink to address the topic. Tracy and Robles (2013) argue that interaction structure impacts the identity of the participant, and in this study turn taking and adjacency pairs are used to keep the disclosure casual and to help the alcoholic achieve a positive identity. Another way that participants keep the disclosure casual is through informal language, including the use of disclaimers. Tracy and Robles (2013) also note that disclaimers can be used as a conversational move to help speakers achieve their desired goals. For example, the use of disclaimers such as “just letting you know” and “I'm not unloading this baggage onto you,” can be used to make the conversation less intimidating. Lastly, participants use jargon from youth culture such as “blackout” and “I still go to the bars” to frame the disclosure as normal and casual.

Prior research has noted that facework is crucial in managing stigma in a relationship (Goffman, 1955; Goffman, 1963). A casual approach is one form of facework that successfully minimizes stigma and helps the alcoholic to achieve their desired identity in a romantic relationship. Specifically, this situated ideal is crucial in the disclosure process because it allows the recovering alcoholic to reduce the magnitude of such a serious topic and to decrease the possibility of unwanted alarm in the romantic partner. Ultimately, disclaimers, casual language and interaction sequence minimize stigma by portraying the alcoholic identity as “no big deal.” Consequently, when there is less focus on the alcoholic identity, the recovering alcoholic is able

to shift the focus to other aspects of their character, allowing them to achieve their desired identity.

Lastly, a casual approach allows the recovering alcoholic to disclose their alcoholic identity in an unconcerned way that is non-threatening to a potential romantic partner. This approach, in turn, conducts facework for the romantic partner and helps to manage the partner's stigma by association (Goffman, 1963; Nieweglowski & Sheehan, 2017). Specifically, this situated ideal is imperative in allowing the romantic partner to feel more comfortable with the disclosure and, therefore, more accepting of their recovering alcoholic partner. Ultimately, when the recovering alcoholic becomes less stigmatized, the romantic partner in turn becomes less stigmatized as well.

Be confident. The third situated ideal notes that the recovering alcoholic must be confident when they disclose to their romantic partner. Specifically, confidence in disclosure includes, directness, self-assured non-verbal communication, a firm tone and, in some cases, humor. For example, participants directly say “no thank you, I just don’t drink” and “you have to just come out and say it.” Participants also display confidence when they make jokes about their sobriety during the disclosure such as “I’ll just go on a bender tonight.”

A confident approach to disclosure is another crucial way to minimize stigma and achieve one's preferred identity in the relationship. Romo (2012) observed that alcoholics are stigmatized because it is a deviant identity. However, a confident approach aims to normalize the identity and offsets any feeling of shame or self-reproach, resulting in reduced stigma. For example, when participants were upfront about the identity and “just said it,” it reduced the secretive nature of the disclosure, which normalized the identity. Additionally, with a confident approach, participants are able to conduct facework in order to manage the tension between

privacy and honesty, which was presented in prior literature (Derlega et al., 2008). The recovering alcoholic is able to maintain privacy and minimize stigma by using self-assured non-verbals, a firm tone, and/or humor to command the interaction. Specifically, with a confident approach, the recovering alcoholic is able to set the boundaries and control what is allowed and what is not tolerated in the conversation between the two romantic partners. For example, one participant noted that her partners do not pry for more information when she discloses because she uses a firm tone “to let them know that is all the information I am ready to give at that given moment.” They are also able to maintain honesty with their romantic partner because they are straightforward and truthful about their alcoholic identity.

Lastly, when using this approach, the alcoholic successfully conducts facework for their romantic partner (Nieweglowski & Sheehan, 2017). Specifically, a confident approach demonstrates that the recovering alcoholic is able to embrace their alcoholic identity without shame because they are comfortable with all aspects of their identity. This mentality reassures the romantic partner that there is no need for them to feel any shame or to have concerns about the identity either. Ultimately, when the recovering alcoholic is confident, the romantic partner is able to be at ease with their identity as a romantic partner of an alcoholic.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. First, disclosure can be shaped by one’s background and the support organizations that they are affiliated with. This is a limitation to this study because most of the participants were pulled from the same community. Although the participants came from different backgrounds in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity and range of sobriety time, the majority of the participants were members of the same organization on the University of Colorado campus. This organization provides a supportive learning environment for recovering alcoholics in higher education. Therefore, many of the

participants had the same foundation of encouragement and advocacy in dealing with their alcoholic identities. This factor could have impacted the data because participants were members of the same organization and their disclosure strategies might, in part, be a reflection of what they learned in that organization.

Additionally, participants' construction of disclosure was based only on the recovering alcoholic's perceptions. This is a limitation because disclosure involves two people. Therefore, this study was slightly one-sided, in that it did not address how the romantic partner constructed the disclosure. However, the recovering alcoholics were able to make assumptions and inferences about their romantic partners' reactions to the disclosure. For example, the participants noted strategies that they used in their past experiences of disclosure and they labeled these strategies as successful based on the reactions of their romantic partners. These successful strategies are established from the perceptions and assumptions of only the recovering alcoholic. If the romantic partners were also included in this study, they would be able to address which of the strategies and situated ideals actually helped the recovering alcoholic to achieve their preferred identity. Therefore, the situated ideals and the claims could have been stronger if the perceptions of the romantic partners were included in this study.

Similarly, the construction of disclosure depended on the participant's memory. The stigmatized nature of the disclosure resulted in participants providing extensive stories and details from past experiences of disclosure. However, it would have been ideal to have actual recordings of disclosure with follow-up interviews. This is because actual instances of disclosure are much more reliable and would provide stronger pieces of evidence to support this study's claims. Observing disclosure would have been extremely challenging due to the allotted time and resources for this study, but could be explored in future studies.

Lastly, the use of discourse analysis partially acted as a limitation to the study because this approach restricted the quantity of data that could be presented. On the one hand, discourse analysis was beneficial in examining the disclosure of an alcoholic identity in romantic relationships because I was able to use details to understand how participants disclosed, as well as for what purpose in specific contexts. In particular, with discourse analysis, the reader could see the context of the quotes from the participants, in order to understand the purpose and motive of their statements, which would be lost in theme-based coding alone. However, there was rich and relevant data in many of the narratives provided by the participants, but due to space limitations, I was not able to present and explicate them in the findings section.

Future Research

There are several avenues for future research that can extend the findings of this study. First, future research should examine how disclosure practices vary depending on a participant's sobriety time. In this study, one theme that was apparent in the data was that disclosure was approached in different ways, and for different reasons, based on sobriety time. Participants reflected on how they disclosed in their first year of sobriety and compared it to their approach to disclosure in present day. More specifically, participants noted that in early sobriety, they often disclosed out of necessity because they did not want to be in a situation where drugs and alcohol were present. Whereas, participants that had accumulated some sobriety time, waited to disclose because they felt that other aspects of their identity were more important than their alcoholic identity. The data in this study did not provide sufficient evidence to make the claims to support this premise, but with additional research it would be interesting to examine the difference in disclosure during the first year of sobriety versus disclosure after one has several years of sobriety.

It would also be beneficial for future research to investigate the role of gender in the disclosure of an alcoholic identity. Several participants noted instances where their gender served as a disadvantage in the disclosure process. For example, a few of the male participants acknowledged that disclosure was difficult because they did not want to be seen as “creepy” or taking advantage of a woman who had been drinking. A study examining the role of gender in the disclosure process would likely produce valuable data about how gendered cultural norms impact interactions, including disclosure in a romantic relationship.

Lastly, future research should examine the differences between disclosure in serious romantic relationships and casual romantic relationships. Several participants acknowledged that they approach disclosure differently when they are in a casual romantic relationship versus when they are in a serious romantic relationship. For example, one participant noted that she would only disclose with humor in casual romantic relationships. In addition, several participants noted that they would include more details when disclosing to a serious romantic partner. Research on this topic would be beneficial in providing a better understanding of how the recovering alcoholics view serious and casual relationships and the role of an alcoholic identity across the romantic relationship spectrum.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study established the complexity of the disclosure of an alcoholic identity in romantic relationships. Through the framework of Craig and Tracy’s (1995) Grounded Practical Theory, this study addresses the ways in which recovering alcoholics construct disclosure as problematic and the strategies used to manage those problems. Additionally, it provides practical and useful situated ideals. These situated ideals can be used to help recovering alcoholics successfully manage future disclosure experiences. However, it is important to note that each recovering alcoholic is different and each disclosure is unique,

therefore, these situated ideals will not consistently apply to every disclosure. Rather, they are meant to be taken as a broad understanding of “good” practices in disclosure that will depend on the situational factors. Overall, this study found that in order to manage the tension between honesty and privacy, to reduce stigma, and to achieve their preferred identity, the recovering alcoholic must be vague, casual, and confident when disclosing to a romantic partner.

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Appendix

Interview Guide

IRB Approval Letter

Interview Guide

Introduction

I just want to say thank you for meeting with me. My name is Grace and I will be asking you some questions today. I am doing an honors thesis project on how recovering alcoholics disclose their alcoholic identity in romantic relationships. You do not have to participate in this interview if you do not want to, you can agree and later back out, and your decision to not participate will not be held against you. If you do decide to participate, I will keep this data on my password-protected computer and your identity will not be shared because I will use pseudonyms.

Verbal Consent

Please read this consent form carefully and make sure to ask any questions you have regarding this study. I want to make sure that I take any measures I can to protect your identity, therefore instead of signing your name on the form I will have you give me verbal consent. As stated in the consent form you do not have to participate in this study and you can back out at any time. If you do decide to participate in the study please state your name and state that you willingly agree to participate in this study.

Demographic Questions

1. What is your age?
2. What gender do you identify with?
3. How many years have you been sober?
4. How many relationships have you had since the start of your sobriety?
5. Are you in a relationship right now?

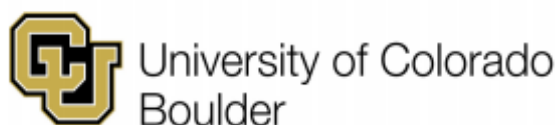
Overall Question

I'm studying how recovering alcoholics disclose their alcoholic identity to their romantic partners. I am a recovering alcoholic myself and have experienced some uneasiness around disclosure. Can you tell me about your experience with disclosure of your alcoholic identity in romantic relationships.

Possible Follow Up Questions – Ideally participants will talk freely but if they need probing, I will ask the following questions:

1. How do you feel about your alcoholic identity?
 - a. What feelings do you associate with your alcoholic past?
 - b. How often do you tell other people about your alcoholic identity?
2. In general, what do you think people think about recovering alcoholics?
 - a. Why do you think people have these perceptions?
3. Do you ever feel that your alcoholic identity has an impact on your everyday life?
 - a. Do you feel that there is anything you can't do because of your status as a recovering alcoholic?
4. Can you provide me with an example of a time when you disclosed your alcoholic past to your romantic partner?

- a. How long did you wait to disclose?
 - b. Did you use certain words or avoid certain words?
 - c. Where were you when you disclosed?
5. Do you think disclosure early on in a romantic relationship is an important factor of a long term satisfying relationship?
6. In past experiences when you disclosed your alcoholic identity with a romantic partner how did they react?
 - a. What are some of the examples of things romantic partners have said?
 - b. If people reacted negatively how did you respond?
 - c. If people responded positively how did you respond?
7. Do you have a hard time disclosing your alcoholic identity?
 - a. If so, why do you think that is?
8. Is disclosure of your alcoholic identity something that you think about or plan?
 - a. If so, why do you think that is?
9. Do you have trouble disclosing your non-drinking status in other areas of your life?
 - a. For example, at work, in the classroom, at parties etc.?
10. What do you think some of the risks of disclosing to a romantic partner might be?
 - a. Can you provide an example?
11. What do you think some of the benefits of disclosing to a romantic partner might be?
 - a. Can you provide an example?
12. Do you feel that there is something I haven't covered that you'd like to discuss?



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APPROVAL

29-Nov-2017

Dear Grace Musselman,

On **29-Nov-2017** the IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Submission:	Initial Application
Review Category:	Exempt - Category 2
Title:	What do you Say on the First Date?: An Examination of a Former Problem Drinker's Disclosure Process in Romantic Relationships.
Investigator:	Musselman, Grace
Protocol #:	17-0652
Funding:	None
Documents Approved:	Musselman Interview Guide; Musselman campus resources; Musselman Recruitment Email; 17-0652 Consent Form (29Nov17); Musselman Additional Resources; 17-0652 Protocol (29Nov17);
Documents Reviewed:	Protocol; HRP-211: FORM - Initial Application v8;

The IRB approved the protocol on **29-Nov-2017**.

Click the link to find the approved documents for this protocol: [Summary Page](#) Use copies of these documents to conduct your research.

In conducting this protocol you must follow the requirements listed in the [INVESTIGATOR MANUAL \(HRP-103\)](#).

Sincerely,

Douglas Grafel

IRB Admin Review Coordinator

Institutional Review Board