

Collegiate Recovery Program Student Employee

Role Descriptions through a Constructionist Lens

TEL 713 Advanced qualitative methods SP17

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Background

The focus of this study was to build on the understanding of how to support students in recovery from alcohol and other drug addiction through the structure, advocacy, and services of a Collegiate Recovery Program (CRP). The targeted qualitative research that I conducted this semester examined how student employees of the CRP at Arizona State University (ASU) described their role as employed peers to support students in recovery.

The expansion of substance use prevention, treatment and recovery support was one of the nationwide efforts for which the Office of National Drug Control Policy dedicated resources (Executive Office of the President). While alcohol and drug educational resources provided primary prevention and treatment centers administered secondary prevention, within the university environment, CRPs delivered social support as a tertiary prevention strategy to relapse (Smock, Baker, Harris, & D'Sauza, 2011). Students who participated in CRPs noted that their involvement served as a protective barrier between themselves and the perceived pro-alcohol, “abstinence hostile” university environment (Cleveland, Harris, Baker, Herbert, & Dean, 2007). For these students, CRPs provided a valuable method to finding a like-minded community of their peers in the college campus space where they felt otherwise alienated. The “instant friendships” formed within the context of the CRP community protected students in recovery from social isolation, which is linked to risk of relapse (Bell, Kanitkar, Kerksiek, Watson, Das, Kostina-Ritchey, & Harris, 2009).

Study Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to describe how CRP student employees viewed their role as providers of recovery support within the university. The epistemological perspective of

constructivism and the framework of Weick's (1984) "small wins" theory combined with Ajzen's theory of planned behavior was used to describe the CRP student employee role within the complicated problem of addiction and recovery.

The study was guided by two Research Questions:

RQ#1: How do student employees of the CRP at ASU describe their individual role?

RQ#2: Do student employees of the Collegiate Recovery Program at Arizona State University (ASU) describe instances of "small wins" (Weick, 1984) within their work? If so, how are the instances of "small wins" described?

Theoretical Perspectives

Constructivism

Epistemology refers to the study of knowledge; the understanding of how one knows. Crotty (1998) inferred "meaning is not discovered, but constructed" (p. 9). Constructivism, then, is "the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context" (Crotty, 1998, p. 18). Within the epistemological theoretical framework of constructivism, meaning is produced in one of two ways: social constructionism, through interaction between people and their environment; or constructionism, where meaning is produced by the individual (Crotty, 1998; Koro-Ljungberg, 2017). Constructionism was the epistemological framework through which I conducted the Spring 2017 individual research project, as I wanted to examine how student employees of the CRP described their role as individuals within the CRP at ASU.

Theory of Planned Behavior

Ajzen's theory of planned behavior (1985) posits that a person's belief about a given behavior, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control is the best predictor of whether he or she will actually engage in a certain behavior. According to this theory, intentions are shaped by the person's subjective evaluation of the risks and benefits of the behavioral outcomes, as well as the ease or difficulty of performing the behavior at a given time or place. The theory argues that the best predictor of a behavior is the behavior a person actually intends to do. Because attitudes and behavioral control are based on certain beliefs, intervention must try to change these personal beliefs in order to shape or reshape behavior. The CRP student employees' job description centers on providing interventions in the form of trainings, events, and meetings. The attitudes and intentions of the student employees are certainly geared toward supporting students in recovery from addiction, based on their applying to and accepting the CRP job. The behavioral outcomes of the student employee's beliefs may be inferred through their description of their role at the CRP.

Small Wins

The theory of "small wins" was used as the analytical framework of the study. A small win is "a concrete, complete, implemented outcome of moderate importance" (Weick, 1984, p. 43). Societal problems are often seen as too complicated for people to perceive that anything can be done to find a solution. The scale of social problems can lead to heightened states of cognitive arousal, leading to an impaired state of lessened problem-solving skills. By scaling down the problem, the heightened state of cognitive arousal caused by the problem can be reduced, leading to a clearer thought process and better strategies to address the problem. "Small wins" are more manageable than major overhauls.

The CRP employees were students trained in addiction and recovery topics. Rather than tackling the larger, overwhelming issue of addiction and recovery, the student employees participated in a host of small-scale activities, such as classroom trainings and event planning. Did these job responsibilities contribute to the larger picture of addiction recovery support? Did evidence of “small wins” within the data inform attitude and perceptions of behavioral control, thereby leading to more or bigger “wins?”

Methods

Study Context and Culture

Collegiate Recovery Programs (CRPs) provide support and advocacy to students in recovery from alcohol and other drug addiction. The task of tackling addiction and providing supportive structures is a massive undertaking within the larger environment of a national drug epidemic (Cadeau, 2016; HHS, 2016; Logan, 2017; National League of Cities & National Association of Counties, 2016; Wydale, 2016). While studies have examined the student participant experience of a CRP (Cleveland, Harris, Baker, Herbert, & Dean, 2007; Laudet, Harris, Kimball, Winters, & Moberg, 2014; Smock, Baker, Harris, & D'Sauza, 2011, Worfler, 2016); there is currently no research that examines how student employees of CRPs describe their individual role as supportive peers within the larger university environment (Laitman, Kachur-Karavites, & Stewart, 2014). Therefore, there is room to examine this aspect of CRPs.

Critical Incident Analysis

According to Hughes (2007), “critical incident technique involves the study of critical incidents...as experienced or observed by the research participants” (p. 1). The method of critical analysis is one that holds practical applications. The discourse within the transcribed interviews

from two student participants provided rich depictions of both descriptions of their roles and “small win” critical incidences.

The framework of critical incident analysis was used to identify instances of “small wins” and followed a five step process (Flanagan, 1954). After determination of specific aims of the research (in this case, the goal criteria was within RQ#1 and RQ#2), a plan for collection of the participant statements that related to the aims was established (interview questions and methodology). The data were collected and analyzed for the specifications stated in the initial phase of planning, then interpreted and reported. Although the theoretical perspective of constructivism called for researcher detachment (Koro-Ljungberg, Yendol-Hoppey, Smith, & Hayes, 2009), practical application of the analyzed data required proper interpretation by the researcher (Flanagan, 1954). In addition to examining their planned and enacted behavior as a function of their attitudes and perceptions through data analysis, I looked at whether these students view their job responsibilities as “small wins” to solve the larger problem of addiction and recovery.

Researcher’s Subjectivity

As both the researcher and the director of the Collegiate Recovery Program, my bias was one of familiarity. Schram (2003) noted that “Clyde Kluckhohn is reputed to have once stated, “if a fish were an anthropologist, the last thing it would discover would be water”” (p. 58). For those who research within their work settings, familiarity bias must be noted. It is for this reason that I chose to conduct research under the epistemological category of constructionism, where the role of the researcher is “detached” (Koro-Ljungberg, Yendol-Hoppey, Smith, & Hayes, 2009). Koro-Ljungberg (2017) stated that within the theoretical perspective of constructivism,

“the mind needs interact with the external world for knowledge to become.” Constructivism seeks to describe the experience of the study participants rather than analyze the experience through the eyes of the researcher.

According to Crotty (1998), “constructivism is primarily an individualistic understanding of the constructionist position” (p. 58). It is the mind of the study participants that is studied and described, not the mind of the researcher. In the constructionist tradition knowledge is produced through the study participant only. It is through the description of the participant experience, rather than the analysis of the experience, that I aimed to promote objectivity and reduce bias.

Sampling Method and Sampling Process

For this study, I sought to understand how students described their role and experience working as an employee of the CRP. Therefore, a non-probability sample was used where “units are deliberately selected to reflect particular features of or groups within the sampled population” (Ritchie, & Lewis, 2003, p.77). This sample was chosen with purpose and the selection of participants had one criteria: employment within the CRP. These student employees had “particular features or characteristics which will enable detailed exploration and understanding of the central themes and puzzles which the researcher wishes to study” (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p.78-9). The specifications of the participants as student employees provided me with a detailed description of their roles within the CRP.

Description of Participants

The sample of participants was selected from the CRP at ASU (n = 2). Participants were chosen because they were the two student employees of the CRP and this study examined the descriptive experiences of students who work in the CRP. Participants were contacted in person,

by me, when I invited them to take part in the study. Consent was obtained at the time of the interview and audio recorded.

Data collection methods

According to Crotty (1998), methods refer to “the techniques or procedures used to gather and analyze data related to some research question or hypothesis” while methodology refers to “the strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of methods to desired outcomes” (Crotty, 1998, p. 3).

The methodology used to collect the data for my Spring 2017 research project was from a qualitative research approach. The methods used to conduct this research were closed interview questions based on a guide. The interviews were recorded using an audio-recorder, secured in a locked drawer, and transcribed without processing software. As the epistemology of constructionism set to describe the individual meaning-making experience, I examined the data for central themes and concepts and maintained a detached view as the researcher while searching the data for instances of role description and potential experiences of “small wins.” IRB approval was obtained before the interviews.

Secondary data sources included the observation of the student employees both individually and in their interactions with their peers. The method of utilizing observation as a data collection and analysis technique allowed for triangulation of information, however, the element of bias was noted, as I supervised these students. Observing the students through a researcher’s eyes and transparency about my study and intentions while observing them served to limit bias.

Validity and validation strategies

“Validity is, in short, power, the power to determine the demarcation between science and not-science” (Lather, 2007). A threat to internal validity within this study was researcher bias. According to Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2006), constructivist design is prone to researcher bias, as the researcher has a dual role of both researcher and data collection instrument. In this case, not only was I serving as the instrument collecting the data, I was also staff in the CRP who worked closely with the student participants.

The validation strategy utilized was transparency and member checking, which reduced the potential of the researcher misunderstanding the data, especially within the category of “small wins.” After the interviews were transcribed and categories established, the student employees were asked for their feedback on accuracy of the categories. Finally, their feedback was obtained about the study conclusions in order to ensure accuracy.

Analysis and Findings

Data Analysis

In order to understand the qualitative data obtained from the interviews, I first transcribed the interviews. I began by reading the data for the main concepts and analyzed those concepts into units of meaning, or “clusters of text that carries one meaning” (Koro-Ljungberg, 2017). I identified the meaning units by *invivo* codes in the text of the transcribed interviews and viewed the range of meanings within the responses. I then searched for and then labeled the description of student roles and instances of “small wins.” The meaning units were open coded and transferred to an Excel document where themes were identified. A thematic analysis of the data is presented in the next section.

Findings

A systematic method of identifying meaning units and coding those units produced four themes: outreach, one-on-one support, and strategic planning as a function of the student role as employees of the CRP. While I remained detached as a researcher during the analysis process, critical analysis allowed me to interpret the fourth theme of “small wins” within the data.

To answer Research Question #1, “How do student employees of the CRP at ASU describe their individual role?,” the results indicated that both students described their main role as one of outreach (“reaching out to sober living houses, and treatment centers in the valley”), one-on-one support (“intimate and personal one-on-one conversations”) and strategizing the most effective way of “figuring out how three people [in the CRP] can reach” [91,000 students]. The outreach process included “educating more students and their peers in their community and in their residence halls.” The role of having “one-on-one” conversations with student peers was identified as a benefit that “builds on a level of connectivity.” Strategies to conduct the work required of the CRP included having to “figure out what is the best thing for that one individual student” and the “educated tactic” of using student survey data for “help” and “changing the cultural norm” of the college environment.

In my observation of the students, I acknowledged their roles as described and saw instances of them attending community meetings, leading Alcoholics Anonymous meetings; speaking directly to their peers and providing individual support; conversing, suggesting, and debating as to best strategies to expand the CRP’s reach. These themes were member checked and validated by both students.

To answer Research Question #2, “Do student employees of the Collegiate Recovery Program at Arizona State University (ASU) describe instances of “small wins” (Weick, 1984)

within their work? If so, how are the instances of “small wins” described?” While students did not directly categorize the theme of “small wins,” the critical incident analysis noted descriptions of these incidents.

N stated, “this is one of the most difficult things I’ve ever done in my life, but also the most enjoyable,” and noted a “supportive” office atmosphere. V described that “staff has been very receptive of feedback from students and the community” which “led to very huge success in the program.” The role of being a student rather than a staff member was also a “small win” for both students which allowed them to have a serve a unique role (“I know what it’s like to have the pressures and the stresses of going through your undergrad” which “goes a long way...in terms of my relationships with my fellow students” and that a student in recovery is more likely to “reach out to you in order to share about their ideas.”) Instances of “small wins” were easily observable to me as a researcher. The positivity following a “small win” was apparent in their communication. Ajzen (1985) states that “attitudes and personality traits can express themselves, and can therefore be inferred from, verbal as well as nonverbal responses” (p. 34). This theme and observation was member checked and validated in the data analysis phase by both students.

Ajzen’s (1985) theory of planned behavior suggested that attitudes and perceptions of societal norms lead to behavior intention. If student employees perceived their role as one of multiple “small wins,” Weick (1984) states that many “small wins” in succession can add up to significant results. Scaling down problems into manageable chunks can make the issue understandable, creating a visible and easily understood format for the solution. The student employee’s belief about their efficacy as student employees through “small wins” may lead to a positive attitude toward influencing the larger problem of addiction recovery. If so, behavioral intention toward the larger problem becomes consistent with their attitudes and beliefs, which

Weick (1985) suggests may be a function of the subsequent action that guides their work within the CRP to support students in recovery.

Limitations

The main limitation in this study was the small sample size. Two students were employed by the CRP, therefore there were only two participants. For future research, it would be beneficial to collect data from more student employees as well as interns or volunteers who have an association with the Collegiate Recovery Program. Conducting similar studies in multiple universities may lead to transferability of findings. My positionality within the research is another potential limitation, as the close relationships between myself and the research participants and setting could be a limiting factor in perception.

Anticipated implication and benefit to the public

The anticipated implication of conducting this research would be filling a gap in existing research. As noted in the above section, many aspects of research on CRPs are lacking. Therefore, the data collection and analysis of student employee role within the CRP would contribute to the existing literature.

A benefit to the public of conducting this research would be to provide more descriptive data about the experiences of student employees who lead recovery efforts in CRPs. Although two students were interviewed for this study, this data can serve as a model for student employee roles and responsibilities when CRPs are developing strategic plans and determining best practices. Additionally, the data can guide employers in generating student job descriptions or provide information to share with students in their onboarding and training process.

Conclusion

This study has been a constructivist investigation into student descriptions of their roles and responsibilities as related to the Collegiate Recovery Program. Qualitative interviews were used to describe the data and select instances of “small wins” that students described. Results show that CRP student employees describe their role as one of outreach to organizations and departments; supporting individual students in recovery through one-on-one conversations; and tactical strategy to find best practices in order to lead the CRP. Implications for future research and benefits to the public have been demonstrated.

Response to the research process

Linking meta-, mid-level, and ground-level theory to methodology and subsequent analysis has helped me grow as a researcher tremendously. Putting the theory of constructivism to work providing a roadmap to the research process - from identifying theoretical perspectives and analysis methods to my role as a researcher - setting theory as the guiding framework has proven to be an invaluable lesson in making all the parts of this study fit together. I thought that I knew how to do this already, but I really didn't, not to this extent. While often challenging, the lessons learned in this semester-long work will prove useful in my dissertation and beyond.

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APPENDIX

Interview Questions

1. You are a student employee of the Collegiate Recovery Program (CRP) at ASU. Tell me about your work.
2. Describe the function of the CRP.

3. Tell me about how ASU upper administrative staff has responded to the CRP.
4. ASU is a university with over 90,000 students. Describe your role as a CPR student employee in serving those 90,000 students.
5. Describe your role in supporting students in recovery from alcohol and other drug addiction at ASU.
6. What are the benefits to having a peer employee in this role?
7. What are the obstacles to having a peer employee in this role?
8. Is there anything else you would like to add?