

A Narrative Analysis of Agential Movement from Addiction to Recovery
in Erin Khar's *Strung Out* (2020)

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Note to reader: Anyone who might be triggered by descriptions of self-harm or explicit drug use should think carefully before reading this document.

Acknowledgements

And all poor souls that have scoured bowls
Or have them lustily trolled—
God save the lives of them and their wives,
Whether they be young or old.

—Anonymous lyric, 15th-century England (Allison *et al.*, 1975)

I would like to thank the members of countless Narcotics Anonymous, Alcoholics Anonymous, Al-Anon, and SMART Recovery meetings throughout the Greater Toronto and Prince Edward County areas. Those brave souls received this stranger with open arms, courage, and superbly good grace welcoming me into their communities. But for those people, Erin Khar foremost amongst them, the understood truth of addiction would remain obscured, shamed, and misunderstood. If my efforts, through this analysis and anything else I do, brings light to the nature of the journey from addiction to recovery, it cannot come too soon.

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Abstract

The research question examined in this thesis is *What was the agential experience of moving from addiction to recovery?* The literature review included the prevalence of substance use disorder (SUD), definitions of addiction and recovery, a comparison of the Cycle of Change and the Adaptive Cycle, and a discussion of natural recovery. The means of answering the research question was through a narrative analysis of a memoir of addiction, Erin Khar's *Strung Out* (2020). That memoir was read, reviewed, abstracted from, and then analyzed from three perspectives. The first was Labov's (1972, as cited in Murray, 2003) linguistic perspective containing six categories of description, namely: abstract, orientation, complicating action, resolution, evaluation, and coda. That analysis was followed by Frye's (1990) genre-based method of narrative analysis which placed the subject story within the genre of romance. The data set was then tested against the criteria associated with romantic composition. Finally, Holman's (1972) description of refrains was used to define and discuss six of thirteen identified refrains and their role in the narrative. The discussion of those analyses involved examining the results with respect to themes identified in the literature review, namely, the opponent-process theory, Maté's (2018) theory of addiction, human psychology as biography, and the roles of McAdams' (2018) actor, agent, and author. The final themes were concerned with the theories of change, natural recovery, recovery as a process, and the significance of this study. Three questions concluded this work: 1) Is Psychology's estimation of the impact and intensity of emotional pain complete and/or adequate? 2) Do those with addictive behaviours often seek unconsciousness as an end; and 3) What was the teleological nature of the subject's reversal of sought ends i.e., what was the direction of Erin's move from reluctant to embraced recovery?

Keywords: Addiction, recovery, agency, Narrative Analysis, Erin Khar

**A Narrative Analysis of Agential Movement from Addiction to Recovery
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Erin Khar (born 20 October 1973) began abusing stolen prescription drugs at age eight and heroin at age 13. Those behaviours continued for 21 years. Erin has been clean with progressively improved functioning since 2003.

It is because Erin crossed the bridge from addiction to recovery that her memoir was selected as the data set for this qualitative study. This study is exploratory and investigative rather than hypothesis-driven; that is, I want to know what about Erin's particular experience led her to seek and achieve the existential states of both addiction and recovery. I also want to know if the essential attributes of that bridge can be understood and refashioned for others in the addictive community.

The intent of such analytic observation is to increase the knowledge of what it is like, on the streets, in the hospitals, and in church basements, to make the psychosocial quantum leap from addiction to recovery. By understanding that transition, at a granular level, our conceptualization and treatment (social and therapeutic) of the condition of addiction may change.

To contextualize the *scope* of Substance Use Disorder (SUD) in Canada, "...21.6% of Canadians (about 6 million people) met the criteria for substance use disorder" (Pearson, Janz, & Ali, 2012). That statistic means just over one in five Canadians suffered from a SUD in their lifetime as of 2012, *pre*-COVID-19 pandemic.

To contextualize the effects of a SUD is to enter a world of suffering, misunderstandings, poor communication, and enormous individual, family, and social frustration, all resulting in dysfunctionality across affected families. Those family members then go forward manifesting

either addictive, enabling, or co-dependent tendencies, often for generations. Where a spouse has a SUD, her mate is left feeling responsible, helpless, and alone with spousal shame. That constellation of experiences is at least as acute for the parents of a child suffering from addictive behaviours, or vice versa (Meyers and Wolfe, 2004, pp. xiii-xvi).

Literature Review

Explanations of Addiction

SUD was recognized and redefined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM V) in May 2013. Although specific types of drugs were identified, the DSM V left the SUD category open to unhealthy uses of yet unlisted drugs and/or behaviours (Hartney, 2020). The salient neurochemical attribute of a SUD is the activation of the reward circuit in the brain, colloquially known as “the high.”

Although it is often thought that the addictive cycle begins with users chasing the high, it works in the opposite fashion. An accepted neurological interpretation is that a user returns to using, not to chase the high, but to lessen the low which is neurochemically lower than the datum level prior to using (Domjan 2015, p. 54). This is the opponent-process theory. The difficulty with this theory is that, if left to play out as predicted, there is only one trajectory for those suffering from addictive behaviours: increased dosage resulting in death. As many people suffering from addictive behaviours do not end up dead, but in recovery, the opponent-process theory fails to account for acts of human agency fostering self-extrication from addiction.

An alternate interpretation is Maté’s (2018) tripartite understanding of addiction requiring “...a susceptible organism; a drug with addictive potential; and stress” (p. 139). Maté emphasized that drugs do not make people into addicts; people with a lack of meaning in their lives, troubled childhoods, emotional isolation, and powerlessness are the previously mentioned

“susceptible organisms.” Maté (2018, p. 134) cited Dodes (2002) who defined addiction as “...a human problem that resides in people, not in the drug or in the drug’s capacity to produce physical effects.”

Maté’s (2018) definition of addiction contains four parts including preoccupation with the addictive behaviour; weakened control over the drug of choice (DoC); continued usage and/or lapses and relapses despite obvious harms; and, what the 12-step culture describes as “restless, irritable, and discontent” emotional status. One of Maté’s premises is that all addictive behaviours have biological dimensions.

Ontology of Addiction

Brinkmann (2020) wrote meaningfully about biological dimensions in psychology. Specifically, Brinkmann returned the centre of a human being to its ancient Greek roots by (re-) establishing the Aristotelian sense of a non-dualistic, embodied soul (*De Anima*, II.1). This parallels Maté’s emphasis on biological dimensions. But Brinkmann took the Greek root, *bios*, a step further insisting that the mind-body duality in psychology is a false dichotomy. Brinkmann’s insistence (contra William James, that psychology is the science of *mental* life) is that psychology, full, embodied human psychology, is the study of a life i.e., a *biography*.

That insistence, on the primacy of biography, dovetails with the work of the personality psychologist, Dan McAdams. McAdams (2018) posited that human beings are best understood inhabiting three overlapping, intersecting, and evolving roles: the actor, the agent, and the author, the latter-most being the autobiographer. McAdams holds that human beings are best understood as agential creatures, a position supported by Brinkmann and Maté. What, then, is the agential experience of a human being staring down life-altering changes; changes so fundamental that

they circumvent near-term death? Through critical observation of the addictive career of Erin Khar, this narrative analysis will examine precisely that research question.

Explanations of Change

Prochaska, DiClemente, and Norcross (1992) proposed a stage-based change theory known as the Cycle of Change (CoC). That well-accepted theory consists of a non-linear sequence of self-understandings. Those understandings pertain to one's agency with respect to a desire to change one's life, typically away from criminal or addictive behaviours. (Those stages are listed in *Table 1*, below.) The CoC is known to have been conceptualized as an adjunct to Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). The CoC predicts that a person with addictive behaviours, who successfully abandons the addictive cycle, will travel back and forth through six stages of change. While the CoC is accepted and useful, qualitative research leaves possible patterns open to observation.

With the stages of the CoC visible, immediately below, Prochaska *et al* explained that those entering the change cycle could move through the stages with lapses (temporary setbacks), relapses (returns to the addictive lifestyle) and movements backward and forward. Stated more plainly, the CoC fully anticipates lapses and relapses. The implicit assumption is that learning involves "two steps forward, one step back" and that self-affirming persistence will eventually pull one through.

Arising from an interest in ecological systems, C. S. Holling's Adaptive Cycle (AC), (2002 as cited in MacGill, 2011) looks at change in a less behavioural and arguably more organic fashion per *Table 1*, below.

Table 1 A Comparison of the Cycle of Change and the Adaptive Cycle (MacGill, 2011).

Cycle of Change	Adaptive Cycle
Pre-contemplation	Re-organization
Contemplation	
Determination	
Action	Exploitation
Maintenance	Exploitation-conservation
Relapse	Release
Termination	Quantum leap to new cycle

In this cycle, motion is unidirectional but recurrent. The first stage, *exploitation*, is anticipated to arise from a prior *release and reorganization phase*, not unlike entropy, where the previously organized elements of a system devolve into chaos. The example of a forest fire was provided with new growth sprouting from wind-driven seeds. While the system thrives through this exploitation phase, a natural limiting factor will arise such as, in the case of the new-growth forest, too little soil sustenance for that density of tree roots. At this point, new growth stops, and the system enters a *conservation phase* where self-maintenance is the norm. MacGill (2011) expresses the idea that, because the trees are so tightly integrated within the same contextual system, the system is vulnerable to disturbances. Stated in terms of addiction, a young person moving through adolescence is a possible analogue. Becoming tightly enmeshed in a culture of addictive behaviours means giving up connections with school, work, sports, family, and non-using friends i.e., the connectedness of one community becomes the focus at the expense of alternate cultural growth.

Problems begin when “...old strategies are not working as they have in the past” (MacGill, 2011, p. 528). MacGill discusses this phase in terms of overcompensation for inflexibility. That overcompensation may allow the system to return to a temporarily functioning

level but eventually destabilization of the system occurs leading to failure. The parallel might be hospitalization, prison, or family abandonment within the context of addictive behaviours.

In a fortunate addiction scenario, this crash will propel a person into rehabilitation, sobriety, and recovery. The AC describes this as *release and reorganization* i.e., the person with addictive issues is released from his too-tightly connected cycle of dealer, money, use, post-use-blues and back to dealer...and finds a new form of organization around meetings, medical staff, sponsors, health agencies etc. It is noted, within the AC, that the longer and more persistent the conservation phase i.e., multiple instances of rehabilitation, meetings, followed by sustained relapse, the more valid the requirement of a substantial quanta of energy to release the addictive personality from her own addictive cycle. While neither the CoC nor the AC perfectly describes any one person's addictive/recovery cycle, both provide useful markers and guidelines of change.

Explanations of Recovery

But what of those addictive narratives where no recovery groups are involved and a seemingly spontaneous return to a healthy, productive lifestyle occurs even after intense addictive experience? Granfield and Cloud (1996) describe *natural recovery*, a process in which people (n = 46) with addictive behaviours ceased using their DoC with neither rehabilitation nor recovery-group attendance. The mean time of sobriety/recovery for this group was 5.5 years with the range in ages varying between 25 and 60 (mean = 39). From the outset, Granfield and Cloud establish that the participants in their study come from established middle-class backgrounds so that the "typical" addiction stereotype of the drug user as "other" is negated i.e., this population consists of "insiders," people who are part of their own local and larger networks.

Granfield and Cloud (1996, p. 46) cite Sobell *et al.* (1993) stating that "...82% of alcoholics [in Canada] who terminated their addiction reported using natural recovery." The referenced sample is known to be comprised of users of heroin, other opiates, cocaine, and alcohol. As Granfield and Cloud (1996) point out, the disease model of addiction is called into question by the statistic above. If not obtaining treatment, in a rehabilitation or medical context, is a sign of denial of the disease, how does the disease model account for the more than four of five alcohol dependent people who used natural recovery to exit the addictive cycle?

Granfield and Cloud (1996) cite the characteristics of natural recovery. Those characteristics begin with self-extrication from a user's drug-use context and contacts, increased association with non-using family and friend networks, and establishing new daily routines (usually based on work). Of course, per Maté (2018), above, the difference with this prosperous middle-class population is that they had education, training, and solid familial-social relationships to return to and rely upon. If Maté's notion of social disconnection (as the root of addiction) is valid, Granfield and Cloud's (1996) results reinforce his argument that it is not the physical component of the addiction that hooks users, it is the social isolation that takes people down. Waldorf *et al* (1991) in Granfield and Cloud (p. 54) reported that those with "a stake in conventional life" were much more likely to walk away from addiction than others experiencing helplessness.

Granfield and Cloud (1996) also argue that medicalization of addiction, reinforced by the prevalence of 12-step culture, relieves the addicted soul of personal responsibility for her actions (or inactions). Further, the addict-for-life concept that is also part of the 12-step culture has lifetime implications for identity formation and possibly one's sense of agency. Of the sample

questioned by Granfield and Cloud (1996), nearly 67% thought of themselves, not as recovered addicts, or people in recovery but, in “some other way.”

“I’m a father, a husband and a worker. This is how I see myself today. Being a drug addict was someone I was in the past. I’m over that and I don’t think about it anymore” (p. 50).

Like many people in recovery meetings, Granfield and Cloud’s (1996) sample vociferously rejected a negation of their own agency.

“I read a lot of their [12-step] literature and the very first thing they say is that you’re powerless. I think that’s bullshit. I believe that people have power inside themselves to make what they want happen. I think I have choices and can do anything I set my mind to” (pp. 52-53).

An interesting observation made by Granfield and Cloud (1996) is that those who experienced natural recovery had kept their social networks intact, even during periods of heavy addictive use. Given Maté’s emphasis on disconnection, it may be significant that Granfield and Cloud (1996) speculate that the popularity of self-help groups results from “...the fragmentation of communities within postmodern society...” (p. 54). The fragmentation/disconnection argument implies that the social connections, maintained by the natural recoverees, were critical for their re-integration into work, family, and society presumably in a relatively seamless way given their desire to dissociate from their using identities. And indeed, the report itemizes new social groups that this population melded with while leaving addiction behind. What this study does not discuss what is meant by “recovery.”

Sobriety Versus Recovery

That issue is front and centre in Shinebourne and Smith (2011) in which the authors discuss the experience of long-term recovery. A key distinction made in that study is the difference between sobriety and recovery—two terms often mistakenly read as synonymous. Citing Laudet (2007), Shinebourne and Smith (2011) note that participants within recovery identify that stage as characterized by “...a new life, well-being, a process of working on oneself, self-improvement, [and] learning to live drug free” (p. 283). I will suggest that the central feature of recovery is working on oneself in such a way as to understand why one behaved addictively to begin with. Without such knowledge, the 12-step culture describes a day-to-day life of hanging onto one’s sobriety as “white-knuckling.” That description is meant to convey a grip so tight that no blood remains in one’s hands. Interestingly, the loosening of that deathly grip is an apt metaphor for easing into a new self-conception in which maladaptive social stimuli and behaviours have the sting removed via new understandings.

In support of the arguments advanced by Maté (2018), and Granfield and Cloud (1996), Shinebourne and Smith (2011) state that their three participants described “...connecting with others...” (p. 289) as the key component of their recoveries. This is supported by a recently published study defining recovery as “...an ongoing dynamic process of behaviour change characterized by relatively stable improvements in biopsychosocial function and purpose in life” (Witkiewitz, Montes, Schwebel, and Tucker, 2020). That definition (inadvertently) reasserts Maté’s (2018) Brinkmann’s (2020), and McAdams’ (2018) ties between agency and biographically viewed lives as Witkiewitz *et al* (2020) explicitly maintain that, “...recovery is a process that is dynamic and focuses on improvement of health and wellness” (p. 9).

Method and Theoretical Approach

Narrative Analysis

This study is a narrative analysis (NA) of a memoir. That memoir, *Strung Out* (Khar, 2020), details Erin Khar's life from age 13 to 39 with occasional backward glances extending to the age of four years.

Braun and Clarke (2014) state that NAs view individual people as the units of analysis. The researcher "...looks within the person's account to find meanings" (p.333). While the data sets hold overarching themes, the suitability of NA to memoirs resides in the self-constructed biographies of which they are comprised. Per Brinkmann (2020) and McAdams (2018), the agential journey from addiction to recovery is one that simultaneously empowers and defines the identity of the subject. People tell stories about the important events in their lives. There are few story types more powerful or cherished than redemptive tales and these are stock-in-trade within recovery communities. As such, NA is one of the best suited methods of qualitatively analyzing such data.

There are two questions that arise from the references to NA. First, why is this study qualitative and not quantitative? The short answer, is because this study is concerned with identifying critical turning points within the life of the person (bios) experiencing addiction, should such points be revealed. If so, those turning points may help others fighting addiction as well as aid the recovery community in understanding successful transitions from addiction to recovery.

That answer anticipates the second question, which is, "Why do this study at all?" or the "So what?" question. As the literature review demonstrated, there is *general* theoretical data on the nature of recovery with some qualitative focus on individual experience but the salient

premises, that undergird the importance of this study, are the qualitative focus on the *specific experience and meaning* of recovery. As well as contributing to the general literature on recovery, this study will contribute to literature concerning what it is like to live through addiction and recovery. Without this specificity, how does one answer the question posed by Silver (2013, p. 447), “To what extent and in what ways did the protagonists’ actions challenge the social relations within which they took place?”

Qualitative research assumes an interpretive component. To make that component transparent, a researcher’s position within the context of the study ought be declared. I grew up with addiction in my family. Although unnamed, my siblings and I had identified it in our teenaged years. Some thirty years later, I became aware of issues classically identified as arising from that background.

To address those issues, I began attending open Narcotics Anonymous (N-Anon) and Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings which soon led me to my more natural home, Al-Anon meetings (for the families of those with addictive issues). While these proved helpful, supportive, and welcoming, the dogmatic rigidity of the literature was troubling. After perhaps ten years of 12-step acculturation I learned of SMART (Self-Management And Recovery Training) Recovery which is science based and advertises itself as changing alongside changes in science. Those meetings are also weekly group meetings, but with science-based tools and trained facilitators.

By 2017, I was trained and facilitating a weekly SMART Recovery meeting for addictive behaviours and by 2018 another for family and friends of those with addictive behaviours. With this background, I have an ear for recovery stories that is both an asset and a liability. While I lean toward philosophical realism, my awareness of Heisenberg’s dictum, that the observed is

affected by the observer (and vice-versa), means that I stray into the neighbouring yard of critical realism. That school of thought maintains that "...no two qualitative researchers will analyze a set of data in the same way" (Elliott and Timulak, 2021, p. 13). Those factors apply to me and my view of Erin Khar's narrative as much as to any other qualitative researcher.

Datasets and Inclusion Criteria

The data set used in this study was selected at a late date in the process. The initial intent was to interview between two and eight individuals who had journeyed from addiction to recovery and analyze those transcripts. For reasons beyond my control, this proved impossible within the time allotted for this study.

The question then became, one data set or many and, if the latter, how many? Given the qualitative nature of the research question, a single deep-diving study was determined to be more in keeping with the meaning and experience criteria of narrative analysis.

The final question was then which memoir to select. That decision was based on my experience with the voice of the narrator and her time in recovery. As I have been involved involuntarily with the addictive community since birth and voluntarily for the last fifteen years, I have a sense of the language, terms, and tone common to those in recovery who tell their stories. Erin Khar's voice met those criteria as well the criterion regarding time in recovery.

Research Question

The primary research question is *What was the agential experience of moving from addiction to recovery?*

Results

Table 2, below, provides a charted outline of Erin's narrative. While organized by chapters, Erin's age, and the page count of each chapter, the highlighting facilitates observations about the construction of the narrative.

Macroscopic Observations

Table 2

Outline of Erin's story by Chapter, Year, Page Count and Age

Chapter	Year	Pages	Count	Age	Events	Place
1	1986	19-27	9	12-13	Gives up virginity using heroin for first time	L.A.
2	1987	28-35	8	14	Working at stable	L.A.
3	1987	36-48	13	14	Maternal G'ma dies at Xmas, meets Sam, her age, who dies July 1988	L.A.
4	1988	49-57	9	15	Ellen @ barn & new school; kicks Ted	L.A.
5	1989	58-68	11	16	Her & parents in therapy; disconnected time w/ dad; new SUV; Ian/no Ian	L.A.
6	1991 - 1993	69-80	12	18-20	Own apt, living w/ Mike-Jim meth dealer; 18 dating 26-yr-old Will	L.A.
7	1993	81-88	8	20	Keith; Ian died, alcoholism	L.A.
8	1995	89-98	10	22	Chris in Paris; Lila San Fr; Vincent Paris	Paris
9	1996	99-109	11	23	Paris, accepts marriage proposal, gets high after LAX	L.A., Paris, Auvergne
10	1997	110-116	7	23	Bergdorf Goodman, The Palm Court, Plaza Hotel, using in washrooms	NYC
11	1997	117-132	16	23	Detox ward w/ Vincent, mom, dad; rehab #1	L.A.
12	1997	133-141	9	23	Meets Pete at 12-step mtg; Nate at another	L.A.
13	1998	142-148	7	24	Nearly fatal OD	L.A.
14	2000	149-157	9	26	Lapsing, kicking, hiding; meets CeCe, Jack	L.A., Providence RI
15	2000	158-174	17	26	Pregnant by Jack; aborts fetus; using heavily. "Corpse baby" begins	L.A.
16	2000	175-183	9	27	Whitey, Jack, Thanksgiving with dad & Stacy	Providence , RI

17	2001	184-189	6	27	Christmas in Providence: Christopher, the 12-yr-old dealer	Providence RI, L.A.
18	2001	190-200	11	27	Recalls maternal G'pa's death; fixes in Burger King	L.A.
19	2001	201-214	14	27	Depression increasing; roof edge w/ Bob; calls Pete for drug \$; I want rehab	L.A.
20	2001	215-224	10	27	Getting clean	Pasadena, CA
21	2001	225-238	14	29	Michael at art opening; Jack in Chicago; lapse; Pete kicks	Chicago, L.A.
22	2002	239-248	10	29	Michael on again, off again; pregnant; they marry despite contrary emotions	L.A.
23	2003	249-256	8	29	Diana & Erin do med detox; Erin learns Michael married her for \$;	L.A., Providence RI, CT
24	2003	257-265	9	29	Erin & Michael's son, Atticus born	L.A.
25	2003 - 2005	266-276	11	29-31	New apt, Bea & Dale +3 kids; fights w/ Michael; yoga as spiritual start; divorce	L.A.
26	2005 - 2008	277-283	7	31-34	Ryan-1 st no romance male friend; no marriage Ralph; Depression, anxiety; writing starts	L.A., NYC
27	2009 - 2016	284-296	13	35-41	Writing classes, blog, degree; therapy + meds; marriage, Judaism; relating	L.A., NYC

Erin's narrative reaches back into her life at age 4 and ends in 2016 with thirteen years of clean living behind her. As such, it is predictable that the memoir would fade quickly from the period following 2003, when Erin stopped abusing drugs. *Strung Out* (Khar, 2020) devotes only 31 of its 278 pages of the addictive saga, to that denouement. Somewhat expectedly, as Erin began writing in 2016, the first two decades of her life occupy only 56 pages. Those 56 pages represent 20% of the 278 pages of narrative. In contrast, 36% of the memoir described Erin's life at ages 27 and 29.

This, too, is understandable because Erin had to reach back in time and that time was the most distant from the climax of the narrative. That climax was the successful delivery of her son, Atticus, who arrived simultaneously with Erin's insight into a new way of living.

Her 28th year (aged 27) was a harrowing time as she had aborted her first pregnancy. That event acted as a poltergeist through her last years of addiction. Her 30th year (aged 29) was the year she ceased abusing drugs and gave birth to her son whose arrival she credits with saving her life.

When viewed biographically, these decisions of narrative apportioning make sense, but when considered from the point of view of a full and evenly distributed description of a human life, one might expect a more egalitarian relationship of pages to years lived. Such a page allocation also speaks to the creation of dramatic tension, a requirement of successful commercial writing being to pull readers through to the end.

Such observations are the tertiary reasons the narrative was charted in Table 2, above. The secondary reason was to provide readers of this study with a quick overview, while the primary reason was to revisit the data set with an eye to understanding the prevalence and weight of some of the themes and refrains that constitute Erin's story.

The Professional Nature of the Narrative

Before beginning the recollection or analysis of Erin Khar's narrative, some cautions should be set out. First, this narrative involves Erin's life from the time she was four years old until the time she reached her early forties. As such, the literal truth of the narrative is reliant on the accuracy of Erin's memory. Less literally, there can be a different sort of truth, a more refracted truth, in Erin's recollection and reflections. That refracted truth can also possess significant validity.

The second caveat is that *Strung Out* (Khar, 2020) is a professional commercial venture. The book is a well-publicized memoir from an individual who now has a public persona as an advice columnist gaining a living from writing, public speaking, and the advertising that ensues.

As such, *Strung Out* (Khar, 2020) had an acknowledged team of editors, publishers, etc. bringing their skills to crafting and packaging this book. *Strung Out* is not a found journal or diary.

With that acknowledged, it is equally true that any twelve-stepper (a person in Narcotics Anonymous or AA with a few years of sobriety) has told her story to various audiences providing the opportunity for feedback i.e., everyone who tells stories learns to tell them more effectively.

So, while Erin's account is professionally edited, the human touch and the imperfection of the eyewitness prevails in most story-telling populations. Erin addressed this issue stating, "I have taken great care to present the truth as I remember it" (Khar, 2020, Author's Note).

Labov's Narrative Categories

In 1972, Labov wrote *The transformation of experience in narrative syntax* (as cited in Murray, 2003). In that article he outlined six categories of narrative analysis. Those six categories constitute the first set of filters through which Erin's narrative (Khar, 2020) shall be passed for understanding. In order, they are abstract, orientation, complicating action, resolution, evaluation, and coda.

Abstract

Strung Out (Khar, 2020) is about a privileged white woman, Erin Khar, and her journey through, mental illness, addiction, traumatic sexual abuse, self-harm, and social, romantic, and familial dysfunction. Erin opened her narrative in November of 1986 when she was aged 13 and just beginning to use heroin. The combination of her tender age and the seriousness of heroin functioned to focus the reader's attention quickly. Erin's account is a narrator's perspective on close relationships that came and went as the story unfolded. *Strung Out* ends in 2016 at which time Erin was already writing professionally having been clean (free of drug abusing behaviours)

since early 2003. Although Erin had been clean for six months when she delivered her first child, she proclaimed the experience of holding and making eye contact with her son, Atticus, epiphanic. Erin understood, at that point, that her old life of dysfunctionality was behind her. And from both her narrative, and online accounts at the time of this writing, she was right.

Orientation

Erin's story is not easy reading because she was in serious psychological pain and took serious steps to erase that pain.

I never got into pot or alcohol. I'd needed something to take me further way. I took Valium and Vicodin, I dropped acid and took X and mushrooms, I smoked crack, shot the animal tranquilizer ketamine, and snorted the occasional line of crystal meth, but I always came back to heroin. I wasn't fucking around; I craved unconsciousness... (Khar, 2020, p. 16)

The final phrase, "I craved unconsciousness" is the primary theme of Erin's narrative. While the story unfolds mostly in the city of Los Angeles and sometimes in Paris and New York, from 1986 to 2016, the physical geography is insignificant when weighed against Erin's psychological geography.

Erin's psychological geography appeared to be dependent mostly on her perception of her relationships, the primary relationship being with herself. In the following opening passages, Erin described her relationships with her mother, with a colleague at the stables (which employed Erin as summer/part-time help), and with a horse at that stable.

Whatever she [Erin's mother] said, I'd agree and comment back politely. What I didn't tell her was it was the most confusing summer of my life. I didn't tell her that I was hiding more and more parts of myself. I was hiding a boyfriend and drugs and cuts on

my arms and secrets I carried from long ago. I didn't tell her that every day I woke up and went to the barn and lost myself in the scent of horse sweat and alfalfa and leather and dirt and wood. And those horses and grounding smells made me feel like maybe I wouldn't disappear...I was thirteen and Jolene was thirty-three, but we connected because we were broken. [Jolene was the daughter of the owners of the stable.] ...I fed leftovers to Lisette, a Lipizzan mare I'd been assigned to ride. I hated riding her. She was still a little wild and continually tried to buck me off. We had an antagonistic relationship but I understood her. She made sense. She wasn't a labyrinth disguised as a straight line. (Khar, 2020, p. 30-31)

Erin is withholding her entire emotional life from her mother. The last expression in that passage, "...a labyrinth disguised as a straight line..." is apt as her mother was trying to convey and live normalcy while dealing with an assertive set of her own demons (Cf. p9. 19-20, below). While Erin couldn't communicate honestly with her mother, she experienced emotional openness with the Lipizzan mare, Lisette, and the broken young woman, Jolene. By Erin's reckoning, Lisette and Jolene were comprehensible straight lines while her mother was a disguised labyrinth. Implicitly, Erin is telling the reader that she prefers direct or straight-ahead communication, and she was finding such communicative relationships difficult to find (or co-create).

It is also noteworthy that the then thirteen-year-old narrator describes "secrets that I carried from long ago" (Khar, 2020, p. 31). From an adult's perspective, thirteen years of age does not allow for a long ago. Readers might wonder whether this was an offhand expression that the forty-something-year-old Erin wrote, or was this editorially calculated to deepen the

experience of a thirteen-year-old person. In either case, the effect of that phrase is to patinate the thirteen-year-old psyche with echoes of a troubled, difficult past.

However, the revelation of that particular trouble also serves, from page 31 onward, as a narrative device. That device, an echo of as-yet unrevealed harm, was probably intended to increase a reader's interest, to create a mystery so worth solving that the reader would continue to engage with Erin's story.

Erin felt she was failing if she did not meet parental expectations, even if those expectations concerned adult-to-adult relationships.

[My mother had] been through a rough patch with her boyfriend. And by going through, I mean falling apart at the joints, unable to accept the inevitable demise of their relationship. The guy, a total prick, told her he didn't know if he could be with someone who already had a child. (Khar, 2020, p. 22)

Obviously, Erin was made aware of this stressor. That passage describes life in 1986, when Erin was still 13. That same passage introduces three problems; Erin felt unable to communicate with her mother for her own internal reasons and, with the advent of her mother's boyfriend, Erin felt explicitly unwelcome in her own geographic and family home. Further, Erin, from that point forward, openly entertained the notion that she was the causal agent in her mother's unsuccessful romantic relationships. Another passage, from the same page, outlines the effects of those three issues.

That night, during my birthday dinner, my mom didn't eat, and I worked hard to fill the silence with insubstantial chatter. It was what I did best. With each passing day that her asshole boyfriend avoided her, I watched as my mother shrank in literal and physical stature. Watching her cede parts of herself, I felt a strong desire to harm myself. I had

struggled with the urge to kill myself—to cut myself out of my own skin—for many years. I remember at four and five and six, thinking I could just jump out the window; I could just get a knife and cut myself away. (Khar, 2020, p. 22)

In that 108-word passage, Erin referred to herself 16 times. This is compositionally interesting as it indicates that, even in her forties, having been in recovery for at least 13 years, the adult author, Erin, continued to feel the need of recompensative self-assertion. It is also possible that this was editorially calculated but, it has the sound of a genuine teenaged voice.

Her adolescent disappointment was exacerbated as Erin suffered from depression since childhood (Khar, 2020, p. 15). Even when prescribed helpful medication, Erin felt inferior and less-than because she needed pharmaceutical assistance (Khar, 2020, p. 239). Given these factors, the orientation of this story is really one of interiority; it is Erin versus Erin. But the oppositional Erin raised the stakes throughout the narrative through casual sex, double-and triple simultaneous romantic relationships, self-harm, increasingly toxic drug use, and overspending, all the while singing a soliloquy of incessantly acidic negative self-talk. “Underneath the anger I had toward my mom for not protecting me was the fear that it *was* my fault—that my ugliness, my brokenness, ruined everything around me, even my mother’s relationship” (Khar, 2020, p. 38).

Complicating Action

Labov’s (1972) model of natural narrative (as cited in Simpson, 2005) describes the complicating action category as the “what happened?” question. This seems incomplete for what the central complicating action does, is plant a hook and line into a reader with sufficient conviction and resilience to pull her through the entire work.

In this narrative, the complicating action is Erin versus Erin. The first Erin, the narrative heroine, wants to shine as a good kid, a successful student, and a welcome part of her social world.

I pushed myself forward, with straight As and horseback riding and cheerleading and volleyball, and filled my days with lots of friends and lots of chatter. *If I just shine bright enough, no one will notice anything.* But as the week following my thirteenth birthday wore on, I felt parts of me crumple and stay crumpled, like a collapsing star—dead, unable to reignite. And I did want to shine. I wanted to be told I was smart and special and good. I wanted proof—external, tangible proof—that I wasn’t broken, that I was deserving of love. My spirit was at war with the ways I was coping. I wanted to be seen as desperately as I needed to hide. (Khar, 2020, p. 24 Italics original.)

Three statements make the point: “And I did want to shine...My spirit was at war with the ways I was coping...[and] I wanted to be seen...” The ways Erin was coping are the subject of this narrative. Those coping behaviours constitute the second Erin. In an oversimplified way the Erin wanting to shine and perform is the protagonist while the antagonist is the young woman who coped with drugs, self-harm, negative self-talk, promiscuous sex, and all-round dysfunctionality.

But, Erin versus Erin might not have been enough of a complicating action. Left to herself, Erin versus Erin could have imploded into an impossibly negative energy that would fail to keep readers involved. This was not the case with Erin’s story nor was it the case with her life. The complicating action was positivity and fleeting moments of hope.

Two of these hopeful relationships are planted early in the narrative sequence (pages 33 and 52 of 296) and involve Erin’s maternal grandmother and a friend’s parents.

The one person who anchored me to who I was before the drugs was my grandma—my mom’s mom. Since my parents had separated years before, I’d regularly gone to Grandma’s apartment after school to do my homework, eat dinner, and wait for my mom to pick me up. Grandma was everything my mom was not. She was fat and had bold red hair that she had done at the ‘beauty parlor.’ I felt that my mom was embarrassed by her, of the way she did or didn’t take care of herself. But to me she was magic. She was love. (Khar, 2020, p. 33)

Erin’s physical description of her grandmother is intriguing. All the unfashionable attributes of the grandmother (fat, bold red hair, beauty parlor) are the attributes that endeared her to Erin. This reflects Erin’s own self-image, made visible throughout her story through behaviour and self-talk as less-than, undesirable, and a social misfit. But simultaneously the warmth and touching conclusion of that passage provide the reader with necessary hope that Erin still has a chance. It is significant that small bits of adult approval can make such a disproportionate difference in a young person’s life.

I loved her [friend, Ellen’s] parents...They always made me feel welcome in their house. Ellen’s dad took us to rent movies and get frozen yogurt...As the remainder of summer ticked forward, my world revolved around horses, and Ellen and I became inseparable. I spent all my time at her house or the barn and was genuinely excited for the new school year, a fresh start with my new best friend. But something else was happening—I was starting to feel things again. The thick protective coating that heroin had provided was gone. And I was left with all the difficult feelings I had avoided—grief over the loss of Grandma and Sam, unresolved anger toward my parents, and scariest of all, that nagging unnamed fear that lived in the pit of my stomach. It came from foggy memories and

summoned a strong sense of shame from all the sexual parts of my body. (Khar, 2020, p. 52)

This is an astonishingly transparent passage. If addiction involves gaining the strength to begin seeing the world as it is and not as you wish it were, the melting of the thick coating is accomplished in two ways. First, the heroin was simply absent; Erin didn't use it in this period. But more significantly, Erin is feeling some love, some fitting-in, and some connection. That positivity is allowing her the strength to look at the foggy memories and locations in her body with which those memories are associated. Simultaneously, the reader gains hope that the I-wanted-to-shine Erin has a chance against the I-craved-unconsciousness Erin. This is the complicating action that pulls the reader through Erin's story.

Resolution

Under "resolution," in Labov's (1972, as cited in Simpson, 2005) categories, is the claim that the narrative function of the resolution is the presentation of the definitive end scene of the story. In Erin's case, the climax and definitive end occurred with the birth of her son, Atticus. To reach that point, Erin moved through two rehabilitation centres, lived through at least two detoxifications, aborted a fetus, had dozens of often simultaneous dysfunctional relationships, used virtually every drug on the street all seasoned with an unrelenting dose of acidic self-hatred lashed on through self-talk.

'You have a healthy baby boy,' Naomi said, and she placed him on my chest. We looked into each other's eyes, Atticus and I. *Oh, it's you*, I thought. I knew him. I knew this soul in the body of a baby. I'd been waiting for him for a lifetime. / After years of feeling lost at sea, everything came together and made sense in that very moment. His birth was a miracle, a turning point. A switch flipped. *I love him more than I hate myself. I love*

him more than I hate myself. [Sic.] / I knew I would never use drugs again, and I didn't. This sounds overly simple. Maybe it is. Maybe I got lucky. Maybe I won the lottery. There would be work to come—spiritual, emotional, mental, cognitive work to do—but things would never be the same again. He saved my life. (Khar, 2020, p. 265) [Forward slashes indicate new paragraphs.]

For the reader, Erin's definitive statement is "...and I didn't" [use drugs again]. This finally allows the reader to exhale. This speaks to the veracity of Erin's narrative. Simply by having the book in his hand, the reader knows the story must have ended well as it is Erin's story, told by Erin. But her thirty-year struggle, moving through excruciating backsliding defeats, convinces the reader that victory may, indeed, not be possible.

But that exhalation is only a part of the reader's experience by this point in the story. In the first line of the passage above, the maternity nurse introduces Atticus to Erin as a "...healthy baby boy." This brings the narrative full circle for the reader is introduced to Erin not that long after she had been similarly introduced to the world as a healthy baby girl.

The repeated sentiment, "I love him more than I hate myself" is remarkably touching and freighted with baggage. If that is precisely what Erin thought at that moment, her pain-killing epidural must be accounted for as does her total exhaustion. If that statement is the recalled sense of first seeing Atticus, it is still of significant import. What strikes most poignantly is that love outweighs self-hate.

That self-hate had been building and self-reinforcing in Erin for at least the twenty-one years through which the preceding chapters are dated. Thus, her newfound love for her dependent infant son was experienced by Erin as having more I-want-to-shine existential power

than I-craved-unconsciousness power, which had dominated Erin's life until 1 August of 2003. This appears to be a moment of teleological reversal.

While a discussion of religion is not part of this analysis, that there was a spiritual dimension to Erin's recovery is now part of the narrative record. This theme will be discussed more fully below (pp. 31, 33, 44, 52).

Evaluation

Per Labov, the salient question in the "evaluation" category is "So what?" The single most important answer to that question is that a woman, with a lifetime of self-destructive addictive behaviours, got up and walked into a new life. That is the simple version. But it is also a true version of the story, the point being, recovery is possible even in the direst circumstances.

The more complex answer is that there were signs that Erin stood a chance despite almost unrelenting self-sabotage. In terms of the narrative delivery, the reader becomes aware of the construction of underlying strength just after page 200. The birth of Atticus is described on page 265. Between pages 200-265 there are six indicators that Erin was changing for the better:

1. Something had to stop me, p. 209.
2. Asking Mary to sponsor me, p. 222.
3. Writing music and journaling p. 224
4. Returning to childhood home, p. 240
5. Corpse baby dream, p. 247
6. I stayed, I didn't run, p. 252.

The passage below begins the explication of these positive indicators.

I hadn't told Jack about my visions of the corpse baby or the time spent on the ledge or the invisible gun in my invisible pocket or the growing fear that I was going crazy. I knew something had to stop me, whether it was detoxing or the ledge or the box cutter or a wall. Something had to stop me—I knew I wouldn't or couldn't stop chasing that low until something with real force did. (Khar, 2020, p. 209)

The corpse baby and the box cutter will be discussed below with respect to Holman's poetic refrains (1972, pp. 442). Of immediate concern is Erin's awareness that a) the downward vector of addiction had to be arrested and that, b) some external event or agent was required to provide sufficient arresting force. After some time in her second rehabilitation centre, a friend from the addictive community visited Erin.

Mary was beautiful, and I didn't see the same beauty in me. Pete had run into her at a twelve-step meeting and told her where I was and asked her if she could visit me, said I needed some female support. She showed up on a dark Sunday in the pouring rain.

When I saw her, I burst into tears—a flood of emotions that took me by surprise. I asked her if she would be my sponsor. She said yes. (Khar, 2020, p. 222)

Within the twelve-step culture, asking for a sponsor is an anxiety-inducing experience because Erin was asking for outside help which meant a mature acknowledgement that she could no longer shoulder her load unaided. Erin's tearful outburst is another positive sign of change. Erin and the reader are touched by the visit from an old twelve-step ally who has her life together and it is heartening that, out of the blue, Mary agreed to sponsor Erin. (Sponsorship is a type of one-to-one friendship in which the twelve steps are "worked." Working those steps exposes one's mistakes, broken promises...and allows the sponsee to make amends to those harmed.)

Sponsorship is an opportunity for two members in recovery to share their experience, strength, and hope, a twelve-step phrase that occurred numerous times in the text.

An indication that Erin was starting to emote came through her admission that she had begun writing.

And I started writing songs even though I didn't know what I was doing. The music did something for me. I started keeping a journal again and wrote song lyrics. This renewed connection to writing and expression was a gift. It was that elusive feeling one gets from creating something, from reflecting on the human experience, that brings a type of satisfaction like nothing else can. *I believed in living again. I believed that maybe I could stay off drugs. I believed that maybe I could be happy.* (Khar, 2020, p. 224, Italics added.)

The ability to reflect on human experience indicates a new perspectival distance for Erin. The final three beliefs (italicized above) speak for themselves and for Erin's growth seen from 2001 onward.

A less obvious but poignant indicator, that Erin was gaining reflective distance, was her insistence on driving by the house in which she had lived with her mother, when stealing pills from medicine cabinets and using heroin began.

I don't know why I needed to see it. Maybe because of the depression I was in, I needed to see where it had all started. Maybe I was looking for something I'd lost a long time ago. Maybe I thought I could go back to some before time, before it all went wrong.

(Khar, 2020, p. 240)

Circling back to impactful past locations may be about place. More likely, that retrospective glance might not be about the place but about who that person was in that location vis-à-vis who that person *is* at the time of looking back.

Erin gave many indications that she knew her drug-using career was entering its endgame. That introspective retrospection speaks of a desire to come to terms with who she was i.e., was Erin-in-the-car able to map her current self onto her naïve thirteen-year-old self? What did that look like for Erin? While Erin doesn't tell the reader what that mapping looked like, the desire for the mapping can be viewed as integrative rather than disintegrative. Erin can be seen as literally trying to pull selves together.

Yet the disintegrative behaviours had not ended. Erin had not intended to become pregnant the first or second time. The abortion haunted Erin relentlessly and she often saw internal images of that lost life that was once hers to grant.

I'd fallen asleep or nodded out [lost consciousness using heroin] in Pete's bed and dreamed about my corpse baby, which I hadn't done in a long while. Is it a sign? I can't have this baby. Maybe I can? Maybe I'm supposed to? I have to get clean. (Khar, 2020, p. 247)

Within the narrative strand, "Maybe I can?" is the most important change of pattern. The next most important is "Maybe I'm supposed to?" Both point to a future in which sobriety and recovery are contemplated as possible. The "supposed to" comment is intriguing for its broadening of agency to contemplate a context far beyond Erin alone. That contemplation of positive possibilities was the fifth of the six indicators that Erin was changing.

The sixth indicator is conveyed in the final line of the following passage.

I slammed my computer shut and forced myself to concentrate on breathing. I wanted a cigarette or heroin or a knife. It felt impossible to sit there stewing in the myriad of things I was feeling, but I had to. The alternative was running back to heroin. As much as I wanted to escape, I didn't want that baby to be born addicted and I'd come this far. I dug deep and found the will to stay, to sit, to not exit. (Khar, 2020, p. 252)

In Labov's third category, *complicating action*, above, the struggle at the centre of this narrative is described as the I-wanted-to-shine Erin versus the I-craved-unconsciousness Erin. Erin has begun shining with her ability "...to stay, to sit, to not exit" because the desire for unconsciousness is the desire for egress. At that point in the narrative, Erin faced that desire within herself and openly, consciously resisted the desire to disappear.

To recap, the six indicators of change are listed below.

1. Something had to stop me.
2. Asking Mary to sponsor me.
3. Writing music and journaling.
4. Returning to childhood home.
5. Corpse baby dream.
6. I stayed; I didn't run.

Labov's model describes the evaluation stage as "functioning to make the point of the story clear" (1972, as cited in Simpson, 2005, Table and Exercise). The point could not be clearer. A life with substantial entropic momentum changed. That change was manifest to the agent, Erin, at the moment her son, Atticus, entered her life (p. 265). That does not mean that Erin walked out of the maternity ward a psychosocially high functioning human being, but it

does mean Erin had a realization that her wellness henceforward would be invested in the pursuit of order and not entropy.

Coda

The final category provided by Labov was “coda.” In that category, the narrative is to signal the end while bringing the reader back to the beginning (1972, as cited in Simpson, 2005, Table and Exercise). But, musically, the coda functions as a final resolution i.e., a standard thirty-two bar song, particularly in jazz, can be played multiple times with a clear end point reached each time the thirty-second bar is played. What the coda does is lift the song, in the final sounding of the twenty-fourth or twenty-eighth bar, into another key or a cadence signaling a brief but final change (decades of author experience).

Erin’s narrative had such a coda. The story began with a prologue which opened with twelve-year-old Atticus asking Erin, “Mom, did you ever do drugs?” (Khar, 2020, p. 13). Knowing what the reader does, about Erin’s past, particularly those readers who are themselves parents, puts an extraordinary weight on *if and how* that question is addressed.

Erin’s coda returns to that discussion with Atticus by answering one of his follow-up questions, *Why were you so sad that you used heroin?*

Well, part of it is that my brain works a little differently than most people’s. I have depression and I didn’t understand that when I was a kid. [...] I want you to know that while I hope you don’t make those kinds of choices, that if you do, you can come to me. Even if I am sad or disappointed, I will never judge you, and I will always love you. I wish I had asked for help when I was a teenager. The good thing is that now I don’t feel that way. I’m not perfect. I still make mistakes. But I know how to take care of myself,

I know how to ask for help, and I take medication for my depression. (Khar, 2020, pp. 289-291)

While I am intrigued and persuaded by Robert Elliott's dictum that data never speak for themselves (Elliot and Timulak, 2021), Erin's coda will be allowed to do just that.

Genre-Based Analysis

As outlined above, the three perspectives through which Erin's narrative is viewed are linguistic (Labov, 1972, as cited in Simpson, 2005), genre-based (Frye, 1990) and literary, (Holman, 1972). The linguistic discussion has just concluded, and the genre-based discussion begins immediately below.

Northrop Frye was one of the largest of literary figures in the mid-to-late 20th-century, particularly in the English-speaking world. In his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1990) he outlined four mythopoetic forms or types of storytelling: comedy, romance, tragedy, and satire. As Erin's narrative is deeply focused on, first, the pursuit of unconsciousness and, second, the pursuit of recovery, hers is a quest-based tale, placing it squarely in the realm of the romance genre.

Frye (1990, p. 192) [outlines]...four distinguishable aspects of the quest-myth. First, the *agon* or conflict itself. Second, the *pathos* or death, often the mutual death of hero and monster. Third, the disappearance of the hero, a theme which often takes the form of *sparagmos* or tearing to pieces. Sometimes the hero's body is divided among the followers, as in Eucharist symbolism: sometimes it is distributed around the natural world...Fourth, the reappearance and recognition of the hero, where sacramental Christianity follows the metaphorical logic: those who in the fallen world have partaken of their redeemer's divided body are united with the risen body.

As discussed above, the obvious *agon* or conflict, is Erin versus her drug of choice. The less obvious, and more profound, struggle is the I-want-to-shine Erin versus the I-craved-unconsciousness Erin. Concerning Frye's second criterion, the *pathos* or death, the fit is less literal. Erin does not die but the self-named monster within her (Table 3, fifth refrain, p. 38) is slain and her need to render that monster unconscious is displaced.

Regarding Frye's third criterion, there can be little question that Erin is torn to metaphorical pieces, bodily, mentally, and spiritually to use the three categories outlined by Frankl (2014).

And when I couldn't [get drugs] I took a small razor blade and made tiny marks on the inside of my arm, cutting, mesmerized by the appearance of microscopic trails of blood coming to the surface to greet me. It wasn't heroin, but it softened the hardened shape I found myself in, trapped in all this perfunctory crap I smiled my way through every day. My life was becoming a series of compartments connected by a long string of lies and duplicities, of pretending to be all the versions of me they wanted, or I thought they wanted. (Khar, 2020, p. 32)

The passage immediately above is taken from the early part of Erin's narrative, just after she had started using heroin at age 13. The trails of blood, the heroin use, and the felt necessity of compartmentalization all speak of disintegration or, per Frye, being torn to pieces by her own need of escape.

The fourth criterion of Frye's (1990) is the least literally fitting. Erin does not die or disappear from her social or psychic milieu. However, the I-want-to-shine Erin is under almost unremitting life-threatening self-assault for most of twenty-one years. Frye acknowledges the

metaphorical nature of this transformation and, with that acknowledgment in mind, Erin's narrative fits the part of the metaphor that speaks of being, "...united with the risen body."

Unlike the *Christos*, Erin does not claim literal re-birth but, in the way she recognized her newborn son, Atticus, and in the way her doubts about her ability to stay clean were apparently expunged, there is a sort of re-birth of Erin simultaneous with the birth of Atticus. She ended her description of that moment with the most Christian of expressions, "He saved my life" (Khar, 2020, p. 265). It is probably important to note that Erin is not, and never mentioned being, a practicing Christian, but after marriage, and at Atticus's insistence, became a practicing Jew (Khar, 2020, p. 288).

Characterizing the core of romance, Frye wrote the following.

The essential element of plot in romance is adventure, which means that romance is naturally a sequential and processional form, hence we know it better from fiction than from drama. At its most naïve it is an endless form in which a central character who never develops or ages goes through one adventure after another until the author himself collapses. (Frye, 1990, p. 186)

Strung Out (Khar, 2020) is written and presented in chronological form, broken only at the beginning and end. At those two points, Erin addressed the reader from the time out of addiction, as near to present day as book publishing makes possible. Frye's (1990) characterization, above, of naïve romanticism only partially applies to Erin's narrative. There is a lack of growth in the sense of psychological developmental stages per Erikson, Rogers, *et al* but there is no lack of aging or absence of imminent collapse. In either case, the fit of Erin's narrative to Frye's (1990) typology is meaningful, shedding light on her and her story.

Frye (1990, p.187) offered a three-part description of the stages of a “complete romance” which, in addition to the *agon* and *pathos*, above, he terminated with *anagnorisis*, or the “exaltation of the hero.” The exaltation does not fit Erin.

That lack of fit is because the subject narrative was a memoir. It would be unusual, though certainly not unheard of, for the memoirist to exalt her elevation into recovery. It is also probable that Frye (1990) did not contemplate memoirs as romances; his precedents being plays, poems, and novels most of which are third-person fictional accounts where Erin’s was a first-person non-fictional remembrance of her addictive life. As further evidence of Frye’s (1990) lack of consideration of the memoir as romance is the following statement.

...in the myth proper he [the hero] is divine, in the romance proper he is human. This distinction is much sharper theologically than it is poetically, and myth and romance both belong in the general category of mythopoetic literature...Most cultures regard certain stories with more reverence than others, either because they are thought of as historically true or because they have come to bear a heavier weight of conceptual meaning. (Frye, 1990, p. 188)

This is particularly relevant to the subject narrative as a representation of a distinctly recent literary type. Erin’s story is neither myth nor poem. Where Frye’s (1990) characterization is mindful of a roughly 5,000-year-old canon, Erin’s story with its first-hand confessional nature is—typologically—a square peg in a round hole. Yet that hole appears to have sufficient diameter to accommodate this new square peg. This is made evident in Frye’s description, below.

The enemy can be an ordinary human being, but the nearer the romance is to myth, the more attributes of divinity will cling to the hero and the more the enemy will take on

demonic mythical qualities. **The central form of romance is dialectical: everything is focused on a conflict between the hero and his enemy, and all the reader's values are bound up with the hero. Hence the hero of romance is analogous to the mythical Messiah or deliverer who comes from an upper world, and his enemy is analogous to the demonic powers of a lower world.** The conflict however takes place in, or at any rate primarily concerns, our world, which is in the middle, and which is characterized by the cyclical movement of nature. (Frye, 1990, p. 187) [Bold emphasis added.]

There are few if any divine attributes clinging to Erin; she is every inch a torn-to-shreds mortal. However, Erin's tale is highly dialectical. While it is actually a conversation between a memoirist and her reader, it often reads as an internal conversation between the I-want-to-shine Erin and the I-crave-unconsciousness Erin. Frye (1990) was correct, the reader's values are bound up with Erin almost literally praying that she will find the perceived salvation of sobriety and recovery.

Erin is neither messianic nor from a higher world but there is little doubt that what ails her, street drugs with the potential to kill, can be viewed as demonic powers of a lower world. Per Frye (1990), if Erin trails no divinity, there is no higher plane and, as such, the metaphor works only partially i.e., everyday life, the reader's world characterized by cyclical nature, is one plane and the world of street drugs, dealers, hook-ups, and crime is perceived as a lower world.

But, per Erin, this may be a false dichotomy and possibly a product of myopically clean, well-washed, governing-class hands (reminiscent of Bob Dylan's *Lay, Lady, Lay*: His clothes are dirty, hut his hands are clean).

The American ethos of putting your nose to the grindstone and persevering does a great disservice to our mental and emotional health. When you can't get out of bed in the morning, when you have no self-worth left, when you've had childhood trauma, when you

suffer from any form of PTSD, the option of pulling yourself up by the bootstraps and overcoming addiction or other mental health issues is not possible. And that's not a moral failing...The only way to break through that shame is by talking about it...Shame is a gatekeeper that prevents people from seeking help. Stigma is bred from that shame. (Khar, 2020, p. 15)

These issues, too, arise in Frye's anatomization of the romantic typology in two ways. First, he wrote of the sterility of the land being the actual villain stating that, "...the quest-romance is the victory of fertility over the waste land..." and, just prior to that, "The removal of some stigma from the heroine figures prominently in romance..." (Frye, 1990, p. 193).

As these intersections of typology and instantiation demonstrate, the mapping of Erin's narrative onto Frye's (1990) typology is imperfect but nonetheless substantial and enlightening. Erin's *cri de coeur*, concerning the American ethos, directs the reader's possible judgment of addiction outward toward the conditions that foster such behaviours, habituations, and coping mechanisms. As the introduction, above, stated, over one in five Canadians will suffer from a SUD which excludes food, gambling, pornography, etc. If more than 20% of a population copes with day-to-day life escaping into addictive behaviours, perhaps that day-to-day life itself bears further scrutiny. That point concludes the outline of the intersection of the subject narrative with the quest-romance genre.

Refrain-Based Analysis

Having concluded the linguistic (Labov, 1972, as cited in Simpson, 2005) and genre-based (Frye, 1990) analyses, the third (and final) mode of analysis of Erin's story is a focused review of the refrains within the subject work.

Refrain: A group of words forming a phrase or sentence and consisting of one or more lines repeated at intervals in a poem, usually at the end of a stanza. / Refrains are of various types...Another, less regular form, is that in which the refrain line (or lines) recurs somewhat erratically throughout the stanza...Poets have made so much of the

refrain, have wrought so many variations in form and manner, as to have greatly enriched English verse. (Holman, 1972 p. 442) [Capitalization and italicization indicating other referenced terms were removed for reading ease.]

Whether or not the refrains in *Strung Out* (Khar, 2020) add to the poetic value of the narrative is an individual aesthetic decision. The purpose of the current refrain-based focus is to increase understanding of the quality of Erin’s experience, and how the language of her refrains shed light on the meaning of that experience.

Six refrains were selected from among thirteen examined. The first five refrains were selected for their *prevalence* (number of times mentioned in the memoir), and *dispersal* across the breadth of Erin’s 21 years of drug abuse (from age 8 until 29 years). The exception to the dispersal criterion for inclusion is the sixth refrain, “corpse baby.” This is included because its *intensity of impact* and density between pages 169-247 is extraordinarily powerful, haunting, and frequent. Those six refrains are listed in Table 3, below and discussed, one-by-one, afterward.

Table 3

Most Prevalent Refrains, Strung Out (Khar, 2020)

Refrain	Citations	Pages Mentioned
Cut myself out of my own skin. (“box cutters”)	9	22, 31, 32, 152, 188, 202, 209, 222, 239
...that compulsion to annihilate myself	13	22, 143, 145, 153, 179, 180, 181, 182, 186, 203, 204, 209, 240
You’re broken and ugly and crazy and stupid.	14	24, 25, 38, 39, 41, 57, 67, 83, 125, 179, 181, 194, 221, 271

Dad's money made me feel protected and provided for. (And added to my guilt.)	9	64, 70, 113, 132, 159, 176, 185, 199, 294
I'm a monster.	9	77, 79, 126, 131, 169, 189, 202, 204, 212
Corpse baby	17	169, 172, 174, 177, 178, 179, 187, 191, 192, 199, 202, 204, 205, 210, 212, 213, 247

In February of 2001, aged 27, Erin began work with a new therapist. Two of the refrains, from Table 3, above, are part of the description of their first meeting.

I didn't tell her about the leg incident or the PTSD. I didn't tell her about the heroin or the crack or how I fucked things up with Pete or the corpse baby or the invisible gun in my invisible pocket or how I fantasized about getting really high and letting myself float right off the roof of my building. (Khar, 2020, p. 191)

The "leg incident" occurred when Erin used a utility knife (also referred to as a box cutter) to gouge her leg. That incident, often referred to as the "box cutter" became a refrain. This was, arguably, another manifestation of the I-crave-unconsciousness Erin as the intent was to harm her person, and in the box cutter instance, possibly to harm her person to such an extent that she would bleed to death.

Just prior to the box cutter incident, Erin and her mother visited a psychiatrist with whom Erin had already met. At the joint meeting, with Erin's prior permission, the psychiatrist raised what he saw as a causal factor in her behaviour, Erin's PTSD resulting from a series of sexual assaults beginning at age four and ending at age twelve. Her mother questioned the truth of these

events. That verbalized breach of epistemic faith hurt Erin deeply. After being dropped off at her own apartment, Erin reported the effects of her mother's lack of confirmatory support.

I walked into my dark apartment, into the kitchen, and got a box cutter out of the utility drawer. Then, I stripped off my clothes, got into bed with the box cutter, and curled into the fetal position and cried. [...] Alone again in the room, the tears did stop, and I took that box cutter and began jabbing myself in the leg, gently at first—like a gather of raindrops trying to penetrate my skin—and then with more force until I started carving small sections of my thigh in little circles. (Khar, 2020, pp. 152-153)

As a refrain, and as an emotional tool, the box cutter continued to become a means of relieving unbearable tension at times when Erin was unable to rely on other coping mechanisms. As the page references, column three, Table 3 (above), indicate, self-cutting began years before, but the use of the box cutters escalated the danger considerably. The effect on the narrative is to create an increasingly raised threat level throughout Erin's story while providing a visceral sense of the psychic pain this human being endured.

The next refrain was "...the compulsion to annihilate myself." As the range of the page numbers (Table 3, above) on which these references occur indicates, this desire was constant in Erin's life of addiction. The choice of the word "annihilate" is interesting. Etymologically, the root of the word is *nihil* meaning *nothing* (Morris, 1975, pp. 887-888, 1530). The prefix *an* and the suffix *ate* both *activate* the nothingness of nihilism; thereby transforming a state of being into an action, a noun into a verb.

The dictionary definition of *annihilate* is "1. To destroy completely; wipe out; reduce to nonexistence" (Morris, 1975, p. 53). Examined as a phrase, *the compulsion to annihilate myself* can be reworded as *an unrelenting drive to reduce myself to nonexistence, to nothing*. Even the

dead are not nothing. They are a set of deteriorating remains, a set of documented or undocumented memories, a collection of remnant artifacts, and, often, a genetic and cultural force in present and future generations. The desire to *annihilate* is steps beyond a desire for death. The nothingness speaks of complete existential and metaphysical erasure.

This is a level of emotional emptiness that exceeds self-loathing, at least in the chosen words, as they speak to the most profound level of disconnection imaginable, per Maté *et al*, above. To be erased from existence, to be nothing, is never to have existed. It is with this impenetrable void in mind that Erin's epiphanic eye-to-eye contact with her newly born son becomes most comprehensible. Life finally triumphed nothingness. *I love him more than I hate myself. I love him more than I hate myself...He saved my life* (Khar, 2020, p. 265).

Having acknowledged the foregoing, it will come as no surprise that Erin frequently used self-talk such as this third refrain, "You're broken and ugly and crazy and stupid." That refrain occurred 14 times in the narrative varying between two descriptors and four. The brokenness is the state most readily related to Erin's desire for annihilation. The brokenness might indicate a sense of maladaptation to the culture in which it exists. If Erin was broken, she did not work with her life conditions. Of course, from a detached analytical point of view, one might then ask, perhaps the conditions were wrong and the human being too sensitive to endure such maladaptive conditions. But that sort of figure and ground reversal would be all but impossible if your self-concept, from childhood, included being less-than, other, unwelcome. Perhaps the most objective restatement of Erin's brokenness is that there was an inability for Erin to thrive within the conditions she inhabited.

The second term, "ugly," is probably more commonly used by females than males and probably more often contemplated near Hollywood, a suburb of Erin's hometown of Los

Angeles, than in places less associated with glamorous fame. By all accounts in the narrative Erin is, in fact, more frequently considered physically beautiful than the contrary. But that evaluation was irrelevant to young Erin.

Her decidedly negative self-assessment of her appearance tells the reader about Erin's internal state and about her self-talk. Per the previously cited *leitmotif* of *Strung Out* (Khar, 2020), this re-validates the I-want-to-shine Erin versus the I-craved-unconsciousness duality in Erin. In fact, the self-flagellating "ugly" speaks to Erin's disappointment in her inability to shine. However, it is vital to understand that her inability to shine was predicated on a harsh self-assessment against a set of impossible-to-reach external standards frequently disseminated by the nearby suburb of Hollywood, her parents, her friends...our culture.

The third and fourth terms in this refrain are similar enough to be analyzed together. Erin manifested fear of mental illness throughout the memoir. Calling herself "crazy" and "stupid" is self-loathing and on a subtler level a way of preconditioning herself for something she intensely feared. By throwing those accusations at herself, she may have been trying to prepare herself for the time when she would have to accept their feared reality, or she may have been lashing herself with her verbal whip; or both could be true. While it would be satisfying to defend Erin against those accusations, the point is that Erin, through her addictive career, felt the need to hurt herself by calling herself stupid and crazy.

When repeated as a sentence, "You're broken and ugly and crazy and stupid" functions as an all-rounder of a put-down. What comes to mind as a next statement in a similarly destructive vein is, "You're nothing." Which puts this third refrain in the same zone as annihilation.

“Dad’s money made me feel protected and provided for. And added to my guilt” is the fourth refrain. Simply glancing over the places Erin lived during her addictive career provides a sense of the wealth she was born into. As those who have pondered the value of inherited resources may realize, money can help *or* hinder.

Money helped Erin obtain treatment when she needed it—a luxury many, probably most, addictive careers don’t share. But access to that money also harmed Erin as she had a ready supply of drugs as desired, not to mention cars, homes, and educational opportunities in the U.S. and in Paris. But...nothing comes without costs.

One of the most poignant price-paying encounters Erin experienced was with Christopher. After Christmas, 2001, Erin and Jack (her boyfriend at that time) flew to Rhode Island to visit her father. Erin returned to the drug dealer she met at Thanksgiving. Instead, she encountered a 12-yr-old black lad, Christopher, who tells her that her previous dealer, Whitey, has been shot dead and that he, Christopher, can get her what she needs. This was Erin’s response:

I taught him that—people like me. I was part of the overriding problems that keep little black boys, like Christopher, stuck in a cycle of systemic poverty and subjugation. I have thought about Christopher many, many times over the years. I hope he got out. God, I hope he got out. (Khar, 2020 p. 185)

Erin’s perception of privileged white guilt was part of the price she paid for buying drugs from Christopher. There were other similar repeats of that refrain with respect to the children of dealers, other addiction stories with more severe circumstances, and self-loathing for her ability to waltz into expensive shops and restaurants in whichever city she found herself.

What this tells us about Erin's narrative, and about her experience of moving from addiction to recovery, is that no one gets out for free. If money, privilege, and white skin are the means of access to better goods, people, and services (a questionable premise), they are also the means of throwing yourself back into the stocks for another round of self-flagellation and easier access to your DoC should you be jonesing for a quick one-time hit.

The fifth of the five refrains that ran most of the range of the narrative, was "I'm a monster." This declaration follows seamlessly after privileged white guilt. If Erin were the privileged white woman whose behaviours enslaved other people in self-destructive roles, the monster title would, at least, be comprehensible. In fact, Erin was exhibiting a superego the size of the great outdoors.

Put in proportion, Erin was *one* of millions of people supporting the illegal trade in drugs. As such, her responsibility and self-blame should be of a similar proportion i.e., one of millions. But Erin's sense of proportion was not calculated for objective assessment of sociological factors, Erin's sense of proportion was calculated to get her nearer self-annihilation. Thinking of herself as a monster to be slain could only aid that intention.

The sixth refrain was one that did not span the breadth of Erin's narrative. In fact, it is significant that of the nine "I'm a monster" claims, five of those came after or with the arrival of the "corpse baby," an image sometimes so vividly rendered as to horrify, even in print.

The corpse baby was the name Erin assigned to the fetus she had aborted in 2000. When some part of Erin felt the need of self-hatred, the corpse baby reappeared. While the image and refrain occurred more than any other, those 17 repetitions happen in only 78 pages of text. That one mention per every five pages may be one of the reasons this refrain was the first recalled.

If Erin saw herself as the killer of her own baby—the harshest, least charitable view possible—it would have been much easier to classify herself as a monster, or as crazy, ugly...and this is the ultimate point of the refrains cited: *they were an accretive means of verbal self-destruction*. Repetition built momentum and momentum build tension, in Erin and within the narrative.

What was happening within the narrative at the point when the corpse baby refrain appeared is of tremendous importance as the entire drama reaches its climax with the successful delivery of a vital baby. That identity cannot have escaped editorial eyes as a means of building a symmetrical/asymmetrical tension both created and resolved through death and birth. That is the calculated novelistic observation that must be made in a narrative analysis. Yet, there is an alternate side to that entire story-telling craftsmanship.

These things happened to Erin Khar. Without that assumption of veracity, there is little point discussing these issues as they bear on addiction. Given that veracity, there is a Frye-like mythic character to the climatic delivery of Atticus and insight. It is so symbolically like the birth of Jesus, in its ability to save Erin's life, that it cannot be completely dismissed for having had that power. We can question whether Erin's life was really saved but most of this analysis points unidirectional fingers at Erin's decidedly downward trajectory.

A woman walked in with a sleeping baby, snug against her chest in a carrier. I shifted my weight on the hard orange plastic chair in the pharmacy and shut my eyes. But all I saw when I did was the dead baby, my dead baby. She's wearing a yellow shirt and I can't remember her name. I hadn't told Jack about my visions of the corpse baby or the time spent on the ledge or the invisible gun in my invisible pocket or the growing fear that I was going crazy. I knew something had to stop me, whether it was detoxing or the

ledge or the box cutter or a wall. Something had to stop me—I knew I wouldn't or couldn't stop chasing that low until something with real force did. (Khar, 2020 p. 209)

That something was Atticus, her newborn son. While that may be strange, uncomfortable, and unwieldy for 21st-century evidence-based eyes, it was the birth of a child that changed—*not saved*—Erin's life. Erin saved herself, Atticus was the primary catalyst. Despite the awkwardness of that observation, or the editorial construction of the narrative, there is something wonderfully life-affirming about that teleological reversal. In that moment, the I-want-to-shine Erin finally overtook the I-crave-unconsciousness Erin.

Discussion

If the literature review, above (pp. 2-9) is combed for central points, the following topics emerge:

- The opponent process theory.
- Maté's (2018) understanding of addiction.
- Brinkmann's (2020) claim that human psychology is bio/graphy.
- McAdams' (2018) intersection of actor, agent, and author.
- CC/AC stages of change.
- Natural recovery.
- Definitions of addiction and recovery.
- So what? (Has this study been worth the effort?)

Braun and Clarke (2014) suggest that the aim of a good NA is to understand the individual whose narrative is studied and that person's socio-cultural context. Comparing Erin's narrative with the theoretical issues listed above is another means of understanding and illuminating Erin, her socio-cultural context, and her journey from addiction to recovery while

reflecting on the theoretical issues identified as being inherent to that journey. For purposes of discussion, these issues will be grouped under five headings:

1. Erin's Narrative and the Opponent-Process Theory / So What?
2. Erin's Narrative and McAdams (2018) and Brinkmann (2020)
3. Erin's Narrative and Natural Recovery
4. Erin's Narrative and Theories of Change
5. Erin's Narrative with respect to Understandings of Addiction and Recovery.

Erin's Narrative and the Opponent-Process Theory / So What?

What bears discussion is the narrowness of the opponent-process theory (p. 2, above) in relation to the broadness of the factors with which Erin grappled. The opponent-process theory focuses on the neuropsychological aspect of addiction. Erin's story included sexual assault resulting in PTSD, family dysfunctionality, depression, sexual promiscuity, self-loathing, self-harm, suicidal ideation, and drug abuse. Using NA, multiple factors are considered simultaneously.

Holistic research may have to admit that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. If the whole is greater than the sum of its parts the subtraction of gender, or trauma, or self-harm...leaves Erin's story is incomplete. A full human life is infinitely complicated. This is the reason narrative analysis is worth the time and effort: at their best, these studies allow consideration of the fullest possible dynamic realm. The alternative is looking at the addiction component through one lens (e.g., the opponent-process theory), self-harm through another, depression...under which lenses the whole human being never appears.

Secondly, Erin's account particularizes addiction to a time, context, and person. The opponent-process theory generalizes addiction to characteristic populations. If Erin's account is credible, effective treatment of this complex human behaviour appears to require particularized, not generalized, means of healing.

Erin's Narrative and McAdams (2018) and Brinkmann (2020)

Such particularization of subjects paradoxically allows for a fuller, more meaningful comprehension of human lives. This point was made by both McAdams (2018) and Brinkmann (2020). Brinkmann's focus, on *bios*, as the root of the claim that whole human lives are the proper domain of psychology, is addressed in this NA. Per both McAdams and Brinkman, Erin's trajectory is discussed (herein) with respect to her inner life, her friend group, her mental health, addictive behaviours, romances etc. As importantly, McAdams' (2018) characterization of human lives as intersections of actor, agent, and author is brilliantly well served by memoir writing and NA.

While the issue of uneven narrative distribution (pages written per years lived) was raised, this issue occurs as frequently in biography and autobiography as in memoir. As such, NAs, and qualitative research in general, allows for the broadest possible survey and analysis of existing conditions which constitutes at least one response to the *So what?* question.

Erin's Narrative and Natural Recovery

In the literature review, above, the concept of natural recovery is described as a process in which people with addictive behaviours ceased using their DoC with neither rehabilitation nor recovery-group attendance. This was not the case with Erin as she attended two rehabilitation centres and was/is an avid attendee of recovery group meetings. However, one key attribute of natural recovery, is its socio-economic bias favouring those individuals who a) are from middle-

class backgrounds, and b) retain their network relationships from that background. That background and retained familial ties are part of Erin's story. As such, some of the factors that make natural recovery possible may also have contributed to Erin's recovery, though the overlap is admittedly partial.

Erin's Narrative and Theories of Change

Two theories of change were outlined in this NA. The CoC lists six possible stages of change. Of those six, Erin's story described passage through all but the first and last. Of these two, the first is by far the more interesting. Precontemplation was described by Prochaska, DiClemente, and Norcross (1992, p. 1103) as, "...the stage at which there is no intention to change behavior in the foreseeable future. Many individuals are unaware or under aware of their problems. As G.K. Chesterton once said, 'It isn't that they can't see the solution. It is that they can't see the problem.'" Neither the description from Chesterton nor from Prochaska *et al.* (1992) fits Erin's narrative. To the contrary, at no time in the narrative was Erin not aware of her problem and the heavy impact that problem was making on her life and the lives of those around her.

That interpretation depends on readings of the ambiguous term "foreseeable future." There were months described by Erin in which she used heavily to the point at which she would describe herself as "strung out." However, even during those strung-out phases, the I-want-to-shine Erin kept reasserting herself.

The evidence for that reassertion is contained in Erin's narrative. It is vital to note that while my reading of the data sees evidence of that life-affirming force within Erin, it might be more a product of thematically consistent editing and writing than actual thought processes

experienced by Erin during those times. An interview with Erin might be able to clarify this issue which is of interest as it is not commonly heard in addiction narratives.

The less interesting relationship (because it is more predictable) is that Erin's narrative didn't provide explicit evidence of her entering the final phase, termination. While the study by Prochaska *et al.* (1992) lists and diagrams that phase, it is left undefined. The accepted definition within SMART Recovery, which uses the CoC model, is that termination is characterized by consistent maintenance, transcendence of addiction into a new life, and viewing a return to addiction as "atypical, abnormal, and even weird" (SMART Recovery, 2016, pages unnumbered). While the final chapters of Erin's narrative convey 13 years of sobriety, the shadow of addiction is actively observed.

Someone once asked me, about my writing, 'Don't you want to leave all that mess behind you?' When we write the truth, when we write about our experiences, we reflect back what it means to be a human being. And that reflection creates connection. I write about what I know, what I've learned, and about the road that got me from there to here. (Khar, 2020, p. 295)

While not quite termination, there is certainly a sense of transcendence in Erin's reflection.

Erin's narrative also maps onto Holling's Adaptive Cycle (2002, as cited in MacGill, 2011, and Fath, Dean, and Katzmaier, 2015) in some revealing ways. What is most arresting about the AC is its characterization as unidirectional but recurrent. What was most unsettling about understanding Erin's journey was that her seemingly negative downward trajectory led her into positive upward recovery. As mentioned earlier, there is a directional element in play here. If the continuum of human direction is a relatively straight line, with order (wellness) at one end

and disorder (unwellness) at the other, Erin's reversal is difficult to explain. Or was that reversal, in fact, illusory i.e., was Erin always headed for recovery?

If Holling's recurrent unidirectionality is accepted, the directional continuum might be circular, helical, or a series of stacked concentric rings requiring quantum leaps to move ring-to-ring. In fact, Holling did diagram the AC, extensively, as a torqued figure-8, like a twisted ribbon with on- and off-ramps at one end (Fath, Dean, and Katzmaier, 2015). However, the purpose of this study is exploratory not determinative and, as such, these questions have been raised and noted, which is sufficient for present purposes.

Given Holling's theory of recurrence, there really is no necessary first phase. However, Holling refined and renamed four distinct stages: growth, equilibrium, collapse, and reorientation (Fath, Dean, and Katzmaier, 2015). *If*, from the outset, Erin's journey is viewed positively—that is, as leading to recovery or reorientation—the addictive journey can be seen differently. So viewed, Erin's trajectory through trauma, addiction, depression, social dysfunction, self-harm, and abortion maintained its own perverse equilibrium or, allowed Erin to maintain a shifting equilibrium that led to collapse ending in reorientation. There is support for this in the data, both early and late in Erin's journey: "My spirit was at war with the ways I was coping" and, "Something had to stop me—I knew I wouldn't or couldn't stop chasing that low until something with real force did" (Khar, 2020, pp. 224 and 209, respectively).

That spiritual war did end via the momentum of continued recovery catalyzed by the birth of Erin's son. It was through recovery and delivery that the reorientation emerged. Again, the purpose here is not determinative but the fit is, at the very least, intriguing.

Erin's Narrative with respect to Understandings of Addiction and Recovery

The final pair of themes, emerging from the literature review, concern understandings of addiction and recovery and what Erin's narrative offers those understandings. Maté's (2018) definition of addiction required "...a susceptible organism, a drug with addictive potential, and stress" (p. 139). Maté emphasized that drugs do not make people into addicts and that the "susceptible organisms," above, are people with a lack of meaning in their lives, troubled childhoods, emotional isolation, and powerlessness.

Erin's story certainly qualifies her to meet this definition, particularly regarding her troubled childhood and emotional isolation. The less clearly met criterion is powerlessness. By current standards, Erin would be classified as a privileged, white, upper-middle class, cisgender woman. By current standards, this would preclude Erin from classification as powerless.

But, of course, per positionality, there are multiple, if not infinite, perspectives on this narrative, or any other. Given Erin's traumatic sexual abuse, which began when four years old together with her parents' divorce during her childhood, coupled with self-harm, self-loathing, and suicidal ideation all driven by a diagnosis of depression, her early affection for drug use serves as a convincing argument for a type of powerlessness.

Being "privileged," "white," or "upper-middle class" did not stop Erin from seeking unconsciousness as an escape from, per Frye (1990), her emotional *agon*. That agony arguably qualified Erin under Maté's (2018) tripartite definition, the last part being "stress." *Stress* is defined as "...a feeling of being overwhelmed by events that you cannot seem to control" (Larsen and Buss, 2014, p. 556). Evidence of that state can be found in passages taken from Erin's narrative and quoted, above, on pages 17, 19-20, 26 (first passage), 29, 32, 35-36, 39, 42 and pp. 44-45. As such, Maté's (2018) definition is a suitable fit for Erin's situation, describing

the conditions of her addiction accurately. As is often joked about in recovery meetings, addiction is an equal opportunity employer.

In terms of understanding Erin's narrated endgame, recovery was described as "...an ongoing dynamic process of behaviour change characterized by relatively stable improvements in biopsychosocial function and purpose in life" (Witkiewitz, Montes, Schwebel, and Tucker, 2020). Other factors, cited in the literature review above (p. 6-9), envision recovery as constituting a new life, well-being, self-improvement, learning to live drug-free, increased self-understanding, and connection with others, all of which *could* but are not necessarily subsumed under the definition by Witkiewitz *et al.* (2020).

Erin's narrative certainly contains indications that she is meeting many of these standards. If I were asked to rank order those factors, I would cite learning to live drug-free, connection with others, and increased self-understanding but even those would follow Witkiewitz *et al.* (2020) and Frankl's (2014) citing of purpose in life.

If a child brings anything to a parent, it is an obligation to do one's best to ensure the child you have called forth has an equal or better chance of a well-spirited life than the chance you had. The fact that Erin's narrative is preceded and concluded by conversations with her then teenaged son, Atticus, is somewhat convincing of how seriously she has embraced that purpose. In the pages above, I denied Erin's own claim that her son, Atticus, saved her life. While I stand by that claim, Atticus undoubtedly invested Erin's soul with a love and purpose she had neither experienced nor anticipated. Erin's story indicates that that purpose carried her beyond sobriety and well into recovery.

Conclusion

The research question posed at the outset of this study was *What was the agential experience of moving from addiction to recovery?* The answers to that question, provided in Erin's narrative and this analysis of that narrative, are surprising and expansive rather than predictable and reductive. Given that this study was intended to be exploratory rather than determinative, this is not surprising.

The first issue is the most basic and concerns whether psychology has underestimated the personal intensity and impact of emotional pain. This issue follows directly from the second concern unearthed in Erin's story: Is the *agon* of the I-want-to-shine part of a personality versus the I-crave-unconsciousness part at all typical of addictive sagas?

As described above, within the results brought out by the analysis of Erin's refrains, her desire for unconsciousness was so profound that it sometimes approached a desire never to have existed. This is sad, frightening, and disturbing but, intrinsically, a part of the human experience. It is from this realization that the preceding question arose concerning Psychology's possible underestimation of the depth and scope of emotional pain. Erin's story wasn't directly concerned with answering such questions, but the questions remain, nonetheless.

Finally, and inextricably related, is the teleological issue, also discussed above. How did Erin's downward trajectory lead to such a radical turnaround that she has been able to rebuild her life and remain clean since 2003? Or is the understanding of a linear directional continuum flawed?

For readers unsatisfied with a conclusion consisting of three unanswered questions, these points can be inverted to appear, with equal accuracy, as issues raised in Erin's story. What an analysis of *Strung Out* (Khar, 2020) reveals is that 1) our understanding of the depth and impact

of emotional pain may be underestimated; and that 2) a desire antithetical to growth-based positive movement can have sufficient intensity to seek annihilation of one's human footprints; and, finally that, 3) our understanding of ends-based human motivation may be oversimplified, particularly if conceived as merely antipodal.

Strengths and Limitations

If viewed from a classically empirical perspective, the greatest strength of this study is also one of its primary weaknesses. As an in-depth study of one person's journey from addiction to recovery, this study offers multiple perspectives on that journey as well as some critical commentary on how the journey was reconstructed to form a coherent narrative. So, while *Strung Out* (Khar, 2020) reveals some nearly unfathomable depths of the addictive trajectory, it is also confined to *only* one person's story i.e., what it offers in depth it lacks in sample-size breadth.

However, with that limitation understood at the outset, another limitation is that Erin's story had more material to mine, refine, and examine. As well, there are many more perspectives through which Erin's data set could be viewed. Those views might amplify or dampen the themes which have begun to emerge.

With externally limited project time, integrity checks and consensual cross-checking of interpretations were not possible. Both would have improved this study.

That acknowledged, next steps involve the analysis of more typologically similar data sets combined with an awareness of the issues cited in the conclusion of this study. The hope and intent is that, in time, a series of finely grained analyses of journeys from addiction to recovery will provide both etiological and therapeutic insights useful in healing the pain implicit in addictive behaviours.

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