Deconstructing Narratives of Place, Stigma, Identity, and Substance Use in Appalachia: A Narrative Ethnography of a Women's Transitional Recovery House

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Abstract

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Deconstructing Narratives of Place, Stigma, Identity, and Substance Use in Appalachia: A Narrative Ethnography of a Women's Transitional Recovery House

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Master narratives of substance use and recovery in Appalachia have been largely dictated and stigmatized by outside entities, leaving little room for the complexity and nuance of the individual voices of those most intimately familiar with the topic. This dissertation explores the individual and collective stories that create the narrative of Wisdom River, a women's transitional recovery house in Appalachian Ohio, in an effort to elevate the lived realities of those experiencing substance use disorder (SUD) and recovery in Appalachia. By centering these stories, the overarching goal of this research is to move away from homogenized, stigmatizing narratives of substance use and recovery in Appalachia and toward a new narrative that honors localized knowledge and creates space for new definitions of success in SUD and recovery organizing.

Data for this dissertation were created through intentional participant observation at Wisdom River (attending weekly dinners, driving residents to and from work, participating in recovery events) and through semi-structured interviews with nine members of the organization. I also engaged autoethnographic methods to explore my own role in this narrative as the child of a parent with SUD. The research questions that guided this dissertation are rooted in narrative and identity: What narratives are at play in the narrative ecology of Wisdom River, and how do those connected to Wisdom River narratively construct their identities? As participants shared their stories with me, they

explored pieces of their own narratives and identities that reify, complicate, and rebut their understandings of master narratives of SUD and recovery.

By confronting master narratives of what it means to experience SUD and recovery, who deserves access to safe and dignified recovery spaces, and what it looks like to be successful in recovery, Wisdom River employs what I identify as a narrative feminist approach to 12 Step recovery. While I remain committed to the conviction that recovery will look different for different people in different places, Wisdom River's disruptive take on a longstanding recovery strategy opens an avenue for new norms in recovery organizing—especially regarding women and other identity groups who have historically been denied authorship in master narratives of substance use and recovery.

Dedication

To the women of Wisdom River, who are and forever will be the heroes of this story. It has been an honor to walk a little way with you.

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I could not have undertaken this journey without the support of my advisor, Dr. Brittany Peterson. Thank you for your friendship, your guidance, your patience, your understanding, your vulnerability, and your unwavering confidence that I could, in fact, do this. To my committee, Dr. Lynn Harter, Dr. Jerry Miller, and Dr. Risa Whitson: thank you all for deeply engaging this project with me, for understanding and honoring what this research has meant to me, and for showing me how to revel in the beauty of meaningful scholarship. Dr. Dean Farmer, thank you for sparking my love for socially conscious research and for cheering me on from day one.

Mama, thank you for passing down your love of words and for reminding me constantly of the worth of this project and of my own worth outside of it. Dennison, thank you for being my partner through all of this in every sense of the word, for holding me steady when things got wobbly, and for marrying me right in the middle of this whirlwind.

Finally, this endeavor would not have been possible without the groundbreaking and tireless work of the women at Wisdom River. Thank you for demonstrating true compassion, strength, and care in the face of overwhelming odds, and for welcoming me into your beautiful stories.

"We shall not cease from exploration

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time." (Eliot, 1943)

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Chapter 1: Introduction & Problem Statement

It's an unusually warm day for southeast Ohio in late fall, and the four of us are taking a break from leaf blowing the long driveway that leads up to Wisdom River. Taylor jokes about the 50 feet of connected extension cords hanging out the window of Ann's office:

"If Karen saw us doing something this ratchet, she'd have the police up here in a heartbeat."

As I laugh with the other women, I ask, "who's Karen?"

"She's our neighbor, I guess."

"Yeah, she lives in that house over there. You can't see it now because of the trees, but in the winter you can kinda see over there," Hannah chimes in.

"She doesn't like that there's a bunch of addicts living so close to her," Taylor laughs.

"Yeah, if everyone had their way, we wouldn't be this close to regular people!" Janelle rolls her eyes as the rest of the women laugh along with her.

"Well that's not very nice," I reply, laughing with the women despite the anger and discomfort welling in my chest.

Hannah shakes her head and shrugs. "Don't I know it. But you know, people have this idea of us, that we're always strung out, that we're thieves and, you know…"

"Which we all were at some point!" Taylor exclaims, and our laughter echoes off the trees once again.

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Appalachia has been labeled many different things by many different people. To

some, it is a wellspring of natural resources fit for the taking. To others, it is a hotbed of poverty, substance use, and antiquated ways of life. To still others, like myself, Appalachia is home—a tapestry of complex, intersecting, oft conflicting identities and meanings. As a member of the seventh generation of my family to be born in Appalachia, the realities of resource extraction, poverty, substance use, etc. are not lost on me. They are, however, only part of the narrative of Appalachia. The tendency of mainstream discourse to elevate those deficit narratives has engendered widespread misrepresentations of an incredibly diverse region and tangible consequences for the people who call Appalachia home.

Narratives of substance use have become central to cultural misrepresentations of Appalachia in recent years (Skinner & Franz, 2019). Widespread substance use is not a phenomenon unique to Appalachia, and the sensationalist focus on substance use in Appalachia serves only to silence the lived experiences of Appalachian people and people with histories of substance use disorders, dependencies, and addictions. Further, by ascribing words like "crisis" and "epidemic" to substance use in Appalachia, state and federal government officials exonerate themselves from any responsibility, thus masking the systemic inequities that undergird the prevalence of opioids and other potentially harmful substances in Appalachia. Missing from these depictions of substance use and Appalachia are the voices of the people actually experiencing the effects of substance use in Appalachia, which perpetuates the stigmatization of those experiences. Without individual voices and narratives influencing the construction of master narratives of Appalachia, the individuals affected by these narratives become faceless abstractions, subhuman entities on which dominant powers can dump blame.

The stigmas attached to Appalachian identities (see Duncan, 2014; Gaventa, 1982) and the stigmas attached to substance use identities (see Dyregrov & Bruland Selseng, 2021; O'Shay-Wallace, 2020) intersect in ways that are rarely acknowledged in research on either topic, let alone in mainstream societal discourse. The silencing of lived experiences of substance use in Appalachia and the pervasiveness of stereotypes surrounding them suggest that people experiencing substance use in Appalachia have little agency in defining and communicating their identity. In other words, the layered stigmatization of substance use in Appalachia threatens to define the experience of an entire group of people and negate any attempts by individual members of the group to resist dominant discourse and (re)define their own identities.

In this dissertation, I explore the ways in which master narratives of substance use in Appalachia interact with the communicative construction of identity, stigma, and place of individuals who are experiencing or who have experienced substance use disorder (SUD). The master narratives of SUD in Appalachia to which I refer throughout this dissertation are based on my own experience growing up in Appalachia with a parent experiencing SUD and on the myriad observations forwarded by the scholars who have paved the way for this dissertation (see Catte, 2018; Harkins & McCarroll, 2020; Judd et al., 2021; Skinner & Franz, 2019; Stine, 2020). Broadly, these master narratives are characterized by persistent blame on the individual, casting substance use disorder as a personal moral failing rather than a symptom of systemic injustice. This framing of SUD gives way to damaging stereotypes regarding gender, race, socioeconomic status, educational attainment, and personal resilience. In probing the narrative ecologies

(Gabriel, 2017) and individual narratives of Wisdom River[1], a women's transitional recovery house located in north central Appalachia, I aim to challenge the homogenization of experience purported by master narratives that stigmatize and dehumanize people with substance use disorders. Ultimately, I my goal is to collaborate with the residents and staff of Wisdom River to elevate individual narratives and create space to imagine new normals (Harter et al., 2022) in the deconstruction and redefinition of what it means to experience substance use in Appalachia.

To that end, this chapter provides an overview of my rationale for a narrative ontology as I oriented this project toward the study of the stories and lives that create the reality of substance use in Appalachia. I also briefly introduce literature that guided my approach to studying the construction of identity and how identity intersects with conceptions of stigma and place. Next, I offer a synopsis of current literature on the language surrounding substance use to clarify the connection between communication and substance use and to situate my language choices within broader discourses of substance use. Finally, I provide a brief overview of my research site, Wisdom River, and address my positionality in this research project.

The Case for a Narrative Ontology

A narrative ontology consciously departs from the notions that people are rational, that knowledge is objective, and that the world can be analyzed systematically (Fisher, 1984). Thus, narrative research recognizes and celebrates the diversity of individual embodied experience, an orientation that is markedly absent from the widely accepted master narratives of Appalachia and substance use. In the aftermath of the rise of J.D.

[1] This and all further references to organizations, locations, and people directly related to research operations are pseudonyms to protect participant anonymity.

Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* as the single defining story of Appalachia—a story of an irrevocably broken, addicted, and impoverished region (see Catte, 2018; Stine, 2020 for critiques)—narrative approaches that highlight the multivocality and diversity of experience in Appalachia are crucial (Harkins & McCarroll, 2019). Similarly, following McGinty and colleagues' (2018) call for a shift toward research focused on individual stories of substance use as an avenue for more humane treatment of people experiencing substance use issues, a narrative approach to exploring how substance use, identity, and place coalesce is the only way to responsibly attend to this research.

Building on Fisher's (1984) position that people are essentially storytellers and that we create reality through stories, research centered on the stories that create Wisdom River will add crucial depth to our understanding of the lived experience of substance use and recovery in Appalachia. Granted, the stories and voices in this research cannot and will not be representative of all experiences of substance use and recovery in Appalachia, and that is part of the rationale for a narrative approach here; I aim to challenge the privileging of generalized knowledge and assumptions about a phenomenon as complex and situated as substance use.

Substance use is an intensely complex topic in and of itself, and combined with the complicated nature of the place of Appalachia, there is a multitude of narratives vying for prominence in this study. So, instead of pitting these narratives against each other or hyper-focusing on certain narratives, I draw on the narrative ecology framework to explore how the different narratives that arise throughout the course of this research interact with one another. Gabriel's (2017) narrative ecology framework creates space for different types of narratives, different narrators, different plotlines and characters and

motivations to be understood in context of one another.

A narrative ontology also positions me to attend to research with systemically silenced and marginalized populations in a socially conscious way (i.e., without exclusively amplifying my own voice at the center of this research). Souto-Manning (2014) positioned narrative as conducive to the co-construction of critical awareness (Freire, 1970), which many social change and social justice scholars argue is at the heart of any socially responsible research (see Dillard, 2020; Frey et al., 1996). Similarly, Harter and colleagues (2022) underscored the potential for narrative to serve as a particularly effective emancipatory tool for people living in the midst of precarity. A narrative ontology prods us to ask:

> What stories do we get caught up in? What truths are being told? What actions are de/legitimated? Whose voices are privileged, minimized, or missing altogether? Under what conditions can storytelling be therapeutic? How do dominant cultural narratives shapeshift as stories intersect, oppose, destabilize, and/or reinforce each other? (Peterson & Harter, 2022, p. 2)

As I learned from and with the residents and staff members at Wisdom River, as I asked them to trust me with their stories, a narrative ontology served to correctly order my priorities within this research—the first of which was to listen as the people who should have been first authors in the master narratives we deconstructed together tell me their narratives of substance use in Appalachia.

Orienting Identity

Within a narrative ontology, storytelling is, among other things, the main way we create, share, and make sense of our identities (Bruner, 1990). As residents and staff

members of Wisdom River shared their stories with me, they also shared pieces of their identities and insights on how they understand and construct their identities. Because substance use has historically been stigmatized in mainstream discourse, and because facets of identity that are stigmatized often define a person's entire identity in the eyes of the majority (Smith, 2007), attention to identity construction and management is central to this study (Hecht, 1993; Orbe, 1998; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Further, because Appalachia carries its own identity and implications for the identities of people who claim Appalachia as home, attention to the ways in which place and identity intersect informed my approach to understanding participants' incorporation of place (or lack thereof) as a salient factor of their identities.

Conceptualizing Place

The place of Appalachia serves simultaneously as a context for individual stories explored in this study and as an agential actor in a story of its own. Drawing on Valentine and Sadgrove's (2014) conception of emplacement, which describes the ways in which people express facets of their identities as products of material spaces, the lens of Appalachia as a context positions place as crucial to understanding the narratives of Appalachian people. In this sense, place by itself is an entity to which people have relationships and give meaning. Thus, the emplacement of identity could be interpreted as a one-dimensional process: place is agential insofar as place can affect which social performances take precedence over others when individuals (re)tell biographical narratives differently in different places. This understanding of place underscores the subtle yet powerful ways in which places act on bodies and beings.

Alternatively, to understand emplacement in relation to more foundational

theories of place and agency, we can turn to Massey's (1994) conception of place, which situates places and people as more equal co-authors of meaning. Massey offered four tenets that position place as socially and communicatively constructed: places are the emergent, dynamic result of human-to-human and human-to-place interaction; places are not defined by boundaries; places have multiple, sometimes conflicting identities; places are constantly produced and reproduced, holding multiple truths at once (Massey, 1994). This vision of place as agential aligns with Appalachian scholars who have theorized a deeply rooted connection between Appalachian people and Appalachian land, based partially on shared histories of extraction and exploitation (see Gaventa, 1982; Kozlowski & Perkins, 2016) as well as shared histories of resilience (see Lukacs & Ardoin, 2013; Okamoto, 2020). Similarly, Grieder and Garkovich (1994) positioned land as inherently agential, rooted and active in its own history independent of human intervention.

Following Wilhoit's (2016) lead in bringing these agential conceptions of place into communication theory, I explore the broad narratives of place endemic to Appalachia that arose in the individual narratives I heard from participants throughout this study. As these narratives interact, I also explore the role(s) that place plays in participants' construction of their identities. Wilhoit advocated for the confluence of material and social understandings of place in organizational communication, opening a space for collaboration between critical geography and communication theory in which my dissertation resides.

One of my main goals in this study is to problematize the homogenized narratives of Appalachia and of substance use, and I believe analyzing and exploring the agency of place in those narratives is key in that endeavor. Scholars who do research in

Appalachia—myself included—often rattle off statistics from the US Census Bureau or the Appalachian Regional Commission in order to center Appalachia as a "unique" (read: desolate, needy, poor) place. In reality, reliance on these statistics does more to perpetuate the "homogeneities implied by gathering up social practices, demographic distributions, cultural beliefs, built-environments, and physical topography" (Gieryn, 2000, p. 473) than to center the uniqueness and agency of Appalachian land and Appalachian people. So, in an effort to move away from this tendency, I plan to use the above definitions of place to center the emplaced narratives of participants in the reconstruction of master narratives surrounding Appalachia and substance use. Further, a conscious resistance of the reduction of Appalachia to a list of statistics speaks to the need for a constant awareness of the language I use as I engage in conversations about substance use.

Language of Substance Use

Language, like place, is a structure that imposes material consequences on social reality. We order our worlds—our societies, our organizations, our stories, our identities—largely through language (Bruner, 1990). As such, the words that populate the narrative ecologies of an organization like Wisdom River and the words that are used to describe and label identities are imbued with power. In the context of substance use specifically, language has proven to hold tangible—sometimes life-threatening—authority: stigmatizing language has been shown to dissuade people from seeking treatment (Barry et al., 2014), perpetuate stereotypes of people with addictions as dangerous or subhuman (Judd et al., 2021), and even encourage the stigmatization of entire families who lose family members to substance-related deaths (Dyregrov &

Bruland Selseng, 2021). Further, certain linguistic choices have the potential to stigmatize entire regions and people groups, as evidenced in the narrative of Ohio as the "epicenter" of the opioid "crisis" in the United States (Skinner & Franz, 2019; Wiederhold Wolfe, 2016). In academic and medical circles, the language of substance use is constantly evolving as nonstigmatizing and person-first terminology become more prevalent. In mainstream discourse, however, more antiquated and stigmatizing approaches remain normative (Verma, 2022).

One such approach is the addiction-as-disease model. This approach to understanding addiction has been widely challenged in recent years, but the power of the addiction-as-disease model over public opinion still merits discussion here. The concept of addiction as a disease began in the 1930s as a necessary and largely effective strategy to get people with addictions the help they needed and to challenge the tendency of medical professionals to refuse treatment to people with addictions (Fisher, 2022). To this day, proponents of addiction as a disease view addiction as a predominantly physiological condition to be addressed via medicalized treatments and therapies. This facet of the addiction-as-disease model is positive in that it positions addiction as an issue that extends beyond the individual and that can be addressed in scientific, concrete ways. However, defining addiction solely as a disease situates the root of addiction in a person's biology and ignores the myriad sociocultural factors of addiction such as unequal access to medical, social, and/or monetary support, intrapersonal and interpersonal stigma, and racially biased legal systems (Fisher, 2022). Because Wisdom River adheres to the 12 Step ideology of Alcoholics Anonymous, it is important to note that Alcoholics Anonymous has never forwarded the concept of addiction as a disease

(Kurtz, 2002). Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12 Step based programs do employ language such as "illness," and many members of these programs describe their addictions as a disease (including people involved with Wisdom River), but founders and leaders of Alcoholics Anonymous have purposely refrained from any official definition of addiction as a disease (Kurtz, 2002).

In exploring explicit and implicit bias related to common terms in the substance use field, Ashford et al. (2018) found that person-first language (e.g., "person with a substance use disorder" instead of "addict"; "person in long-term recovery" instead of "clean"; "recurrence of use" instead of "relapse") significantly affected interpersonal and intrapersonal stigma surrounding substance use. Currently, the most widely accepted "professional" term for drug and/or alcohol addiction is substance use disorder (SUD). SUD was added to the fifth iteration of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) in 2013 after a work group of academics and doctors who specialize in substance-related disorders decided that "substance dependence" and "substance abuse" should be combined under one term with one set of criteria (Hasin et al., 2013). This move was significant in shaping social and medical understandings of certain levels of substance use as a diagnosable disorder as opposed to a moral failing or choice (Avery et al., 2020).

Even so, categorizing substance use as a disorder poses potentially negative implications. Ashford et al. (2019) found that the term "substance use disorder" is not always less stigmatizing than the term "addiction," considering the long-term, often irreversible nature of disorders. Addiction, when understood as a temporary state (or disease) rather than a lifelong disorder, is sometimes seen as more manageable, treatable,

and less definitive of a person's entire being (Ashford et al., 2019). Ashford and colleagues purported that, while language choice may not play a significant role in individual recovery outcomes, it does affect public opinion and individuals' likelihood to seek recovery treatment in the first place. Thus, Ashford and colleagues concluded that professionals and those on the periphery of SUD and recovery communities should always use person-first language when referring to SUD.

Having weighed the consequences, I will refer to drug and alcohol addiction as SUD throughout my dissertation, despite the fact that participants rarely used this language. Galinsky et al. (2013) found that members of stigmatized groups often find power in self-labeling with language that would be stigmatizing or derogatory if used by an outgroup member (e.g., addict, alcoholic, drunk, etc.). So, while I remain devoted to constantly learning about and using language that challenges the dehumanization of people with SUD, I recognize that my identity as someone who has never experienced SUD firsthand influences which words I can and cannot use. Further, as the child of someone who does struggle with SUD, I recognize that everyone's experience with SUD is different—and that is one of the main points of this study. Ultimately, no amount of "correct" verbiage will dismantle the systems that thrive on the stigmatization, oppression, and scapegoating of individuals who experience substance addiction. Even so, as a communication scholar, I believe wholeheartedly in the power of words, and the recognition of how words construct and label identities is a step in the right direction.

Recent scholarship on the social aspects of substance use has positioned narrative methods as an effective way to identify and deconstruct stigma surrounding substance use. McGinty et al. (2018) found that amplifying personal narratives of people who have

experienced SUD can be a particularly effective strategy in engaging the public in conversations about SUD, challenging dehumanizing and ineffective public health policies regarding SUD, and identifying systemic barriers to sustainable recovery. Werder et al. (2022) underscored the power of storytelling by individuals in long term recovery in generating support for effective recovery programs and dismantling stigmatizing stereotypes of people experiencing SUD. In an autoethnographic piece recounting experiences with patients experiencing SUD, Salwan (2019) highlighted the importance of medical practitioners' (and, I would add, researchers') willingness to listen to and respect people with first-hand experience with SUD when choosing language surrounding SUD. Finally, Judd et al. (2021) explored the ways in which simply generating more conversations about substance use among people with and without experience with SUD can help dispel the taboo nature of substance use in everyday conversation.

With the findings of these studies in mind, I introduce Wisdom River in the following section as a suitable site to explore how narrative and ethnographic research methods can contribute to the rewriting of stigmatized narratives surrounding substance use in Appalachia.

Field Setting: Wisdom River Transitional Recovery House

Wisdom River (pseudonym) is a Level Two transitional recovery residence located in a single-family house on a seven-acre lot just outside the county seat of Anderson County, Ohio. The residence is open to women experiencing SUD who have been in recovery, usually in a Level Four residence, for at least 30 days. Supervision at Wisdom River is relatively minimal, as the goal of most Level Two residences is to

prepare residents for independent living: daily operations are overseen by the Executive Director, who lives off-site, and two Peer Recovery Support Specialists (previous Wisdom River residents who live independently in the area) frequent the house to help with transportation and to provide informal support. Members of the Wisdom River Board of Directors are involved mainly in macro organizational operations, but some members join the women at Wisdom River during Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) meetings throughout the week. Some board members are in long-term recovery, and some have never experienced SUD. Residents are required to attend a certain number of AA and/or NA meetings per week in addition to the daily house meeting each morning (A. Bennett, personal communication, August 23, 2021). Volunteers from the Anderson County community lead weekly group activities like yoga, music therapy, and meditation sessions in Wisdom River's converted garage. Wisdom River also hosts a community dinner once a week, which is open to all residents, staff, and anyone attending the subsequent NA meeting.

At the onset of my involvement with Wisdom River, the organization housed up to six women at a time. Since then, Wisdom River has undergone a major construction project to create space for up to eight women. Length of residency typically varies between three and 18 months (A. Bennett, personal communication, August 23, 2021). The application process for residence at Wisdom River involves an intake inquiry form, an eight-page intake application, a release of information form, and a phone interview. The intake application includes questions about the applicant's reason for interest in Wisdom River, history with substance use and recovery thus far, and self-analysis of that history (e.g., which recovery strategies have/have not worked for them in the past).

Ideally, when women leave Wisdom River, they move to either a Level 1 recovery residence or to an apartment or house unaffiliated with recovery-related programs (A. Bennett, personal communication, 23 August 2021).

Wisdom River operates under the umbrella of Women's Recovery Collective, a 501c3 nonprofit organization founded in March 2017 in response to the lack of safe and effective recovery housing for women in Anderson County (About Us, n.d.). Women's Recovery Collective was founded by women local to Anderson County who have deeply personal experiences with and understandings of substance use, and Wisdom River has been Women's Recovery Collective's main focus since the organization acquired the seven-acre property in July 2017. Wisdom River's roots in asset-based social change (see Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Singhal & Svenkerud, 2019) coupled with its founders' deep understanding of what it means to be in recovery and what it means to be Appalachian, make Wisdom River an ideal site to learn about SUD and recovery in Appalachia.

Positionality and Problem Statement

In a sense, my identity as a seventh generation Appalachian and as the child of a father with SUD shape my research more in how those experiences differ from those of the people I have met at Wisdom River than how they relate. Nothing about my childhood reflects any of the negative stereotypes of what it means to live in Appalachia; in fact, many people are not even aware that the hip tourist destination of Asheville, North Carolina (my hometown) is well within the geographical and cultural bounds of Appalachia. Similarly, while I can point to plenty of residual scars and open wounds from growing up with a parent experiencing substance use disorder, those scars do not

resemble the scars I "should" have, based on master narratives of what an addict looks like (see Judd et al., 2021; Skinner & Franz, 2019). So, one of the defining questions that prompted this project is: If my narrative is not represented in the master narrative of substance use disorder in Appalachia, what other narratives are not represented?

As someone who has not personally experienced substance use disorder, I recognize that my understanding of substance use, recovery, and the stigma and systemic barriers that accompany those experiences is vastly different than participants' understandings. Further, I recognize the role that white, upper middle-class privilege has played in my and my dad's experience. I have never seen him be treated as less than human because of his substance use disorder, which has instilled two convictions in me in regard to this research: first, every human should be treated as a human (i.e., with basic respect and dignity), regardless of their socioeconomic status, mental health status, or, in this case, substance use status. Second: the systemic structures that allow some people with substance use disorder to be stripped of their humanity and dignity while others are not must be addressed if any sustainable social justice for people experiencing substance use disorder is to be achieved.

Building on these convictions, I explore the narratives that structure experiences of substance use and Appalachia, both within the organization of Wisdom River and in the broader Anderson County community. In so doing, I seek to contribute to the deconstruction and rewriting of overarching narratives of substance use in Appalachia by elevating the embodied narratives of people experiencing SUD in Appalachia. In Chapter Two, I situate my approach to identity, stigma, place, and narrative and highlight intersections between these topics as they pertain to SUD in Appalachia. In Chapter

Three, I outline my philosophical commitments to narrative ethnographic research and detail my methods for this project, which drew on ethnography and autoethnography, critical narrative analysis, and participatory action research.

Chapter 2: Scholarly Groundings and Theoretical Sensibilities

This dissertation is situated within a narrative ontology because I believe stories are the fabric of the world. Stories shape the everyday lives of individuals and the dominant ideologies that structure societal and organizational norms. We make sense of ourselves, our identities, our realities, our surroundings, our pasts, presents, and futures through stories. Narrators, plots, settings, and scripts are constantly created and recreated, negotiated and renegotiated, as stories evolve. A narrative lens is particularly salient in research that involves issues of social justice and social change as questions of whose stories are told, whose stories are silenced, and which narratives come to the fore to define the reality of entire groups (see Harter et al., 2022; Wilson et al., 2022).

Further, a narrative approach creates space for agency to be re-conceptualized as we explore how stories act on and through people (Frank, 2010) and places (Gieryn, 2000). Multiple narratives create the reality of Wisdom River—broad societal narratives of substance use and Appalachia; organizational narratives that define what it means to be in recovery at Wisdom River; and individual narratives, storied lives, of the people who create and are created in the narrative ecology (Gabriel, 2017) of Wisdom River. As I engaged with the stories shared with me during interviews and participant observation, I aimed to remain conscious of the agentic nature of stories and how they shape reality.

The stories people tell, the way they tell them, and to whom they tell them are also deeply entwined with the construction of identity (Bruner, 1990). Similarly, the stories people choose not to tell, or to tell only in certain settings, speak to the process of identity construction, especially when different actors have the opportunity—with varying levels of agency—to disclose the same story. This question of agency over one's

own story becomes complicated in settings like Wisdom River, where potentially private and/or stigmatized facets of residents' identities may be disclosed for them—either tacitly, by where they live, or explicitly, by staff members who serve as proxies/intermediaries between residents and the "outside world" (e.g., employers, health providers, AA sponsors, case workers, etc.).

The stories told *about* people and places may also play into individual and collective constructions of identity. Wisdom River's position in Appalachia and its orientation toward addressing substance use suggest that facets of identity related to place and substance use may be salient to this conversation. Appalachia and substance use—together and separately—have largely been defined by others; people on the periphery, who have no real stake in the reality of what it means to be Appalachian or what it means to have a substance use disorder, often have louder voices that are taken more seriously in the authoring of the master narratives of Appalachia and SUD (Harkins & McCarroll, 2020). Further, the reality of communal living, the physical proximity and shared space of fellow residents who at once have virtually identical and vastly disparate experiences with substance use, may inform how residents understand themselves and the world around them. Even the ways in which land, spaces, places, and substances act on bodies and take part in the creation of meaning suggest interesting implications for the study of identity at Wisdom River.

Building on these convictions, I open this chapter by grounding my research in foundational narrative scholarship. Drawing on Fisher's (1984) narrative paradigm, I build a framework for a more nuanced discussion of narrative research as it pertains to the current study. Harter and colleagues' (2022) approach to embodied narrative

research—research attuned to the more-than-verbal nature of storytelling—orients this study toward questions of agency and material reality, which are crucial points in research that intersects with issues of social justice. Gabriel's (2017) narrative ecologies framework provides a structure on which to study the multiple narratives at play in the fabric of Wisdom River in context of one another. Finally, Okamoto's (2020) conceptualization of narrative resilience invites place and agency to the conversation, which highlights the contextually relevant positioning of Wisdom River in Appalachia and situates my first research question.

Recalling Bruner's (1990) synthesis of narrative theory and identity construction, I then lay out an approach to the study of identity through this narrative ontology. After a brief overview of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), communication theory of identity (Hecht, 1993), and Razzante et al.'s (2021) extension of Orbe's (1998) co-cultural approach to identity, I discuss the ways in which more topical identity research based on these foundational theories relates to the construction of identity in the context of SUD in Appalachia. Working from Smith's (2007) stigma communication framework, Meisenbach's (2010) extension of that framework in stigma management communication, and Zhang et al.'s (2020) problematization of layered stigma research, I examine the role of stigma in the narrative construction of identity at Wisdom River. Then, based on the assumption that the labelling of identities as stigmatized complicates disclosure processes, I draw on Petronio and Durham's (2015) definition of disclosure and McDonald et al.'s (2020) critical approach to disclosure and closeting to explore how identity disclosure may be negotiated within the narrative ecology of Wisdom River.

In the latter part of this chapter, I expound on the role of place in my research by

positioning place as an agentic entity that influences identity (Fraley, 2007), engenders specific attachments (Barcus & Brunn, 2010), co-creates realities (Giddens, 1979), and perpetuates hegemony and difference (Gieryn, 2000).

Narrative Ontology

In keeping with Fisher's (1984) narrative paradigm, I believe that stories are integral to a realistic understanding of the human experience. Fisher argued that all meaningful communication occurs through storytelling, positioning narratives as the basic framework on which all human action is based. According to Fisher, the view of humans as *homo narrans*—storytelling humans—does not negate other conceptions of the essential nature of humanity (e.g., *homo sapien,* "wise human"; *homo economicus,* "rational human"). Rather, *homo narrans* encapsulates these different understandings of how we account for, recount, and make meaning of our life-worlds. The nature of stories and storytelling practices vary widely, but the essential function of stories according to the narrative paradigm is to define what constitutes "a 'truth' of the human condition" (Fisher, 1984, p. 6).

Building on Fisher's foundational contributions to narrative theory within the field of communication, I gravitate toward more recent iterations of narrative theory that recognize and challenge the patriarchal roots of narrative theory and frame narratives as powerful agents of change. Specifically, Harter and colleagues' (2022) explication of the forms and functions of narrative guides my understanding of what constitutes a narrative, what narratives do, and why a narrative ontology matters in the context of this research. Harter and colleagues positioned the knowledge claims generated in and through narrative research as vital in understanding "spaces characterized by vulnerability,

resilience, inequities, and/or social justice" (p. 15). As I explored the spaces between master and counter narratives of SUD in Appalachia from my liminal positionality as an "insider" and an "outsider," attention to the ways in which concepts like vulnerability, resilience, inequities, and social justice are defined, challenged, complicated, and reified were key in engaging with these narratives in a socially responsible and ethical way. Through the lens offered by Harter and colleagues, narrative encompasses not only to the plot of a story, but the way in which a story is told, the socio-material assumptions that undergird a story, the silences and omissions of a story, the narrator's motivations for telling a story, the temporal and spatial contexts of a story, and the embodied reality created by a story.

Importantly, Harter and colleagues argued that narratives take forms beyond the traditional understanding of verbal storytelling and that a more creative, embodied approach to narrative is crucial in research that seeks to privilege the knowledge of people who have traditionally been excluded from narrative authorship—in this case, the knowledge of those with embodied experience of SUD. Among the many functions of narrative research, Harter and colleagues (2022) highlighted the personal and political power of storytelling to upend societal norms by shedding light on "lived inequities" (p. 33). From this perspective, stories are a powerful form of emancipation for individuals and groups who have been denied ownership of the narratives that purport to represent them (see also Peterson & Garner, 2019). Harter and colleagues' approach to narrative creates space for stories to challenge and redefine what constitutes "normal" life, which speaks to the fact that recreational substance use and SUD generally fall outside the expectations of a of "normal" lifestyle in the United States. Further, within these breaches

of normality, there are different definitions of what is "normal" when it comes to substance use across different social groups. Consider, for instance, the stark differences between the narratives surrounding the rise of crack-cocaine use in the 1980s (which cast people of color as uniquely responsible for the crack-cocaine "epidemic") and the current narratives surrounding opioid use among mostly white Americans: while both sets of narratives place individual blame on people with substance use disorders, there is at least a semblance of communal caring in the narrative of opioid use today (Skinner & Franz, 2019). The fact that Wisdom River is operating in the context of Appalachia in response to the prevalence of opioid use in the area, combined with the fact that the majority of Wisdom River residents, staff, and board of directors are white Americans, suggests that attention to the broader metanarrative surrounding Wisdom River is central to understanding the individual narratives that exist within the organization.

In their argument for the importance of a narrative ontology to social change research, Harter and colleagues (2022) defined narrative as "at once a phenomenon worthy of study and an orientation toward the study of a social phenomenon" (p. 13). Harter and colleagues argued that an ontological approach centered on narrative situates storytelling as a viable source of knowledge production, pushing back against approaches that privilege more concrete, objective, capital-T Truths. This orientation toward narrative as a source of knowledge echoes Fisher's (1984) explication of the roles of narrative probability and narrative fidelity in determining the rationality of stories.

In direct contrast to the Aristotelian rational world paradigm, which purports that humans make decisions based on sound arguments and objective evidence, the narrative paradigm argues that we make decisions based on subjectively defined "good" reasons

(Fisher, 1984). In the narrative paradigm, rationality arises from coherence with lived experience more so than coherence with external facts. We make sense of, or rationalize, our lives and others' lives through narrative ordering—which, from Fisher's perspective, entails the concepts of narrative probability and narrative fidelity. When we analyze the extent to which a story follows itself—whether its characters, settings, and plotlines make sense in context of one another—we are judging the story's narrative probability. Accordingly, narrative fidelity requires us to measure a story's truth against what we already believe to be true about ourselves, our worlds, etc. (Fisher, 1984).

Narrative probability and narrative fidelity are uniquely important to this study because they provide a foundation from which to explore which stories are accepted, and, perhaps more importantly, which stories are rejected in the broad narrative of SUD in Appalachia. Peterson and Garner (2019) explained that counter-narratives arise when organizational members begin to question or denounce the narrative probability and narrative fidelity of the master narratives that comprise their organization. Extending Fisher's (1984) concepts of narrative probability and fidelity, Peterson and Garner (2019) identified the role of narrative ownership—the power to "direct and control the story line" (p. 5)—as central to understanding the interplay between master and counter-narratives in organizations. As I explore the stories that create Wisdom River, attention to narrative ownership—how ownership is defined, negotiated, reproduced, and challenged—is key in understanding the interactions between master and counter-narratives of SUD in Appalachia.

Narrative Ecologies

To further nuance the role of master and counter-narratives in this study, I drew

on Gabriel's (2017) concept of narrative ecologies. A narrative ecology is the space in which different narratives interact to create a narrative lifeworld. In the context of this study, Gabriel's framework illuminated the different narratives that comprise the narrative ecology of Wisdom River. Gabriel argued that the study of individual narrative ecologies is vital to the analysis of larger societal ecologies and vice versa; thus, this framework served as an ideal lens through which to analyze the ways in which narratives of Wisdom River influence and are influenced by broader narratives of SUD in Appalachia.

According to Gabriel, master narratives are narratives that "seek to neutralize, discredit or silence counter-narratives, representing as they do the interests of those in power" (p. 208). Thus, in the context of SUD in Appalachia, master narratives may be defined as narratives that homogenize, dehumanize, and villainize the individual experience of SUD while simultaneously maintaining the hegemonic norms that keep the authors of those master narratives in power. Conversely, Gabriel defined counter-narratives as "attempts of the powerless, marginalized, or disempowered to make their voices heard, to place their stories on record, and to challenge the uncontested hegemony of master narratives" (Gabriel, 2017, p. 208). Heeding Souto-Manning's (2014) warning against casting any one person or group as powerless, marginalized, or disempowered, I aimed to refrain from determining whose stories "count" as counter-narratives in this study, opting instead to learn with participants as they construct the definition of a counter-narrative within the context of Wisdom River. However, based on Gabriel's general definition, I operate from the baseline understanding that counter-narratives of SUD in Appalachia problematize traditional understandings of substance use and

underscore the individuality, complexity, and humanity of SUD.

The transformative power of Gabriel's narrative ecology framework lies within its blurring of the binary between master and counter-narratives. Gabriel posited that master narratives and counter-narratives are infinitely interdependent: the existence of master narratives hinges on the existence of counter-narratives and vice versa. This constant co-creation gives rise to narrative ecologies in which "different elements and populations of narrative emerge, interact, compete, adapt, develop and die" (Gabriel, 2017, p. 220). By relating narratives to living organisms participating in an ecosystem, Gabriel positions narratives as agential both in relation to humans and independent of humans. This conceptualization of narrative complements Massey's (1994) recursive approach to place, outlined in the previous section: narratives, like place, simultaneously act on and are acted on by humans (see also, Giddens, 1979).

Also reminiscent of Massey's understanding of place is Gabriel's (2017) vision of narratives as unconstrained by organizational boundaries. According to Gabriel, narratives travel "from one organization to another, from one discourse to another, and from one narrative space to another" (p. 209). This view of narratives as nomadic and interactional provides a framework to explore the ways in which narratives of Appalachia and narratives of SUD create, define, expand, and challenge one another. More specifically, the transience of narratives speaks to the different narratives at play in the ecology of Wisdom River. For example, the narrative of 12 Step ideology migrated to Wisdom River from another space, creates space for itself in residents' life stories as they participate in the narratively structured reality of Wisdom River, and travels to new ecologies as residents leave Wisdom River. In the same vein, Gabriel suggested that

narrative ecologies are the spaces in which narratives in, around, and outside of organizations coalesce. In the context of Wisdom River, this meant approaching narratives *in* the organization (e.g., narratives from current residents and staff), narratives *about* the organization (e.g., narratives from former residents and community members) and narratives *outside* the organization (e.g., broader narratives of SUD) as inextricable from one another.

Gabriel offered seven different types of narrative ecologies, each of which cultivates different narrative patterns. For example, a narrative temperate region—which aligns most closely with the narrative ecology of Wisdom River, considering the sociopolitical realities surrounding the organization—allows a wide variety of narratives to grow together. Alternatively, a narrative monoculture is guided by a few master narratives and has no space for counter-narratives to grow roots. While none of these archetypal narrative ecologies can exhaustively encompass the material realities of everyday life, they do offer a necessary complication of the binary between master narratives and counter-narratives. Instead of denying this binary, Gabriel expanded it by introducing a plurality that creates space for the multiple truths present in the lived narratives of people and places.

To further explicate how narratives interact with each other, Gabriel centered nostalgia narratives, specifically juxtaposing sentimental nostalgia and aggressive nostalgia: "Sentimental nostalgic narratives are narratives of loss; aggressive nostalgic narratives are narratives of betrayal and fall" (Gabriel, 2017, p. 217). Nostalgia narratives (both sentimental and aggressive) introduce a sense of longing for an idealized past to a narrative ecology, which echoes Wiederhold Wolfe's (2016) description of crisis

narratives. Crisis narratives center on communities that were once whole but have fallen from grace and often blame stigmatized groups and activities (e.g., widespread substance use) for the collapse of the community. Opportunity narratives, on the other hand, identify systemic inequities as the root of disjunction and use those inequities as a starting point to bring a community from disjunction to conjunction (Wiederhold Wolfe, 2016). Thus, instead of perpetuating social issues by blaming individual actors as responsible for a "crisis," opportunity narratives challenge the hegemonic norms that placed individuals in the center of the "crisis" to begin with. Harter et al. (2006) took a similar asset-based approach in explaining the intersection of individuality and context in narrative research, positioning narratives as "constituting complex and sophisticated knowledge of individuals, as well as the lived socio-cultural and political contexts in which individuals (re)create and perform stories" (p. 5). This definition of narrative raises questions regarding how and when individuals choose to (re)create and perform stories, how stigma affects individuals' knowledge and performance, and what level of agency (or lack thereof) individuals have in choosing to share their stories.

In the context of SUD in Appalachia, narratives rooted in crisis language mirror nostalgia narratives in casting people with SUD as the destroyers of bygone Appalachian purity and simplicity. In this sense, seemingly positive narratives of Appalachia as pure, simple, or resilient can be just as harmful as seemingly negative narratives of Appalachia that classify the region as distressed or in crisis.

Narrative Resilience

In line with the contrasting, intersecting, dynamic nature of narrative ecologies and the ability of narratives to hold multiple truths at once, I turn to Okamoto's (2020)

theoretical concept of narrative resilience. According to Okamoto, narrative resilience is an epistemological approach to identity that highlights the roles of place, tragedy, and triumph—all of which are central to the rationale for this dissertation—in the construction of identity. Importantly, narrative resilience views tragedy and triumph as equally important in the construction and understanding of lived experience. Narrative resilience resists the idea that adversity is something to overcome; rather, narrative resilience frames adversity as a natural and necessary part of being human, and therefore an integral element of narrative construction.

Through the conceptualization of narrative resilience, Okamoto redefined the term "resilience" itself. Contrary to definitions of resilience that champion a "return to normal" as the ultimate goal, narrative resilience answers McGreavy's (2016) and Buzzanell's (2010, 2018) calls to explore resilience in light of the lived experiences and narratives that create the need for resilience in the first place. Further, Okamoto (2020) identified the importance of meso-level understandings of resilience that bring macro and micro understandings of resilience into conversation. Ultimately, this kind of meso-level understanding creates space for large-scale, collective narratives of resilience and small-scale, individual narratives of resilience, resulting in a more nuanced definition of what it means to be resilient in a certain community. An understanding of how residents and staff at Wisdom River narratively define resilience may help call into question the ways in which more traditional definitions of "resilience" have been used to gloss over the systemic roots of SUD.

Okamoto also positioned the role of place as integral to analyzing narratives and narrative resilience. Without an appreciation for and understanding of the narrative

histories, cultures, and physical materiality of a place, one cannot understand that place. Accordingly, Okamoto outlined three pillars of narrative resilience: a) an appreciation of action based on the history of place, b) a commemoration of heroes, and c) a strong rooting in pragmatism. Okamoto explicated these pillars through the lens of a nonprofit organization called Sustainable Appalachia (SA), which operates in a community very similar to the community surrounding Wisdom River. SA's history of place centered on the longstanding cultural, economic, and environmental effects of extractive industries like coal and natural gas in Appalachia. Therefore, Okamoto interpreted the individual narratives she gathered during her research with SA based on that salient collective narrative of extraction. While Wisdom River's core mission is not centered on environmental concerns like SA's, the fact that both organizations operate within the broad history of Appalachia suggests that attention to a broad narrative of extraction is warranted in my understanding of the more specific narratives of Wisdom River. Further, this first pillar of narrative resilience offers a rationale for understanding how history of place factors into the narrative ecology of Wisdom River.

Okamoto explained that "a commemoration of heroes" involves elevating the narratives of community members who have done or are doing meaningful, socially conscious work. Harkening back to Gabriel's (2017) narrative ecologies framework, I this attention to commemorating "heroes" added an interesting layer to the narrative ecology of Wisdom River: who is commemorated in the stories shared throughout this research? How do residents define a "hero"? How do board members and staff define a "hero," and how, if at all, do those definitions differ? Finally, narrative resilience's rooting in pragmatism impels researchers to recognize the practical realities of narratives

and incorporate those practical realities—both the tragedies and the triumphs—in social change initiatives. In short, narrative resilience focuses on stories (narratives) of tragedy and triumph (resilience) in order to reimagine what social change and resilience look like for specific communities. This pillar grounded my work with Wisdom River in the conviction that the stories I heard and what I chose to do with them would carry material consequences for the people with whom I interacted.

Because narrative resilience relies on narratives and definitions of resilience that center on place, narrative resilience as a framework could inadvertently suggest that certain communities should be held responsible for finding solutions to issues that were caused by systemic forces outside the community. Okamoto conceded that a potentially harmful narrative of self-sufficiency undergirded the narrative of resilience she uncovered with SA. Similarly, I would argue that communities that have been systemically abused and oppressed have tragedies deeply rooted in racism, sexism, economic inequity, and other forms of social injustice woven inextricably into their narratives. By positioning tragedy and triumph as equally important in the construction of narrative resilience, Okamoto may have inadvertently sidestepped certain components of the visceral reality of oppression, thereby undermining narrative resilience's pillar of pragmatism. That is, if we are to be pragmatic in integrating a community's "history of hardship" into everyday practice (Okamoto, 2020, p. 16), it may be irresponsible to expect community members to hold tragedy and triumph in the same space, especially when the need for triumph came in response to tragedy brought on by oppressive forces outside the community.

Further, though Okamoto, McGreavy (2016), Buzzanell (2010, 2018), and other

resilience scholars have made significant headway in redefining resilience, the term still carries weighty implications. In the context of my research with substance use in Appalachia, I strove to remain aware that "resilience" is a term that has been placed on Appalachian people and people experiencing SUD, often in a negative and condescending way, by people who are not members of either community. Thus, one of my main goals in employing narrative resilience in my research was to understand how people experiencing substance use disorder in Appalachia define resilience, and how those definitions play into their individual narratives.

Drawing narrative resilience into conversation with the narrative ecology framework (Gabriel, 2017), I explored the ways in which master narratives, community narratives, and individual narratives of SUD in Appalachia intersect. Analyzing the power dynamics within these different types of narratives through the place-based lens of narrative resilience added a crucial layer to my understanding of the narratives of SUD in Appalachia. More specifically, approaching the stories that create and are created by the structure of Wisdom River from a critical narrative perspective positions this research to answer McGinty et al.'s (2018) for more nuanced knowledge in applied communication scholarship surrounding SUD organizing practices, which leads me to my first research question:

RQ1: What stories and narratives are at play in the narrative ecology of Wisdom River?

To invoke Fisher (1984) once again, humans are inherently storytellers; when we tell our stories, we implicitly and explicitly tell others who we are. Fisher argued that we are *homo narrans*—we narrate our realities and our identities into being. Part of the

rationale for this project is to explore how individual narratives, or life stories, influence what it means to experience SUD in Appalachia. The stories that create the narrative ecology of Wisdom River—stories of resilience, tragedy, triumph, place—all create and are created by the identities of the people who claim connection to Wisdom River. Thus, in the next section, I explore the ways in which narratives of SUD interact with the construction of identity.

Identity

Attention to the ways in which individuals experiencing SUD in Appalachia construct, narrate, and make sense of their identities is crucial to challenging the silencing and dehumanizing aspects of the master narratives of SUD in Appalachia. As I asked people at Wisdom River to share their stories with me, inherent in that request was an understand that they would be sharing pieces of their identity with me. As such, I strove to avoid defining or assuming any parts of their identity for them. So, part of my rationale for exploring identity construction in this study was to invite participants to tell me, in their own words, who they are.

Further, I sought to understand how people at Wisdom River incorporate others' stories—master narratives that involve pieces of their identities, or simple stories that others tell them or tell about them—into the construction of their identity. More specifically, I was interested in how stigma is defined by and for people at Wisdom River. A significant process in stigma management is the individual's decision to decide whether to accept the socially constructed definition of a certain stigma and whether to incorporate that definition into one's identity (Meisenbach, 2010). So, as I asked residents and staff of Wisdom River to share the narratives that influence who they are, I

paid attention to the ways in which stigma was defined, negotiated, accepted, and rejected in those narratives.

Closeting and disclosure—decisions regarding concealing and revealing sensitive or private information—are also salient factors of identity management when it comes to socially stigmatized identities. Attention to the ways in which residents and staff members of Wisdom River negotiate closeting and disclosure provided relevant insight into the agency (or lack thereof) that people in recovery communities have in disclosing the parts of their identity that relate to their substance use.

This section on identity literature is divided into five subsections. The first three subsections outline three foundational theories in the study of identity from a communication perspective: social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), communication theory of identity (Hecht, 1993), and co-cultural theory (Orbe, 1998). These theories shape my broad understanding of identity and serve as the basis for the more focused theories and concepts I drew on as I attended to certain aspects of identity construction throughout the course of this dissertation.

Building on these foundational theories, the latter two subsections detail the specific tenets of identity research that shaped my engagement with data during my immersion in the narrative ecology of Wisdom River. Specifically, Smith's (2007) explication of stigma communication, Meisenbach's (2010) stigma management communication model, Okamoto and Peterson's (2021) concepts of resurrected and appended identities, and Dryregrov and Bruland Selseng's (2021) differentiation between interpersonal and intrapersonal stigma undergird my approach to the potentially stigmatizing role that SUD plays in the construction of identity. Then, McDonald and

colleagues' (2020) critical approach to closeting and disclosure orients me to attend to the power dynamics at play in the negotiation of potentially stigmatized facets of identity at Wisdom River.

Social Identity Theory

Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social identity theory (SIT) serves as the foundation for many modern theories of identity in the field of communication. SIT examines the interaction between one's personal identity and one's identification with a social group or groups and relies on three general assumptions: (1) self-esteem and a positive self-concept are key factors in an individual's identity formation; (2) societal evaluation of the groups to which one's social identity is tied determine whether that social identity is positive or negative; (3) social comparisons between one's own group and relevant outgroups determine an individual's evaluation of their own group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Further, SIT posits three stages of identity construction: social categorization, social identification, and social comparison (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The social categorization stage serves as an organizing tool for our own identities and the identities of others; as we categorize ourselves and others into social groups, we define appropriate behavior based on the norms of the group with which we identify and we create assumptions and predictions for how others will act. Drawing on the first assumption that self-esteem and self-concept are crucial identity factors, the social identification stage involves meshing one's self-esteem and self-concept with the values of the group. Finally, social comparison underscores the ingroup/outgroup binary on which SIT rests. In order to maintain one's own positive self-concept and the positive self-concepts of

fellow group members, individuals draw comparison between their ingroup and outgroups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

In short, SIT posits that people construct their identities around the groups they belong to and use the norms of those groups to understand (and judge) members of other groups, which creates a strong "us versus them" binary. According to SIT, we emphasize similarities between ourselves and other members of our ingroup(s) while simultaneously emphasizing differences between ourselves and members of outgroups. In line with Hecht (1993), I believe the stark ingroup/outgroup binary on which SIT rests is too rigid and simplistic to fully encapsulate identity construction. Nevertheless, this theory is a necessary foundation for the identity theories from which I draw more heavily, and the ingroup/outgroup binary is useful in analyzing narratives of SUD from different groups. Similarly, SIT provides a framework with which to explore the nuances and tensions of individuals' membership in multiple groups (e.g., identifying as a person who no longer uses substances while also subscribing to the "once an addict, always an addict" mentality of many 12 Step programs).

Communication Theory of Identity

Drawing on SIT's conception of social categorization and intragroup membership, Hecht's (1993) communication theory of identity (CTI) views internalized societal norms and ingroup/outgroup dynamics as central to identity formation. However, CTI theorizes beyond SIT's vision of communication as a product of identity to define identity as "the multilayered ways that individuals and communities socially construct themselves" (Hecht & Choi, 2012, p. 138). One of CTI's main contributions to the field of identity is this focus on identity as a layered concept, citing four interdependent layers of identity:

personal, enacted, relational, and communal (Hecht & Lu, 2014). Personal identity aligns most closely with more mainstream definitions of identity in that it encapsulates an individual's image of themselves. Enacted identity focuses on interactions between the individual and the society around them and involves the co-creation and exchange of meaning. Relational identity is formed on three levels: the internalization of others' opinions, the formation of relationships with salient others (e.g., parents, spouses, friends), and the creation of an identity based on those relationships. Finally, communal identity is a society's conception of a group's identity. Communal identity is different from an individual's identity as a member of a group in that it comprises "the general or collective agreement about what defines a group of people in society" (Hecht & Lu, 2014, p. 4). Communal identity is particularly interesting to explore in the context of SUD in Appalachia since stereotypical narratives of SUD and Appalachia have long been defined by outgroup members. CTI specifies that communal identity is an identity layer held by ingroup members that "bonds [members] together" (Hecht & Lu, 2014, p. 4), but concedes that communal identities often manifest as stereotypes. So, I examine how the communal identities I encountered in my research formed and which systems of power are privileged in those identities.

The interdependence of identity layers also gives rise to identity gaps, which Jung and Hecht (2004) define as "discrepancies between or among the four frames of identity" (p. 268). The dialectical tensions between the four layers of identity are virtually unavoidable, but the gaps created by those tensions are not inherently negative. In fact, contradictions between identity layers reinforce the dynamic and fluid nature of identity (Jung & Hecht, 2004), creating space for a more wholistic picture of identity as a messy,

multifaceted, remarkably human experience.

CTI's conceptualization of identity as layered positions identity as a complex, dynamic, ever-evolving experience, rather than as a static destination to be reached. The idea of identity layers also disrupts the tendency of other identity theories to homogenize the identity of entire groups, which lends CTI to the disruption of narratives that hinge on one singular "Appalachian culture." Further, whereas earlier scholars viewed identity as a predictor of communication behaviors, CTI hinges on the belief that communication is identity and identity is communication (Hecht, 2015). This co-constitutive relationship between communication and identity, coupled with Hecht's (2015) position that "identity is experienced in multiple ways" position CTI as a useful tool in deconstructing the narratives that cast people with SUD as wholly defined by their addiction (p. 179). Further, the interdependence of CTI's four layers of identity suggests that "a person's personal identity cannot be examined without considering how society defines the identity and how others view the identity" (Hecht & Lu, 2014, p. 4). This interdependence is crucial in understanding how certain identities become stigmatized and how people navigate stigmatized facets of their own identities, which positions CTI as an integral framework for this project. However, CTI as it stands does not address questions of power and material consequences of the stigmatization of certain identities to the extent necessary for this project. To complement CTI's layered approach to identity and to address the power dynamics and imbalances in identity construction, I turn to Razzante and colleagues' extension of Orbe's (1998) co-cultural theory.

Co-Cultural Theory

In its original conception, co-cultural theory explored how people in marginalized

and stigmatized groups communicate and negotiate their identities (Orbe, 1998). In particular, co-cultural theory advanced the notion that six factors shape the decision-making process of people in non-dominant groups, and "two of the six factors, communication approach (non-assertiveness, assertiveness, and aggressiveness) and preferred outcome (assimilation, accommodation, and separate), interact to produce nine communication orientations" (Razzante et al., 2021, p. 231). In addition to communication approach and preferred outcome, Orbe (1998) also posited that field of experience, abilities, situational context, and perceived costs and rewards shaped non-dominant groups' communication decisions.

Importantly, co-cultural theory resists the idea that all members of a certain marginalized group will have the same experience of identity construction. Harkening back, once again, to one of the convictions that underlies this entire project—that the homogenization of experience in the master narrative of SUD in Appalachia is silencing and harming the lives of those affected by that narrative—this facet of co-cultural theory is integral to my approach to understanding the construction of identity as it pertains to SUD at Wisdom River.

Razzante and colleagues (2021) introduced the perspective of dominant group identity formation to add depth to the complex relationship between dominant and marginalized identity formation in Orbe's (1998) original conception of co-cultural theory. Interestingly, whereas co-cultural theory focuses on the *preferred outcome* (i.e., separation, accommodation, or assimilation), dominant group theory is concerned with *interactional outcomes* (i.e., reinforcing, impeding, or dismantling oppressive structures). Moreover, in Razzante and colleagues' (2021) iteration, an explicit focus on the role of

hegemony in identity construction creates space for stigma to be understood as a layer of identity construction. Razzante and colleagues also drew on intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) to underscore the importance of recognizing facets of identity that are bound in power and/or disadvantage, especially when discussing identity in social change and social justice contexts.

By positioning socio-cultural context as key to identity construction, Razzante and colleagues (2021) also positioned place and history as central components of identity, which is uniquely important when discussing identity construction in Appalachia (Okamoto, 2020). Of particular relevance in the intersections of place, identity, and social issues in Appalachia is Okamoto's conception of narrative resilience: "a place-based form of sensemaking that reflects the intertextuality of identity" (p. 2). Narrative resilience challenges traditional understandings of resilience and underscores the intersections of place, stigma, and lived experience in the construction of identity. Narrative resilience also brings tragedy and triumph into conversation with one another and casts both as equally important in challenging dominant stigmatized narratives and bringing about social change.

Stigmatized Identity

Literature on the reality of stigma and stigmatizing language around SUD abounds (see Ashford et al., 2018; Barry et al., 2014; Dryregrov & Bruland Selseng, 2021; Judd et al., 2021), but the extent to which people experiencing SUD incorporate stigma into the construction of their individual and group identities has not been widely explored from a communication standpoint. Substance use falls outside of most mainstream definitions of "normal" life (Wangensteen et al., 2020), which suggests that

residents of Wisdom River may be perceived as stigmatized by those outside the organization. Drawing on the factors of SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) that elevate societal perceptions as significant in identity construction, it is important to understand how residents of Wisdom River interpret other people's perceptions of them and how those interpretations factor into their identity construction and their evaluation of their position as organizational members of Wisdom River. Similarly, in conversation with Hecht's (1993) communal layer of identity, understanding the role of stigma in how members of Wisdom River collectively define what it means to be part of the organization—and part of the larger SUD and recovery community in Anderson County—helps illuminate some of the ways in which master narratives and individual narratives interact in the construction of identity.

Goffman (1963) situated stigma as a communicatively constructed and managed phenomenon. Stigmatized people are discounted and reduced to subhuman status in the minds of those who live less stigmatized lives, and the less-stigmatized define and perpetuate stigma through communication with each other and with the people they aim to stigmatize. Smith (2007) centered the communicative aspect of Goffman's definition of stigma in her explication of stigma communication. Salient to the current discussion are Smith's definitions of marking, entativity, and responsibility. Marking arises from stigma messages in which dominant groups construct and perpetuate markers that categorize stigmatized people "for quick recognition, learning potential, and suggested social response" (Smith, 2007, p. 468). Markers exist on a spectrum of visibility; more visible markers are harder to conceal, so people with more visible markers are automatically more easily stigmatized. Marking leads to entativity, which sets a group

apart from "normal" culture, defines the group by certain markers associated with certain stigma(s), and assigns all members of the group a common fate (Smith, 2007, p. 469). Finally, in stigma communication processes, responsibility refers to the assumption that stigmatized people are responsible for their own stigmatization based on choices or moral shortcomings.

Building on Smith's (2007) work, Meisenbach (2010) forwarded a theory of stigma management communication (SMC). Extending the concept of marking, Meisenbach outlined different types of stigma that can be communicated through stigma messages (physical, social, and moral) and argued that types of stigma can overlap. Broadly, SMC is organized around two criteria: an individual's decision to accept or reject the public perception of the stigma and an individual's attitude toward whether the stigma applies to them. Based on these criteria, Meisenbach forwarded six SMC strategy categories: accepting, avoiding, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, denying, and ignoring/displaying, all of which can be further refined into subcategories. For example, stigmatized individuals who both accept the public perception of the stigma attached to their identity *and* accept the application of the stigma to their sense of self may engage in the *accepting* strategy of *displaying* or *disclosing* the stigma. To bring this concept into the context of SUD, we can recall Galinsky et al.'s (2013) position that people who are experiencing or have experienced SUD may refer to themselves as "addicts" or "junkies" as a subversive power strategy. Alternatively, stigmatized individuals who accept the public perception of a stigma but deny that the stigma applies to them may engage in the *avoiding* strategy of *hiding the stigma attribute.* In the context of SUD, this strategy is illuminated by Judd et al.'s (2021) finding that stigma often

discourages people from seeking treatment.

Further, the foundation of SMC lies within the stigmatized person's perception of stigma rather than public or political perception of stigma. By shifting the focus from the stigmatizer to the stigmatized, SMC avoids the marginalizing stigmatized/un-stigmatized binary (Meisenbach, 2010). In other words, SMC is mindful of the power dynamics inherent to stigma communication and stigma management and commits to avoid perpetuating the marginalizing power of stigma messages. These orientations toward stigma are a helpful lens through which to interpret the extent to which residents and staff members of Wisdom River incorporate stigma into the construction of their identities.

Okamoto and Peterson (2021) drew from SMC in their analysis of the role that nonprofit organizations play in (de)constructing stigmatized identities. The authors found two ways in which the nonprofit in their study used membership negotiation to facilitate stigma identity management. The first, which they termed resurrecting of latent identities, "helps facilitate a scaffold to strengthen an already existing identity" (p. 13). This strategy encourages members of an organization to explore and build on "alternative identities" rather than allowing society to define their identities based on the facets of their identities that mainstream discourse has deemed stigmatized (p. 8). In the context of my immersion at Wisdom River, this strategy supports my rationale for approaching this study from a narrative perspective: as residents and staff members narratively construct and share their identities, the possibility for new normals (Harter et al., 2022) that resist the negative effects of stigmatizing discourse emerge. The second strategy, appending identities, "encouraged members to think about, and provided avenues for, performing their identities in new ways" (Okamoto & Peterson, 2021, p. 10). Residents of Wisdom

River engage in appending their identities both theoretically, as they restructure their realities as people in recovery, and literally, as they begin the process of finding employment, looking for more permanent housing, negotiating child custody agreements, etc. This concept was especially salient as I asked residents and staff members of Wisdom River to define recovery in their own words.

These theories related to stigma, stigma communication, and stigma management provide a link between a broad communicative approach to stigma and a scholarship on stigma that focuses more explicitly on substance use. Barry et al. (2014) found that Americans reported feeling more wary of people with SUD than of people with other mental illnesses, despite SUD being documented in the DSM-5. Further, Dyregrov and Bruland Selseng (2021) found that families who lost loved ones due to substance-related deaths received myriad stigmatizing comments, including attacks on the morality of the deceased and suggestions that death was the only logical outcome for the choices they made.

Importantly, stigma surrounding SUD can arise from different sources for different reasons, many of which intersect with and co-construct each other (Matthews et al., 2017). Dryregrov and Bruland Selseng (2021) differentiated between interpersonal and intrapersonal stigma: interpersonal or social stigma arises from the perpetuation of stereotypes and discrimination against certain groups, and intrapersonal or self-stigma is the internalization of interpersonal stigma by members of stigmatized groups. Recalling the criteria for Meisenbach's SMC strategies, interpersonal and intrapersonal stigma likely play significant roles in how people experiencing SUD choose to manage and define the stigma attached to their identities. One example of the interplay between

interpersonal and intrapersonal stigma is Judd and colleagues' (2021) finding that the terms "addict" and "addiction," when used by outgroup members, are uniquely stigmatizing to people with SUD. Participants explained that those terms elicit assumptions that do not reflect their identities (e.g., dangerous, uneducated, unemployed), demonstrating that the internalization of social stigma around SUD has a significant effect on the lived experience of people with SUD (Judd et al., 2021).

Both interpersonal stigma and intrapersonal stigma are socially constructed and highly dependent on context (Dryregrov & Bruland Selseng, 2021), which suggests that the unique sociocultural context of Appalachia would affect how people at Wisdom River experience and understand their own identities in relation to the stigmas constructed by master narratives of Appalachia and SUD. Skinner and Franz (2019) suggested that the stigma surrounding Ohio—and Appalachia by proxy—as a hub of SUD has the potential to be turned into a strength rather than a weakness. In collecting stories from people with first- and second-hand experience with SUD, the authors laid a foundation to begin shifting the master narrative of substance use in Appalachia from one of defeat to one of power and hope.

In a comprehensive review of stigma literature, Zhang and colleagues (2021) problematized the history of stigma research, positing that the stigma categories on which scholars have built for decades have reached their enabling limits and are now constraining research on stigma. Zhang and colleagues argued that research must stretch across the boundaries of individual experience of stigma to encompass "how individuals, organizations, occupations, and industries become stigmatized and how their stigmatization emerges, transfers, is maintained, or removed" (p. 45). Zhang and

colleagues' novel framework for stigma research links stigma, disclosure, closeting, and identity as they work toward enabling scholars to look at stigma from multiple angles.

In line with Zhang and colleagues' multidimensional approach to stigma, I aim to examine the intersections of identity and place in my exploration of narratives of SUD in Appalachia. Further, I aim to problematize the tendency of researchers to label certain identities as stigmatized, as this labeling can—and often does—lead to the perpetuation of the very stigma those researchers purport to challenge. Finally, by questioning the roots of stigma research, Zhang and colleagues create space for questions of agency regarding the definition and disclosure of "stigmatized" identities.

Identity Disclosure

Crucial to any conversation on identity management is the question of disclosure, which Petronio and Durham (2015) defined in communication privacy management theory (CPM) as "the process of revealing private information, yet always in relation to concealing private information" (p. 336). This definition offers a framework to explore how and why people decide whether to share private information. When people do share private information, the person(s) with whom they share become co-owners of that information. Co-owners must then engage in boundary negotiation, or decisions regarding the management of the private information moving forward (Petronio & Durham, 2015). Decisions surrounding disclosure are less straightforward when power dynamics are taken into consideration, which is an important factor in disclosure of identity markers that may be stigmatized.

In taking a critical approach to conceptions of disclosure, McDonald et al. (2020) expanded some of CPM's core components by highlighting the impact of power

dynamics and agency surrounding disclosure. McDonald et al. positioned closeting, which they defined as "the communication process through which individuals navigate the concealment and revelation of stigmatized, invisible identities" (p. 85), as a vital area of study in conversations about disclosure of stigmatized information. Given that the aim of my dissertation is to understand how people experiencing SUD in Appalachia conceptualize their identities in relation to the highly stigmatized master narratives of SUD and Appalachia, the first five axioms of McDonald and colleagues' work are particularly salient:

> Axiom 1: Closeting processes are negotiated through interaction. Whether a difference is revealed or concealed is not solely an individual's decision.
>
> Axiom 2: Coming out of the closet—revealing difference—can have both extreme negative consequences and positive impacts.
>
> Axiom 3: Individuals may not always know whether they are in or out of the closet in any given context, because someone else may have outed them, perhaps without their consent.
>
> Axiom 4: For individuals whose differences are invisible, non-normative, and stigmatized, negotiating closeting processes is a constitutive feature of everyday interactions.
>
> Axiom 5: Although the term "closeting" derives from LBGQ people's experiences, it has implications for all forms of difference that are invisible, non-normative, and stigmatized in a given context. (McDonald et al., 2020, pp. 88-89)

McDonald and colleagues' approach diverges from traditional conceptions of closeting in that it consciously accounts for agency (or lack thereof), ambiguity, and the multiplexity

of human identity. Recalling Judd et al.'s (2021) finding that perceived and experienced stigma surrounding SUD often leads to concealment (or closeting) and reluctance to seek treatment or other forms of support, McDonald et al.'s (2020) attention to power dynamics could play a crucial role in the construction of SUD disclosure processes.

Applying these axioms to Wisdom River is a collaborative and emergent process, as each resident and staff member likely has a different definition of what constitutes "closeted" information. Broadly, however, it is worth noting that residents have to engage in a certain level of disclosure (e.g., their history with substance use, a self-analysis of which recovery strategies have and have not worked in the past, the reasons behind their interest in Wisdom River) in order to live at Wisdom River. Staff members often serve as intermediaries between residents and case workers, potential employers, doctors, etc., so the information shared by residents during the application process and during everyday conversation may be disclosed without residents' explicit consent. Further, one of the core tenets of 12 Step ideology is that anything shared during a 12 Step meeting is not to be shared outside the meeting (Weichelt, 2015), which suggests that closeting and disclosure negotiations may look different during meetings than they do outside of meetings. This separation is complicated by the fact that residents of Wisdom River do not just see each other at a meeting once a week; they live together, and the lines between different disclosure rules may blur.

McDonald et al. (2020) also drew from queer theory in defining difference and the implications of disclosure regarding different, non-normative, and stigmatized identities. Queer theory conceptualizes difference as inseparable from power (McDonald, 2015), which creates space for conversations about the unique nature of disclosure of

difference. Further, McDonald et al. (2020) echoed Butler (1990) in a call to deconstruct existing categories of difference instead of trying to understand experiences of difference through preexisting categories defined by normative powers. So, instead of examining stigma-related disclosure processes through the lens of normative assumptions about disclosure, McDonald and colleagues' (2020) critical approach to closeting and disclosure offers an avenue for exploring stigma disclosure in a way that sufficiently attends to power dynamics and the complexity of lived experience.

At Wisdom River, one salient layer of difference that affects closeting and disclosure processes is the simple difference between those who leave at the end of the day and those who stay. As a Level Two recovery residence, no Wisdom River staff members live on site. So, the only people who would list Wisdom River's address as their current address are residents who are in the relatively early stages of recovery. Job applications, medical forms, rental applications, custody negotiations, etc. all require an address, and when one's address discloses a potentially stigmatizing factor of their identity, the power to choose whether/when/how to disclose that information is jeopardized. Even answering a question like, "do you live around here?" may become a complicated process of identity negotiation rather than a simple response. So, expanding the way in which McDonald and colleagues' (2020) work encourages us to depart from normative understandings of identity and stigma, I analyze the extent to which place factors into the narrative construction of identity in the context of substance use in Appalachia.

Place

Following Gieryn's (2000) position that "place is not merely a setting or

backdrop, but an agentic player in the game—a force with detectable and independent effects on social life" (p. 466), I aim to analyze how place acts on and is acted on by the narratives shared in my research. This conceptualization of places as agentic casts places as a structure (Giddens, 1979) that has as much power in shaping and defining reality as the human actors who exist in those places. Thus, central to the foundation of this study is the argument that any conversations regarding social justice that fail to recognize the role of place are incomplete.

Gieryn (2000) outlined three defining features of place—location, material form, and meaningfulness—all of which must be present in research that seeks to avoid reductionist pitfalls (e.g., geographical fetishism, environmental determinism, and/or unbridled social constructivism). In line with Gieryn's trifold explanation of place, Brown et al. (2016) summarized the pivotal role of place in the creation of meaning and identity in Appalachia through a study on environmental agency in Black Appalachian spaces:

> We explore these families' landscapes of meaning in a double sense, both conceptually—examining a life-world constructed and contested through the tensions between life and death, freedom and oppression, ruin and progeny, that emerges from the subjective experience of living in these coal camps—and in the literal sense—drawing attention to the very trees, creeks, and creatures that make up the physical landscape and that have meaning for Appalachia's coal camp Blacks. (p. 333)

Brown and colleagues argued that most scholarship on environmental justice quantifies and maps the disproportionate effects of environmental hazards on people of color, but

scholars stop short of investigating the systemic issues that underlie environmental racism and the erasure of Black places of memory. As a result, environmental awareness and place attachment have been linked to whiteness and environmental degradation and transience have been linked to non-whiteness, thereby perpetuating environmental racism. Brown et al. aimed to center the lived experiences of environmental racism by analyzing the "landscapes of meaning that can emerge from racialized displacement from land and environment" (p. 327). The authors explored collective identity, sense of belonging, and agency as they pertain to one's relationship with meaningful places by drawing on the lived experience of Black Americans who moved to central Appalachia (specifically Harlan County and Letcher County in southeastern Kentucky) during the Great Migration to become coal miners. In so doing, the authors also challenged dominant narratives that homogenize Appalachia as "*hopeless, helpless, homeless,* and *White*" (p. 328, italics in original).

One of the defining moments in many dominant depictions of central Appalachia is the exodus of extractive industries (e.g., coal mining) and the subsequent ruination of coal-dependent towns. Brown et al. explored and complicated the concept of ruination and argue that the tensions between oppression and resilience—tensions crucial to understanding much Appalachian history and culture (see Harkins & McCarroll, 2020)—can be productive and liberating. The majority of this study presents a collective narrative of Black families who were displaced upon the closing of the coal mines in Harlan and Letcher counties and the landscapes of meaning that unfolded as a result of that displacement. Ultimately, Brown et al. offered an opportunity to shift the perspective on the intersections of race and environment: The authors argued that strictly quantitative

and spatial understandings of racialized environmental burdens, while important, often fail to explore the landscapes of meaning created in those tensions. In so doing, the authors positioned place as an indispensable piece of Appalachian narratives and identities.

Within broader conversations of the agency of place, the concept of place attachment adds an interesting layer in the relationship between identity construction and place. Barcus and Brunn (2010) challenged the assumption that people with strong place attachment are automatically less likely to leave certain places than people with weak place attachment. Situating rural areas in the United States as places that have historically engendered strong place attachments and low rates of outmigration, Barcus and Brunn examined the role of transportation and communication technology advancements in recent rises of outmigration and the effects of that outmigration on place attachment. In so doing, Barcus and Brunn problematized the weak/strong place attachment binary by introducing the concept of place elasticity: the ability to be physically distant from a meaningful place while maintaining a strong attachment to that place. Considering the fact that Wisdom River is home to people who were born and raised in Appalachia *and* to people who were not, place elasticity plays a role in how some residents of Wisdom River conceptualize place in relation to their identities.

Place elasticity is comprised of three characteristics: strong place bonds, permanence, and portability. Place bonds can include connections with land/landscape, familial networks, specific places (e.g., rooms or houses), and general environments (e.g., mountains, lakesides, etc.). Permanence refers to the rootedness of a place in a person's psyche and can be concrete (parents or friends still residing in the place) or imagined

(strong, meaningful memories tied to a place). Finally, portability refers to an individual's ability to return to a place, either physically or emotionally. Barcus and Brunn developed this concept while conducting research in eastern Kentucky, and their participants continually reconciled the importance of place in identity formation in Appalachia with the growing tendency of people to leave the places they are attached to in Appalachia.

Similarly, Fraley (2007) deconstructed dominant narratives of Appalachia as a place people strive to leave in light of her own experience as a person who was born in eastern Kentucky, moved out of Appalachia for work, and was spurred to return to Appalachia by a deeply rooted sense of place-based identity. She explored various angles of the significance of place in Appalachia: the implications of the tendency of policymakers to view Appalachia "just a place" (i.e., not recognizable as an underrepresented or marginalized area); the nuances and meanings of specific localities for Appalachian people; the Appalachian tradition of believing in the "power of place" (p. 251); and the popular use of "Appalachia" as a derogatory term. Fraley's account offers insights into the multiplexity of place in Appalachian history and culture and how the meaning of place has been co-opted and denigrated by people whose understanding of Appalachia is based on misrepresentations of the region.

Echoing Fraley's argument against Appalachia as "just a place," Perdue (2018) drew connections between the decades of rampant environmental extraction in Appalachia and the relatively recent shift toward siting prisons in "spaces with long legacies of strip coal mining" (p. 178). Perdue highlights the pattern of dominant powers viewing Appalachia as valuable only insofar as its land can produce natural resources;

once the land is exhausted, the entire region is expendable. Perdue argued that this way of thinking translates to the dehumanization of incarcerated individuals who are forced to live on land that has been poisoned by extractive industry: expendable people living on expendable land. This connection centers the significance of place in a unique way, underscoring the physical and psychological connection between people and land.

For all the positive aspects of recognizing the agency of place, it is crucial to avoid falling into an idealistic view of place as inherently benign. After all, if place has agency, it must have the potential for harm. According to Gieryn (2000), "place sustains difference and hierarchy both by routinizing daily rounds that exclude and segregate categories of people, and by embodying in invisible and tangible ways the cultural meanings vicariously ascribed to them" (p. 474). This perpetuation of difference and hierarchy and its effects on certain identities is exemplified in the normative separation of public space as masculine and private space as feminine, class-based spatial categorizations like "urban" and "rural," and zoning regulations that determine who is "allowed" to live where (Gieryn, 2000). In the context of my research site, the rules, expectations, norms, and overall structure of Wisdom River—and the ways in which they uphold hierarchy—must be acknowledged as I analyze the data that emerges throughout the course of my research. Further, considering the deep historical connection between gender roles and space (see Ewalt, 2016; Gieryn, 2000; Whitson, 2017), the classification of Wisdom River as a women-only recovery house with a staff and board of directors comprised mostly of women highlights the agency of place in important ways.

Summary and Research Questions

Given that a narrative approach to identity assumes that identities are

communicatively constructed based on the stories we tell and the stories we are told (Fisher, 1984), I aim to explore the ways in which people at Wisdom River produce, reify, challenge, and reconstruct the stories that are salient to their identities. Further, drawing on Hecht's (1993) communal layer of identity, I believe it is important to attend to the reciprocal nature of identity construction between the individual members of Wisdom River and the structure of Wisdom River as an organization; that is, I seek to understand how members of Wisdom River act the organizational identity. Considering also the complications inherent in processes of closeting and disclosure at Wisdom River, attention to the macro and micro level power dynamics at play in the organization are key in understanding the nuances of identity construction that are unique to Wisdom River. With these curiosities in mind, I pose the following research question:

RQ2: How do those connected to Wisdom River narratively construct their identities?

Additionally, given the relative lack of scholarship that explicitly links stigma management, substance use, and place in the construction of identity, I pose the following two more nuanced research questions:

RQ2a: To what extent, if at all, do those connected to Wisdom River incorporate SUD and recovery in the construction of their identities?

RQ2b: To what extent, if at all, do those connected to Wisdom River incorporate place in the construction of their identities?

In the following chapter, I offer an expanded description of the setting of Wisdom River, detailing the layout of the house and property, the norms and rules that guide residence, the implications of the organization's identity as a Level Two recovery house,

and the sociocultural context in which the organization was founded and currently exists. I then outline the role of narrative inquiry as it pertains to the unique context of my research with Wisdom River. The latter half of the chapter outlines my specific research methods and concludes with an introduction of the narrators of this project: the women of Wisdom River.

Chapter 3: Inquiry Practices

In this dissertation, I seek to amplify and analyze individual and collective narratives of SUD and recovery in Appalachia in order to identify, understand, and deconstruct the stigma(s) around those narratives. To that end, I begin this chapter by outlining the philosophical commitments that undergird my research regarding the production of knowledge, what counts as knowledge, and what constitutes a socially and culturally responsible researcher-participant relationship.

To uphold these commitments to the people and stories represented in this dissertation, I employed the foundational tenets of narrative research—namely, a focus on lived experience, the amplification of culturally situated knowledge, and the privileging of emergent data over uniform methodology (Josselson, 2011)—as a sensitizing framework for this project. I collected data in the forms of participant observation, in-depth collaborative interviews, participatory action research, and autoethnography. I analyzed these data using tenets of feminist ethnography and critical narrative analysis.

Field Setting

Just outside the city limits of the county seat of Anderson County, Wisdom River sits at the top of a long, steep driveway covered by a canopy of tall trees. In front of the house, a large, rolling field sprawls out from the parking area to the tree-lined perimeter. Whitetail deer frequent the property, and a stray black cat has made itself at home on the front patio since learning that the women at Wisdom River never fail to leave bowls of food and water outside the kitchen door. Two large glass-topped patio tables and a grill decorate the patio to the left of the front door, and a wooden picnic table and a hammock

sit to the right. A concrete walkway leads from the front door to the two-car garage that was recently converted into an extra living space. Recovery meetings and workshops like music therapy and yoga are held in this space, and it also serves as an area where residents can spend time with visitors (e.g., siblings, friends, children, sponsors). Most of these visits, especially when children are involved, must be approved by Ann, the director of Wisdom River.

The front door leads to an eat-in kitchen bathed in natural light from the sliding glass door on the front wall. A large whiteboard calendar listening each resident's work schedule, recovery meeting schedule, doctor's appointments, and any other relevant events for the week hangs on the wall above the window seat in the kitchen. Next to the refrigerator, there is a smaller whiteboard that lists which resident is responsible for which household chores for the week. A tall built-in pantry to the left of the refrigerator holds large plastic baskets with residents' names on them to delineate whose food is whose. Adjacent to the kitchen is the large living room, which houses board games, a small television, two couches, two loveseats, the house's communal laptop, and the binder containing rules and expectations for residents of Wisdom River.

At one corner of the living room, a hallway leads to a bathroom, a bedroom, Ann's office, and a door leading to the basement. Ann has a password-protected cabinet in her locked office that contains residents' daily medications, which Ann distributes every day. Various locked filing cabinets in the office hold current and former residents' application information and other pertinent documents (medical histories, court documents, documents of residence from previous treatment centers, etc.). The basement houses two washers and two dryers, a deep freezer, an extra refrigerator, exercise

equipment, and storage space for residents' belongings and general household items (e.g., extra paper towels, toilet paper, etc.). At another corner of the living room, a stairwell leads up to the two other two bedrooms and one bathroom. Each bedroom has two twin beds with matching bedframes, two matching dressers, and two matching nightstands. The back porch, which overlooks a steep, densely wooded hill, doubles as a designated smoking area for residents and visitors.

In the first 30 days of residence at Wisdom River, residents are not allowed to have their own form of transportation (i.e., they cannot have their own car, nor can they carpool with anyone not associated with Wisdom River). For the entirety of their time at Wisdom River, residents must receive a "pass" from Ann to go on any excursions that are not related to work or recovery (i.e., group recovery meetings or meetings with sponsors). Wisdom River staff coordinate transportation for trips to the grocery store, pharmacy, etc., as well as group trips to engage with the Anderson County community. For example, residents recently took a trip to the local middle school to attend an event celebrating Black History Month.

Residents also are not allowed to have a job during their first 30 days at Wisdom River. According to Ann, residents' first 30 days should be focused on settling into their new life and finding ways to continue in recovery. After the 30-day waiting period, Wisdom River partners with organizations geared toward finding jobs for people with SUD, and many residents end up working at local nonprofits and other business that have active relationships with Wisdom River and other social justice-oriented organizations.

Wisdom River is the only Level Two transitional recovery house for women in Anderson County, and one of only two in the tri-county area served by the public works

board dedicated to mental health and addiction services in southeast Ohio. The National Alliance for Recovery Residences (NARR) delineates four levels of recovery housing: Level Four residences are strictly monitored, employ clinical supervision, and offer on-site clinical services; Level Three residences are supervised by full-time administrative staff members who follow specific policies and procedures outlined by state licensure programs and offer connections to recovery services in the surrounding community; Level Two residences typically have one paid staff member (a house manager or senior resident) who monitors residents and enforces house rules; Level One residences are peer-run residences with no formal policies or procedures (National Association of Recovery Residences, n.d.). To be eligible to move into Wisdom River, a potential resident must have completed at least 30 consecutive days at a Level Four or Level Three recovery program. Ideally, after spending an average of six to 18 months at Wisdom River, residents will move on to either a Level One living space or an independent living situation. Wisdom River has three two-bed rooms and houses up to six women at a time. According to Ann, in its five years of existence, Wisdom River has never had an empty waiting list.

Wisdom River is a 12 Step-based program, meaning that their approach to recovery is rooted in the 12 steps for individual recovery developed by Alcoholics Anonymous. According to the organization's philosophy, Wisdom River defines SUD as a "physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual disorder," and recovery as "an individually designed lifelong process best addressed holistically" (About Us, n.d.). 12 Step-based programs are highly structured around certain narratives that draw on Western norms of spirituality (Wiechelt, 2015), specific definitions of addiction and recovery

(Sundin & Lilja, 2019), and membership norms and expectations (Glassman et al., 2021). As such, the narrative construction of the 12 Step program is salient in this project.

The practical application of the 12 Step program at Wisdom River is as follows: The residents have a house meeting every weekday morning in the living room, during which a resident (per the rotating schedule) picks a section of a 12 Step-related book to read aloud. The rest of the meeting focuses on a discussion of that section of the book. Wisdom River hosts two weekly 12 Step meetings in their converted garage, both of which are categorized as open meanings (i.e., open to those who identify as people in SUD recovery and to those who have never experienced SUD). On days when Wisdom River is not hosting a meeting, the residents carpool with a Wisdom River staff member to meetings at different locations nearby. For example, one weekly meeting is held at one of the men's Level Two recovery houses nearby. Because most residents have different work schedules, not every resident goes to every meeting. However, each resident is responsible for attending at least six meetings per week.

Philosophical Commitments

At the outset of any (socially responsible) research project, I believe it is crucial to answer the question, *what counts as data?* Drawing on the methodological training I have received thus far, I see data as any information that reflects, interprets, complicates, and/or illuminates a research site. In the context of the type of research to which I am drawn, I categorize conversations with community members—whether they are semi-structured interviews that are recorded and transcribed or casual conversations in passing—as one of the most salient forms of data in any study. In line with Emerson et al. (2011) and Tracy (2019), fieldnotes from participant observation, reflective field notes,

primary and secondary codes, emergent themes, cultural artifacts, participant-created artifacts, and participant narratives all constitute invaluable data in my mind.

However, in considering what constitutes data from a place of deeper reflexivity, I align myself with Ellingson and Sotirin's (2020) alternative interpretation of this question. Ellingson and Sotirin ask, "What do data do?" and "What are the possibilities for 'making' data?" (p. 1). The authors' rationale for this interpretational shift stems from longstanding disagreements between social constructionist, critical, new materialist, and postqualitative positions on what data are, or whether data even exist. By shifting the focus away from what counts (or does not count) as "data," Ellingson and Sotirin centered the practice of *data engagement*, which "enables qualitative researchers to focus on what is at stake—theoretically, ethically, and methodologically—when researchers do (and are done by) data" (p. 5). I am drawn to Ellingson and Sotirin's approach to data because it elevates the role of collaboration between researcher and participant in very tangible and practical ways. One of the driving forces behind my research is the belief that participant agency and knowledge should be privileged, especially in contexts that involve systemically silenced groups. So, as I engaged in this project with people whose narratives have essentially been told for them by dominant voices, Ellingson and Sotirin's approach allowed me to design my research around collaborative sensibilities.

Data engagement comprises three "elements," or core convictions, regarding data: "that data are *made* rather than found; *assembled* rather than collected or gathered; and *dynamic* rather than complete or static" (p. 5, emphasis in original). The element of making data initially gave me pause, as I tend to bristle against any methodological approaches that position the researcher as the dominant source of knowledge in a

research setting. However, I now interpret the idea that "data do not pre-exist researchers' interpretive engagement" (p. 5) as a way to preserve the reality and humanity of participants' lived experiences. To suggest that data are found instead of made would be to suggest that people's narratives are dormant and static until a researcher swoops in and gives them meaning by categorizing them as data. To view data as *made*, on the other hand, is to value the co-construction of data between researchers and participants and to recognize that the lived experiences that comprise parts of those data exist independently of the researcher's goals and interpretations.

Data as *assembled* speaks to the messy, nonlinear, intersectional nature of data engagement (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020). Ellingson and Sotirin positioned researchers as "integral aspects rather than owners" of data (p. 7), and data as inherently agential in the data engagement process. This conception of data assemblage aligns with Frank's (2010) notion of stories as agential, living, breathing actors in emplotted lives—a conviction that undergirds my approach to narrative data in this study. Further, Ellingson and Sotirin (2020) called on Lather's (1993) view of data as rhizomatic, working "against the constraints of authority, regularity, and commonsense" to create space for creative, critical thought (Lather, 1993, p. 680). Viewing data as rhizomatic creates a parallel between the process of data engagement and the process of living: both processes are nonlinear, intersectional, complex, and multidimensional. Thus, again, Ellingson and Sotirin's approach to data aligns with conceptions of stories and lived experiences—which, I would argue, are inherently rhizomatic—as data.

Positioning data as *dynamic* rather than complete or static reinforces many of the foundational convictions put forth by the first two elements. Ellingson and Sotirin (2020)

celebrated the instability of data, insisting that interpreting data as dynamic allows for multiple interpretations of the same data based on context, such as location and cultural moments. In other words, a researcher may read a transcript or listen to a recording in one setting (e.g., an office) and then again in a different setting (e.g., a coffee shop) and glean vastly different meanings from the same transcript or recording. Further, the dynamic nature of data underscores, again, the agency of data: data are not at the mercy of researchers, they do not bend to the will of researchers, and they are not simply static objects waiting to be found by researchers. Finally, understanding data as dynamic illuminates the "radical specificity" (Sotirin, 2010) of data, which envisions data as unique, unable to be replicated, and necessarily situated in sociocultural context (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020). This view of data negates the tendency of researchers to try to quell the radical nature of data in an attempt to order data into specific, replicable patterns.

In conjunction with the three elements of data engagement, Ellingson and Sotirin offered three ethical commitments to understanding data: a commitment to pragmatism, a commitment to compassion, and a commitment to joy. The overarching goal with these commitments is to instill an awareness in the researcher that "Data are never neutral but always already imbued with discourses of power within local, national, and global contexts that perpetuate massive and tenacious social, economic, and political inequities" (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020, p. 11). This awareness aligns with my own metatheoretical convictions regarding research, which stem from social constructionist, critical, and feminist ontologies.

First, a commitment to pragmatism celebrates the "flexibility and practicality" of

qualitative methodology (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020, p. 11). In calling on Saldaña's (2014) focus on tangible, on-the-ground research and Charmaz's (2014) focus on marginalized communities—both of which have played integral roles in my understanding of the foundations of qualitative research—Ellingson and Sotirin (2020) pointed explicitly to the role that pragmatism plays in conducting ethical, sustainable, social justice-oriented research. Further, Ellingson and Sotirin argued that "a future state of social justice starts in the data, rather than in research outcomes" (p. 12) by offering an example of the role of pragmatism in community-engaged research.

Second, Ellingson and Sotirin's explication of a commitment to compassion is perhaps the most compelling of the three commitments in the context of my research. I believe compassion is integral to honoring the vulnerability and humanity of data, especially when data arise from stories shared by participants. Ellingson and Sotirin argued that compassion necessarily encompasses compassion toward data, which in turn "fosters research attuned to the complexity of material co-existence" (p. 13). This understanding of compassion as reaching beyond empathetic human relationships created space for the multiple, potentially conflicting data that emerged in this project to co-exist and illuminate each other. Further, as I interacted with different stakeholders in the narrative ecology of Wisdom River (e.g., residents, board members, staff), this commitment to compassion held me accountable to a practice of constant reflexivity as I found different avenues for compassion toward each individual participant.

Finally, Ellingson and Sotirin positioned a commitment to joy as a way to engage data deeply, creatively, ethically, and, at times, in risky ways. Joy entails "losing control of the narrative" (p. 14) in an attempt to embrace the agency and dynamics of data. I am

drawn to this last commitment because it complicates the researcher's interpretation of data and invites different ways of knowing, which I believe is crucial when engaging with data that centers on other people's lived experiences. Because Wisdom River, like many recovery-oriented organizations, is rigidly structured in some respects, I am especially drawn to the tenet of creativity in a commitment to joy. That is, I wanted my research to be a creative outlet, not only for myself, but for the people with whom I interacted throughout this project. As I worked to design those creative outlets *with* participants (rather than *for* them), this project took on meanings and forms of life that I never would have imagined on my own. For example, after giving one participant a copy of the transcript of her interview, bound on the edges so it resembled a book about her life, that participant used her transcript to plan and deliver a presentation about her recovery journey at a community-wide AA meeting in uptown Anderson.

Ellingson and Sotirin's approach to engaging data explicitly challenges traditional, empirical, positivist research norms, which I see as one of its greatest strengths. However, considering the hegemony of academia and the tendency of academic organizations to privilege more traditional process of knowledge production, employing Ellingson and Sotirin's description of data engagement could inhibit meaningful research from circulating widely enough to effect macro-level change. That said, I remain (perhaps naively) hopeful that academic culture is shifting, albeit slowly, toward more acceptance and celebration of these types of research methods. Further, I believe that what this approach "lacks" in adherence to traditional academic knowledge production norms it more than makes up for in pragmatism and ethicality. A major interpersonal goal in this project, especially in its early days as I began to be invited into

the Wisdom River community, was to avoid stepping into the role of the arrogant researcher who hoards data for their own gain. My loyalties were—and are still—foremost to the people and communities with whom I research, and Ellingson and Sotirin's approach to data creates space for those loyalties.

Stories as Data

Stories are inherently indicative of broader sociocultural contexts (Harter et al., 2006). Stories cannot be lived, shared, or understood in a vacuum; they reflect the dynamic contexts in which they occur and are imbued with cultural, place-based, highly subjective meaning (Josselson, 2011). As such, interpreting stories as data requires a different level of ethics and a different set of skills than other types of data require (Frank, 2010; Harter et al., 2022). To learn a person's story necessitates familiarity with that person's sociocultural reality and vice versa (Souto-Manning, 2014); to use stories as data responsibly requires responsible immersion in communities (Frey et al., 1996).

The concept of stories as data decenters and humbles the researcher; I am convinced that one can never fully understand or analyze someone else's lived experience, regardless of how well they know the other person or how well versed they are in narrative methodology. Unlike other forms of data that can be compared, tested, proven, stories have a different burden of proof. On one hand, this level of subjectivity raises questions of trustworthiness in interpreting stories as data: Can we trust the storyteller? Can we trust the researcher's retelling of the story? Frank (2010) argued that the *real question* posed by stories is, "What kind of truth is being told?" (p. 5). Frank further explained that stories do not answer that question; instead, stories remind us that we live with "complicated truths" (p. 5). Thus, stories are unique in that they, perhaps

more than any other form of data, demonstrate the multiplicity and complexity of the lives represented in narrative research.

Frank viewed stories as agential and posits socio-narratology as a study of "what the story does, rather than as a portal into the mind of the storyteller" (p. 13). Stories are active in the creation of lives, positioning them as crucial sources of data. Frank also offered the concept of a narrative habitus, which comprises "the collection of stories that interpellate a person" (p. 52). In short, stories are not static collections of words and memories; they create identities. Similarly, stories privilege, define, reflect, and create place in ways that other types of data do not. Cresswell (2015) defined place as "meaningful or lived space, involving meanings, memories, histories, and values" (p. 3)—all of which inherently involves stories and storytelling.

In the context of research with marginalized groups specifically, stories offer unique sources of power, validation, and emancipation. In the form of counter-narratives, stories amplify voices that have been silenced by systemic inequities and hegemonic master narratives (Peterson & Garner, 2019). In the form of historically and culturally conscious autoethnography, stories challenge dominant ways of knowing and privilege localized, place-based knowledge (Fraley, 2007). Through creative forms of storytelling, stories create space for new realities that resist oppressive norms (Harter et al., 2017). Through the lens of narrative ecologies (Gabriel, 2017), stories create, change, sustain, and kill one another, highlighting the intricacies of stories as lives and lives as stories.

Positioning narratives as political and poetic symbolic resources, Harter et al. (2022) offered several defining features and forms of narratives that guide my engagement with stories in this study. In this lens, narrative research involves

"autobiographical stories, cultural scripts, institutional plots, and the process of storytelling," positioning the construction, (re)telling, and enactment of stories as equally relevant (p. 14). Narratives, as defined by this approach, are event-centered, context-dependent, dynamic, and characterized by disruption; they create unique spaces for powerful performance, especially for members of vulnerable and marginalized communities; they illuminate the relationality of coexistence and the social construction of meaning. Importantly, Harter and colleagues resisted the tendency of communication researchers to privilege the orality of stories over the embodied, sensory nature of stories: in this lens, narratives are understood and analyzed based not only on what is said in a story, but how a story is told, when it is told, where it is told, why it is told, who tells it, who hears it, and what emotions the story involves and evokes.

Harter and colleagues offered an extensive list of questions inspired by narrative theory

that give rise to questions like, "Who is not eligible or qualified to act in certain roles?"; "What stories are (re)told in particular contexts until they become taken for granted?"; "To whom are stories told?"; "Whose interests are served (or not) by stories?" (pp. 26-27). As participants shared their stories with me in conversations during participant observation and interviews, these questions sat in the back of my mind as a lens through which more deeply understand the narrators, characters, plotlines, backdrops, sociocultural contexts, emplacements, consequences, and motivations of those stories. I wanted my interactions with the people at Wisdom River to be as natural and unobtrusive as possible, and Harter and colleagues' vision of narrative research provided an avenue for storytelling—one of the most basic tenets of natural conversation—to become a rich

source of data and collaboration between myself as the researcher and participants as co-creators of data.

Data Engagement

Methodologically, my role in the early data engagement portion of my dissertation was a meaningfully involved participant observer, or what Tracy (2019) calls a "play participant" (p. 109). This form of participant observation involves a sort of roleplaying as an active member of an organization or community while still remaining unconstrained by the formality of full membership. So, instead of merely observing and recording fieldnotes on the daily operations at Wisdom River, I was actively engaged—talking, laughing, listening, problem solving, cooking and sharing meals with participants—in order to more fully understand life at Wisdom River.

Papa and colleagues' (2005) analysis of family-style community meals as a path to social justice served as a framework on which I built my research as I began to understand how Wisdom River functions as an organization, both within the substance use/recovery community and in the larger Anderson County community. Papa and colleagues specifically studied the role of a fragmentation/unity dialectic in social change work, which is present at Wisdom River in the sense that the goal of the organization is to equip women to leave the house (fragmentation) by grounding them in a caring, intentional, quasi-familial community during their time in the house (unity). Papa and colleagues emphasized the power of simply *being* with people—engaging in meaningful, unscripted interactions with people in the field, not for the sake of generating useful data, but for the sake of getting to know people as people (as opposed to subjects to be studied). This approach facilitates a deeper and more honest understanding of the field

setting as the researcher gains natural insights into the narrative structuring of the lifeworld of the research site (Papa et al., 2005). Practically, I this facet of my research unfolded in the form of simple acts like sitting in the kitchen with the residents as they cooked dinner, reading a book as we all sat out on the patio on a sunny afternoon, and, importantly, remaining silent when silence was needed.

Ethically and interpersonally, especially during the more involved phases of my research (i.e., during participant observation and interviews), my role with the residents, staff, and volunteers of Wisdom River was first an ally and advocate, then a researcher. I believe this specific order of roles accurately and honestly reflects my intentions within the community throughout the project, which Dillard (2020), Frey (1998), and Sternin and Choo (2000) all regard as crucial to ethical social justice research. This role was be enacted as I got to know the people at Wisdom River, served as an empathetic ear and a sounding board, and listened as they told me how I could be involved in community initiatives that were (and are) meaningful to them.

Participant Observation

Because Wisdom River is first and foremost a home, I strived to remain conscious of how my presence affected the women who live there. So, I eased into participant observation slowly by spending a few hours at the house each week with no set agenda. Following the lead of the residents (i.e., upon invitation for more involved participation), I began attending open AA and NA meetings[2], house dinners, and community engagement events. As I engaged with residents and other people associated with Wisdom River, my main goal in the early stages of participant observation was gain an

[2] Open AA/NA meetings are open to anyone who would like to attend, while closed meetings are open only to people who are experiencing or have experienced substance use disorder.

understanding of everyday life at Wisdom River—the rules and norms that structure life at Wisdom River and the narratives that create, shape, challenge, and reify those rules and norms.

In an effort to avoid embodying the "negative academic" (Glesne, 2016), I avoided the traditional practice of recording field notes on paper during my interactions at Wisdom River. When necessary and appropriate, I recorded jottings—notes consisting of a few words to jog the memory later (Emerson et al., 2011)—on a virtual notepad on my phone, still striving to be as unobtrusive as possible. On my way home from each visit to Wisdom River, I voice recorded fieldnotes and wrote reflections on them later in the day. Emerson et al. (2011) described reflective fieldnotes as crucial to the ethnographic process as they help researchers organize what has been happening during observations and equip them to "participate in new ways, to hear with greater acuteness, and to observe with a new lens" (p. 19).

I also employed Conquergood's (1991) interpretation of embodied ethnography as a practice of reflexivity and deeper field engagement. Conquergood encouraged researchers to invite their senses into the research setting, taking note of what they hear, taste, see, smell, and feel, and analyzing those notes during reflective moments out of the field. These tenets of embodied ethnography align with Tracy's (2019) description of a play participant observer as a form of conscious, deep engagement that creates space for researchers to attune not only to what is going on in front of and around them, but also to what they themselves are feeling in the moment. The kind of participant observation I engaged in was inherently emotional and engendered emotional connection with participants (Tracy, 2019), which accurately reflects the emotional and moral investment

I have in this research. In other words, I already cared about the people I had met at Wisdom River by the time I began participant observation in earnest, and these approaches allowed me to orient my relationships with participants in a way that both reflected my compassion toward them as fellow humans and protected my ethical commitments as a researcher.

While I believe it is inevitable—and important—for my voice and perspectives to enter my research, I believe it is more important for community members' voices and perspectives to be explicitly centered in the analysis and final product of this research. In the mundane process of this research, I was aware of my responsibility to be transparent, honest, and vulnerable with participants if I expected them to be transparent, honest, and vulnerable with me. During my time as a participant observer, I shared some of my own stories as they shared their stories with me, not necessarily for the sake of adding my stories to the body of data, but for the sake of creating and maintaining meaningful relationships with the people in the room with me. After all, they invited me into their home—a space of rest and refuge—and the least I could do was try to keep up my end of the conversations we had there.

I began recording participant observation data the day I received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Ohio University. Between then and the end of data creation, I engaged in approximately 187 hours of participant observation, which included spending unstructured time at the Wisdom River house; attending weekly community dinners; driving residents to and from work, appointments, and errands; and participating in weekly yoga and music therapy classes at Wisdom River.

Interviews

Because I spent a significant amount of time in the field before beginning interviews, and because I claim identities related to Appalachia and substance use, Wiederhold's (2015) cautions surrounding the stance of a "researcher-at-home" influenced my approach to interviewing. Wiederhold explained that scholars who conduct research in communities in which they already have a high level of familiarity run the risk of overidentification with participants, which "can be advantageous but can also cloud judgement, facilitate hasty agreement between researcher and participant interpretations, and diminish critical analysis" (p. 606). Wiederhold turned to participatory action research guided by feminist ethnographic commitments as a way to situate her own local knowledge alongside, rather than on top of, the local knowledge of her participants. In a conscious departure from the limitations of traditional interviewing methods, Wiederhold asked each interview participant to lead a walk through their city during the interview. This practice privileged participant-researcher collaboration, centered the participant's definition of and relation to place, and blurred the lines of agency between participant and researcher.

Following the lead of participants as much as possible (i.e., gauging their level of comfort with me and with this project), I invited current residents and staff, previous residents, and members of the Board of Directors to participate in semi-structured interviews. These interviews centered on participants' narratives and how they interpret their own narratives and the narratives of their community in relation to master narratives about SUD in Appalachia. Interview questions were guided by Souto-Manning's (2014) approach to critical narrative analysis (CNA) in that they focused on eliciting

participants' understandings of power, agency, and the narrative structure of their worlds. Borrowing from Wiederhold's (2015) mobile interviewing design, I asked each participant to decide where they would like to hold their interview. Most current and former residents chose to hold the interview in the converted garage next to Wisdom River – the same space in which residents and community members attend weekly AA and NA meetings, music therapy sessions, yoga classes, and community dinners. I believe conducting interviews in different spaces, especially when those spaces are chosen by the participants, underscores the role of emplacement (Valentine & Sadgrove, 2014) in the construction of identity. Further, this form of participatory action research undergirds my conviction that participants are the experts of their own narratives and of the narratives that emplot their lives (see Frank, 2010).

Interviews for each category of participants involved a common interview guide based on observations I made during my time in the field, but also allowed room for topics to emerge based on the conversations that occurred during the interviews (Appendix A; Appendix B) (Charmaz, 2014). Similarly, as Souto-Manning (2014) emphasized the danger of imposing one's own definitions of critical awareness, emancipation, and/or agency onto participants, I included simple probing questions that encouraged participants to define those concepts for themselves. I conducted a total of nine interviews, averaging approximately 70 minutes per interview. Interview participants included two current residents, two founders/current board members, three staff members, the current director of Wisdom River, and a medical student who attends weekly NA meetings at Wisdom River. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed using Otter transcription software and coded through NVivo software.

Autoethnography

I engaged in autoethnography throughout the course of my dissertation in an effort to recognize and own the role my own body and narrative play in this research. Holman Jones et al. (2013) defined autoethnography as an artistic and analytical practice of storytelling that navigates "how we come to know, name, and interpret personal and cultural experiences" (p. 1). Autoethnography disrupts traditional academic norms (Chawla & Atay, 2018), redefines and complicates what experiences count as "normal" (Michael, 2021), and invokes feminist and postcolonial theory by rendering the personal as political (Chandrashekar, 2018).

The practice of autoethnography in this project was beneficial in two ways: first, it created opportunities to explore performative writing, which allowed me to communicate my experiences in the field more accurately and fully than traditional academic writing alone would have (Ellingson, 2009; Hamera, 2011). Second, and perhaps most importantly, engaging autoethnography allowed me to situate myself in the research in an ethical way. Chawla and Atay (2018) argued that autoethnography re-centers the ethnographer in a way that allows the researcher to analyze their own story as an actor in the data. This facet of autoethnography is especially relevant when the researcher has some sort of personal stake in or relationship to the research site, which I do as an Appalachian, a person who grew up around SUD, and as an advocate and ally with the residents of Wisdom River.

While I remain committed to centering the voices of participants in this study, I cannot detach myself from this research. In fact, to do so would be a disservice to participants and to my own morals as a researcher (and as a human). Autoethnography as

a vessel of performance study centers the role of the researcher's body, creating space for emotion and physicality as analytic tools (LeMaster, 2018). Because I am simultaneously on the periphery of this research (i.e., someone who has never experienced SUD) and at the heart of this research (i.e., someone who has been deeply affected by SUD), autoethnography served as a useful tool as I navigated the physical and emotional tensions that arose due to my positionality.

I engaged three autoethnographic practices in this portion of my dissertation. First, drawing on Bhattacharya's (2009) use of ethnodrama in the form of scripted one-act plays, I created a script portraying an imagined conversation between myself (the researcher) and my younger self (the child unwittingly navigating a parent's SUD). Next, I translated Tracy's (2019) narrative mapping process into an autoethnographic tool by creating a narrative map of my body, populated by words and phrases that characterized the early years of growing up with a parent experiencing SUD. Finally, I penned an autoethnographic poem to demonstrate the messy, unraveled "end" of my ongoing experience as the child of a person with SUD.

Data Analysis

My analysis was informed by Tracy's (2019) phronetic iterative approach to qualitative data analysis, Ellingson and Sotirin's (2020) conception of data as dynamic, and Souto-Manning's (2014) description of critical narrative analysis (CNA). Harter and colleagues' (2022) guiding questions for narrative research nuanced my engagement with CNA.

Phronetic Iterative Approach

Tracy's (2019) phronetic iterative approach proffers two stages to qualitative data

analysis: primary cycle coding and secondary cycle coding. Before I began conducting interviews, I analyzed participant observation field notes and reflective memos in three rounds of primary coding to identify broad, surface-level codes that would inform the construction of my interview guides. Primary cycle codes answer the question, "what is happening in the data?" to provide a foundation for more in-depth, contextual codes in later coding cycles. Each round of primary cycle coding resulted in more descriptive, precise categorization of what was occurring in my participant observation data (Tracy, 2019). The primary cycle codes that most significantly informed my interview questions were community, internalized stigma, relational dynamics, and "bottoms" (i.e., life events/stages that participants characterized as turning points in their SUD and recovery journeys).

After I conducted all the interviews, I listened to each recording in the order each interview was conducted and read along with the transcript. I listened in chronological order in an attempt to pinpoint any information/stories I had absorbed that subsequently colored my interpretation of stories I heard in later interviews. Because Wisdom River is such a close-knit community, there was significant overlap in stories shared during interviews, and the similarities and discrepancies in different narrations of the same story held import for my overall understanding of what it means to be connected to Wisdom River. I then listened to each interview again without the transcript in front of me—mostly on walks through Anderson—in order to focus on the tones, inflections, silences, laughs, and hesitations of the narrators of each interview.

Once the potential for primary codes was exhausted, I examined those codes for salient patterns within and across data sets and categorized those codes into "interpretive

concepts" (Tracy, 2019, p. 194). The secondary coding cycle takes on an iterative nature similar to that of the primary coding cycle: I re-read and cross-examined data sets in search of emergent themes in order to produce a nuanced portrayal of participants' experiences (Tracy, 2019). After engaging deeply with the narratives and stories shared by participants, *12 Step narratives, narratives of care, and narratives of success* became the three guiding themes of my analysis of my first research question. Within those narratives, as I paid closer attention to participants' construction and narration of their identities, *SUD and recovery as identity fracture*, *SUD and recovery as wholeness,* and *the agency of the physical space at Wisdom River* shaped my understanding of identity construction in response to my second research question and subquestions.

In the context of my research, Tracy's approach served only as a concrete starting point for analysis. Recalling the philosophical commitments listed above, I relied on Ellingson and Sotirin's (2020) approach to data as dynamic as a sensitizing conviction throughout my data analysis to temper the rigid, mechanical nature of Tracy's (2019) process. By combining these approaches, I aimed to privilege reflexivity and sensitivity to the culturally situated knowledge that emerged through participants' narratives. Further, to uphold my commitment to center the voices of participants as much as possible, I turned to critical narrative analysis and critical participatory action research to theoretically ground my analysis.

Critical Narrative Analysis

In an effort to create a framework to examine the ways in which individual narratives and societal and institutional narratives act on each other, Souto-Manning (2014) proposed a collaboration between critical discourse analysis (CDA) and narrative

analysis, which she termed critical narrative analysis (CNA). CNA employs the foundational tenets of CDA—namely, attention to institutional and societal power imbalances—which, according to Souto-Manning, often are absent in narrative analysis: "personal narratives are constructed and situated in social and institutional realms—yet by and large, they are analyzed apart from issues of power and/or institutional discourses" (p. 163). Conversely, the implementation of narrative inquiry practices in conjunction with CDA addresses the tendency of CDA to focus too heavily on meta-narratives and unilateral forms of institutional power over individual narratives. Thus, CNA challenges the binary between micro/macro and counter/master narratives, which is a key goal of this dissertation.

Souto-Manning explained that CNA works well with projects based on ethnographic practices because CNA requires the researcher to situate individual narratives within the context of societal and institutional narratives and vice versa. To that end, my analysis was heavily informed by the core tenets of CNA: that individual and societal/institutional narratives should be analyzed in the context of one another; that power structures and agency should be defined by participants; and that the questioning and challenging of taken-for-granted narratives can be a powerful catalyst of social change (Souto-Manning, 2014).

Souto-Manning's (2014) practice of CNA begins during data engagement—in my case, during participant observation and interviews—as the goals of CNA center on the narrators of stories (i.e., participants) critically engaging with, questioning, and challenging their own stories and the stories that construct their social worlds. Souto-Manning's perspective of the role of stories in research overlaps with Harter and

colleagues' (2022) perspective in that they both emphasize the power of stories to disrupt hegemonic norms, create and sustain new normals, and privilege systemically silenced knowledge. Souto-Manning (2014) offered examples of questions from specific studies that have employed CNA, but no universal guiding questions for the practice of CNA. So, given the harmony between Souto-Manning's work and Harter et al.'s (2022) work, I incorporated Harter et al.'s guiding questions for narrative research as I engaged CNA in the analysis of my data. For example, questions like, "How do contexts give rise to particular stories?"; "How does storytelling reveal conditions of its production?"; "What cultural markers of concern are revealed in narratives?" (Harter et al., 2022, pp. 26-27) coalesced with Souto-Manning's (2014) conviction that analyzing the construction of micro and macro narratives together is crucial for any movement toward sustainable social change.

Commitment to Excellence in Interpretive Research

At baseline, in addition to Ellingson and Sotirin's (2020) in-depth guidelines for richly engaging data, I followed Lindlof and Taylor's (2002) explication of the commitments of interpretive research as a guide for determining the strength of interpretive research. Most salient based on the nature of my work were: the privileging of deep understanding of human actions, motives, and feelings; the illumination of how cultural symbol systems are used to attribute meaning to existence and activity; recognition of the interdependence of researcher and participant; preservation of the subjective experience and motivations of social actors; commitment to prolonged immersion; and continuous reflection on the ethical and political dimensions of research activities (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, pp. 11-12).

These commitments were woven throughout my methods as I engaged in research with Wisdom River. My attention to stories as salient forms of data encompassed my commitment to the deep understanding of human actions, motives, and feelings; the intertextuality of macro and micro narratives in CNA involved the illumination of how cultural symbol systems are used to attribute meaning to existence and activity; the collaborative approach I took during the interviewing stage privileges researcher-participant interdependence; my implementation of Harter et al.'s (2022) questions of narrative research preserved the subjective experience and motivation of social actors; my commitment to a prolonged period of engaged participant observation was rooted in my commitment to prolonged immersion; and my attention to the material realities of the stigmatization of SUD and Appalachia, as well as my examination of my own identity as it pertains to SUD and Appalachia, provided a space for continuous reflection on the ethical and political dimensions of research activities.

Tracy and Hinrichs' (2017) "big tent" criteria for excellent qualitative research also factored into my standards of rigor for interpretive research. Those criteria include worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethics, and meaningful coherence (p. 2). According to Tracy and Hinrichs, a worthy topic has cultural, temporal, and social relevance and necessitates deep engagement, which negates studies that center on convenience or opportunity. Further, worthy topics often challenge dominant understandings, theoretical approaches, and/or sources of knowledge production, lending Tracy and Hinrichs' guidelines well to interpretivism with a critical bent. Rich rigor refers to the depth and complexity of description in pursuit of accurate representation of research sites and participants in qualitative research. Sincerity involves

reflexivity, vulnerability, honesty, and transparency on the part of the researcher in order to address biases, backgrounds, and research tactics that may factor into the researcher's interpretation and presentation of data. In contrast to credibility in quantitative research (e.g., replicability, consistency, and validity), Tracy and Hinrichs explain that credibility in qualitative research relies on thick description (Geertz, 1973) crystallization (Ellingson, 2008), multivocality, and member reflection. Resonance is a sort of variation on the concept of generalization common in quantitative research; in qualitative research, generalization (or resonance) refers to the impact the research has beyond the researcher (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017). In other words, resonant qualitative research should positively impact many different stakeholders. Significant contribution varies based on the topic, but the general goal of qualitative research should be to advance knowledge in a certain field.

Tracy and Hinrichs outline four categories for ethical qualitative research: procedural, situational, relational, and exiting ethics. Procedural ethics mainly involve institutional/bureaucratic guidelines, such as participants' right to anonymity and researchers' commitment to avoid falsification. Situational ethics speak to the researcher's ethicality while in the field or while relaying experiences from the field (e.g., deciding when it is or is not appropriate to audio/video record, or which stories to tell and which to keep quiet). Relational ethics involve how a researcher relates to and with participants and center the researcher's awareness of their impact on the lives of those with whom they are researching. Exiting ethics deal with the researcher's departure from the field and their decisions regarding how to portray their findings. Exiting ethics hold particular weight for my research with Wisdom River, as research with stigmatized

and/or marginalized populations has the potential to further stigmatize, marginalize, exploit, and endanger participants if not handled carefully and ethically. Tracy and Hinrichs' final criterion is meaningful coherence, which refers to the "overall consistency, rationality, and soundness" (p. 9) of each facet of a study—the rationale, literature review, data engagement methods, sharing of results, etc.—and the unity among those facets.

In sum, the practicality of Tracy and Hinrichs' "checklist" of criteria, the widely applicable nature of Lindlof and Taylor's (2002) ideological commitments, and the attention to critical sensibilities of Ellingson and Sotirin's (2020) approach to data engagement undergirded my ethical commitments in this project.

Concluding Research

Because of the familiarity I had already gained with the women at Wisdom River by the time I officially began this project, the process of concluding research there is something I did not take lightly. I actively tried to decenter myself in this research, which, on a practical level, meant that any social change that occurred during the course of my research should not have changed in any significant way when I left the research site. The connective thread in my research moving forward will be my desire to help rewrite the narrative of Appalachia. I envision this macro-level change occurring through several iterations of micro-level partnerships with Appalachian communities—which, again, will not hinge on my presence in those communities. I do not see this intentional transience as an excuse to engage in short-term, shallow partnership with communities; rather, I see it as a way to maintain reflexivity and flexibility in my role as a researcher. In other words, it will allow me to recognize when my presence in a community has

reached its enabling potential (Giddens, 1979).

The end of my dissertation process aligned with a responsible end to my time at Wisdom River, as the organization was nearing the end of a major construction project to raise its capacity from six residents to eight. About halfway through the interview stage of this project, the construction on the house precluded my regular Wednesday afternoon visits to Wisdom River. Thus, my main contact with members of Wisdom River for the latter part of this project was through previously scheduled interviews, weekly community dinners, and biweekly 12 Step meetings hosted at Wisdom River. While I personally lamented the end of my lingering in the living room, this shift allowed me to gradually step back from participation at Wisdom River instead of suddenly ripping myself from the organization's everyday narrative.

Introducing the Narrators of Wisdom River

The following chapters draw heavily on the words of the experts in this research: the women of Wisdom River. Chapter Four explores the myriad narratives and stories that comprise the narrative ecology of Wisdom River, and Chapter Five draws on my own story and relationship to SUD to tie together the broad concepts of narrative and identity that structure this dissertation. Chapter Six details the layers of identity at play in the stories and narratives of the women of Wisdom River, and Chapter Seven brings narrative and identity into conversation to discuss the practical and theoretical implications of this project.

Before we forge ahead, I want to introduce the people who have lent their stories to this project, providing just enough context to open Chapter Four without inviting any assumptions or imposing my own interpretation of their identities. An entire chapter of

this dissertation is dedicated to participants' narrative constructions of their identities in their words in an effort to move away from a long tradition of "outsiders" having defined the lives and identities of those who have experienced SUD. So, while I could write paragraphs about my admiration for each of the women I met through the course of this project, I will introduce them as simply as I can: by their pseudonyms and their objective relationship to Wisdom River.

Ann is the first and current director of Wisdom River.

Lorelai and *Peggy* are founding members and board members of Wisdom River.

Hannah and *Nicole* were current residents of Wisdom River at the time of data creation.

Jenna lived at Wisdom River during the first year of its existence and is currently a Peer Support Specialist (staff designation) at Wisdom River.

Scarlett and *Rachel* are current Peer Support Specialists at Wisdom River.

Joey is the COMCorps Health and Wellness Specialist (staff designation) assigned to Wisdom River for the August 2022-July 2023 term.

Chapter 4: The Narrative Ecology of Wisdom River

I'm sitting across from Lorelai in an uptown coffee shop. We're about 25 minutes into our interview and I've asked her to tell me her story. As she winds down the story of her life, I ask her the more pointed question, "How long have you been involved with Wisdom River?"

Lorelai pauses, leans back, and her signature one-sided smile creeps up the left side of her face.

"You don't know the story of Wisdom River?"

"Well, I know bits and pieces, but not the whole thing."

"I'll just start at the beginning, then. It's really something."

***

The story of Wisdom River is layered and complex. Technically, Wisdom River is a Level Two recovery house for women with substance use disorders. Structurally, Wisdom River is a single-family house perched atop a hill overlooking seven acres of land. Geographically, Wisdom River is situated just outside the city limits of Anderson, Ohio in North Central Appalachia. Theoretically, Wisdom River espouses the ideology of 12 Step recovery programs. Narratively, in the words of those whose stories have created and have been created by Wisdom River, it is a home *(Nicole)*; a safe haven *(Ann)*; a dream *(Peggy)*; an answer *(Lorelai)*; a guide *(Hannah)*.

In this chapter, I explore the layered stories and narratives that mingle with the organizational narratives of Wisdom River in response to RQ1: *What stories and narratives are at play in the narrative ecology of Wisdom River?* In line with Gabriel's (2017) narrative ecology framework, this chapter brings participants' stories into

conversation with one another and with the broad societal narratives that weave those stories together. The goal here is not to frame individual stories in direct opposition to master narratives of SUD in Appalachia, nor is it to impose my own interpretation of participants' life stories through the lens of any particular narrative. Rather, I aim to explore how those most intimately involved in the lifeworld of Wisdom River narrate their stories, how those stories coalesce to create narratives, and how external narratives interact with the narratives created within Wisdom River.

As I listened to participants tell their stories, Harrington's (2008) explanation of the interplay between stories and narratives materialized before my eyes. According to Harrington, stories are "living, local, and specific" (p. 24)—temporally bound and concerned with immediate events (see also Frank, 2010). Meanwhile, narratives are "templates: they provide us with tropes and plotlines that help us understand the larger import of the stories we hear, or see in action" (Harrington, 2008, p. 24). Similarly, Gabriel's (2017) narrative ecology framework invites exploration into how different narratives, narrators, and stories mingle to create a narrative lifeworld. In short, narratives help us construct our own stories and interpret the stories that surround us all as we move through our lives, and, more specifically, as those most intimately involved in Wisdom River co-create the organization's lifeworld.

Within the stories of residents, staff, peer support specialists, founders, and board members of Wisdom River lie tropes and plotlines derived from many different narrative templates. I organized these narrative templates around three themes that emerged in response to RQ1: (a) *12 Step narratives*, (b) *narratives of care*, and (c) *narratives of success*. These narratives are not always linear and did not always emerge in the order

listed here in participants' individual stories, but I discuss them in this order in an effort to follow the general narrative arc of Wisdom River's narrative ecology as I understand it. To anchor this chapter in an understanding of what the narrative ecology of Wisdom River looks like on the surface, I open with a verbatim account of the origin story of Wisdom River from the perspective of Lorelai, one of the six founding members of Wisdom River. Then, I walk through the three narrative frameworks that characterized the stories shared with me by the women connected to Wisdom River to build an understanding of how these stories and narratives interact with(in) the narrative ecology of Wisdom River.

Near the beginning of each interview, I made a deceptively complex request: *Tell me your story.* This request was met with silence while, as is the responsibility of any narrator, participants tried to decide where to begin. So, before I move on, I invite you into the silence to ponder how, when, where, why, and with whom you would begin your own story in response to this request.

[…]

The Story of Wisdom River

Lorelai sits forward again, wraps her hands around her quickly cooling coffee

mug, and begins the story of how Wisdom River came to be.

Peggy and I have been doing the jail meeting[3] together for years and years and years. And most of the women who are in jail, awaiting trial or awaiting transfer to the women's prison, are there because of drug or alcohol related offenses. Most of them are clean and sober there. Occasionally, maybe something will slip in, but mostly, they get a handle on it, so they do become clean and sober. They have the option of attending our 12 Step meeting, and so often during those meetings we would hear, "I'm so tired of living like this, I can't do this anymore, but I don't have any place to go." At the time, the Mercy House was the sober living facility for men, but there was nothing in Anderson for women.

So, the MHAS Board—that's the state agency that ensures there are mental health and addiction services in any of the areas they are responsible for—we went to the board

and asked for a meeting to talk about this. So the MHAS Board arranged a huge meeting at the public library, and they invited all the agencies—they invited probation officers, parole officers, the Anderson County prosecutor's office, the university, a number of other individuals in the community to discuss it. The consensus was, "Oh, yeah, that's a problem. It's a need. We need this. We need this. Okay, who wants to take it on?" Nobody raised their hand—except Women's Recovery Collective. That's the name of our group. It took us quite a while—I mean, we're pretty smart ladies, but we don't have the connections. So it took us a couple of years, actually, to organize together, to find a house, all of that. And

[3] Narcotics Anonymous meeting for incarcerated women in Anderson County

then we opened up in April 2018. It'll be five years this April.

And I think the coolest story is that in 12 Step recovery, if you make any decisions, they have to be by consensus. So we got this house, we're opening up, what are we gonna call it? There were like five different names, and we voted, and dwindled it down to two. And I can't even remember what the second one was. But Wisdom River was the one we agreed upon. We had somebody who was working on the website, and they put the name on there. And then a couple of days later, we got a message saying, "You're not going to believe this. I used to live in that house when I was a kid. And I called it my [wisdom] house." *Lorelai pauses here, smile growing wider, and takes a big breath before continuing.*
I love being there. It's an amazing group of women there right now. It's—to see the growth, to see the changes, you know—that's recovery. That's the program.

This excerpt from Lorelai's interview—the basic, nutshell origin story of Wisdom River—demonstrates the arc of the three narrative frameworks that arose during the rest of the interviews in this project. The story opens with an overview of a stigmatizing and punitive answer to substance use in Anderson County, juxtaposed with the 12 Step ideology in which Wisdom River is grounded. From there, the story moves through narratives of care, pointing to a genuine empathy for women who have no safe place to continue their recovery journey as the impetus for the creation of Wisdom River. Within this empathy lies a commitment to the decision-by-consensus model as a central tenet of Wisdom River's care-based organizing structure. Finally, Lorelai hints at Wisdom River's narrative definition of success, which, as I will discuss later, directly opposes the taken-for granted master narratives of success in traditional SUD and recovery communities.

As I move through the three narrative frameworks within the narrative ecology of Wisdom River in the following sections, I invite you to pause at the beginning of each section and feel how each theme strikes you: what comes to mind when you think of 12 Step narratives, narratives of care, and narratives of success? What expectations or assumptions, if any, do you bring to the table as you move through this chapter? Following Gabriel's (2017) assertion that master and counter narratives are perpetually interdependent, constantly (re)creating each other, it is important to recognize that each person reading the words in this chapter will interpret them differently, through their own narrative lens. Indeed, one person's interpretation of a narrative as a master narrative may strike another as a counter narrative. One of the grounding convictions of this project is that the narrative power of SUD is at once collective and highly individual: the majority

of people who read this dissertation will have some level of connection to SUD, and yet, each of their stories and understandings of SUD and recovery will be unique.

Building on that conviction, I offer only a brief, basic overview of the themes covered in this chapter to preserve the space for each reader to enter these themes from their own narrative standpoint. The first theme addresses the inherently narrative nature of a recovery program based in 12 Step ideology and explores how the narrative structure of 12 Step recovery influences the organizational structure of Wisdom River. The second theme, narratives of care, draws on feminist organizing literature to demonstrate some key facets of what sets Wisdom River apart from other Level Two transitional recovery houses. Finally, the third theme, narratives of success, moves toward redefining what a "successful" recovery program looks like.

Theme One: 12 Step Narratives

12 Step ideology is deeply narrative, fueled by stories of individual and collective dichotomies: success and failure, strength and weakness, brokenness and wholeness. The first chapter of the seminal text in the 12 Step framework is entitled "Bill's Story" and details the recovery journey of "Bill W.," the pseudonymous founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, as a sort of paradigmatic narrative for the 12 Step approach to SUD (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001). 12 Step meetings typically center on participants sharing, listening to, and affirming stories of all kinds—stories about their day, their week, their life. Many 12 Step recovery communities host a weekly Lead Speaker meeting, during which one member of the community is invited to share the story of their recovery journey as the central point of discussion for the meeting. In fact, several participants structured their interviews for this project around the story they shared when

it was their turn to spearhead the Lead Speaker meeting in Anderson.

I chose to refrain from data collection during the AA and NA meetings I attended at Wisdom River to respect the anonymity and vulnerability of the attendees. At the beginning of each meeting, four attendees read the four introductory 12 Step guidelines to set the tone and expectations for the meeting. The second in this list of readings is entitled "What is the Alcoholics/Narcotics Anonymous Program?" and includes the statement, "We are under no surveillance of any kind." In meetings at Wisdom River, the rest of the attendees respond, "That we know of," which, without fail, elicits a collective laugh. At the end of each meeting, someone reads the closing reading, which includes the mantra: "Who you see here, what you hear here, let it stay here." The rest of the circle responds, "Here, here!" followed by more laughter.

Even without explicit data from AA and NA meetings, the narrative power of 12 Step ideology is palpable in the narrative ecology of Wisdom River. One of my favorite memories from my participant observation at Wisdom River centers on the pervasive presence of the 12 Step narrative in the mundane. One late spring afternoon, Hannah and I sat on the front patio of Wisdom River as the sun cast golden rings around the canopy of leaves above us. Midnight, the house's stray-turned-unofficial-pet cat, lay sprawled across a pool of sunlight reflecting off the concrete steps a few feet away from us. Hannah was focused on a 12 Step workbook and a journal, I on a mindless romance novel. The scene was a paragon of the serenity that characterizes Wisdom River, save for Hannah's periodic sighs of frustration. Earlier that day, she explained to me that she had been stuck on step four—making a searching and fearless moral inventory of herself (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2004)—for weeks, which was making her feel stagnated in her

recovery. I learned gradually that step four is a common sticking point for people at Wisdom River, and for good reason: the practice of laying bare one's moral failings, even in a private journal, no small task. Yet, in the narrative of 12 Step recovery, this step is a crucial piece of one's recovery journey and, specifically, in participating in the narrative everyday life at Wisdom River.

Step work, or actively working through the 12 steps on one's own time (i.e., in addition to regularly attending 12 Step meetings), is a requirement for residence at Wisdom River. As such, step work is a common topic of conversation around the house. There is no race or pressure to move through the steps at any certain pace, but there is a general expectation of forward motion, continual commitment. Joey alluded to this expectation in explaining that some residents, especially around steps four and five, tend to forget that Wisdom River is not *just* a place to live:

> I think a lot of things are just in disarray with the construction, but I think the fact that some of them aren't working on their steps and it's just like they're living there, and going to work, you know, which isn't—which is part of it, of course, but it's also a recovery house. It's not just—if you want to live and work, you just get a little apartment.

Here, Joey was reflecting on the fact that a construction project to expand Wisdom River's capacity from six beds to eight had disrupted the flow of life at Wisdom River, but that a more significant disruption was rooted in residents' stagnation with their step work. This dissonance, coupled with Hannah's exasperation with her searching and fearless moral inventory and notion of feeling "stuck" on a certain step, speaks to the fact that life at Wisdom River is, in part, defined by a relationship to the steps.

During the final few months of this project, Hannah struggled with her reticence to accept an invitation to tell her story at the Sunday night Lead Speaker meeting in Anderson. Hannah agonized over this decision for months, bringing it up in nearly every conversation we had. On the one hand, she knew leading a Lead Speaker meeting was a major milestone in 12 Step recovery, and the fact that Peggy—a founding member of Wisdom River and one of Hannah's role models—invited Hannah to speak affirmed the progress she had made in her recovery. On the other hand, Hannah could not overcome the nagging feeling that she was not worthy, not eloquent enough, not far enough along in her recovery to take on such a responsibility. On more than one occasion, Hannah wondered aloud if her hesitation to accept the role of lead speaker indicated some kind of defect in her recovery—that perhaps her two years of active recovery were somehow fraudulent.

On the surface, Hannah's inner turmoil might seem like a simple case of stage fright. However, Hannah's situation represents a major facet of 12 step ideology in the narrative ecology of Wisdom River. Leading a Lead Speaker meeting is, in theory, the manifestation of step 12: "Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to others, and to practice these principles in all our affairs" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2004, p. 12). During her interview, Lenora elucidated, unrelated to Hannah's situation, the significance and expectation of a Lead Speaker invitation: "You can't mess it up, because it's your it's your story. When you're asked to do it, you're really supposed to always say yes. You're not supposed to—you really shouldn't say no, because it helps other alcoholics." This sense of responsibility (or pressure, depending on how you look at it) is supposed to instill a feeling of accomplishment—the completion of

a major milestone, a sort of quasi-finish line, in a process that is infinite by design and necessity.

Hannah ended up spearheading the Lead Speaker meeting five months after Peggy's initial invitation, and a month and a half after she moved out of Wisdom River and into her own apartment. In fact, she informed me of this decision at a Tuesday night dinner at Wisdom River the same day I wrote the section above. When I asked her what changed her mind, she shrugged and said, "I'm just ready. I finally feel peace about it." She went on to explain that she had been putting more pressure on herself to accept Peggy's invitation than Peggy or Ann or anyone else at Wisdom River had been. In the end, Hannah reinterpreted the pressure she had been feeling from organizational leaders at Wisdom River as support, encouragement, and a vote of confidence in the progress she had made in her recovery.

This vignette about Hannah's tumultuous journey to lead speaker highlights the unique salience of step 12 in the narrative ecology of Wisdom River. At Wisdom River, step 12 means turning one's recovery outward, walking with others who are earlier on in their recovery journey. Step 12 was by far the most-referenced step in interviews, especially among participants who had been in recovery for more than a year or who had completed the 12 steps at least once. In explaining how and why she decided to spend the early years of her retirement working tirelessly to help found Wisdom River, Peggy affirmed the integral role of step 12 in the narrative lifeworld of the organization:

> There's a 12th step in the recovery world, and that is that a large part of our recovery is dependent on passing it on. That's what the 12th step says: in order to keep it, you've got to give it away. And of course, my own amazement and

> gratitude for having my own life saved compels me to be a part of continuing to give back. And in the giving back you receive.

So, in a sense, Wisdom River would not exist without the 12th step. This sense of responsibility to give back to the "recovery world," as Peggy put it, underscores the emphasis placed on communal care at Wisdom River.

At first glance, step 12 may seem to run the risk of bestowing moral superiority on those who have reached the final step in a 12 Step program. While this may be true in some 12 Step programs, at Wisdom River, step 12 has the opposite effect. Wisdom River implements step 12 as a way to disrupt any potential power imbalances based on different stages of progress or longevity in recovery. Ann narrated this co-construction of power while reflecting on the meaning of step 12 in her own story:

> I feel like every woman here has—I'm part of their story and they're part of mine in a really, really, really meaningful and beautiful way. Not everyone who comes here, I think, ever sees that. They don't. But enough of them do that I that I find that unbelievably rewarding. … And that was, for me, a missing piece. Because in 12 Step recovery, step 12 is you've got to give it away, you've got to work with other people. And I would say that early on, that was a piece I didn't even care about. I simply wanted to not drink so that my family would get off my back. And then I could get about my life. And I really didn't care. I'm just like, 'I'm never going to sponsor anybody' …. And now I have a completely different opinion about all of that. But I can't keep it if I'm not giving it away. I have to be working with others. And it's every bit as much for me, I don't mean in a self-serving way, as it is for them. The more I give, the more I get. And so, I think that's what's

most memorable about my time here, is recognizing how important it is to work with other people.

At Wisdom River, step 12 is about individual and communal survival; it insists that members of a recovery community who have been in active recovery for decades need the newest member of the community just as much as that new member needs the long-term locals of the community. The narrative framework of 12 Step recovery at Wisdom River casts every member of the community as equally integral, valid, and worthy.

Beyond each specific step, the narrative framework of 12 Step ideology posits that SUD is a lifelong condition—a permanent character in one's life story. Wisdom River wholeheartedly adopts this framework in defining SUD. Lorelai likes to use this metaphor when explaining SUD: "Telling an addict just to stop is like telling diabetic, 'Well, get your pancreas to produce more insulin already!' It's a brain problem." The "once an addict, always an addict" foundation of 12 Step ideology has been criticized as narrow, stigmatizing, and disempowering by recent SUD scholars (see Vederhus et al., 2020; Zemore et al., 2017). In fact, upon entering this research, my understanding of this facet of 12 Step ideology aligned with these scholars. However, at Wisdom River, SUD as a lifelong condition narrates recovery as a facet of narrative resilience (Okamoto, 2020): it creates space for members of this recovery community to celebrate tragedies and triumphs in the same breath, to explore what it means to be resilient in recovery. In contrasting the 12 Step approach with her family's tendency to avoid conflict and hard conversations, Ann explained, "That's another thing I love about 12 step recovery. The whole premise is you just put it out there on the table and say, 'Here's the deal.'" The narrative that SUD will always play a role in a person's story does not inherently suggest

that SUD is that person's *entire* story. Rather, this narrative provides a foundation for people to reckon with the reality that they may wrestle with various facets of substance use for their entire lives, but that does not mean their lives are over. SUD may be an enduring character in the stories of the women at Wisdom River, but it is not the main character.

Similarly, while official 12 Step doctrine does not explicitly adopt the language of addiction as a disorder or a disease (Kurtz, 2002), most people at Wisdom River use disorder- and/or disease-centric language in their definitions of their own substance use. For the women at Wisdom River, conceptualizing problematic substance use as a disease or disorder opens space for compassion and challenges the narrative of substance use as a moral failure. As a certified Chemical Dependency Counselor Assistant (CDCA) and Peer Support Specialist at Wisdom River, Rachel uses the terms interchangeably:

> I feel personally that substance use disorders are a mental health disorder. It is a health disorder, as it says in its name. I feel that most addicts have a preexisting genetic tendency. And then we do something, or we experience something, and it's traumatic, or we actively use something, and it triggers that part of our brain that was there all along. It makes me sad. This disease is—the knowledge of it is growing, and that makes me happy. But the way people are treated for that makes my heart hurt. And the fact that there's not enough resources—or sometimes there are enough resources, it's more that people who are actively using are uncomfortable with the judgment of other people.

Here, in contrast to Fisher's (2022) condemnation of the disease model of addiction as a way to ignore the sociocultural components that contribute to substance use, Rachel

brings both the biological and the social components of SUD into conversation to reconcile her own embodied knowledge of SUD with the master narrative of SUD.

To deny or denigrate the use of disease- and disorder-related language in all circles wipes out the voices of those who see these models as a beacon of hope or a lens through which to understand their experiences and healing processes. Thus, while I agree with Fisher (2022) and Ashford and colleagues (2018) that those outside of the recovery world should refrain from—or, at least, use caution with—the disease and disorder models of addiction, I argue that their position is too far-reaching. The fact that this model helps those connected to Wisdom River make sense of their realities suggests a need for more collaboration and communication between scholars who study substance use and people who have experienced or are experiencing substance use.

Another defining feature of 12 Step ideology, and one that has historically been the feature of divisive discussion about 12 Step programs (see Vederhus et al., 2020), is the centrality of a "higher power." I entered this research expecting to be critical of Wisdom River's veneration of the 12 Step framework, mainly due to my (misguided, as I eventually realized) understanding of the spiritual component of 12 Step programs. Joey shared this concern when she accepted her position with Wisdom River, specifically citing an aversion to the Christian doctrine and practices that she assumed went hand-in-hand with the 12 Step reliance on a higher power. During our interview, Joey and I touched on this shared reticence and subsequent shared surprise at the openness of Wisdom River's interpretation of spirituality as it pertains to 12 Step recovery:

> I grew up Christian. I would say I'm very spiritual, but I don't follow any Christian stuff now. And I thought AA and NA were all, like, really religious

> things. … I didn't have a terrible idea about it, but I didn't have the best idea I would say. And then being a part of them, it's just been amazing. And so, working a program really does work, whether you're in recovery or not. But working a program, I think, specifically, is something that is really beneficial for people in recovery. No matter what way you do it. There are many different ways you could do it.

I want to be clear that Wisdom River's approach to spirituality is not universal or even common. Many 12 Step programs, especially in the United States, conflate the explicitly nonsectarian spiritual component of 12 Step ideology with Christian doctrine—which, given that SUD does not discriminate based on religious background, has the power to perpetuate religious harm (see Tallen, 1990). Meanwhile, at Wisdom River, those who identify as Christian are actually in the minority.

Acknowledgement of a higher power is discussed regularly and openly at Wisdom River, and specific emphasis is placed on the 12 Step tenet that a major part of recovery is defining a "god of our own understanding" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2004, p. 14). Hannah explained this emphasis in simple, straightforward terms:

> They talk about god all the time in the book, in the Big Book. I don't have to be perfect, but to be aware that he is always aware. I don't know if he's a he. I've always said he was a he because I grew up thinking he was a he, you know. Dad would send us off to church. We went to this Baptist church…. And really, I think the main reason he [sent us to church], well, to get rid of us, one, and he knew we'd be fed there. But so, it was a Baptist church… and I learned about god as being a he (laughs). … I love the way that people, how they express their god.

And it's the same god, I know it is.

Hannah's conviction that god can be expressed in a multitude of ways underscores Wisdom River's unique approach to the spiritual undertones of the 12 Step narrative. People involved with Wisdom River often related their spirituality to nature, self-reflection, and communal support. Others professed a connection to a Christian understanding of god. Over the entire course of my time at Wisdom River, I never witnessed any tension caused by differing understandings of god. Even those who expressed hesitation or frustration toward the very idea of a higher power were met with patience and space to explore the idea for themselves.

Finally, I would be remiss to omit discussion of alternative recovery strategies here. The current cultural conversation regarding SUD often pits abstinence-based approaches (like 12 Step recovery) against harm reduction approaches, leaving little room for collaboration or compromise between the two. One of the most prevalent harm reduction strategies at the moment is medication-assisted treatment, or MAT. MAT uses medications like naltrexone, buprenorphine, and methadone (popular brand names are Vivitrol, Suboxone, and Methadose, respectively) to ease the effects of opioid use withdrawal. In most MAT approaches, these medications are administered in combination with counseling and behavioral therapy. Many residents at Wisdom River receive regular doses of naltrexone, especially during the earlier days of their residence. Naltrexone is unlikely to be addictive and does not offer any sort of mood alteration, while buprenorphine and methadone can be misused more easily.

During one of my earliest conversations with Ann, she mentioned the MAT versus 12 Step debate and alluded that she did not view long-term MAT alone as a

sustainable or healthy path to recovery. This sentiment was echoed throughout this project, both in casual conversations and in interviews. Peggy framed MAT as limited by its heavy focus on the physical effects of SUD and subsequent lack of focus on SUD as a spiritual and psychological concern, while 12 Step recovery offers a more wholistic—physical, psychological, social, and spiritual—approach:

> The emphasis is very much, in the professional world, on MAT at this point. …And I think that without having that sister component of a community like we have in the recovery community, without having that sense of the importance of doing the more deep mental, spiritual, emotional work, that people are vulnerable to relapse.

In short, as it stands, an MAT-only approach to recovery is not supported by Wisdom River's approach to 12 Step recovery. While residents are permitted to receive naltrexone for as long as their healthcare provider advises it, MAT is always seen as a temporary solution to a lifelong problem in the overall narrative recovery at Wisdom River. However, the conviction that each person's recovery story is different and there are myriad valid paths to recovery is present and active in the narrative ecology of Wisdom River. As an organization, Wisdom River had to choose a recovery framework under which to operate, and the 12 Step framework has made the most sense for these particular people, in this particular organization, at this particular time, in response to particular stories of SUD. I am not suggesting, nor does anyone at Wisdom River purport to suggest, that 12 Step recovery is the only way to enter lifelong recovery. Really, the opposite is true: there is a grounding understanding at Wisdom River that 12 Step recovery is not a magic cure for SUD and that every person's recovery story is different.

The space to celebrate individuality and particularity in Wisdom River's approach to 12 Step recovery echoes Gilligan's (1982) focus on individuality and particularity as central tenets of feminist care in organizational settings.

The role of 12 Step narratives in the narrative ecology of Wisdom River aligns with Frank's (2010) position that, "rather than understanding the story as a portal into the mind of the storyteller" (p. 13), stories themselves are actors whose roles are worthy of study, both independently and in conjunction with the roles of the storyteller. 12 Step ideology is deeply storied, and the stories that comprise a 12 Step program have agency in the creation and interpretation of the life narratives of those who identify with and participate in 12 step programs. In the following section, I expand my understanding of the tenets of feminist organizing that characterize Wisdom River's incorporation of 12 Step narratives in the narrative ecology of the organization. Specifically, I explore the role of embodied care (Hamington, 2001) in defining the feminist organizing practices at Wisdom River. Before I proceed, I need to clarify that participants did not explicitly label their organizing practices as feminist; this is a label I have chosen to use given the emphases on care and individual experience that anchor Wisdom River's approach to 12 Step recovery.

Theme Two: Narratives of Care

The word "care" came up in nearly every interview I conducted during the course of this study as participants reflected on their experiences with Wisdom River. Current and former residents pointed to the care they felt during their time living at Wisdom River as a key player in the success of their recovery. Staff described how they had been cared for by the women (board members and residents alike) at Wisdom River and how

the opportunity to pass on that care to others through Wisdom River contributes to their own recovery processes. Board members and founders described the role of intentionally caring for and about others in the recovery community as the impetus for the founding of Wisdom River. Narratives of care affect the past, present, and future of the narrative ecology of Wisdom River, positioning care as a uniquely important facet of the organizational structure of Wisdom River.

Specifically, Hamington's (2001) concept of embodied care is especially important in the context of Wisdom River; the narratives of care that help shape the narrative ecology of Wisdom River center on SUD as a material, visceral, embodied experience. External narratives of SUD rooted in stigma and stereotypes have stripped SUD of this embodiment, casting people experiencing SUD as, at best, a generalized, abstract burden on the public. By reintroducing the concept of embodiment, coupled with the tenets of a feminist ethic of care that emphasize context and particular knowledge, the narratives of care being created at Wisdom River directly challenge those master narratives that refuse to recognize the personhood of people experiencing SUD. Therefore, in this section, I position narratives of care as an integral component of Wisdom River's feminist organizational structure.

Describing the early days of her residence at Wisdom River, Jenna exemplified the narrative dichotomy between stigmatizing master narratives and narratives of care at Wisdom River:

> I remember pulling up to Wisdom River and being like, "Oh, this is something from a fairy tale. This is crazy." And everybody was just so caring, and so accepting. And I was just like, "This just isn't real life," you know? And a lot of

> them were professional women. And I was just like, “They're gonna figure out that I've had the opportunity to have my kids back four or five times, and I've lost them every single time. They're gonna find out that I've been to prison, and this is all going to be over.” …I think that I was just looking and waiting for that flicker of judgment in somebody's face so I could be like, “Alright, I'm leaving.” And I never saw it. Never. Not one time. And the patience that they had, the constant vigilance and patience with me—because I knew how to fake it. I knew how to fake that I wanted to get clean. But I didn't know how to actually do it. It had been such a long time that I didn't know how to live without wanting to [use], or sneaking to do it. …And back where I'm from, they preach to you, "Get clean, get clean, get clean. Change your life, change your life, change your life." But they aren't willing to help you. I think the biggest difference for me was, at Wisdom River, I could look around and tell that these women who cried in meetings and who bared their souls, and who were preaching honesty, honesty, honesty, they were also honest. And then they were preaching and preaching and preaching to help others and to help yourself and to stand on your own two feet … to be part of the community, to go out and do it. And they were doing that. So it was hard not to go, "Okay, I'm going to do this too."

Jenna was one of Wisdom River’s first residents, and her move from a nearby inpatient rehabilitation facility to Wisdom River was part of her seventh distinct attempt at recovery. Jenna’s explanation of what set her experience at Wisdom River apart from her experience with other recovery organizations mirrors the explanations provided by the two current residents I interviewed for this project. For Nicole, what sets Wisdom River

apart is “just the caringness and the support I have. And it's not so strict like my old sober living was. It's just a lot more calm here.” In Hannah’s experience, the people at Wisdom River embody the care at Wisdom River: “[There are] people who really care. You guys care. You do. … Jesus. I don't want this to be for nothing. You, Ann, Peggy, Lorelai—I have never …[pauses]… I have some good people in my life today.” Between Jenna as one of Wisdom River’s earliest residents and Nicole and Hannah as two of its most recent residents, five years of Wisdom River’s history of embodied care is represented in these accounts.

Jenna’s immediate bewilderment at the care and acceptance that characterized her initial experience with Wisdom River highlights two important points regarding organizational narratives: first, that the narrative frameworks of her six previous attempts to enter long-term recovery had been characterized by something other than care, acceptance, patience, and honesty. In other words, Jenna’s certainty that the pieces of her story that had worked against her in the past—losing custody of her children multiple times, multiple incarcerations—were going to spell the downfall of this new attempt at recovery suggests that the norm in recovery approaches, at least in Appalachian Ohio, are based more in stigma narratives than in narratives of care. Second, Jenna’s disbelief that a place like Wisdom River even existed highlights that Wisdom River’s commitment to care is a central piece of what sets the organization apart from other recovery organizations and positions the people involved in Wisdom River to challenge the status quo of stigma narratives in recovery organizing and to spearhead the shift toward narratives of care as the defining framework of recovery organizations.

In Jenna’s quote, we also see the centrality of vulnerability as a component of

care in the narrative ecology of Wisdom River. Vulnerability and emotionality are core components of 12 Step meetings, and those components are amplified in meetings as small and intimate as those hosted at Wisdom River. Moreover, staff and board members are not required to attend these meetings, yet at least four staff and/or board members were present at each meeting I attended throughout the course of this project. And, just as Jenna described, staff and board members were equally if not more emotionally vulnerable than residents during these meetings. Staff and board members also voluntarily serve as 12 Step sponsors[4] for residents, which introduces another layer of embodied care and vulnerability to the resident-employee relational dynamic.

Whereas patriarchal organizing norms position vulnerability as a weakness in organizational leaders, vulnerability is key to the feminist organizational structure at Wisdom River. The devoted participation of board members and staff in weekly meetings, community dinners, and sponsor partnerships highlights a unique facet of Wisdom River as an organization: everyone who works at Wisdom River in an official capacity (a) is a woman, and (b) has a personal history of substance use. The only exceptions to the latter are one board member and Joey, the COMCorps Health and Wellness Specialists, both of who have not personally struggled with SUD but have close family members who have. In describing her relationship with one of the Peer Support Specialists at Wisdom River, Joey explained that, even without personal experience with SUD, her voice is still valued in decision-making processes at Wisdom River:

I know she knows a lot more than I do, but … I still feel listened to and not

[4] In 12 Step programs, a sponsor is a person who has been actively working a 12 Step recovery program for an extended period of time and who partners with a newer member of a 12 Step program to help them navigate the program.

> looked down upon when I am talking to her. … And same with Ann, and same with all the staff, truly, even though I know that they know more than me and I know that they have more personal experiences because I'm not a person in recovery from substance abuse. So I really do appreciate that, even in places where I feel inadequate, I still feel valued. And they want to hear what I have to say, what I'm thinking.

Whereas a personal history of substance often manifests as a barrier to meaningful membership in the workplace, Joey's *lack* of personal experience with SUD complicated her role during her early days at Wisdom River. This disruption of deficit-based narratives of SUD in the workplace exemplifies the practical ways Wisdom River turns the narrative of what it means to organize around SUD on its head. Further, the fact that Joey feels valued—that being valued and heard is an integral part of the narrative of being an employee of Wisdom River—underscores the role of a feminist ethic of care in the organizational structure at Wisdom River.

Similarly, the shared experiences of being women and being in recovery blur the line between what may, in a more traditional organization, be a stark sociopolitical division between residents and board/staff. Wisdom River's conscious decision to employ only women and to position a history of SUD as a strength for employment maximizes the role of care in employee-resident and employee-employee relationships. This organizational strategy echoes Addams' (1910) concept of sympathetic knowledge, which Hamington (2001) positioned as central to embodied care. Sympathetic knowledge is an approach to care that hinges on fostering connection with and deep understanding of others (Addams, 1910; Hamington, 2001). Hannah noted the role of sympathetic

knowledge in her own experience of embodied care at Wisdom River, explaining that "one thing for certain is all of us that come through this house, man, is on the same journey. They're going through the same thing I am and have been through pretty much the same thing." The notion that a recovery house for women with substance use disorders would be organized and maintained by people who actually know what it is to inhabit the body of a woman with a substance use disorder seems at once incredibly simple and incredibly radical.

The role of sympathetic knowledge in the narrative ecology of Wisdom River is also exemplified in Ann's explanation of the deep mutual respect that characterizes the relationships between residents, staff, and board members:

> I have profound respect for each individual who's chosen to walk through the doors and is trying to do this. So personally, I have [a lot] in common now, because … they are people in recovery, I am a person in recovery. … I think there's a mutual respect. My hope would be that, even if somebody here disliked me personally, or disliked the part that I represent as the professional "person in charge," that there would always be a mutual respect. So, maintaining a healthy, healthy respect for humans, would be the most important thing, I would say, in my job. It makes sense. And in the end, the relationship with the people who are here.

Naturally, as Ann describes here, there are certain levels of power associated with certain roles in the organization: the director and the board have more power to make technical decisions regarding Wisdom River than the residents do, and the director and staff have to enforce house rules created by the board. However, because of their commitment to 12

Step ideology, all decisions at the board level are made by consensus, and residents often are invited to weigh in on important decisions that will affect everyday life at Wisdom River.

The organization's central commitment to sympathetic knowledge also precludes hierarchical organizing based solely on things like active recovery time or substance of choice. In fact, when Ann was invited by the board to step into the role of director of Wisdom River, she had less than a year of active recovery under her belt. So, as Wisdom River began to welcome its first residents, Ann was in a strikingly similar temporal stage of recovery as the women walking through the doors. Reflecting on her initial days at Wisdom River, Ann underscored the power of the organization's lateral hierarchy:

> I think the motive of everybody involved in getting this up and off the ground has been not, "I'm gonna save you," but, "I will walk with you until you find your way, and then you can walk on your own." … I know that everything about what this organization represents that I just said, without me knowing it, these other women actually—see, I'm gonna cry. They were walking with me without me even knowing it. Yeah. Wow, I really feel that. I don't know if I've ever said it like that, and I don't think they knew it. But they were doing that. It's not contrived. It's just real.

In sum, there is a sobering yet inspiring shared understanding that everyone actively involved in creating the narrative fabric of Wisdom River—residents, staff, and board members alike—has experienced SUD and could relapse at any time, which gives rise to a collective sense of responsibility and care for one another, regardless of organizational rank.

Hamington's conception of embodied care articulates everything I have struggled to put into words when trying to describe the narrative ecology of Wisdom River. At the risk of compromising the identity of a detached, emotionless, completely objective researcher I have so carefully crafted throughout this dissertation [pause for laughter], the word I have landed on most often when describing Wisdom River to those outside (and inside) the organization is "magic." A calmness that is at once mundane and extraordinary mingles in the air at Wisdom River, and that feeling was notably present at one of my final community dinners at the house in the late spring of this project:

> *Tonight was the celebration of Wisdom River's fifth birthday. When I walked into the house, there were two happy birthday banners on the walls, iridescent paper stars plastered around the room, a birthday crown on the dining room table, potluck food lining the long, brand new kitchen counter, and 26 women smiling, laughing, reminiscing, catching up, reveling.*
>
> *The care was tangible.*
>
> *This is the magic I have tried (and failed, I fear) to describe in these pages.*
>
> *And maybe that's just it: it's not magic. It's hard work. It's perseverance. It's compassion. It's blood, sweat, tears, painful detoxes, rage, hope, mistakes, grilled chicken, homemade peanut butter chocolate cheesecake with five birthday candles lovingly placed on top.*
>
> *The women at Wisdom River make radical, intentional community feel commonplace. There is no fanfare, no self-aggrandization.*
>
> *We celebrated this incredible accomplishment for an hour, and at 6:30 on the dot, Nicole started the NA meeting. Business as usual.*

The theme of that night's NA meeting was "gratitude," and as we went around the circle to reflect on what we were grateful for, Jenna's words came to life: we cried together and bared our souls, a box of Kleenex traveling around the circle to embody the radical care that ties our stories together in the narrative ecology of Wisdom River.

For Jenna, Hannah, and Nicole, their residence at Wisdom River marks the beginning of their longest consecutive stretch of active recovery. As Jenna put it, before coming to Wisdom River, "I could pull together a few months [of recovery]. Or if I was locked away, I could pull together that amount of time." Hannah's experience was similar in that most of her extended lengths of recovery were marked by either incarceration or pregnancy. Nicole was nineteen when she came to Wisdom River, so she is currently living her first foray into long-term recovery. Jenna has been in active recovery since she left Wisdom River in 2019, and Hannah and Nicole had been living at Wisdom River for at least a year at the time of their interviews. Since then, Hannah and Nicole have moved out of Wisdom River, but both still regularly attend weekly community dinners and 12 Step meetings at Wisdom River. Hannah lives in a one-bedroom apartment in a small apartment complex with no official recovery organization affiliation, and Nicole lives in a Level One recovery house nearby. All this to say, care as a feminist organizing strategy is clearly working at Wisdom River. In the following theme, I explore what "working" means in the context of Wisdom River's narrative ecology.

Theme Three: Narratives of Success

Recovery approaches and organizations often are evaluated quantitatively; average relapse rates, lengths of recovery, breadth of use, empirical grounding, etc. write the "story" of any given recovery strategy in the eyes of the public and many medical

professionals and policy makers. Quantitative data are especially valued by potential supporters trying to decide whether to allocate funds to certain recovery organizations, and Wisdom River is no exception to this rule. On the surface, this seems like a logical phenomenon: if an organization purporting to address a tangible issue cannot prove some level of tangible success, in a capitalist society, that organization does not merit monetary support. In reality, the idea of a universal, quantifiable definition of success for a recovery organization sets up a harmful success/failure binary based on stigma narratives about SUD. This line of thinking suggests that "successful" recovery is simply abstinence from addictive substances and "failed" recovery is simply the use of addictive substances after a period of abstinence, which ignores the reality of SUD as an experience that encompasses more than just the physical.

When asked about Wisdom River's success rate, Ann chooses her words carefully. While she understands the significance of a quantifiable success rate from a potential funder's standpoint, she explained that the kinds of answers those funders are looking for imply, albeit sometimes subconsciously, a stigmatizing deficit narrative. In other words, the definition of success from which those outside the recovery community work is incompatible with Wisdom River's definition of success:

> I think that there's a part of me that intentionally doesn't want to go with keeping that statistic. I was asked, "What's your success rate?" And that always—I've got to be careful that I don't come off defensively or prickly on that one. But what I would say is that it's 100 percent. 100 percent of the women who have come here have gained valuable insight into themselves and into recovery and into the belief that recovery is possible—that lifelong recovery is possible, whether or not they

> choose at this moment to stay in recovery. That's a statistic I'm not interested in keeping, because even somebody who left us and has gone back out and might be using, their story is not over. And it could be that something they picked up here is instrumental in them ultimately making that decision to stop using.

Ann's description of a more qualitative, individualized approach to defining success draws in the tenets of embodied care and sympathetic knowledge present in the organization's narratives of care. At Wisdom River, success is created through the hundreds of stories that swirl around in the narrative ecology of the organization.

While it may be jarring to some to hear the director of a transitional recovery house include residents who start using substances after leaving the house in her definition of success, this inclusion demonstrates one of Wisdom River's greatest strengths in narrative organizing. The women at Wisdom River are not ignorant of the danger of SUD; their personal, visceral knowledge of SUD position them to be experts on the unique and precarious nature of the disorder. By focusing on individual people's stories, working from the perspective that "success" can and should look different in everyone's story, the women at Wisdom River create space for more people to figure out what recovery will look like for them, individually, in their own story, long-term.

The narrative of success around which Wisdom River organizes mirrors the biopsychosocial approach to recovery central to 12 Step ideology. In the words of the narrators of Wisdom River, success is

> To be confident in myself, to know: Do I want to stay in the light? Or do I want to go back to the darkness? Yeah. Today, I want to stay in the light. I want to stay in the light. *(Hannah)*

*

> Today, I can maintain all my bills, I don't need my family's help. … I go to the grocery store and buy what I want. I go out to eat when I want. I have custody of my daughter back. … I own two vehicles. I don't have to wake up sick this morning. And I know that, when I wake up sober, I have the opportunity to remain sober the rest of the day. It's my decision now. … And I have meaningful relationships. … The trust is there. The understanding's there because I communicate my feelings and my needs, and they are able to better understand me since I'm able to better understand myself. And I couldn't be more grateful. *(Rachel)*

*

> I've gained relationships back with my family since I've been here, too. I've gotten to make amends with my family and they're all trusting—they trust me now, which is great because I wouldn't have trusted me either whenever I was in addiction [laughs]. So, it's great to have their trust again. *(Nicole)*

*

> Now I have a credit card, I have a debit card, I have three different savings accounts. … And without my connections through Wisdom River and the recovery community in general, I wouldn't have the job that I have now. I wouldn't have the house that I live in now. I mean, there are so many obstacles, because of the felonies I have. *(Jenna)*

At Wisdom River, success is the ability to live fully, with dignity, confidence, security, self-respect, emotional regulation, safe housing; it is the opportunity to repair broken

relationships, to exercise agency over oneself and one's actions, to feel fully known and trusted and accepted in a community. Each of these storied definitions of success implies a contrasting "failure" that led to the success, which echoes Okamoto's (2020) marriage of tragedy and triumph in defining narrative resilience. Like narrative resilience, Wisdom River's narrative of success is place-specific and unique to each individual's story, yet collective in that it brings different definitions of success together and holds space for all of it, however messy.

In a conversation early in Nicole's residence, Ann explained to me that it would not be wholly unlikely for Nicole to relapse at least once before her recovery "stuck." Ann was adamant that this was not a judgement on Nicole's ability or willpower; in Ann's experience, age can play a major factor in long-term recovery, and Nicole was the youngest resident Wisdom River had ever housed. This conversation took place at a time when Nicole was having significant interpersonal strain with fellow residents and was threatening to leave on a near-daily basis. During our interview, Nicole reflected on this time, laughing as she recalled nickname given to her by the women at the recovery house she lived in before coming to Wisdom River: "Runner." Nicole identified that period of interpersonal strain at Wisdom River as a significant turning point in her recovery journey, explaining that even in the middle of heated arguments, her roommate would unpack whatever bags Nicole had packed in her most recent threat to run. As noted earlier, Nicole has maintained her recovery since she moved out of Wisdom River a few months ago.

Nicole's experience is not unique for residents at Wisdom River. It is almost a given among the people who know Wisdom River well that new residents will entertain

the idea of leaving out of frustration or anger in the initial months of their residence. Some even follow through; during my fieldwork, four new residents left Wisdom River unceremoniously within the first three months—one within the first week—of their time there. Most, however, make it past that tipping point. The fact that there is space within Wisdom River's narrative of success for people to leave, or threaten to leave, without completing the 12 steps mirrors Ellingson's (2017) suggestion of "realistically ever after" as a disruption to the "happily ever after" trope in storytelling. Realistically, not everyone who walks through the doors at Wisdom River is guaranteed lifelong recovery. Realistically, everyone who walks through the doors at Wisdom River will be exposed to tools that could aid in lifelong recovery. Realistically, in Wisdom River's definition of success, a lapse in recovery does not automatically cast one as a failure.

Wisdom River's narrative of success creates space to reframe relapse as a "narrative jolt" (Sharf et al., 2011) as opposed to a failure. A narrative jolt is a moment in a story that disrupts the plot and demands a new way of thinking about the story. Okamoto (2020) posited narrative jolts as a step toward incorporating hardships into a new definition of resilience, a shift emulated by Ann's refusal of the success/failure binary in recovery organizing:

> I'll come back to [Jenna], and my own story, like when I fell apart again. Is it either—is it black and white, all or nothing thinking that either I'm in recovery and a success, or I'm not and a failure? Or was that a necessary part of my story? For me, it was a necessary part of the story.

Ann drew on what she knew of Jenna's story to illustrate her point further:

> She's been incarcerated numerous times, jail and prison. She had gone to eight

> different treatment centers, and, separate from that, some different rehabs and detoxes. And at what point should people have said, "Oh, give up. She's a failure"? Because look at her. And she has said that every single bit of her journey was necessary to get her to where she finally was like, “I don't want to live like this anymore.”

By framing returns to active substance use as integral pieces of a person’s recovery story rather than as failures, Ann underscores the power and importance of a nuanced, person-centered narrative of success in recovery organizing. Anyone would be hard pressed to look at the lives Ann and Jenna lead and call them failures, and both women credit their lives today partially to the narrative jolts in their recovery stories.

The fabric of the narrative of success at Wisdom River is an unadulterated exemplar of Harrington’s (2008) conviction that narratives are comprised of thousands of individual stories. While the stories that contribute to the narrative ecology of Wisdom River share significant plot points and characters, the members of the organization share a deep and persistent understanding that each person’s story is different—and within that understanding, a conviction that each narrator is worthy of care and capable of recovery.

Summary

The narrative themes that comprise the narrative ecology of Wisdom River are co-constitutive, perpetually ebbing and flowing in relation to one another. Structurally, the narrative framework of 12 Step recovery has the biggest impact on the day-to-day operations at Wisdom River. 12 Step ideology provides a common lens through which to interpret what recovery looks like and a level of order and accountability that allows the organization to function in a Western society. Beneath the surface, however, narratives of

care and narratives of success steer the overarching narrative lifeworld of the organization. Without the commitment to feminist care and the reconstruction of success that characterize the organization, Wisdom River would be simply another 12 Step recovery house, tacitly perpetuating a patriarchal and hegemonic approach to SUD and recovery. But Wisdom River's feminist lens on 12 Step narratives, guided by individual and collective narratives of care and success, sets the organization apart as uniquely effective in addressing substance use and recovery among women in Appalachia.

The relationality of a narrative approach to knowing suggests that the listener and the teller share authorship (Harter, 2013; Okamoto, 2020). I inhabited the role of listener in interviews and participant observation, but I also became part of this community for nearly two years, bringing with me my own stories and narrative interpretations. My understanding of who I am, my relationship to SUD, and my beliefs about recovery were challenged, stretched, reified, and rebuilt as I became entwined with the narrative ecology of Wisdom River. So, in the following chapter, I offer an autoethnographic account of my connection to SUD as a way to honestly reckon with the narrative lenses I brought into this research and to serve as an interlude between RQ1, which centers on narratives, and RQ2, which centers on identity.

Chapter 5: Autoethnography

Wednesday, February 9, 2022

6:23 p.m.

White plastic chairs fill in gaps between the couches and loveseats to create a makeshift circle in the garage-turned-activity-room. As I make my way into the room, my eyes dart around to find a familiar face. *I didn't think about the fact that there would be people here I've never met. What will they think about me being here?* Fluorescent lights create sparkles out of the raindrops on my glasses as I adjust my mask. Marin smiles at me, hands me a Big Book, and tells me to sit wherever. I take a chair close to the door, adjust my mask again, and try to breathe more normally. Across the circle, Hannah waves at me. That helps.

Hi, I'm Caroline and I'm here to support.

Hello! I'm Caroline and I'm here to show support.

I'm Caroline, here to support.

Maybe I just shouldn't say anything? Nope that would create a weird pause.

This isn't even about you, Caroline. You are literally here to support.

Just be normal. Hi, I'm Caroline, I'm here to support.

Nailed it. Okay we're starting.

"Hi, Ann"

I wonder if—wait what? I didn't know that about Ann. Like I thought I heard her say something about having a sponsor one time but I didn't think…like I just thought she was…just fucking say it Caroline, you didn't think she was an alcoholic because she doesn't act like an alcoholic.

Wow I am the actual worst.

"Hi, Hannah"

I straight up adore Hannah.

Oh…my god. Oh my GOD.

Why am I shaking? This isn't about you, Caroline. You're here for support.

Jesus, Hannah has been through a lot…how is she still so kind? Oof my throat is tight.

And my nose is running. Now people will think I brought COVID in here. Perfect.

"Hi, Denise"

Okay, pull it together.

If her kids are what made her quit…why have I never been enough to make him want to quit?

This isn't about you, Caroline.

But still, why have I never been enough to make him want to quit?

The top of my mask catches a tear rolling down my cheek and I pray no one can see it.

This isn't about you, Caroline.

"Hi, Janelle"

Stop shaking. Stop crying. Stop shaking and stop crying.

I look down at my hands and realize they're bright red. The cuticles on both of my thumbs are completely worn down. And I'm next.

Inhale, 1…2…3…4…

Exhale, 1…2…3…4…

"Hi, I'm Caroline and I'm here to support. And…I didn't expect to share this tonight, or to feel any of this, but…"

***

This experience in an open AA meeting at Wisdom River allowed me to dig into a tension I'd been feeling since I started this research: I have deep compassion for the women who live in this house. I believe in and support their recovery efforts and I want nothing but the best for them. I hate the way they and other people who experience SUD are portrayed in mainstream discourse. And yet, I couldn't locate my own experience or my dad's experience in those feelings. I couldn't reconcile the resentment I have toward him with the compassion I have toward every other person I'd met who struggles with addiction throughout the course of my research.

When it was my turn to introduce myself at the meeting, I was an absolute wreck. I shared a little bit about my experience as the child of a father with SUD, thanked everyone for allowing me to be there and for sharing the stories they shared, but I kept tripping over my words. Looking back, I realize I was trying to figure out a way to talk about my dad without villainizing the people in the room with me who share his struggle with substance use—all while also trying not to soak my mask with any more tears than I already had. After the meeting, almost everyone there—both the residents I had spent the past five months getting to know and the strangers who were only there for the meeting—came up to me, hugged me, and thanked me for sharing. The researcher in me logged a quick mental note regarding community and social support, and the human in me finally admitted: *this IS about you, Caroline.*

That was the first and last meeting I attended for quite some time. A few weeks later, one of the residents at Wisdom River told me she really enjoyed having me at the meeting and she hoped I would come back soon. The other residents in the kitchen with

us agreed. I told them I had just been too busy (true) and that I would be back once the semester ended (also true), but the truest truth is that I was not ready or willing to wrestle with the dissonance between what I feel toward my dad and what I feel toward the women in those meetings—and that's one of the main reasons I wanted to incorporate this kind of autoethnographic work into my dissertation. Even outside of AA meetings, just in general conversation in the house, the women shared their delicate stories with me. They trusted me. I wanted to be worthy of that trust, I wanted to know how I could reciprocate that trust and still stay within my bounds as a responsible researcher, and I decided the only way to achieve that was to determine how to hold these different truths and realities in my mind at once.

***

Narratives of substance use have long been dictated and homogenized by mainstream discourse, which often centers on the stigmatization and dehumanization of people who use substances (Skinner & Franz, 2019). The backdrop has been painted, the stage has been set, actors have been given their roles and scripted as heroes or villains. It is a comedy (tragedy) of errors with exigent material consequences for actors who have been barred from the scripting process—often, those who are experiencing or who have experienced substance use disorder (SUD). As the child of a father who struggles with SUD, I have played many roles in these narratives. I find myself at the intersection of deep compassion for the generalized other's experience with SUD and deep resentment for the ways in which one specific person's experience with SUD has impacted my life. I have no trouble articulating strong arguments for why stigmatizing language surrounding SUD should be challenged, why harm reduction should become the norm in SUD policy,

why decriminalization is a vital step toward humanely addressing SUD in the United States; yet, when the one person in my life who is actively impacted by these arguments calls me, I hesitate to answer the phone.

As I prepared to explore how narratives of SUD interact with the construction of identity for those experiencing SUD at a women's transitional recovery house, I thought it necessary to confront the ways in which my understanding of SUD has been influenced by my father's substance use. Using practices derived from Bhattacharya's (2019) conception of front- and back-stage ethnodrama and Tracy's (2019) narrative mapping strategy, I explore the ways in which my own identity has been shaped by my experience with a father who has dealt with SUD since before I was born. Through this layered autoethnography (Ellingson, 2021; Rambo Ronai, 2005), I intersperse relevant scholarship on SUD and narrative research with autoethnographic vignettes in order to situate my own story in the broader story of SUD and to uncover and unpack the tensions and biases surrounding my understanding of SUD.

Wangensteen et al. (2020) found that children of parents with SUD bear a disproportionate amount of the stigma-induced shame surrounding SUD as they are bombarded with messages of normative parental behavior but lack the tools and information to make sense of their parents' breaches of parental norms.

The Case for Stories as Data

Stories are inherently indicative of broader sociocultural contexts (Harter et al., 2006). Stories cannot be lived, shared, or understood in a vacuum; they reflect the dynamic contexts in which they occur and are imbued with cultural, place-based, highly subjective meaning (Josselson, 2011). As such, interpreting stories as data requires a

different level of ethics and a different set of skills than other types of data require (Frank, 2010; Harter et al., 2022). To learn a person's story necessitates familiarity with that person's sociocultural reality and vice versa (Souto-Manning, 2014); to use stories as data responsibly requires responsible immersion in communities (Frey et al., 1996).

Positioning narratives as political and poetic symbolic resources, Harter et al. (2022) offered several defining features and forms of narratives that guide my engagement with stories in this study. In this lens, narrative research involves "autobiographical stories, cultural scripts, institutional plots, and the process of storytelling," positioning the construction, (re)telling, and enactment of stories as equally relevant (p. 14). Narratives, as defined by this approach, are event-centered, context-dependent, dynamic, and characterized by disruption; they create unique spaces for powerful performance, especially for members of vulnerable and marginalized communities; they illuminate the relationality of coexistence and the social construction of meaning. Importantly, Harter and colleagues resisted the tendency of communication researchers to privilege the orality of stories over the embodied, sensory nature of stories: through this lens, narratives are understood and analyzed based not only on what is said in a story, but how a story is told, when it is told, where it is told, why it is told, who tells it, who hears it, and what emotions the story involves and evokes.

Unlike more traditional forms of data that can be compared, tested, and proven, stories have a different burden of proof. On one hand, this level of subjectivity raises questions of trustworthiness in interpreting stories as data: Can we trust the storyteller? Can we trust the researcher's retelling of the story? Frank (2010) argued that the *real question* posed by stories is, "What kind of truth is being told?" (p. 5). Frank further

explained that stories do not answer that question; instead, stories remind us that we live with "complicated truths" (p. 5). Thus, stories are unique in that they, perhaps more than any other form of data, demonstrate the multiplicity and complexity of the lives represented in narrative research. Frank viewed stories as agential and posits socio-narratology as a study of "what the story does, rather than as a portal into the mind of the storyteller" (p. 13). Stories are active in the creation of lives, positioning them as crucial sources of data. Frank also offered the concept of a narrative habitus, which comprises "the collection of stories that interpellate a person" (p. 52). In short, stories are not static collections of words and memories; they create identities.

In the context of research with marginalized groups specifically, stories offer unique sources of power, validation, and emancipation: stories disrupt dominant understandings of marginalized experiences. McGinty et al. (2018) argued that a strong focus on first-person narratives is key in challenging and changing political and public understandings of SUD, which creates space for autoethnographic accounts of experiences related to SUD to enter the conversation in a powerful way. This pointed shift away from generalized knowledge and toward situated, individualized knowledge reflects Cruz et al.'s (2020) focus on autoethnographic work as an arena for deep understanding of lived experience. Similarly, autoethnography invites writers and readers to "*think with* a story…rather than break it apart for analysis" (Ellingson, 2021, p. 28; see also Frank, 1995). Wangensteen et al. (2020) underscored the specific significance of exploring—or *thinking with*—stories from childhood for children whose lives have been affected by parental SUD.

In a sense, my identity as the child of a father with SUD shapes my research more

in how my experiences differ from those of the stereotypical experiences surrounding SUD than how they relate. While I can point to plenty of residual scars and open wounds from growing up with a parent experiencing SUD, those scars do not resemble the scars I "should" have, based on master narratives of what an addict looks like (see Judd et al., 2021; Skinner & Franz, 2019). So, one of the defining questions that prompted my entire dissertation is: If my story is not represented in the master narrative of SUD, what other stories are not represented?

Autoethnographic Stories

I engaged an autoethnographic lens on stories as data in an effort to recognize and own the role my own body and narrative play in my broader dissertation research on narratives of SUD. Holman Jones et al. (2013) defined autoethnography as an artistic and analytical practice of storytelling that navigates "how we come to know, name, and interpret personal and cultural experiences" (p. 1). Autoethnography disrupts traditional academic norms (Chawla & Atay, 2018), redefines and complicates what experiences count as "normal" (Michael, 2021), and invokes feminist and postcolonial theory by rendering the personal as political (Chandrashekar, 2018).

I envision the practice of autoethnography in the larger context of my dissertation as beneficial in two ways: first, it created opportunities to explore performative writing, which I believe allowed me to communicate my experiences in the field more accurately and fully than traditional academic writing alone would (Ellingson, 2008; Hamera, 2011). Second, and perhaps most importantly, engaging autoethnography allowed me to situate myself in the research in an ethical way. Chawla and Atay (2018) argued that autoethnography re-centers the ethnographer in a way that allows the researcher to

analyze their own story as an actor in the data. This facet of autoethnography is especially relevant when the researcher has some sort of personal stake in or relationship to the research site, which I do as an Appalachian, a person who grew up around SUD, and as an advocate and ally with the residents of Wisdom River.

While I remain committed to centering the voices of participants in my dissertation research, I cannot detach myself from this research. In fact, to do so would be a disservice to my participants and to my own morals as a researcher (and as a human). Autoethnography as a vessel of performance study centers the role of the researcher's body, creating space for emotion and physicality as analytic tools (LeMaster, 2018). Because I am simultaneously on the periphery of this research (i.e., someone who has never experienced SUD) and at the heart of this research (i.e., someone who has been deeply affected by SUD), autoethnography served as a useful tool as I navigated the physical and emotional tensions that arose due to my positionality.

(Auto)Ethnodrama

Using data from participant observation, conversational interviews, and photo elicitations, Bhattacharya (2009) employed ethnodramatic one-act plays to explain and analyze vignettes from ethnographic fieldwork. Drawing on Goffman's (1959) figuration of front- and back-stage selves, Bhattacharya created two scripts—a front-stage script and a back-stage script—to demonstrate the nature of the performative self as "full contradictions, inconsistencies, tensions, voices, and silences" (p. 1065). Consequently, the front-stage script portrayed the polished, chosen performance of the subject of the study, and the back-stage script became a space in which the contradictions, inconsistencies, tensions, voices, and silences of the performative self were analyzed.

To translate Bhattacharya's practice to autoethnography, I created a script portraying an imagined conversation between myself (the "objective" researcher) and my younger self (the child unwittingly navigating a parent's SUD). In place of the ethnographic data Bhattacharya used, I drew from stories, memories, and pictures from my childhood as "data" to create a composite imagined conversation between my current self and my younger self. The back-stage script will incorporate an analysis of the conversation portrayed in the front-stage script by interspersing the voice of a narrator throughout the lines of the front-stage script. This narrative voice will draw on insights I have gained as I continually (re)make sense of my childhood and my current identity as it pertains to my father's SUD, as well as the tensions and mysteries in which I still find myself entangled.

The characters and acts of these scripts represent three (st)ages of my narrative. The structuring of "(st)ages" speaks to the fact that I, like many children who grew up around substance use, never truly "acted my age" (Wangensteen et al., 2020). As such, my narrative as it pertains to my experience with substance use is better categorized in stages: (a) before I knew about my father's substance use, (b) as I started to figure out what was going on, and (c) my current state—a space between reflection and moving forward. In the front-stage script, my voice as the child represents the first (st)age, my voice as the researcher represents the second (st)age, and my voice as the narrator in the back-stage script represents the third (st)age.

Incidentally, I had a different name during the first stage of my life. Until around age 12, I mainly went by my nickname, Cece. My dad and his side of the family has always called me Caroline, but to most of the world from 1997-2009, I was Cece. Today,

only my mom's side of the family and anyone who met me before 2009 calls me Cece. There was no deep, significant reason for this change; I moved to a new school in 2009 and decided I was tired of correcting teachers who called me Caroline instead of Cece at the beginning of the school year, so I became Caroline full-time. However, for the purposes of this paper, the Cece/Caroline dichotomy is meaningful and helpful in delineating a shift between stages. So, in the following scripts, lines delivered by Cece (my younger self) represent the first (st)age, lines delivered by Caroline (my current self) represent the second (st)age, and the narrator (my current identity as a researcher) represents the third (st)age.

***

Act I, Scene I

Spring, 2006

Cece [age 9] dashes out of the house on North College Street, letting the heavy maroon storm door slam behind her. Sporting hand-me-down basketball shorts and a Beauty and the Beast T-shirt, she trots over to Caroline, sitting on a picnic blanket in the side yard. Caroline laughs to herself as Cece's signature sprigs of bright blonde hair bounce up and down out of the opening in her backwards baseball cap. Cece brushes the grass and dirt off her bare feet before joining Caroline on the picnic blanket.

Caroline: How was school this week?

Cece: Good, except I left my backpack on the bus yesterday afternoon so Mama had to call the school or someone so I could get it back because my homework was in there and also it's my favorite backpack so I couldn't lose it.

Caroline: Oh wow! So did you get it back?

Cece: Yeah. But I wasn't even supposed to ride the bus that day because Dada was gonna pick me up but then he couldn't. But that's okay because I don't know when I would've gotten my backpack back if I left it in Dada's truck.

Caroline: You don't think he would've brought it back?

Cece: Well he would bring it back, but not for a while maybe. He likes to go on adventures so sometimes he's gone for kind of a long time.

Caroline: Oh, okay.

Cece and Caroline sit in silence for a moment, both looking down at the blanket below them.

Cece: I got an award at school and they're having a ceremony next week and all the parents are coming to school for it!

Caroline: That's awesome! Are you excited?

Cece: Yeah! I was gonna remind Dada about it yesterday but he couldn't pick me up, so I didn't get to. But I think he'll remember.

Caroline: Gotcha. I hope he does!

Cece: Me too… *[remembers to be cheerful]* but it's okay if he doesn't! I won't be mad at him or anything.

Caroline: Well, I hope he remembers… *[remembers to be cheerful]*.

Act I, Scene II

Spring, 2006 / **Spring, 2023**

Cece dashes out of the house on North College Street, letting the heavy maroon storm door slam behind her. Sporting hand-me-down basketball shorts and a Beauty and the Beast T-shirt ***Dada gave her, which she refused to take off for longer than it took to***

wash it, *she trots over to Caroline, sitting on a picnic blanket in the side yard. Caroline laughs to herself as Cece's signature sprigs of bright blonde hair bounce up and down out of the opening in her backwards baseball cap. Cece brushes the grass and dirt off her bare feet—**it's spring, after all, and Dada says no one should be wearing shoes when it's this warm outside**—before joining Caroline on the picnic blanket.*

Caroline: How was school this week?

Cece: Good, except I left my backpack on the bus yesterday afternoon so Mama had to call the school or someone so I could get it back because my homework was in there and also it's my favorite backpack so I couldn't lose it. **And Mama made me use my inhaler yesterday too, which I hate.**

The lost backpack had triggered a panic attack…hence, the inhaler.

Caroline: Oh wow! So did you get it back?

Cece: Yeah. But I wasn't even supposed to ride the bus that day because Dada was gonna pick me up but then he couldn't. ***Because he was high.*** But that's okay because I don't know when I would've gotten my backpack back if I left it in Dada's truck. ***Because sometimes he's gone for weeks on end.***

Caroline: You don't think he would've brought it back?

Cece: Well he would bring it back, but not for a while maybe. He likes to go on adventures so sometimes he's gone for kind of a long time.

"Adventures" sometimes means a jail stint or a bender, and sometimes it means adventures. Hobby Wilson has often been described as the most fun, most wild, most impulsive person anyone has ever met—great qualities to have in a friend; complicated qualities to have in a father.

Caroline: Oh, okay.

[Cece and Caroline sit in silence for a moment, both looking down at the blanket below them].

Cece: I got an award at school and they're having a ceremony next week and all the parents are coming to school for it!

Caroline: That's awesome! Are you excited?

Cece: Yeah! I was gonna remind Dada about it yesterday but he couldn't pick me up, so I didn't get to. But I think he'll remember.

Cece really thought she was being convincing, even though she knew he wouldn't remember.

Caroline: Gotcha. I hope he does!

Cece: Me too… *[remembers to be cheerful]* but it's okay if he doesn't! I won't be mad at him or anything.

And she meant it—she wouldn't be mad. She wouldn't even be surprised. She would be heartbroken, but then she would remember to be cheerful.

Caroline: Well, I hope he does… *[remembers to be cheerful]*.

***

My mom often jokes that I was born worried and recalls holding me in the hospital, days after I entered the world, trying to smooth the ridges of my furrowed brow with her finger. The tacit understanding between the two of us that this "joke" is rooted in more truth than jest reflects Wilson and colleagues' (2007) finding that children of parents with SUD tend to have higher rates of anxiety. Further, children of parents with SUD who experience anxiety tend to have more intense reactions when things that are

usually under control suddenly shift (Wilson et al., 2007), like a backpack being left on the bus. It was not until my senior year in college, when I went to the campus health center with what I thought had been a series of asthma attacks, that I began to understand the links between the backpack debacle, the dreaded inhaler, and my dad's substance use. Despite multiple doctors at the campus health center telling me that my breathing issues likely stemmed from a panic disorder, I was convinced that asthma had to be the culprit. I answered "no" to almost every question the doctors asked during the asthma screening, but asthma was the only explanation I had for the vivid memories and deep disdain for the blue inhaler that haunted my childhood. However, one quick phone call to my mom revealed that the inhaler had been my pediatrician's solution for the panic attacks I started having at five years old. Somehow, the fact that I was diagnosed with a panic disorder before I was old enough to understand what a panic attack was had been lost in translation, and that explanation for my sudden onset of panic attacks at 21 never made it into my lexicon.

Similarly, children often lack the language to explain their parent's behavior, even if they are aware of what is happening (Grove et al., 2015). Thus, absences due to jail time, unconsciousness, or other substance-related scenarios become "adventures." As the narrator clarifies, I now, at 24 years old, know exactly what was going on every time my dad failed to show up, or showed up late, or disappeared. At nine years old, however, I had a limited understanding and vocabulary to make sense of my dad's behavior. Grove and colleagues suggested that supplying children with more information about a parent's SUD can help children understand their own identities, their relationship to their parents, and their general place in the world more fully. There was a period of time during which

a court order required my dad to have a supervisor present whenever he would visit me, and I hated it. I remember asking my mom why I couldn't spend time with him alone, and she explained that he had a disease that made him not be able to think clearly or make good decisions. As far as explaining a cocaine addiction to a six-year-old goes, I think she did a pretty good job. Even so, as Grove and colleagues pointed out, children are perceptive, and children of parents who deal with SUD often are especially attuned to what is happening around them. So, generating more conversations about SUD—especially through the use of narratives and storytelling—may be an effective way to equip children to navigate life with a parent's substance use (Grove et al., 2015; see also McGinty et al., 2018).

In a study exploring parents' and children's creation of meaning surrounding SUD, Wangensteen and colleagues (2020) highlighted the tendency of children of parents with SUD to report tension between strong feelings of fear, shame, betrayal, and confusion, and strong feelings of love and closeness. In an effort to attend to those feelings of love and closeness, children often feel an obligation to excuse and/or apologize for their parents when parental behavior is affected by substance use (Selbekk et al., 2018; Wangensteen et al., 2020). As soon as Caroline started to show any doubt regarding the likelihood of Dada showing up to the award ceremony, Cece jumped to his defense— "…but it's okay if he doesn't! I won't be mad at him or anything." As the narrator explained in the second script, Cece was determined to make it "okay," to remember (to pretend) to be cheerful, to make sure no one was mad at Dada on her behalf. If she wasn't let down by his absence, no one could hold it against Dada. This feeling of responsibility to protect my dad's honor when other adults in my life would

shame him, directly or indirectly, for failing to show up for me lasted into early adulthood, and remnants of that responsibility still linger. In line with Grove et al.'s (2015) findings, only after I started piecing things together, asking my mom and other family members questions, and learning about my dad's SUD did I start to separate myself from that responsibility.

Throughout the course of this research, I often have been tempted to abandon the effort to bring my understanding of my dad's SUD and my understanding of SUD as it presents in my fieldwork into conversation with one another. On the surface, these understandings are largely disparate; I have enough awareness to not fault the people I meet at Wisdom River for the effects my dad's SUD has had on my life without writing an entire chapter to outline the similarities and differences between those experiences. However, as I reflect on lingering realities of this ethnodramatic script, it is clear that my experience with a parent who has a substance use disorder is woven into the fabric of who I am and of how I move through and understand the world—which, harkening back to Cruz et al.'s (2020) rationale for autoethnography as a way to responsibly attend to one's own role in shaping the narrative of the field—warrants exploration in and of itself. Similarly, as evidenced in the opening vignette of this paper, those pieces of who affect the way I engage with people and places during fieldwork. With that in mind, I turn to narrative mapping as a way to further explore how my presence, convictions, and understandings shape and are shaped by my dissertation research.

Autoethnographic Narrative Mapping

Tracy's (2019) concept of narrative mapping offers a way to engage space creatively, drawing attention to the "temporal, ritual, and routine features of the people

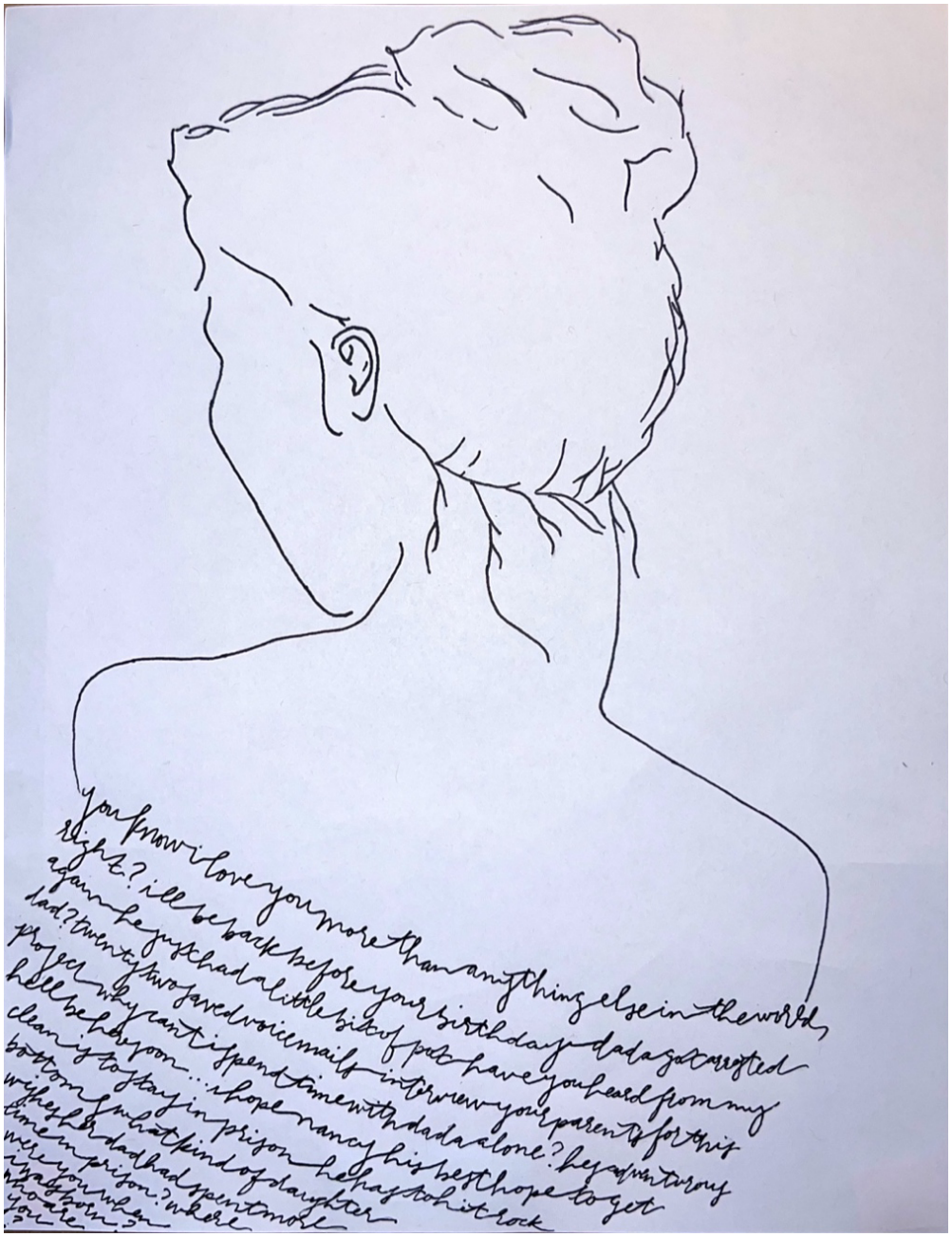
and issues in the scene" (p. 84). The act of physically drawing a map of a space challenges researchers to depart from linear understandings of their research sites, turning instead to sounds, smells, feelings, and tensions as rich forms of data. Narrative maps are accompanied by written narrative tours in which researchers reflect on the map, draw connections between different points on the map, and hypothesize potential connections between the data on the map and data collected through other methods throughout the project at hand (Tracy, 2019). The narrative mapping process provides critical contextual depth to a project by proposing unconventional ways to relate to and learn from space. Further, narrative mapping fits well with Harter and colleagues' (2022) conviction that narratives must be understood beyond their linear, verbal creation.

Traditionally, a narrative map would encompass the physical space of a research site. However, drawing on McDowell's (1999) position that bodies are spaces worthy of narrative analysis, I applied Tracy's (2019) narrative mapping tenets to create a narrative map of my body. Bodies, like physical places, are constructed through and governed by discourse (McDowell, 1999). Bodies create and are created by space. Bodies are sites of expression, history, oppression, resilience, resistance. Bodies are central characters in our own narratives, in the narratives we co-create with others, and in the narratives we resist. Stories inscribe themselves on our bodies. In the context of SUD, bodies are uniquely significant: substances alter bodies, and the psychological effects of growing up around SUD mark bodies in visible and invisible ways (Backett-Milburn et al., 2008).

[Narrative map on following page]

Figure 1

Autoethnographic Narrative Map



You know I love you more than anything else in the world, right? / I'll be back before your birthday. / Dada got arrested again…he just had a little bit of pot. / Have you heard from my dad? / 22 saved voicemails. / Interview your parents for this project. / Why can't I spend time with Dada alone? / He's adventurous. / He'll be here soon…I hope. / His best hope to get clean is to stay in prison. / He has to hit rock bottom. /

What kind of daughter wishes her dad had spent more time in prison? / Where were you when I was born? / Who are you?

This narrative map of my body portrays the stories, memories, messages, questions, and tensions that have defined a large part of my relationship with my father, and a large part of my identity in general. The choice to have the words wrap around my body like a blanket instead of integrating them into my body itself was purposeful; these stories, memories, messages, questions, and tensions are not final, nor are they definitive of who I am. Similarly, my dad's substance use is not the only thing that defines my relationship with him, nor is it the only thing that defines him. In line with Wangensteen and colleagues' (2020) position that "The complexity of the condition [SUD], one's own experiences, and the stances and attitudes toward people with substance use problems in one's own environment all influence people who are affected by it in their development of an identity" (p. 382), I see this blanket of words as indicative of multiple layers of my identity construction. Throughout the course of my dissertation research, I constantly took the blanket off, examined its seams and rips, stitched new words over top of old ones that no longer fit my understanding of my experience.

I am not convinced that I will ever be able to fully reconcile my understanding of SUD as it pertains to the people at Wisdom River with my understanding of SUD as it pertains to my father—and I am not convinced that such reconciliation is necessary. Stories are inherently contextual (Harter et al., 2022), and the story of my experience with my dad's SUD is inherently contextually different than the stories I heard and co-created while in the field. The one uniting thread between these stories is the conviction that people who struggle with SUD are people—living, breathing, whole people, who love and are loved by people. That should go without saying, but based on the vast array

of stigmas that still dictate public opinion and public policy regarding substance use, it is far from safe to position that conviction as a given.

If nothing else, I have come to the realization that this glaring lack of resolution between compassion and resentment represents the current state of my relationship with my dad more accurately than a tidy conclusion to this autoethnographic exploration would have. So, as I forge ahead with my dissertation research and remain in the tension between compassion and resentment, I am reminded of Frank's (2010) position that the work of stories is to remind us that we live with "complicated truths" (p. 5); that multiple truths can and do coexist in the complex reality of a storied life.

***

He doesn't know that I know.

And for some reason, at least for now, I want to keep it that way.

I want to preserve the idea of the father he thinks he is, the father I want him to be.

As I write this, my eyes—the same shade of blue as his—fill with tears against my will;

The blonde hair he gave me wraps around my shoulders to remind me whose daughter I am;

Hands that look exactly like his—save for a few decades of sun weathering—type this account – fitfully – stopping – often – to think…to wipe tears…to fidget.

My father is the embodied disruption of parental norms, and for parts of that, I am grateful: he taught me how to drive a boat, how to tie knots, how to balance on a

fallen tree in the woods; he taught me how to be spontaneous, how to rest in the unknown; he taught me how to see beauty in imperfection, in disruption, in the messy complexity that is humanity.

There is a push and pull

Between love and loss

Shared features and shared shame

Reconciliation and resentment

Compassion and callousness;

A longing for the childhood I could have had

The person I could have been

The father I could have known

Overshadowed by the love for who I am

For who he is, and how he is

For who we are, and how we are.

Chapter 6: Identity Construction

Generous. Smart. Organized. Competent. Kind. Caring. Blessed. Grateful. Funny. Responsible. Intelligent. Charismatic. Hardworking. Passionate. Hardheaded. Optimistic. Indecisive. Energetic. Growing. Curious. Aware. Outgoing. Compassionate. Selfless. Determined.

***

Above is a collection of words the women of Wisdom River used to describe themselves. In a narrative largely written by external authors with no personal stake in or understanding of substance use and recovery, the words of those most affected by that narrative are a jolting and necessary disruption of the story. One of my favorite moments in each interview was watching the face of the person across from me when I asked them to choose three words to encapsulate who they are. The question always caught them off guard, but their smiles suggested it caught them off guard in a positive way. The moment of silence after they decided on their third word was also rich and meaningful as they settled into the three identity anchors they had secured for themselves at the outset of the interview. This seemed like the only way to approach an interview centered on understanding how identity is constructed at Wisdom River, in a project focused on centering the voices of the people of Wisdom River.

According to Frank (2010), "…human life depends on the stories we tell: the sense of self that those stories impart, the relationships constructed around shared stories, and the sense of purpose that stories both propose and foreclose" (p. 3). This conviction rings true literally and metaphorically in my own story as the child of a parent with SUD and in the stories shared in this chapter as participants detail the life-threatening and life-

altering power of stories, stereotypes, stigma, and strength related to SUD. Building on Chapter Four's exploration of what it means to experience SUD and recovery through the narrative lens of Wisdom River and Chapter Five's journey through the tensions between resentment and compassion, in this chapter I analyze participants' understandings of who experiences SUD, who deserves access to effective recovery resources, who deserves safe and dignified housing, and who defines the parameters for an identity related to substance use and recovery. In short, this chapter asks, who are the women of Wisdom River, and how have they become who they are?

To that end, this chapter addresses the following research questions:

RQ2: How do those connected to Wisdom River narratively construct their identities?

RQ2a: To what extent, if at all, do those connected to Wisdom River incorporate SUD and recovery in the construction of their identities?

RQ2b: To what extent, if at all, do those connected to Wisdom River incorporate place in the construction of their identities?

The stories shared in this chapter reinforce one of the main themes woven throughout this dissertation: we live with complicated truths (Frank, 2010). In response to RQ2a, the first section of this chapter explores participants' conception of SUD and recovery as sources of both *fracture* and *wholeness* in the construction of their identities. Participants' articulation of SUD and recovery as sources of fracture center on the stigma narratives embedded in participants' family identities, parental identities, and sociocultural identities. Participants' conception of SUD and recovery as sources of wholeness focus on communal identity and narratives of care at Wisdom River. The second section delves into the role of place—specifically*, the agency of the physical space of Wisdom River*—in

participants' identity construction in response to RQ2b. This chapter concludes with the marriage of all the identity themes that arose throughout this project to demonstrate the commonality and individuality simultaneously at play in the narrative construction of identity at Wisdom River.

SUD and Recovery in Identity Construction

RQ2a: To what extent, if at all, do those connected to Wisdom River incorporate SUD and recovery in the construction of their identities?

SUD and recovery are deeply woven into the identities of the women at Wisdom River. Given the nature of this project and the overall narrative ecology of Wisdom River, this finding is not necessarily surprising. However, the myriad angles from which participants articulated the role of SUD and recovery in their identity is fascinating. Broadly, participants' incorporation of SUD and recovery in the construction of their identity fell into two seemingly dichotomous, yet surprisingly coexistent, narrative frameworks: *SUD and recovery as identity fracture* and *SUD and recovery as wholeness*. The working definition of SUD and recovery as identity fracture is rooted in Nicole's response when I asked her to define addiction: "It takes part of you—most of you—away from everything. From reality and from everything you love." Building on this definition, identity fracture manifested as separation from oneself, from salient others, and from one's understanding of a "normal" existence in society. Subsequently, wholeness is defined as reconnection with oneself, others, and society, grounded by the integration of SUD and recovery as a formative piece of one's identity.

As participants guided me through their stories, detailing how their experiences of SUD and recovery have been both sources of fracture in the construction of their identity

and sources of healing and wholeness, Frank's (2010) conviction that to be human is to live in the tension of complicated truths echoed in my head. Once again, SUD is not *just* the use of potentially harmful substances, and recovery is not *just* abstinence from those substances. SUD and recovery are deeply embodied experiences that demand a more nuanced and storied understanding than is currently offered by the default master narrative of substance use.

SUD and Recovery as Identity Fracture

After I asked participants for three words to describe themselves, I asked them, with no other pretext or explanation, "Will you tell me your story?" Participants' immediate responses varied, but the most common response I got was some variation of the clarifying questions Rachel and Nicole each asked before they started: "My story as an addict? Or my story as a human being?" (Rachel); "My story before addiction? Or after?" (Nicole). The fact that the majority of participants felt compelled to clarify which story to tell suggests that the role of SUD in their lives has, at some point, represented a sense of fractured identity, separate from the rest of who they are. This separation of stories underscores the fact that Wisdom River does not exist in a vacuum. Decades-long cultural conversations and assumptions about substance use are woven into the fabric of Wisdom River and into the stories of the people meaningfully involved in the organization. This reality echoes Meisenbach's (2010) assertion that the process of deciding whether to incorporate externally defined stigma into one's identity is an important piece of identity construction and stigma management. Further, to recall Gabriel (2017), narratives are not bound by organizational walls. In as much as Wisdom River acts as a safe haven and a key player in the rewriting of master narratives of SUD

in Appalachia, it cannot fully prevent damaging narratives from getting in. As people get involved with Wisdom River, the narratives that have helped shape their identities to this point in their lives enter the organization's narrative ecology. Wisdom River is not some magical space that is immune to the myriad stigma narratives ascribed to the identities of people experiencing SUD, and as participants narrated their identities, stigma narratives were internalized, perpetuated, deconstructed, rejected, and reified.

The reality of SUD and the undeniable stigma associated with substance use is omnipresent in everyday conversation at Wisdom River. During participant observation, I saw these stigma narratives at play as residents and staff members reminisced on past exploits, discussed child custody cases, worked through various stages of their 12 Step program, welcomed new residents and hosted goodbye parties for long-term residents moving on to the next phase in their recovery journey. In keeping with Galinsky's (2013) finding that members of stigmatized groups often use stigmatizing language as a tactic to strengthen ingroup identity, residents affectionately called themselves and each other addicts and junkies, discussed difficult court cases and probation terms over afternoon snacks at the kitchen table, and shared concern for friends, family members, and former residents who had "gone back out" (i.e., had begun using substances again after a period of active recovery).

During interviews, components of internalized stigma arose early and often: most participants touched on their own definition of what SUD looks like, feels like, sounds like within the first 10 minutes of their interview, and those definitions unanimously drew on common tropes in stigmatizing master narratives of substance use. Each participant handled these stigma narratives in a different way: some used them as foundations for

self-deprecating humor, some expressed resentment toward their contribution to a negative self-image, but all detailed how they had consciously and subconsciously validated and perpetuated those narratives in the different stages of the construction of their identity. Within the theme of SUD as identity fracture, two subthemes arose: *family identity* and *sociocultural identity*.

Family Identity. In response to participants' clarifying question regarding which version of their story to tell, I said, "However you want to tell it. If I were writing your biography, what would I need to know?" Invariably, participants began their stories with their childhood. While each participant's story began in a different time, place, and socioeconomic context, they each narrated their childhood through the lens of what a "good" childhood should look like:

> I'm not from a family that drank, or certainly, there was no drug use. Even the concept of partying was a foreign concept. … especially my mom's side of the family, we are a game playing, make good food, share meals together family. We were endlessly playing, and running around and eating good food, close to my relatives, connected. … I just have no idea – how can I possibly be alcoholic? That can't be. I don't know why I'm alcoholic. That part. I just accept that I am. … I definitely feel like I was validated by my parents. I was a good student. They – that was noted. I was supported and loved and praised and given good security, good safety *(Ann)*

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> And from the outside looking in, you wouldn't have thought there was even the slightest chance in the world that I would have become an addict. Even though my dad's side of the family, it does have some issues with alcohol and illicit

drugs. But I was brought up in such a loving home, regardless of who my father was. *(Rachel)*

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I grew up in a very small community…. And on one side of the street were the houses and they were mostly men who came back from World War Two, and new brides, and little kids. And we lived across the street from the city park, which was our playground. There was no worry or concern at the time about kids being kidnapped, kids being abused. There was no – I was unaware of any problems with drugs or alcohol or domestic violence, no police were around, it was just really easy place to be. And I just realized recently how, how lucky that is, and how unfair that I got to experience that. And there are so many other people who don't, and that that has really instilled in me this need, almost, to give, or to help, to be part of the solution. … And I got an extremely good education. No drugs, no alcohol – you know, that wasn't a problem. *(Lorelai)*

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My parents were letting me go on my own, and basically let me do what I wanted. So I didn't have no control then. I did whatever I wanted. I smoked a lot, I drank a lot. And then eventually, whenever the smoking and drinking wasn't enough, and I became depressed again, my mom offered me something a little stronger to help me, which I didn't know what it was. But, you know, I took it because she's my mom, I trusted her. *(Nicole)*

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My parents separated when I was three, both alcoholics. My sister died of a drug overdose when I was 14. I started using when I was probably 11, with her. Like, not all the time, I guess, but you know. And then later on, it was more frequent.

(Scarlett)

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Mom was pretty out of it. She was in her addiction then. And at this time, back home before all this, I had only smoked pot and drank beer. I wasn't introduced to anything other than that before I left Ohio and went to Mom's. I remember seeing Mom, like, doing a line of – well, I found out it was meth. Since she hadn't known me, she left for all them years, and she was in her addiction, it was it pretty much anything I could talk her into letting me do. So, her and her girlfriend, I caught them with a plate and doing it, so I was like "I want some of that." And I remember her kind of giving a little bit of an argument. But I said, "I've done it before, I want some." Probably there was gonna be no way that I let up, so I got some. *(Hannah)*

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Growing up, I really kind of normalized the alcoholism in my dad. And then as I got older, I was like, "that's normal in every family." Because a lot of my families of the friends I was friends with when I was younger were very similar. Oftentimes, like, worse off, I would say, or just in different conditions than I was in. And so I really normalized it a lot. *(Joey)*

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I grew up with a father who was an alcoholic. And the irony is, and it's in many people's stories, as much as we see what happens or happened to our parents, and we don't like it, and we understand what's causing whatever difficulties in the home, we often start doing the very thing that we see our parents do. *(Peggy)*

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I did really well in high school. I was on the honor roll. I went to college. I did do

> some drugs in high school, but like, weed, maybe mushrooms. Not a big deal. My mom was an alcoholic, my dad was a pothead, but it wasn't – I mean, I didn't have, I guess there were some traumatic aspects of it, minorly, you know, but I didn't have like some big traumatic event that happened. I was never really close with my mom. I think that kind of fed a little bit of like insecurity. I was just insecure period. And I never really felt like I belonged. And most of my childhood and into my high school, I lived my life in books. *(Jenna)*
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> It's something that I never saw in my future. I grew up in a household where both of my parents were alcoholics, but they made alcohol seem fun – drinking and playing cards, or playing music. So they made it look like it was fun all the time. But, you know, there was always a downside to that. And I saw some of that early on. And then I just had always told myself, "I'm never gonna be like them. I'm never going to be like my mom, not going to be my uncle, because they're obnoxious. And I'm not going to be like my dad, because I never knew him." Because I was 16 when he passed away, and I didn't get to spend much time with him. So I had told myself that for the longest time. *(Lenora)*

In these excerpts, we see different angles of similar stigmatized and stereotyped assumptions of the kinds of childhoods that lead people to develop substance use disorders. In Ann, Lorelai, and Rachel's minds, their origin stories are incompatible with the typical story of a person with SUD: they had loving parents, were raised in nice homes, did well in school, and were not exposed to substance use at an early age. As Nicole, Scarlett, and Hannah narrated their origin stories, they seemed to categorize their

families as aligning more closely with what may be expected of a childhood that led to SUD, due in part to the lack of those marks of a "good" childhood. Joey, Peggy, Jenna, and Lenora fall somewhere in the middle: while they grew up around parents experiencing substance use disorders, they internalized the belief that addiction is solely a matter of choice, an issue of willpower—a belief which has undergirded decades of stigmatizing, ineffective, and often fatal policies and societal conversations about substance use (Skinner & Franz, 2019).

I chose to include verbatim excerpts from each interviewee's description of their childhood to highlight the common themes in early understandings of SUD, but also to underscore the diversity of experience represented in this group. Just as SUD has been generally touted as a homogenized identity marker (Judd et al., 2021), any deviation from a good or normative childhood has been siloed in master narratives as a direct path to a stigmatized adulthood, especially when parental substance use is part of that childhood (Wangensteen et al., 2020). These assumptions ignore the fact that people experiencing SUD are just that: people, with different stories, different identities, and different backgrounds. The women at Wisdom River are not ignorant to the fact that one's family can be a major influence on one's identity, and the general consensus at Wisdom River is that SUD often is the result of a genetic predisposition or a childhood trauma. Even so, a recognition of the spectrum of family identities and backgrounds represented at Wisdom River is crucial to setting the scene for the diversity of experience at play in this organization.

In a similar vein, most of the women involved with Wisdom River have children. For many participants, the pinnacle of their substance use—what many referred to as

their “bottom” (i.e., the turning point before their decision to begin their current recovery journey)—aligned with a fracture in their identity as parents. In other words, as participants’ SUD became more intense, many could not reconcile their identity as a parent with their identity as a person experiencing SUD. The societal expectation of women not only to be mothers, but to be “good” mothers (see Johnson & Quinlan 2019), and primary caregivers, was highlighted in the stories at Wisdom River. Peggy identified this narrative trope as one of the driving forces behind her commitment as one of the founding members of Wisdom River: “Women, in some ways, are—the impact is more significant, because they’re often the single parent of children.” Peggy’s position was reified in nearly every interview as participants who had children identified the loss of custody of their children as a defining moment in their understanding of their substance use and their incorporation of SUD into their identities.

Scarlett touched specifically on this identity shift as she narrated correlation between the loss of custody of her children and the progression of her SUD:

> I signed all rights over of my kids when they were probably about two and seven. They're about five years apart. And it was off to the races, really. Like, that's – it really, really got bad then. I started using crack cocaine, I started using meth, I started... I didn't care about nothing. I don't think I cared about anything before, but I lost my – I gave my kids away. … That was the end of it. …I might have called [my kids] three or four times in two years. Never went to see them, never... And it wasn't that I wasn't allowed, but I wasn't willing to stop using to go see them. And that's crazy.

Scarlett’s shift in narration in the middle of this excerpt (“I lost my – I gave my kids

away") signifies a decisive moment in her identity construction. In Scarlett's mind, she had to choose between her identity as a mother and her identity as a person with SUD. And, in Scarlett's mind, her choice to relinquish her parental rights and her unwillingness to stop using substances was "crazy," which points to a level of internalized stigma as Scarlett constructed the pieces of her identity related to SUD.

The fracture between parent and person with SUD and the choice-based language Scarlett sets up here exemplifies an interesting dichotomy that surfaced in many other interviews: participants unanimously condemned master narratives that frame SUD solely as a choice, yet often referred to their own SUD—especially in relation to its impact on their parental roles—as a choice. Hannah's account of custody loss is similar to Scarlett's, but offers a bit more insight into the nuances of the relationship between SUD and parental identity that arose so often throughout this research:

> The state would give me my kids, I'd sign, and I'd have my parental rights back. It wasn't very long after that that I would start again, I would start up using again. The third time was probably the last time I knew that I wasn't going to be able to get stopped again— and stay stopped. So I didn't. I let the state take over, let them take completely over. I knew about the court dates, I knew leading clear up to the day that they were going to terminate my rights if I didn't show up. I knew, I knew, I knew. But I knew at that point that I wasn't going to stop [using], and I couldn't do it. So I just never…I never showed up for them.

Hannah interpreted her identity as a parent and her identity as a person experiencing SUD as incompatible for the most part, but also framed her choice to let the state take custody of her children as a choice based in her identity as a mother. Hannah felt unable to be the

kind of mother she wanted to be, or felt like she needed to be, while her substance use was unmanageable. Hannah's account demonstrates the gray area between SUD as a choice and SUD as a disorder: early in our interview, Hannah explained that she had always wanted to be a mom. So, when she found out she was pregnant at 14, she felt ready in many ways to take on this new identity. As she worked through the rest of her story and continued to wrestle with her contrasting identities as a mother and as a person experiencing SUD, she kept coming back to the fact that she never would have chosen to lose custody of her children or to put them in precarious situations if SUD were not a factor. And yet, she knew she couldn't "get stopped—and stay stopped."

The seemingly contradictory framing of SUD as both a choice and a disorder aligns with the facets of 12 Step ideology that center on responsibility. 12 Step recovery posits that "we were powerless over our addiction" (step one) and encourages members to "make amends to all persons we had harmed and become willing to make amends to them all" (step eight). So, the 12 Step narrative affirms that SUD is not a choice, but that those in recovery are still responsible for the outcomes of their actions during periods of active substance use. In other words, according to 12 Step ideology, people can hold themselves responsible, and fellow community members can hold each other accountable; the damage occurs when those outside the community identify people as addicts and place blanket blame and stigma on them based on that reductive identity.

Jenna's journey to reconcile her parental identity with her identity as a person with SUD demonstrates the tangible harm those blanket stigmas can cause:

> It boggles my mind. It's hard to comprehend how deeply I had convinced myself that my kids were better off without me. I would be better off dead because then

> my kids wouldn't have to go through life thinking, "I've just got a junkie mom who doesn't care about us." And I was like, "Well, if I was dead, they wouldn't have to do that. It would just be, 'My mom's dead.'" I had so deeply committed to that idea.

Jenna's story here demonstrates two things pertaining to identity: first, her conviction that her children would be better off without a mother than with a mother experiencing SUD speaks to the strength of the narrative that an identity as a parent and an identity as someone experiencing SUD are always inherently incompatible, perpetually fractured. Second, the fact that Jenna, now an incredible mother by any definition, struggles to even understand how she became so convinced that her kids would be better off if she were dead points to the ability of the stigma attached to SUD identity to fracture one's sense of self.

Given the corporeality of these stigma narratives, reconstructing parental identity is a major piece of life at Wisdom River. Reflecting on her own recovery journey, Ann explained that, "As a single mom, I couldn't be off the clock. So, what I've learned is that, a lot of times, women's stories will drag out quite a bit longer for exactly that reason." Based on that embodied conviction, part of Wisdom River's organizational structure is to take women who have children "off the clock," to provide space and rest as they to reconstruct their parental identity before they begin the process of regaining custody. Okamoto and Peterson (2021) identify this process in nonprofit organizing as appending identities: "encourag[ing] members to think about, and provid[ing] avenues for, performing their identities in new ways" (p. 10). The communal nature of Wisdom River and the fact that the organization is entirely populated by women, many of whom

are mothers, create an ideal space for exploration of what it looks like for members to step into their identities as parents in the new framework of recovery. Thus, instead of ignoring or succumbing to master narratives that paint familial wholeness as incompatible with SUD, the women of Wisdom River define for themselves how to constructively navigate the fractures in their family identities.

Sociocultural Identity. The salience of participants' parental identities points to common sociocultural assumptions that undergird the stigmatization of SUD. Sociocultural identity fractures manifested as disconnection between participants' understanding of their own roles in society and their preconceived notions of what a person with SUD looks like based on gender, employment status, appearance, and social participation. Substance use has long been seen as a predominantly male experience (Vederhus et al., 2020), so women experiencing SUD, already falling outside the "norm" of society at large (Wangensteen et al., 2020), are also cast as outside the norm of their gender. Further, to recall Peggy's point that women experiencing SUD often are the single parents of young children, the added identity layer of "mother" invites further complexity to the experience of SUD. In the eyes of this gendered master narrative, men experiencing SUD are men experiencing SUD, regardless of whether they have fathered children. Meanwhile, if a woman experiencing SUD also happens to be a mother, she becomes a mother experiencing SUD, inciting an entirely new category of stigmatized identity markers, as evidenced in the narratives in the previous section.

In the context of this research, gender-based assumptions about who can have SUD—and, subsequently, who deserves treatment and social support for SUD—can be seen in the fact that the Mercy House (the men's Level Two transitional recovery house

in Anderson) was founded twelve years before Wisdom River. While there are quantitative data to support the assumption that men experience SUD at higher rates than women (see Tull et al., 2020) these data cannot be interpreted separately from societal narratives that make it more acceptable or normative for men to experience and disclose substance use. As an organization founded by women in recovery, led by women in recovery, serving women in recovery, with a constant waitlist of women seeking residence, Wisdom River disrupts the narrative of SUD as a male experience simply by existing. Beyond that, Wisdom River espouses a uniquely feminist approach to the historically patriarchal tenets of 12 Step ideology that directly challenges gender-based assumptions about who can experience SUD, what it means to be a woman experiencing SUD, and what recovery can look like for women.

Even so, gendered stereotypes of SUD still played a role in participants' articulation of their identity fracture in interviews, especially as those who were not privy to substance use during childhood worked to reconcile their preconceived notions of SUD with their own experience of SUD later in life. Ann's early understanding of SUD in particular was highly impacted by gender norms:

> My idea of an alcoholic would have been somebody in a trench coat under the under the bridge, you know, somebody – a man, it would have been a man, kind of like a homeless person type, being super stereotypical. And then drug addiction – I really had no real concept of that.

This excerpt from Ann's interview also demonstrates the intersection of gender and economic status assumptions in societal understandings of SUD: people experiencing SUD are homeless men living under bridges. I highlight this not to condemn Ann's

childhood understanding of SUD, which changed significantly as she learned more about SUD through first-hand experience, but to illuminate the fact that, regardless of how earnestly Wisdom River works against reductive narratives of SUD, the people at Wisdom River still exist in the "real world," and "real world" narratives are still going to influence members' lives and identities.

The experiences of the women at Wisdom River suggest that the sociocultural expectations of women in the United States, however antiquated and reductive, add complexity to the stigma of experiencing SUD as a woman—and, subsequently, delay or deter the act of identifying and disclosing SUD. Ann's recovery journey was delayed in part due to the cultural and economic factors that rooted her notion of what someone experiencing SUD should look like: unemployed, unhoused, unkempt, unloved, unable. At what Ann identifies as the peak of her substance use, she was a seasoned and well-respected middle school teacher, a homeowner, clean and clothed, married, and able to perform her duties as a teacher, wife, and mother. And yet,

> Alcohol is so embedded in our culture, that unless you are behaving in a manner that is so shockingly out of character, like losing jobs, losing your home, getting arrested, getting into bar fights – which, none of that happened. That was never the case in our story, so I didn't see it. I really didn't see it for a very, very long time. Today, I would say, I think that probably it's harder for upper middle-class folks who have jobs and houses and partners and children to identify the truth. Because we live in a culture that celebrates alcohol. And if you are – if you have those things, surely you can't be – you're not the trench coat man under the bridge.

Here, Ann touches on the idea that the severity, validity, and forgivability of SUD are judged largely on gender and class identity in mainstream discourse, and that the narratives linked to different substances create different consequences and identity markers for the people who use them. Ann went on to explain that, "In a way, with drug addiction, it's much easier to identify because it's illegal to start with." Excessive alcohol consumption by a white, upper middle-class adult is socially acceptable—at times, even socially encouraged—because alcohol is a legal substance. As long as that person maintains some level of social acceptability in their outward identity, they can avoid being labeled as a person with a substance use disorder.

Lenora echoed this assumption as she walked me through the evolution of her understanding of SUD:

> There are no drugs in my story. But the only reason why I didn't do drugs is because I was afraid of losing my nursing license, see, and alcohol is legal, but other things are not. …And there is a stigma attached to drugs especially, that a person is never going to get well, or that all people who are drug addicts or alcoholics are bums. …And I've been guilty of having that stigma, too. I did it with my own brother. He loved pills…and he gave them up, but for some reason, I guess I thought I was up here, and he was down here. …It took me a long time to let go of that.

Ann and Lenora's stories also point out that the narratives of extremity on which societal ideas of what a person with SUD looks like are built serve as a sort of double-edged sword: the privilege associated with their identities as white, middle-class women with respectable jobs who used a substance that is completely legal protected their identities

from stigma in their eyes and in the eyes of society, but that protection ultimately contributed to the progression of their SUD. Further, the moral delineation between legal and illegal substances perpetuates the stigmatization of those who lack jobs, homes, clean criminal records, etc., regardless of whether the lack of those things is related to substance use.

Participants who were more familiar with substance use from an early age focused less on specific stereotypes related to economic status and SUD and more on a broad dissimilarity with the general public. This pattern manifested as participants contrasting their identities to those of "normal people" (i.e., people who have never experienced SUD), which relates back to the "addict/human" dichotomy that provided the basis for the overall theme of SUD as identity fracture. In Rachel's words, "Recovery does not mean perfect. Sober does not mean perfect. We are still human beings. Just like normal people are always gonna have things wrong with them and have things they need to work on, so are we." Rachel's identification as something other than "normal" illuminates Wangensteen and colleagues' (2020) position that substance use falls outside of most mainstream definitions of "normal" life and highlights the power of that reality in the identity construction of people who identify as a person in recovery from SUD. Rachel's delineation between people experiencing SUD and "normal people" also demonstrates Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social categorization process: in Rachel's mind, her experience with SUD creates an identity marker that categorizes her as significantly similar to other people who have experienced SUD and significantly different from people who have not.

For Jenna, the narrative gap between her identity in recovery and societal

definitions of what constitutes a “normal” person manifested in a memorable moment at one of the local banks in Anderson in the first few months of her residence at Wisdom River:

> I started working at Dairy Queen, and I had saved up like three paychecks, and I was like, “Man, this is the first job that I've had in eight years, and I'm going to save up. I'm not going to cash it.” And so I get all three checks, right? And this is like a month and a half of stuff. And so I'm like, “I'm gonna go get a bank account, I'm gonna save up however much I can, and then I'm going to help my kids get school clothes. I'm going to help my brother,” which was a big deal to me. …And so I go to Anderson Ridge Bank, and I'm like, I am so proud of myself. My jar is overfilling with pride, and a sense of accomplishment, and just YES. And, to make a long story short, they refused me. They said, “We need to run your credit report.” I said, “No, no, no, no, no, I don't want a debit card. No, I want a savings account. I'm going to give you my money. And you are going to hold it.” And they said, “No, we need we need the last five years of addresses.” I've been homeless, like literally homeless, living in abandoned houses. I don't have five years of addresses. … So they did a credit report. And then they were like, “Well, you have two evictions. Your credit report’s not good enough. And you don't have a rental history or a residential history long enough.” So I am so shattered. I'm like, “See?” I remember going back to Wisdom River, bawling my eyes out and just being like, “This is why. This is why. Like, no matter how hard I try, or how good I think I'm doing, it's not going to be enough for these people. Normal people. It's not going to be enough. I can't ever do enough or say enough

> or be good enough. So why try? … I was really dejected. Just hurt, just hurt. And it was the first time – I think another reason that it stood out to me was it was the first time in – I'm trying to remember how clean I was at that point, maybe nine months, between nine months and a year. And that was the first time that I felt like an addict. That was the first time I felt like people don't want me, I'm always going to be just an addict. So why not act like one? … And Wisdom River had built me up and given me hope and had been like, "You're a part of society, you're just like everybody else." And that was the first time I felt like, "See? I'm not like everybody else."

Here, we see the effects of Smith's (2007) position that the stigmatized facets of one's identity tend to overshadow their identity as a whole in the eyes of the majority. The utter dejection Jenna described as the bank denied her request to open a savings account was palpable in her retelling of the story, even years later. Granted, an argument could be made on behalf of the bank employees that they were simply following protocol and that their denial of Jenna's request to open a savings account had nothing to do with her identity as someone in recovery. As I listened to Jenna tell this story, however, the irony that a bank in a city whose population is largely comprised of transient college students ostensibly had no protocol to work around a lack of rental, residential, and credit history was not lost on either of us.

Regardless of bank policy, this story holds greater significance in that Jenna had been experiencing SUD for years, living in abandoned houses, getting arrested – all activities that, from the standpoint of social definitions of stigma, hold the potential to mark someone as stigmatized (Smith, 2007). Yet, the first time she felt like she "was

always going to be just an addict" – a significant defining moment in constructing her identity in the early days of recovery – occurred during mundane errand. This identity fracture embodies Meisenbach's (2010) position that one's decision to incorporate socially defined stigma into one's identity is a major factor in identity construction for those who live in stigmatized bodies. Jenna's attempt to engage in socially defined appropriate behavior for the social group she was trying to enter ended up solidifying her identity as an outsider of that group.

For Jenna, the inability to open a savings account became a tangible outcome of Smith's (2007) concept of entativity: it marked her as perpetually outside the realm of "normal" people, and Jenna, at least for a time, internalized this otherness as the common fate assigned to all people experiencing SUD. Jenna's experience with the bank also brings McDonald and colleagues' (2020) conception of closeting and disclosure, specifically Axiom 1 ("Closeting processes are negotiated through interaction. Whether a difference is revealed or concealed is not solely an individual's decision") and Axiom 4 ("For individuals whose differences are invisible, non-normative, and stigmatized, negotiating closeting processes is a constitutive feature of everyday interactions") into the conversation. Even if Jenna's SUD was not revealed directly through her experience with Anderson Ridge Bank, other stigmatized facets of her identity and her story were disclosed through the credit check the bank insisted on running. In turn, this everyday interaction became a battle over agency in the disclosure of pieces of Jenna's identity.

Jenna's bank experience, albeit one person's story with one bank, offers a tangible representation of intersecting structural and social barriers to recovery and the impact of those barriers on the identity construction of the people they affect. However, the power

of Jenna's story being one story with one bank lies in Gabriel's (2017) conviction that narratives are nomadic; the stories of hope, strength, and recovery swirling around the walls of Wisdom River are not stuck there. Jenna's story did not end with Anderson Ridge Bank, and the experience, as we will see in the transition from SUD and recovery as fracture to SUD and recovery as wholeness, gave way to a positive identity anchor she still holds today.

SUD and Recovery as Wholeness

Somewhere along the way, as participants narrated their life stories, their "story as an addict" and their "story as a human being" meshed into one cohesive identity. Wisdom River's position of SUD as a lifelong condition frames SUD and recovery as inherently connected, which gives participants space to conceptualize their identities as people with SUD and people in recovery as one unified identity. Thus, SUD and recovery as wholeness becomes a reconnection with oneself, others, and society, grounded by the integration of SUD and recovery as a formative piece of one's identity. This unification is important because, while there is certainly social stigma associated with being in recovery (hence the strict anonymity of AA and NA programs), being in recovery is still seen as morally superior to being "just an addict," to borrow Jenna's words again. Yet, as many participants pointed out, their experience with SUD was always and will always be part of their story, and the narrative of SUD at Wisdom River creates space for SUD and recovery to be celebrated separately and together.

In an effort to accurately portray this merging of identities, I have been careful to avoid framing SUD as something participants had to "overcome," which was a common phrase I noticed in other SUD and recovery literature I came across in preparation for this

project. People at Wisdom River expressed pride in who they are, not in spite of their experience with SUD, but in part *because* of their experience with SUD. As Rachel put it,

> I'm more today because of my addiction, and through my journey of recovery, than I could have ever asked for. I was not a nice person, I really wasn't, when I was younger. And then, like I said, all the trauma built up…. And when you're actively using, there are things that you're going to see, hear, and experience that will change your attitudes and beliefs. And I thought those would never go away. I thought I would always be mean and nasty and snippy, and put my hands on people. And today, I can say that's not who I am. I'm the last person in a group of people to raise my voice. And that used to be my first go-to.

Rachel's articulation of the role of SUD and recovery in her identity formation demonstrates why it is crucial for researchers to take a back seat to participants when researching identities that have been labeled as stigmatized (Zhang et al., 2021). As detailed in participants' understanding of SUD as a source of identity fracture, the women at Wisdom River are aware of, and at times accepting of, the various forms of stigma associated with an identity that includes SUD. Yet, as Rachel demonstrates, it is possible for fracture and wholeness to coexist. At Wisdom River, the stigmatization of identities that involve SUD does not automatically eclipse a person's entire identity; these are the complicated truths of stories that have been touched by SUD.

For all their forgiveness and understanding of SUD, the women at Wisdom River do not belittle or overlook the physical ramifications and implications of substance use. I have seen more times than I can count people at Wisdom River crying together over substance-related loss of life in their community, or the loss of recovery in someone who

is still alive. SUD is serious, it is fatal, it is understood on a personal, visceral level at Wisdom River—and it is that grave understanding that leads Wisdom River to approach SUD the way they do. By broadening the definition of what it means to experience SUD, Wisdom River opens pathways for honest conversation about SUD and creates space for SUD and recovery to be interpreted as a marker of strength.

Discussing her role as a Peer Support Specialist at Wisdom River and a Chemical Dependency Counseling Assistant for another recovery organization in Anderson, Rachel touched on the nuances of the social barriers to recovery in the area and the power of more open conversation about SUD:

> It's the fact that there are not enough resources—or even, sometimes there are enough resources, it's just that people who are actively using are uncomfortable with the judgment of other people. And they're scared to ask for help. Because what if they don't get it? They're let down again. Because a lot of us have been let down in certain ways. But I think it's something that, if we continue to work on, it'll get better. And the more that we share with one another and we're there to support one another, I think that eventually it'll be – I don't want to say normal, but I think it will be accepted.

Here again, we see a departure from "normal." But what separates this excerpt from Rachel's (and others') earlier musings on SUD as a source of fracture from society is a sense of hope—hope that, through the very steps Wisdom River is taking to open conduits of conversation and challenge the stigma of SUD, of not being "normal," more people experiencing SUD will have the space to understand their journeys and identities as whole.

For staff and residents of Wisdom River, the shift toward a unified identity often coincided with the beginning of their involvement with Wisdom River. On the surface, the communal identity—the identity layer that "bonds [members] together" (Hecht & Lu, 2014, p. 4)—at Wisdom River is an identity rooted in experience with SUD. And, on the outside, it would be easy to label communal identity at Wisdom River as perpetually stigmatized, especially considering Hecht and Lu's (2014) position that communal identities often manifest as stereotypes. However, the outcome of Jenna's bank story beautifully captures the nuances of communal identity at Wisdom River and the role of community—of authentically connecting with oneself and others—in members' conception of SUD and recovery as a source of wholeness:

> Ann came in and I was hysterical. And I was mad. Very, very angry. And I was like, "You want everybody to change their life and all that, but you don't want to give them the chance to do that. You want to judge them in this way." And Ann said, "Give me 24 hours." I mean, she said more than that. But I was like, "Whatever. I guess I'll just get a piggy bank, like a three-year-old." But you know Ann, she's a problem solver. So she was like, "Just give me 24 hours. Even if we have to do it where I have to cosign or whatever, I will do it. We'll figure something out. Just give me 24 hours to figure this out." And I'm like, "Yeah, whatever."
>
> …And the next day, Ann came back and she just had this big smile on her face. And she said, "I want you to come with me. Get your ID and come with me." …And we went to Anderson County Credit Union, and she had sat down for like, an hour with this lady at ACCU. And she had figured out that they have this

little loophole where if you donate $5 to the library, and you become a friend of the Anderson County Library, you can get a free savings account. No debit card, no nothing. Just donate $5 to the library, and no questions asked. It's for little kids, you know, so they can have their own little, whatever. And they had to search for it. Like, this wasn't a known program. And so I was like, “Oh, my gosh, this is happening. I'm actually getting a savings account.”

So I walked out of there with a savings account at ACCU. And it just it showed me that Ann cared about me enough and was patient enough and persistent enough to walk with me through it. She didn't have to do that. I would have kept walking on my own, and that would have been the end of it. Anderson Ridge Bank would have been the end of it. It just would have given me an excuse to feel that to feel that way, that I am separate from everybody else. I'm different from everybody else, I'm less than everybody else. Not because of what I was doing right now, right? I had a job, I had a good place to live, I was doing everything that society is telling you to do to get your life back together. But because of all the things that I did few years ago, I'm still less than. And Ann showed me that you have to walk with other people, they have to be a part of your journey. You 100% have to feel connected to society, to the community that you live in. Whatever community you live in, you have got to feel connected, because if you don't, there's no purpose for you. … And that's when I realized, like, okay, I can do this. And when I don't know how to do it, I can ask for help. And somebody won't just say, “Go do it. You figure it out.” They'll help me. So that was big. That was that was really, really big.

Ann's action on Jenna's behalf draws Razzante and colleagues' (2021) dominant group theory into the conversation: Ann understood the impact this situation was having on Jenna's self-concept, recognized the injustice in Anderson Ridge Bank's interpretation of Jenna's reality, and took steps to dismantle the oppressive structures at play. In short, Ann embodied the meaning of communal identity at Wisdom River and created space for Jenna to see herself as whole—wholly accepted, wholly worthy, wholly connected to a community who cares about her.

Building on communal identity, the presence of a "recovery community" is a common topic of discussion and an ever-present identity marker at Wisdom River. The recovery community as participants defined it comprises Wisdom River, regular 12 Step meetings in different locations around Anderson, substance use and mental health agencies in the area, nearby inpatient rehabilitation facilities, local businesses and nonprofits with histories of hiring Wisdom River residents, and, importantly, the people that populate those places. This rich sense of community stands in stark contrast to the stories participants shared that centered on a lack of belonging before coming to Wisdom River. Nicole changed schools four times and recovery houses twice in an effort to fit in somewhere; Jenna and Lenora both recalled floating between friend groups in school, always having friends but never belonging to one specific group; Hannah, having met her mother for the first time at 13, longed to be part of her friend group, which meant participating in substance use with them. Rachel reflected specifically on the contrast between her life before her involvement with Wisdom River and her life now, detailing what it means to identify as part of the community at Wisdom River:

They're here to call you out on your bull crap. But in a kind way, not yelling and

> screaming, pointing out all your defects, but like, "Hey, are you okay? Is there anything you want to talk about? How's things going for you?" …So instead of before, when people just screamed and yelled and degraded people, it is a loving and caring community. I've never been hugged so much in my life, and I've never felt more accepted. Even through all the bad things I've done, I'm accepted. They know who I am.

Community at Wisdom River is to be known, to be seen, to be accepted—not in spite of, but because of one's identification as a person with a substance use disorder.

One major facet of Wisdom River's communal identity is the incorporation of 12 Step language into everyday conversation. The more time I spent at Wisdom River and the more 12 Step meetings I attended, the more I began to notice the prevalence of 12 Step vocabulary in how organizational members narrated their stories and identities. Soon, the use of 12 Step phrases became an ingroup marker: as members of Wisdom River began to use 12 Step words more freely around me and stopped pausing to explain what they meant, I began to feel more and more like a member of the community. Terms like "in the rooms" (actively attending 12 Step recovery meetings), "jails, institutions, and death" (the outcome of unaddressed SUD), "just for today" (taking recovery one day at a time), and "give it away to keep it" (the laymen's manifestation of step 12), all of which came up in multiple interviews, signify alignment with the communal identity of Wisdom River.

This language and identification with the broader 12 Step community also opens avenues for a broader definition of who "belongs" in the Wisdom River community. Joey, despite never having experienced SUD herself, identifies as being "in the rooms"

and is, as far as I can tell, wholly accepted by the women at Wisdom River who have personal experience with SUD. Similarly, toward the end of our interview, Ann and I reflected on what it means to identify as a member of a 12 Step program:

> I think it benefits even people who don't have a substance use issue. When they become involved, it's like a way for anybody to kind of walk further in this discovery of—maybe that's what life is, right? Discovering who we are.

Ann went on to explain why she is often quick to welcome people who have not experienced SUD into the Wisdom River community, and specifically into the open AA and NA meetings on Tuesday and Wednesday nights:

> I think it's brought a deeper level, to have had COMCorps members, and medical students, and you, for instance—to come in and realize that this is a way to approach life. And the gift from that, too, from all of you, is, I think it helps the women who are here as residents who think, "Oh, here I am, I have to do this." Most of them have come either out of incarceration, as you know, or from treatment centers or rehabs. And so they're like, "Well, this is another step in that journey." And that's where I think in my definition of Wisdom River, I want to kind of set us apart. Because this is—yes, it's continuing the recovery journey for sure. And helping hopefully develop skills that will let that continue. But it's also just learning how to live—which, there is no manual for any of us.

So, in Wisdom River's interpretation of 12 Step recovery, communal identity is rooted partially in personal experience with SUD, but also in a commitment to wholeness, to learning how to live as ourselves in the stories we have created for ourselves.

Critics of 12 Step programs have often posited that the emphasis on anonymity in

12 Step programs further stigmatizes and closets the experience of SUD as an identity marker (see White & Kurtz, 2008; Weichelt, 2015; Williams, 2021)—a position which, on the surface, certainly has merit. However, those involved in Wisdom River's implementation of 12 Step recovery affirmed the opposite: the anonymity guaranteed by their participation in AA and NA meetings at Wisdom River and in the broader Anderson community generally affords them the agency to choose if, when, how, and to whom to disclose their SUD. Moreover, the space created within the narrative framework of 12 Step ideology at Wisdom River to speak freely about one's struggles and successes positively affects how those involved with Wisdom River narrate their stories. The assumption that anonymity automatically implies shame is rooted in the assumption that SUD is something to be ashamed of—which, as has been reiterated throughout the pages of this dissertation, is not the case at Wisdom River.

Summary of SUD and Recovery in Identity

Listening to participants verbally navigate the narrative space between fracture and wholeness in their identities helped me make sense of the tensions between resentment and compassion in my own story. In turn, those tensions in my story helped me understand, even from the perspective of someone who has never personally experienced SUD, the interplay between fracture and wholeness in the stories to which I bore witness throughout this project. The women at Wisdom River have a striking ability to conceptualize identity as multifaceted and complex, to hold fracture and wholeness in tension. By understanding SUD and recovery as crucial pieces of their identities, participants implicitly challenged the idea that SUD and/or recovery inevitably define one's entire identity while still recognizing the embodied reality of substance use.

Further, by exploring the fractures in their own identities, participants deconstructed not only what it means to be a person with SUD, but to be a woman (with or without SUD), a mother (with or without SUD), a community member (with or without SUD). In the next section, I expand the conversation on identity to encompass participants' understanding of the role of place in the construction of their identities.

The Place of Wisdom River

RQ2b: To what extent, if at all, do those connected to Wisdom River incorporate place in the construction of their identities?

Place as a facet of identity did not manifest in the ways I expected it to upon entering this research. Given the storied history of Appalachian identity and my understanding of my own identity as deeply rooted in the place of Appalachia, I was interested to see how, if at all, participants incorporated being from and/or living in Appalachia in their understanding of SUD and of themselves as a whole. However, I also wanted to avoid imposing the narratives that shape my identity on participants' narration of their identities. So, none of my interview questions explicitly touched on Appalachia as a potential identity marker. Instead, I asked participants how they would describe the attitude toward SUD and recovery "in this area." To my surprise, most participants described the overall attitude in Anderson as positive, especially within the recovery community. Lorelai described Anderson as "pretty informed and educated," Peggy pointed to "a tremendous amount of very caring professionals" in the area, and Rachel explained that Anderson "has grown a lot" in its understanding of SUD and recovery. Jenna, who had never been to Anderson until she moved to Wisdom River, provided a vivid picture of what this looks like in practice:

> The longer I'm here, the more connections I build. Like, now I have a connection to my job and all the people there, and I'm trying to think of all the connections I've made. It just keeps spreading out and keeps spreading out and I feel more like a human being a human being with purpose, honestly. A human being that people care about.

In sum, experiencing recovery in this place, in this community, has contributed to positive identity (re)construction: participants have been made to feel good, worthy, included, and capable. Thus, the notable lack of references to Appalachia in participants' stories might imply an important piece of the overall counternarrative of Wisdom River in that the women at Wisdom River do not view being Appalachian or living in Appalachia as a barrier to successful recovery.

In relation to identity, place was largely rooted in narratives of home: societal narratives of what home "should" look or feel like and who deserves the ideal home, and individual stories of home that redefine what constitutes home. For many participants, "home" in the traditional sense (i.e., the place they grew up) did not align with the attributes of "home" as defined in mainstream conversation (i.e., safe, warm, grounding, etc.). Home was antithetical to recovery in many stories, so participants' reconstruction of home often entailed some level of identity reconstruction. One defining moment in Hannah's childhood identity formation centered on internalized stigma regarding the house she grew up in:

> I know today that Dad did the best he could with what he knew, which was rough for all of us. So rough. We moved to Carpenter, and they had put these two trailers together over the hill, and you couldn't see the trailers from the road …

> and again, there was no running water. …It was bad. It was embarrassing. It was a dirty lifestyle. And I remember I had come to an age where I would go to the neighbors' houses and see that everybody had more than we did…. I remember me never wanting any kids to come home. I don't even think they were allowed to come into our place, you know, the neighborhood kids. But I would get to go and stay with them. Then I remember telling my friends on the school bus, the friends I went to school with, lying to them about what it looked like over the hill. I'd talk it up like it was nice and we had this and that … because I guess it was at that time that I figured out what was going on with us was like, "wow," you know? After seeing other people's homes and stuff. Like, shit.

Later in her interview, Hannah recalled a conversation with her brothers, both of whom were in recovery, that took place when Hannah was weighing her options as she neared the end of her inpatient rehabilitation program in southwest Ohio. Her brothers begged her not to go home, insisting that "there's nothing for you there, sis." Hannah agreed, explaining that "all this that I've done, it did start at home. It started at home with my dad and my siblings." Anderson is home for Hannah, so she declined her first offer from Ann to come live at Wisdom River.

Hannah's reticence to go home exemplifies a potential extension of Barcus and Brunn's (2010) concept of place elasticity. Barcus and Brunn argued that place elasticity—the ability to be physically distant from yet emotionally close to a place—as opposed to place attachment disrupts the binary of strong/weak place attachment (i.e., the assumption that those with strong ties to a place are unlikely to leave that place). Hannah clearly has strong ties to the Anderson area, and the negative effects of those ties had the

power to deter her from returning to the area. So, given Hannah's experience and the similar reluctance to go home expressed by other participants, further exploration into the effects of strong negative place attachments is an important area of study for place-based identity research.

Having decided against moving to Wisdom River, Hannah still had to find somewhere to go when her inpatient treatment ended. She ended up moving to a different transitional recovery house in southwest Ohio, and after a few months,

> Things weren't getting better. Like I said, I was just doing the bare minimum in [southwest Ohio]. Not going to meetings, not really trying. So I called Wisdom River, I called Ann up again, and she said yes to giving me a bed as soon as one was available. So this time I made up my mind: I'm coming home. …And everything, this time, has been different. It has been different. …It's been two years. I can't believe it's been two years. It's been two years. *At this point in the interview, Hannah is laughing in disbelief, smiling up at the ceiling as she speaks.* I don't know. I came to Wisdom River, and this place…*Hannah takes a long pause here*...I don't think I give myself enough credit, you know what I mean? It's been a process. I love meetings now. I do, I love meetings. I try to be a part of it all. …I've learned a lot. It's a whole lot different this time. I have this job that I love, and…I've finally been able to get out of my own way. I was angry for a long time, I was miserable for a long time, even for a while after I got here. But that's not me anymore. I know I don't want that life again, and I know I don't have to – I don't have to be in it anymore. I have water and I have everything I need here. And even after I move out, I know that I can stay a part of meetings,

> stay a part of Wisdom River. Just as long as I do, I'm gonna be okay. I know that. I know that.

Geographically, Hannah did come home. But Wisdom River offered Hannah a framework on which to build a new definition of home and a new understanding of who she is at home. Hannah's stay at Wisdom River coincided almost perfectly with the duration of my fieldwork, so I got to witness the slow, steady, marked transformation she referenced above. I remember that period of anger and misery she experienced during the beginning of her residence, and I became convinced she hated me during my first few visits to Wisdom River. When I told her that months later during a long car ride we took together to run an errand in the next county over, she laughed and said, "I didn't hate you, I hated everyone back then!"

Hannah has moved out of Wisdom River now and continues to attend Tuesday night dinners and weekly NA and AA meetings at Wisdom River. In the months leading up to her move, she often joked that Ann would have to kick her out because she never wanted to leave. Jenna, one of Wisdom River's earliest residents, said the same of her final days at Wisdom River:

> I did not want to leave Wisdom River. I didn't want to leave. And it got to the point where like, all of my stuff was there, except for like one outfit. And I would come home – see? I still call it home. I'd come back to Wisdom River in my work clothes. I'd be like, "I'm just tired. I just want to – can I just sleep in my bed one more night?" I was scared to death. I was scared to death. And then Ann and Tanya sat me down and were like, "Okay, how about this: we'll take you to meetings, we'll be there for you, you'll be connected." And I was like, "I just

> don't want to lose you!" And they're like "You're not going to lose us." Because living there, it was the first time I felt secure, and I felt like I was a part of something, you know what I mean? It was like a family. …And I remember my first night in my new house, I woke up to probably 12 text messages: "How was your night?" "Did you sleep good?" "Is everything okay?" "Do you need anything?" And it just made me feel really good.

Jenna's account demonstrates the confluence of Wisdom River's narrative of care and Wisdom River's material comfort. It's not that Wisdom River instills in residents some sort of dependence on the organization; rather, Wisdom River has been intentionally designed to be a place where people feel comfortable, a place for people to linger, a place to call home. This design is achieved through both the physical allure of the house and the embodied care of the people who inhabit it to make it a home.

One uniting thread in many participants' recovery journeys pre-Wisdom River was an urgency to leave the recovery facilities they found themselves in. Nicole came to Wisdom River from a different Level Two transitional recovery house a few hours away in an effort to escape the institutional feeling of that house and the conflict that accompanied living with 16 other women:

> It's kept me sober. It's kept me sober longer than I probably would have been in that other sober living, honestly. …And I wanted to be back home, which is here in Anderson. …When I got here, it felt so much more calm. I felt more at home because the house I used to stay in at the old sober living felt more like a facility, all these different bedrooms and everything. But here it's like an actual home. You have separate bedrooms and you have, like, an actual kitchen. Like a family

kitchen, basically, not a facility kitchen like it was there. And you can see deer outside every day. That's a plus.

So, the question becomes, how exactly does Wisdom River contribute to members' (re)definition of home? What is it about the place of Wisdom River that becomes engrained in the life stories and identities of those most intimately involved in the organization? Participants pointed to the way the sun floats through the trees in late spring, the predictability of the deer that graze in the field every morning, the feeling of the dirt in the garden at the edge of the property, the early evening light that sets the kitchen aglow as they cook dinner together as the physical touchstones that remind the women at Wisdom River that they are worthy, capable, safe. The physical space of Wisdom River rejects notions of institutionalization and sterility in recovery housing, pushing against the idea that the only things people in recovery need are a roof and a bed. The physical space of Wisdom River casts its inhabitants as worthy of comfort and mirrors the words participants used to describe themselves: caring, compassionate, organized, competent, optimistic.

The founders of Wisdom River refused to settle for a mediocre space as they created the organization. They intentionally sought out a house that would feel like a home, thereby knocking down multiple significant and common barriers to recovery. Peggy explained that a major factor in her drive to help found Wisdom River was a desire "to be more intimately involved in the basics." Peggy went on to explain that,

> When you think of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, addiction in itself is really a – it's not a monkey, on the back, it's a gorilla. And to put in there all the other factors for women: maybe getting out of prison, having a record, trying to find a

> job, trying to find a place to live where no one uses, having no money. Having the stigma, the self-esteem issues. Just so many compounding factors, all of that came together…and I and a few other women in the recovery world stepped up. And that would be how Wisdom River was born.

Here, Peggy underscores the necessity of a multifaceted, person-centered approach to recovery. Peggy's description of the catalyst for the creation of Wisdom River demonstrates that integral to the narrative ecology of Wisdom River is the conviction that people in recovery deserve not only safe housing, but comfortable, lovely, pleasant housing. The "gorilla" that is SUD is all-consuming and exhausting, and the founders of Wisdom River approached their search for a house from the logical yet shockingly unique standpoint that having a house one is proud to call home should be seen not as a luxury, but as a necessity in recovery organizing. Wisdom River's rejection of the norm of dilapidated, institutional recovery housing points to a grounding belief in the role of dignity and the power of placemaking in identity construction.

The materiality of Wisdom River harkens back to the organization's emphasis on care as a feminist organizing strategy and creates space for "new normals" (Harter et al., 2022) in defining what it means to identify as a person with SUD, or as a person living in a transitional recovery house. Wilhoit Larson (2018) posited placemaking in organizations as a critical feminist practice that has the power to disrupt hegemonic organizing norms. Wilhoit Larson also pointed to care specifically as a central tenet of feminist organizational placemaking, which calls Wisdom River's narrative of care back into the conversation here. The material space of Wisdom River alone is aesthetically pleasing, but more than that, the space of Wisdom River has been made a place through

the care embodied by the people there.

The separation of spaces at Wisdom River also plays a role in defining the experience there. The main level of the house is open to anyone; residents, staff, visitors, etc. are all welcome to mingle in the kitchen, living room, dining room, office space, and front and back porches. The upstairs level, which houses all three bedrooms and a full bathroom, is private; generally, only residents and Ann are allowed upstairs. I only went upstairs twice in the nearly two years I spent at Wisdom River: once during my first visit to the house when Ann offered me a tour, and once when I was invited up by a resident who wanted to show me her perfume collection. This delineation of public and private space is interesting given the general consensus in social geography of public space as masculine and private space as feminine (see Whitson, 2017): in an organization completely populated by women, what role do the lines between public and private space play?

At Wisdom River, the separation of public and private space creates space for agency and dignity and demonstrates Ann's conviction that even in a communal living situation, adults should have the right to private spaces. In this way, private space—which, especially in the setting of a home, has long been associated with female oppression (Massey, 1994)—becomes a site of power and a space in which to cultivate an identity as a "normal person," to borrow Rachel's words again. The role of private space as a source of agency for residents was evidenced early in my fieldwork, when a woman working on a Master of Psychology began visiting Wisdom River twice a week as a way to gain field credit hours for her degree. I noticed a shift in the air of the living room any time this woman came in, and residents quickly found excuses to excuse themselves to

their rooms. Residents are generally expected to be in the public spaces of the house during the day as part of their participation in Wisdom River as a recovery organization, so their absence from the living room in the middle of the day was out of character. One day, when I got to Wisdom River for my regular Wednesday afternoon visit, the woman was sitting at a picnic table at the edge of the lawn with Lorelai. When I got inside, Ann explained that the residents had expressed discomfort with the psychology student, citing their frequent evacuations from the living room any time she showed up. So, Lorelai was asking the student to find a different organization with which to finish her field credit hours. Ann further explained that, while it is important for residents to get to know community members outside the organization, it is more important for them to feel comfortable in their own home.

Gieryn's (2000) three defining features of place—location, material form, and meaningfulness—are all equally present in the construction of place at Wisdom River. Geographically, Wisdom River is situated at the end of a long, steep driveway, set far enough away from the center of Anderson that any stigmatized or closeted facets of residents' and visitors' identities are not compromised, yet close enough for Wisdom River to be deeply involved in the fabric of the recovery community in Anderson. Materially, Wisdom River looks and feels like a "normal" house, which is an important factor in its role in the identities of those who live there and those who visit regularly. Meaningfully, Wisdom River is the product of years of place-based, people-oriented, progressive work toward a new definition of what it means to live in and organize around recovery.

Conclusion

To bring this chapter to a close, and to underscore the interplay between fracture, wholeness, and place in the overall identity framework of Wisdom River, I offer Ann's narration of Wisdom River:

> Wisdom River—although again, you can give it the definition that in the state of Ohio, you know, what is Level Two transitional recovery housing. But I would argue that this is a safe haven for women who are in early recovery from substance use disorder, where they are able to walk with other women who are also in recovery, and reconnect with society, the community—not just the recovery community, but the greater community, and kind of either discover for the first time or rediscover, if they lost it in addiction—I think some people fell into their addiction so early that they might not ever have discovered who they really are. So this is a chance for women to really discover who they are as an individual human. Not with a label. I mean, yes, they come here because they have this presenting issue that has kind of brought them to this need. But to discover far more than just, "Okay, here's how I live life without drugs or alcohol." And I think we're unique in this. I don't—I hope there are other places that do operate like this, but I would argue that we probably are somewhat unique. Because I think the motive of everybody involved in getting this up and off the ground has been not "I'm gonna save you," but, "I will walk with you until you find your way, and then you can walk on your own."

Wisdom River has turned traditional recovery organizing on its head by boldly confronting stigmatizing master narratives of what people experiencing SUD look like

and what recovery spaces look like. SUD and recovery are complex, storied, highly individual and yet highly communal experiences, and the space created at Wisdom River for fracture and wholeness to peacefully coexist as members explore their identities is a crucial piece of their organizational narrative. Further, the physical space of Wisdom River draws dignity, embodied care, and security into the organization's definition of what it means to experience SUD and recovery. The history of recovery organizing is characterized by sanitized, institutional space, and Wisdom River's direct negation of those norms is key to its organizational identity. The women at Wisdom River refuse to define other people's experience of SUD and recovery based on their own preconceived notions and experiences, choosing instead to walk with fellow travelers as they (re)define their own experiences, resurrect their own latent identities (Okamoto & Peterson, 2020), and (re)discover who they are—today, in this place, in their story.

In the next chapter, I offer a discussion of the major theoretical and practical implications of this dissertation. Guided by Wisdom River's feminist approach to 12 Step organizing and reconstruction of what it means to be resilient and successful in SUD and recovery, I introduce the concept of *narrative recovery organizing* to encapsulate recovery organizing practices that elevate local knowledge, celebrate identity tensions, and enact embodied care as an organizational strategy. Finally, the voices of those who lent their stories to the creation of this project bring it to a close as they detail, in their own words, the things they want people to know about SUD and recovery.

Chapter 7: Discussion and Implications

As I barrel toward the conclusion of this dissertation, a nagging sense of incompletion tugs at the back of my mind. The story of Wisdom River is not over. The stories of the women who joined me in the creation of this project are not over. In many ways, these stories are just beginning. Wisdom River is nearing the end of a major construction project that will allow the organization to house two more residents, bringing its capacity from six residents to eight. Long-time residents are moving out to start their next chapter, new residents are moving in and lending their stories to the narrative ecology of Wisdom River, and everyone is still meeting at the dinner table every Tuesday night. Such is the nature of narrative research: there are no clear beginnings or endings, just an invitation to marvel at the mosaic of moments that arose along the way.

My hope at the end of this project is that it has captured salient nuances in the narrative lifeworld of Wisdom River and has adequately honored and represented the unique work the women of Wisdom River are doing. In this chapter, I step more firmly into the role of the academic as I expand the conversations started in Chapters Four, Five, and Six in light of previous scholarship that has nuanced my interpretation of Wisdom River. I begin by analyzing the thread of feminist organizational practices that characterize the narrative realities of everyday life at Wisdom River and set Wisdom River apart from other 12 Step recovery organizations. Drawing on the wide variety of narratives and identities that coexist at Wisdom River, I unpack Gabriel's (2017) concept of narrative ecology—and, more specifically, Gabriel's (2017) and Foroughi and colleagues' (2019) description of narrative temperate regions—as a useful framework for

this project's theoretical and practical contributions to what I term *narrative recovery organizing*.

Next, I tease out important implications for feminist organizing related to Okamoto's (2020) narrative resilience framework through the lens of Wisdom River's definition of what constitutes the concepts of care, heroes, resilience, and success. I explore the theoretical and practical implications of Wisdom River's reconstruction of success that honors the lived realities of SUD and challenges the binary, pass/fail mentality that characterizes mainstream definitions of success in recovery organizing. I then touch on the limitations of this project, focusing specifically on the demographics of Wisdom River and the size of the project as a whole. Finally, I return to an emphasis on the words of those most deeply involved in the narrative lifeworld of Wisdom River as I conclude this small chapter in Wisdom River's narrative ecology.

Implications for Narrative Recovery Organizing

Central to Wisdom River's narrative ecology (Gabriel, 2017) is a commitment to listen to, believe, and validate the life stories of its members. Within that commitment, the narrative ecology of Wisdom River creates space for multiple, potentially conflicting identities to coexist. The stories shared and created throughout the course of this research have led me to two main contributions to offer to the intersection of communication theory and recovery organizing: first, that a feminist approach to 12 Step narratives has the potential to introduce an entirely new recovery strategy within the framework of one of the oldest recovery strategies in modern history, thereby creating possibilities for new definitions of what it means to enter and dwell in recovery; and second, that the opportunity afforded by a feminist approach to 12 Step recovery to redefine resilience

and success in the context of SUD and recovery is integral to the future of recovery organizing.

A Feminist Lens on 12 Step Organizing Narratives

In line with Gabriel's (2017) conviction that the study of individual narrative ecologies is vital to understanding societal narrative ecologies and vice versa, the analysis of the interplay between micro and macro narratives in Wisdom River's narrative ecology has much to offer the theoretical and practical realm of recovery organizing. Wisdom River is a relatively small organization in a relatively small city, but the work being done there and the knowledge flowing from its walls have the potential to change the way we organize around and communicate about SUD and recovery, especially in organizations and communities rooted in 12 Step ideology. Following Gabriel's (2017) and Foroughi and colleagues' (2019) explication of the different types of narrative ecologies, I posit that Wisdom River is a narrative temperate region: an ecology in which a wide variety of narratives can grow together and thrive. In contrast to narrative monocultures, in which a single narrative dominates the narrative ecology and drives out any competing narrative(s), narrative temperate regions "accommodate a plurality of narratives with a wide range of characters and plot turns" (Foroughi et al., 2019, p. 141). The framework of Wisdom River as a narrative temperate region is a significant departure from the narrative monoculture of normative 12 Step recovery organizing. Wisdom River's feminist approach to the historically patriarchal and hegemonic structure of 12 Step recovery balances what would otherwise be an overwhelmingly singular narrative structure. In other words, while the narrative ecology of Wisdom River is largely rooted in the 12 Step narrative, the organization's ecology is tempered by narratives of care and

narratives of success.

In a cultural moment when harm reduction strategies are dominating the recovery field, the abstinence-only approach of 12 Step recovery has come under scrutiny—and for good reason. Alcoholics Anonymous was founded by men in 1935 (Williams, 2021), and the patriarchal remnants of its early 20th century origin still linger in modern-day iterations of 12 Step programs. For example, there is an entire chapter in *The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous*—a central text in most 12 Step programs—entitled "To Wives." The chapter is dedicated to helping women navigate marriages in which the husband is experiencing SUD, which (a) reifies master narratives that portray SUD as primarily a male experience, and (b) highlights a deep-seated heteronormativity in the 12 Step narrative that has no constructive role in a recovery program. The book lacks parallel chapters for husbands, same-sex couples, unmarried partners, etc. Similarly, the spiritual component of 12 Step recovery often has been conflated with western Christian ideals, which imbue the narrative of 12 Step recovery with even more potential for sexism and heteronormativity. Granted, official 12 Step doctrine explicitly denies connection to any specific religion or sect, but the social tendency to relate 12 Step spirituality to Christianity cannot be overlooked. More broad critiques of 12 Step recovery programs focus on the rigidity of the steps themselves and their broad claims of universal effectiveness, when in reality, roughly 50% of new members in 12 Step programs stop attending meetings within three months of their first meeting (Vederhus et al., 2020).

And yet, the women at Wisdom River have managed to work within the framework of 12 Step recovery to create a unique, nuanced, place-based approach to recovery organizing. Wisdom River's decidedly feminist interpretation of 12 Step

ideology simultaneously brings to light the patriarchal defects in more traditional approaches to the 12 steps and demonstrates how a feminist lens on 12 Step recovery can subvert those hegemonic norms. By simply existing as a recovery organization founded by women, led by women, populated by women, Wisdom River complicates the male-dominated narrative of 12 Step ideology. Beyond that, however, Wisdom River's implementation of 12 Step doctrine is grounded in convictions that mirror Wilhoit Larson's (2018) tenets of feminist organizing: authenticity, security, humanity, and community.

Whereas the rigid, linear nature of the 12 steps has been critiqued for its tendency to homogenize the recovery process (see Vederhus et al., 2020; Williams, 2021), participants at Wisdom River described the structure of the 12 steps as a useful path along which to explore their different identities authentically and in community with others on a similar journey. 12 Step language tends to suggest that 12 step recovery is the only path to long-term recovery, and while Wisdom River has a zero-tolerance policy for substance use among residents, most people involved in Wisdom River do not subscribe to the idea that working a 12 Step program is the *only* way to address SUD. In interviews, participants who had attempted recovery in the past were careful to explain that, *for them*, other (non-12 Step) approaches had not worked, but quickly clarified that others in their lives had achieved long-term recovery using other strategies. This simple narrative shift toward validation of other strategies underscores the role of the feminist tenet of deference to local and marginalized knowledge (Hamington, 2001) in Wisdom River's approach to 12 Step recovery. The spiritual component of Wisdom River's narrative ecology is another part of their uniquely feminist approach to a historically patriarchal

framework. Recognition and acceptance of all interpretations of a higher power is a guiding social norm at Wisdom River, which rejects the patriarchal overtones of western Christianity common in more traditional interpretations of 12 Step recovery and upholds the centrality of individuality and particularity (Gilligan, 1982) in Wisdom River's commitment to feminist organizing.

Also central to Wisdom River's implementation of 12 Step recovery is an ethic of care (see Gilligan, 1982; 1995; 2007). Gilligan (1982) described an ethic of care as rooted in connection: "People live in connection with one another; human lives are interwoven in a myriad of subtle and not so subtle ways" (p. 123). This description has been challenged and extended by other feminist scholars like Tronto (1993), who argued that Gilligan's definition of care as a feminist ethic may reify the patriarchal assumption of care as an action socially assigned to women. Gilligan (1995) responded by differentiating between care as femin*ine* and care as femin*ist*. An ethic of care as femin*ine* positions care as a uniquely female experience, thus reifying the antiquated patriarchal assumption that care and other forms of emotional labor are solely a woman's responsibility and, consequentially, that men are incapable or less capable of incorporating care into their ethics. Gilligan went on to explain that an ethic of care as femin*ist* positions care as a radical act, especially in organizational settings: care as a central tenet of organizing privileges connection, particular knowledge, and wholistic wellbeing over the isolation, universal knowledge, and bottom line organizing that characterize traditional patriarchal organizing structures.

Building on Gilligan's work, Hamington (2001) created a definition of care that aligns with several of the core commitments of Wisdom River's narrative ecology:

> [Care] describes an approach to personal and social morality that shifts ethical considerations into context, relationships, and affective knowledge in a manner that can be fully understood only if its embodied dimension is recognized. Care is committed to the flourishing and growth of individuals yet acknowledges our interconnectedness and interdependence. (p. 108)

In this definition of care, Hamington positioned the embodiment of care, or the body's role in physical act of caring, as central to a feminist ethic of care. Whereas earlier scholars had begun to detach the concept of an ethic of care from the physical, Hamington's definition reconnects the concept with feminist theory's focus on the material, creating space for tangible justice in ethical conversations that might otherwise center on disembodied, ethereal ideas.

Scholarly and political discussions of SUD and recovery often spin in lofty ideological circles, talking about change and justice and ethics without actually doing anything (Judd et al., 2021). This is especially true when the voices of those most affected by SUD and recovery are excluded from the conversation. By centering context, relationships, affective knowledge, and embodied consequences in conversations about ethics, Hamington's (2001) interpretation of embodied care creates a solid foundation for shifting recovery organizing norms away from sweeping, generalized narratives and toward contextualized, relational narratives. In the context of recovery organizing, emphasis on the embodied nature of care is essential to sustainable, tangible justice in the rewriting of the narrative of SUD and recovery. The narrative framework of care at Wisdom River is radically physical, and the embodied experience with SUD and recovery shared by organizational members at all levels is a key factor in maintaining that

level of tangible care.

The space for a wide range of characters also positions the narrative temperate region of Wisdom River as able to foster meaningful identity exploration. Unsurprisingly, considering the integral role 12 Step ideology plays in the narrative ecology of Wisdom River, 12 Step narratives weighed heavily in how participants narrated their identities. 12 Step language served as an ingroup/outgroup marker, and many participants—especially residents—meshed their self-concept and self-esteem with the values of 12 Step doctrine. While this identification process objectively is neither positive nor negative, it suggests important implications for recovery organizing, especially in organizations that employ 12 Step programming. For example, the norm of identifying oneself in 12 Step meetings first by one's name, then by one's relationship to SUD (e.g., "I'm Caroline and I'm an addict," or, "I'm Caroline and I'm here for support) has been critiqued for its role in perpetuating stigma and setting people in recovery apart from "normal" society (Wangensteen et al., 2020; Williams, 2021). Wisdom River subscribes to this "once an addict, always an addict" mentality of 12 Step recovery, which I expected to be the source of a major critique on my part when I entered this research. However, as participants narrated their stories and explored their identities with me, it became clear that this framework actually allows those involved with Wisdom River to understand and become comfortable with the tensions between conflicting pieces of their identities. Put simply, the way Wisdom River approaches the conceptualization of SUD as a lifelong piece of one's identity gives the women at Wisdom River the freedom to view their SUD as just that: *one piece* of their identity, not their entire identity.

As participants explored their identities, both in relation to their experiences with

SUD and recovery and apart from them, it became clear that the commitment to feminist organizing norms that underlie the narrative ecology of Wisdom River plays a significant role in defining how those connected to Wisdom River understand their identities. Identity construction at Wisdom River is heavily influenced by 12 Step ideology, but, just as the organization's narrative ecology is tempered by feminist ideology, so too is the overall approach to understanding one's identity at Wisdom River. The organization's commitment to inclusion creates space for anyone connected to Wisdom River—residents, staff, board members, etc.—to explore who they were during active substance use, who they are in this stage of their recovery, and who they hope to be moving forward. This space is important in 12 Step recovery organizing theory because it directly challenges the male-centric, one-size-fits-all norms that characterize traditional 12 Step ideology. Further, in a more practical sense, Wisdom River's feminist lens on identity construction within 12 Step ideology lays a foundation for a broader range of identities to enter and thrive in 12 Step recovery. Building on Wisdom River's redefinition of what it means to identify as a person with SUD and as a person in recovery, I turn now to an analysis of Wisdom River's reconstruction of what resilience and success look like in recovery organizing.

(Re)defining Resilience and Success in Recovery Organizing

Okamoto's (2020) three pillars of narrative resilience lend a constructive lens through which to analyze Wisdom River's theoretical and practical contributions to the communication discipline's understanding of narrative recovery organizing. The first pillar (an appreciation of action based on the history of place) manifests at Wisdom River through members' long-term investment in the Anderson County community. While

participation at Wisdom River is not based on any prerequisite length of residence in Anderson County, those most intimately involved in the organization have lived in the area for decades, if not their entire lives. Thus, a lived understanding of place—of what it means to experience SUD and recovery in North Central Appalachia broadly and in Anderson County specifically—is baked into Wisdom River's approach to recovery. Practically, Wisdom River's attention to place allows for sustainable collaboration with other recovery organizations in the area and with organizations and community members not affiliated with recovery work, which creates pathways and partnerships for residents to reintegrate into the community in a more natural way. Theoretically, Wisdom River's commitment to honoring the emplaced reality of SUD and recovery in Appalachia draws Frey and colleagues' (1996) position that localized knowledge is crucial to sustainable social change into the realm of organizing around SUD and recovery.

A key facet of Wisdom River's understanding of resilience and success related to Okamoto's (2020) second pillar of narrative resilience (a commemoration of heroes) is Wisdom River's interpretation of a "hero": what defines a hero at Wisdom River, and who among those involved in the organization falls into that definition? Unequivocally, Ann Bennett, the director of Wisdom River, was described as a hero in Wisdom River's story. Every single interviewee, unprompted by me, touched on the role Ann has played in their lives personally and in the lifeworld of Wisdom River. Ann's casting as a hero is particularly significant in Wisdom River's theoretical contribution to recovery organizing because of where Ann was in her story when she stepped into her role as director of Wisdom River. Ann was only a few months into active recovery when the board asked her to be the director, and Ann credits the faith the board members had in her ability to

take on the role as foundational in that more precarious stage of recovery.

While it is relatively common for recovery organizations to employ people in recovery, the decision to invite someone so early in their recovery journey—or even someone with a history of SUD at all—to fill the most integral leadership role in the organization is beautifully unorthodox. Further, considering the fact Wisdom River's board is comprised of women who had been in active recovery for years and would have been well suited for the director role on paper, it is clear that the choice to offer the role to Ann was deliberate and strategic: who better to relate to and understand the specific needs of women in the early stages of recovery than a woman in the early stages of recovery?

Ann filling the role of director also demonstrates the centrality of an opportunity narrative mindset (Wiederhold Wolf, 2016) in Wisdom River's organizing processes. By recognizing the systemic inequities and stigma that jeopardize employment opportunities for people with a history of SUD and working in direct opposition to barriers, the board of Wisdom River set a crucial precedent in their organizational narrative when they chose Ann to be the director. This commitment to valuing embodied knowledge of SUD and recovery at the ground level of the organization is yet another layer of Wisdom River's feminist organizing strategy that other recovery organizations would be wise to emulate. In short, being a hero at Wisdom River has nothing to do with recovery time, economic status, level of education, age, or even traditionally "heroic" actions; heroism at Wisdom River is rooted in the care, compassion, and empathy Ann embodies in her role as director.

Building on the tenets of heroism at Wisdom River, I wanted to explore how

those at Wisdom River define resilience in their stories, especially considering the complicated connotations the term has carried in narratives of Appalachia (see Harkins & McCarroll, 2020). Throughout the course of my research, that goal bifurcated into a parallel exploration of Wisdom River's definition of success. In line with Buzzanell and Houston's (2018) rejection of resilience as "bouncing back," the women at Wisdom River expressed no desire to "bounce back" to their stories before their substance use began. Even participants whose lives were ostensibly "normal" before their SUD developed identified their experience with SUD and recovery as integral to who they are today. Wisdom River's reconstruction of success rejects narrow definitions of successful recovery that focus solely on whether a person begins using substances again. Thus, Houston's (2018) definition of resilience as "bouncing forward" is helpful in understanding how Wisdom River's definition of success can open new possibilities for what success in recovery organizing looks like.

As mentioned in Chapter Four, Ann described Wisdom River's "success rate" as 100 percent, based on a more wholistic, attainable, subjective definition of success:

> 100 percent of the women who have come here have gained valuable insight into themselves and into recovery and into the belief that recovery is possible – that lifelong recovery is possible, whether or not they choose at this moment to stay in recovery. That's a statistic I'm not interested in keeping, because even somebody who left us and has gone back out and might be using, their story is not over. And it could be that something they picked up here is instrumental in them ultimately making that decision to stop using.

The end goal of Wisdom River's definition of success is not new or radical: a life without

problematic or compulsory use of substances. This facet of success is ostensibly the same as any recovery organization's definition of success. What sets Wisdom River's understanding of success apart is the recognition of success as a complex process, inclusive of objective successes (e.g., temporal milestones like sobriety anniversaries) *and* of events that would be categorized as failures in mainstream definitions of success (e.g., returning to substance use after a period of recovery). By incorporating success into a person's entire story, Wisdom River's definition of success suggests that success cannot be measured by a single identity factor, a single decision, a single moment in time. Outside the realm of recovery, success is multifaceted and complex, encompassing a wide range of identity markers, decisions, internal and external factors. Wisdom River views recovery as a lifelong process, and the idea of success and resilience in recovery as a lifelong process offers the possibility to reframe the choice to begin using substances again as a step in the overall process of success instead of a story-ending failure. This conception of success is not to minimize the mortal reality of substance use; on the contrary, to position success as encompassing of wins and losses, triumphs and tragedies (Okamoto, 2020) is to create a pathway to address the stigma and sense of hopelessness that often deters people from re-entering recovery organizations after relapse (see Judd et al., 2021).

Wisdom River's multifaceted definition of success also honors the fact that its inhabitants embody a range of different identities. Instead of framing successful recovery as a unidimensional binary, with lifelong abstinence from substance use as the only alternative to failure, Wisdom River's definition of success takes into account what success looks like from the standpoints of all the different identities at the table. For

example, many residents no longer have custody of their children when they get to Wisdom River. Some women spend the majority of their time at Wisdom River fighting to regain custody of their children, and some do not. Both approaches are respected at Wisdom River, as the organization's narrative ecology allows space for individuals to explore which identities are salient at different times. For some residents, resurrecting their identity as a mother is key to their overall success in recovery (Okamoto & Peterson,2021). For others, focusing on what success looks like in other identity areas takes precedent.

From a practical standpoint, it is important to consider how a departure from mainstream definitions of successful recovery might impact the ability of recovery organizations to function and thrive in a socioeconomic reality that equates quantifiable results with success. Ann conceded that, though she has full faith in the role of a more wholistic, relational definition of success at Wisdom River, she often struggles to reconcile Wisdom River's definition of success with the kind of success political actors and potential funders would like to see. So, while the transformative power of success as relational and individualized is evident to those who are personally connected to Wisdom River's narrative ecology, there is still translational work to be done for those who are more removed from the organization.

Exploration into how narratives of success in recovery organizing can begin to separate from an over-reliance on quantitative data and deficit narratives without irreparably compromising avenues for tangible support is crucial to the progress of the recovery field. While full reconciliation between Wisdom River's definition of successful recovery and the definitions of successful recovery that dominate master narratives of

SUD in the United States would require a major overhaul of an entire economic and cultural system, the fact that Wisdom River is thriving and growing on their definition of success suggests that micro shifts in narratives of successful recovery are possible. Wisdom River's structure as a narrative temperate region (Gabriel, 2017), or a space where multiple—potentially conflicting—narratives can coexist positions the organization as a paradigm for how other recovery organizations might begin to redefine success in light of the identities and stories of those most closely involved in the organization.

Limitations and Future Directions

As stated earlier in this chapter, this was a small study in a small city with a small organization—which, on one hand, harnesses the power of place-specific, individualized scholarship in social change organizing (Frey et al., 1996). On the other hand, participants' racial, geographical, and gender identities were largely homogenous. While the voices represented here unequivocally deserve to be heard and validated, white women in Appalachian Ohio are not exactly the most vulnerable or marginalized population in the field of SUD and recovery. Wisdom River is explicitly open to and affirming of all racial identities, but its position as a young organization in a largely white region of Ohio has limited its reach in terms of racial diversity. Further, as it stands, Wisdom River is open only to people who identify as women. Thus, this study did not have the capacity to fully engage conversations around race and gender in recovery organizing.

Within this relatively homogenous group, I conducted nine interviews, and only two interviewees were current residents of Wisdom River. I hoped to interview more

residents, as I believe the voices of those early in recovery often are the least valued in recovery organizing and decision making. The two residents I interviewed for this project were excited about the prospect of an interview from the beginning, while the rest of the residents who passed through Wisdom River during my time there were a bit more hesitant. Some residents would express interest in an interview, then reschedule/cancel our scheduled interviews. Some were clear from the onset that, while they were happy to have normal conversations with me, they would never be interested in an interview. Considering the precarity of early recovery, the trauma often related to substance use and SUD, and the long history of researching exploiting the lived experienced of stigmatized and marginalized groups, residents' hesitation is not necessarily surprising. Plus, adults are busy, and the residents at Wisdom River are required to attend at least five 12 Step meetings per week in addition to working full-time jobs, attending weekly counseling sessions, and readjusting to everyday life.

Further, when the construction project to expand Wisdom River's capacity from six residents to eight got underway in earnest, my regular Wednesday afternoon visits to Wisdom River became a bit of an inconvenience to those living there, which was the opposite of my overall goal in this research. The kitchen and living room—the main communal spaces in the house—were the first to go under construction, and the disruption of a major construction project created a level of tension among residents that I assumed would not have been helped by an extra person hanging out in what little undisturbed space was left. Thus, my main interactions with Wisdom River residents toward the end of my participant observation were at Tuesday night dinners, AA and NA meetings, and yoga and music therapy sessions—all of which residents are required to

attend. These interactions were just as fruitful as they had been before the construction project began, but I did not feel comfortable pressing residents who had already expressed hesitation about the prospect of an interview in the midst of programs they had to attend.

Even within these limitations, this project demonstrates the power of genuine collaboration between researcher and participants in scholarship centered on recovery organizing. It also underscores the need for more narrative scholarship that listens to—and, more importantly, *believes*—those whose lives are most affected by SUD and recovery and by the embodied implications of scholarship on these subjects. Moving forward, I aim to explore how a feminist approach to 12 Step recovery like that employed at Wisdom River can inform recovery organizing practices for a wider range of people, especially those who do not conform to a binary understanding of gender.

There will never be a one-size-fits-all approach to recovery. No one at Wisdom River purports to have discovered the magic cure for substance use disorders, nor is that the goal of this dissertation. I do not even suggest that Wisdom River's organizational structure be replicated, as I remain convinced that sustainable, constructive organizing for social change must center local, individualized knowledge. However, Wisdom River's rejection of hegemonic, patriarchal organizing in favor of an organizational narrative ecology that elevates embodied knowledge, celebrates individuality, centers on care, and creates space for wholistic identity exploration is an exciting and worthwhile contribution to the realm of recovery organizing. Further, the groundwork lain by the women of Wisdom River in moving toward a broader definition of what success means in recovery organizing can help reduce stigma around SUD and help address the burden of

intrapersonal stigma among those in recovery and of interpersonal stigma in master narratives of SUD and recovery.

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The only way to end this dissertation is to return to the words of the people whose stories have created and have been created by the narrative ecology of Wisdom River. To that end, I offer participants' responses to the question, "What else do you want people to know about addiction and recovery?"

> My favorite refrain is that recovery is real. It's real. Because we always hear addiction is addiction is reality. It is. It is. And addiction always will be, unfortunately. (*Ann*)

*

> They say it takes a community to raise a child, and I really think it takes a community to pull somebody up. Doesn't have to be an addict. It could be a veteran, it could be somebody that's really disadvantaged, really, really disadvantaged. I don't care if it's by their own decisions, or not severely. And there's a lot of those people in Appalachia. And it takes a whole community to raise them up. But by raising them up, the whole community just flourishes. (*Jenna*)

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> That we're just people. Just people. And that everybody's got problems. And in order to, to work on problems, you have to admit that you've got problems. And that you have to work on it. Nobody can change it. Nobody can make it better. You know, it's up to you. (*Lorelai*)

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They are not bad people, they're sick people. …I mean, I never thought of myself as being a bad person. …And I think that people just see people do things—like they, they cheat on their husband or wife, or they steal things. And those are bad things that people do. But they're sick, they're sick, they're not in what would be their normal, right state of mind. (*Lenora*)

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Recovery is just such a long (sighs) a such a long, long process. And it's slow, and it's messy. And people are going to make just a fucking shit ton of mistakes before they even make one right one, or do one right thing. And you just gotta stick with them. People are un-learning habits that they have established for 30 plus years, so no wonder they're gonna have to then try to re-make and re-establish new habits. It's not going to happen in a year, cause there's 30 years of undoing and then relearning. And so, I think just the patience, and I know that patience can be hard. Specifically, with Wisdom River, it is so great that it is just smaller and more intimate, like you can really connect with the residents. And I think that is truly what is necessary for them to go out back into society and stay in recovery. And not stay in recovery miserably. (*Joey*)

*

Recovery is beautiful. It's hard work, it takes time. But it's worth the time. (*Nicole*)

*

I will say this, that I remember when we began meeting about it, it seemed—

probably like for someone thinking about running a marathon—it seemed impossible. Like, how are we going to do this? This is just—it'd be like a person that had never run a marathon thinking, “I'm gonna run a marathon.” I mean, it just seemed so, like such a big, huge dream. And so, even now, I’m pinching myself, like, wow. That's part of why I think I love being up there [at Wisdom River]: this is the manifestation of a group of women coming together and just taking it one step at a time. Honoring that it was not always going to be smooth going, that we'd make some mistakes, but we'd figure it out, and that it could really come to pass. And it just, it took, I think, a collective courage, where we leaned into each other, as well as the community. (*Peggy*)

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Be open minded. Understand that this person is experiencing something traumatic. Addiction can be very traumatic. … And it's not only painful for the person who's actively using. It's painful for the people around them. I think that if we all come together, and understand and treat this disease as a disease, versus “there's something wrong with them, why can't they just stop? It's a choice.” I think we just got to understand and love each other. And I know that’s such a hippie thing to say, but it's so true. I have clients who really genuinely have never had anybody care about them. And you wonder why people actively use. They hurt. You know, just be supportive of people, love each other, show concern. Get involved. Instead of pointing the finger and telling them all the things that's wrong with them, build them up, don't push them down. … People don't wake up one day or go to school and they're like, "What do you want to be when you grow

up?" "I want to be a hardcore junky drug dealer. That's what I said" … And so I think that if people are more understanding, and compassionate, and willing to look deeper into where this disease comes from, and understand it, and work towards a solution together, versus people who point the finger. … That's why I'm so proud about who I am. It's part of who I am. And that's okay. It made me, like I said before, it made me a better person than I could have ever imagined. (*Rachel*)

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Appendix A: Resident Interview Protocol

Personal Experience:

- Tell me your story.
    - If I were writing a biography of your life, what would you want me to include?
        - What people, places, experiences, values would be in the story?
    - Are there any parts of your story you would rewrite if you could? If so, are you comfortable sharing them?
- What's your favorite thing about yourself?
- Are there any songs, books, movies, foods, smells, sounds, tastes that you relate to certain parts of your story?

Definitions:

- How do you define addiction?
- How do you define recovery?
- How does Wisdom River define addiction?
- How does Wisdom River define recovery?
- Do these definitions work well together? Why or why not?
- What do you think are the biggest barriers to recovery?

Experience of Wisdom River:

- Moving in:
    - How long have you lived at Wisdom River? Tell me the story of how you came to live here.
    - What was your move-in day like?

    - How have things changed since you moved in?
    - Why do you stay? (or what keeps you here)
- Expectations:
    - What had you heard about Wisdom River before you came here?
    - What has surprised you most about being here?
    - What are things you'll miss about Wisdom River when you leave? What are things you won't miss?
- Residence:
    - Do you see Wisdom River as your home?
        - If so, why? If not, why not? What is your home?
    - What's it like to live here?
    - How would you describe your relationship to the other people who live here?
    - How would you describe your relationship to Ann and the other staff?
    - How would you describe Wisdom River to someone who has never been here?
    - What would you change about Wisdom River?

Twelve-Step Structure:

- What's the purpose of the 12 steps?
- Walk me through a typical AA or NA meeting.
- Which meetings do you usually go to each week? Which one is your favorite? Which one is your least favorite? Why?
- What are other recovery strategies you're aware of?

Place:

- Where are you from?
- What does “home” mean to you?
- What does Wisdom River feel like to you?

SUD:

- How would you describe the general attitude toward drug and alcohol use in Anderson?
- Is it different at Wisdom River? How?
- What did you learn about addiction growing up?
- How have your beliefs about addiction changed throughout your life?

Closing Questions:

- What do you want people to know about addiction?
- What do you want people to know about recovery?
- What is the most memorable experience you’ve had at Wisdom River?

What am I missing? What else do you think needs to be said, or asked, that we haven’t already covered?

Appendix B: Staff/Board Member Interview Protocol

Personal Experience:

- Tell me your story.
    - If I were writing a biography of your life, what would you want me to include?
        - What people, places, experiences, values would be in the story?
    - Are there any parts of your story you would rewrite if you could? If so, are you comfortable sharing them?
- What's your favorite thing about yourself?
- Are there any songs, books, movies, foods, smells, sounds, tastes that you relate to certain parts of your story?

Definitions:

- How do you define addiction?
- How do you define recovery?
- How does Wisdom River define addiction?
- How does Wisdom River define recovery?
- Do these definitions work well together? Why or why not?
- What do you think are the biggest barriers to recovery?

Experience of Wisdom River:

- Beginning:
    - What is the story of Wisdom River?
        - What is the purpose of Wisdom River?
    - How do you fit into the story of Wisdom River?

    - How does Wisdom River fit into your story?
    - How long have you worked at Wisdom River? Tell me the story of how you came to work here.
    - How have things changed since you started working here?
    - Why do you stay? (or what keeps you here)
- Expectations:
    - What had you heard about Wisdom River before you came here?
    - What has surprised you most about working here?
    - What are your hopes for Wisdom River moving forward?
- Reality:
    - How do you describe your role at Wisdom River to people who ask what you do?
    - What's it like to work here, or to be part of Wisdom River?
    - How would you describe your relationship to the residents?
    - How would you describe your relationship to the other staff?
    - How would you describe Wisdom River to someone who has never been here?
    - What would you change about Wisdom River?

Twelve-Step Structure:

- What's the purpose of the 12 steps?
- Do you attend the meetings at Wisdom River?
- What are other recovery strategies you're aware of?

Place:

- Where are you from?
- What does “home” mean to you?

SUD:

- How would you describe the general attitude toward drug and alcohol use in Anderson?
- Is it different at Wisdom River? How?
- What did you learn about addiction growing up?
- How have your beliefs about addiction changed throughout your life?

Closing Questions:

- What do you want people to know about addiction?
- What do you want people to know about recovery?
- What is the most memorable experience you’ve had at Wisdom River?

What am I missing? What else do you think needs to be said, or asked, that we haven’t already covered?

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