



## Research methods

## Following the moving and changing attachments and assemblages of ‘addiction’: Applying the actor network approach to autobiographies

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## ABSTRACT

The article applies actor network theory (ANT) to autobiographical data on alcohol dependence to explore what ANT can offer to the analysis of ‘addiction stories’. By defining ‘addiction’ as a relational achievement, as the effect of elements acting together as a configuration of human and non-human actors, the article demonstrates how the moving and changing attachments of addiction can be dynamically analyzed with concepts of ‘assemblage’, ‘mediator’, ‘tendency’, ‘translation’, ‘trajectory’, ‘immutable mobile’, ‘fluid’ and ‘bush fire’. The article shows how the reduction of alcohol dependence simply to genetic factors, neurobiological causes, personality disorders and self-medication constitutes an inadequate explanation. As ‘meta theories’, they illuminate addiction one-sidedly. Instead, as ANT pays attention to multiple heterogeneous mediators, it specifies in what way the causes identified in ‘meta theories’ may together with other actors participate in addiction assemblages. When following the development of addiction assemblages, we focus on situational sequences of action, in which human and non-human elements are linked to each other, and we trace how the relational shape of addiction changes from one sequence to another as a transforming assemblage of heterogeneous attachments that either maintain healthy subjectivities or destabilize them. The more attachments assemblages of addiction are able to make that are flexible and durable from one event to another, the stronger also the addiction-based subjectivities. Similarly, the fewer attachments that assemblages of addiction are able to keep in their various translations, the weaker the addiction-based subjectivities also become. An ANT-inspired analysis has a number of implications for the prevention and treatment of addiction: it suggests that in the prevention and treatment of addiction, the aim should hardly be to get rid of dependencies. Rather, the ambition should be the identification of attachments and relations that enable unhealthy practices and the development of harm as part of specific actor networks.

## Introduction

In existing theories, alcohol dependence is often reduced to one dominating factor, such as genes, physical dependence, a psychological disorder, will power, family problems or social deprivation. Biophysical and social scientific approaches to alcohol dependence frequently produce disparate, non-overlapping research results.

Developing an addiction to alcohol is usually a complicated process that continues throughout the course of diverse events. Not only social, psychological or physiological factors can participate in, maintain or prevent alcohol addiction, but also elements such as the workplace, a hobby, a pet, changing residence, doing military service, going into retirement, changing religion or being in war can serve as a mediator. Latour (2005) calls such contributing elements ‘actors’ and in his theory an assemblage of actors forms a network that is capable of directing and

transforming action. Accordingly, actor network theory (ANT) provides, along with human ingredients, scope for material and biological factors that may assist the development of alcohol dependence.

In the present article, we apply the actor network theory on autobiographical data of alcohol dependence to explore what it may offer to the analysis of addiction with narrative material. In ANT, the researcher follows the world-making activity of the people under study by mapping the building blocks they use when constructing their world, the tensions involved in it and the solutions they put forward (Latour, 2005: 41). Autobiographies are well-suited to an actor network analysis, because they encourage the authors to describe the unique and concrete conditions, settings, stages of life, successions of events and interactive processes that have guided and modified their life. They make it possible both to track down how actors form networks and to identify which of these actors actively change the course of events and generate

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so-called ‘chains of translations’. In the analysis of actor networks, the researcher does not assume given identities for the actors. Rather, s/he follows the principle: “Attachments are first, actors are second” (Latour, 2005: 217; see also Law, 1999: 5).

In this paper we propose, first, that as ANT examines relational linkages as situational network-related dependencies between actors, it offers productive conceptual tools for studying addictions. The approach questions the idea that we could set ourselves free from dependencies, and underlines how different kinds of linkages of networks as situational dependencies condition and carry our life forward. The task of the research is therefore to identify what kinds of dependencies improve or diminish our ability to act and promote self-control in our action (Weinberg, 2013). In this sense, we may refer to actor network analysis at its core as a ‘sociology of dependencies’ (c.f. Fraser, Moore, & Keane, 2014: 237–238).

Second, we show how ANT provides a productive method for analyzing autobiographical narratives as descriptions of action in which events are moved forward by a heterogeneous and unpredictable mix of human and non-human assemblages. By defining addiction as a relational achievement, as the effect of elements acting together as a configuration of human and non-human actors (Duff, 2014a, 2014b; Moore, Pienaar, Dilkes-Frayne, & Fraser, 2017), we demonstrate how the moving and changing attachments of addiction can be dynamically analyzed with concepts such as ‘assemblage’, ‘mediator’, ‘tendency’, ‘translation’, ‘trajectory’, ‘immutable mobile’, ‘fluid’ and ‘bush fire’. At the same time our definition of addiction challenges the disease model of addiction and suggests that addiction is problematic as a concept. It does not capture the complex nature and variety of dependencies related to regular or heavy consumption of substances (Pienaar & Dilkes-Frayne, 2017). The approach we present provides tools and facilitates prevention and treatment efforts in which the target is not an individual as an autonomous actor but the attachments and relations that enable unhealthy practices and the development of harm as part of specific actor networks (Duff, 2014a, 2014b).

### Earlier applications of ANT to addiction

In ANT, action is not governed by the sovereign consciousness of an autonomous individual. Rather, action can be understood as a node, “as a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies that have to be slowly disentangled” (Latour, 2005: 44). This view implies that entities are not assumed to have internal essential attributes. On the contrary, entities achieve their form and meaning in relation to other entities, and they are performed in, by and through such relations (Law, 1999: 4).

ANT represents an ontology that can be characterized as ‘a semiotics of materiality’ (Law, 1999: 4). It enables us to follow how action is steered and transformed not only by human elements, but also by material ones. If social scientists have traditionally assumed that the ties between people and their joint action are based on ‘actors’ such as laws, social norms or cultural customs (Latour, 2005: 67), to which food, buildings and means of communication appear as secondary matters, actor network theory considers these material mediations to be equally active and important elements in the analysis of action (Lehtonen, 2008: 118).

Latour (2005) calls the actors that actively combine entities ‘mediators’. By connecting two or more entities, mediators always bring forth a modification – a so-called ‘translation’ – of the course of events. Translations cannot be predicted in advance. Therefore, we need to study things empirically, case by case (Latour, 2005: 39). Then we follow how in action human and non-human elements take the positions of ‘active mediators’, which, as principal forces, are capable of authorizing, allowing, affording, encouraging, suggesting, blocking or forbidding action (Latour, 2005: 72). Non-human and human elements become full-blown actors when they influence action as part of a network of ‘assemblages’ or ‘collectives’. Thus, the agency of an actor is not

determined by intention but defined by relational action.

ANT has been applied in studies dealing with the consumption of substances (Demant, 2009; Duff, 2012; Gomart & Hennion, 1999), loss of control in addiction (Weinberg, 2013) and the treatment of drug problems (Gomart, 2004). These studies show that the motives of the user or the pharmacological properties of the substance cannot alone determine the effects of the drug. The quality of effects is situational and calls for skillful preparation of the circumstances to get the hoped-for effects of the drug. In the consumption of drugs the users actively condition themselves, while being sensitive to heterogeneous elements and attachments in order to allow pleasures to arrive. While Gomart (2004) emphasizes addictions as vehicles for the articulation of different types of subjectivities, such as recreational or anesthetic, Weinberg (2013) stresses that addictions can also be destructive.

Furthermore, there are also studies that have applied concepts from ANT to study addiction, such as ‘assemblage’ (e.g. Duff, 2013; Fraser et al., 2014; Moore et al., 2017) and ‘ontological politics’ (e.g. Fraser et al., 2014; Pienaar & Dilkes-Frayne, 2017). The study by Moore et al. (2017: 161) on consumer accounts of addiction, health and well-being shows that addiction is a complex assemblage constructed of many mutually constitutive phenomena: “substance, patterns of use, gender, sexuality, geography, occupation, social conduct, resources, social relationships, stage of life, family obligations (...) state intervention (...) health and well-being”. Some consumer accounts describe addiction as antagonistic to health and well-being but in many accounts addiction, health and well-being are assembled together, meaning that addiction helps the consumer to support health and brings enjoyment to his or her life.

The study by Pienaar and Dilkes-Frayne (2017) on the ‘ontological politics’ of addiction biographies, again, displays that stories of dependent drug use are embedded in multiple realities. By drawing on studies by Mol (1999) and Law (2004), Pienaar and Dilkes-Frayne (2017: 145–147) define realities as neither prearranged nor stable but shaped within specific practices. From this perspective, addiction is understood as an unstable phenomenon, ontologically multiple, and constantly made and changed in practice (see also Fraser et al., 2014). Since realities of addiction depend on practices through which they are done, they could be done differently. The study by Pienaar and Dilkes-Frayne (2017) exemplifies this. It shows that in some personal narratives, regular and heavy drug use is established as a disorder of compulsion in line with the accounts dominating popular and therapeutic discourses that participate in narrow and stigmatizing ontological politics as they construct a reality in which addiction is one-sidedly performed as a disease. However, there are also personal narratives in which regular and heavy drug consumption is constituted as helping the users to complete their day-to-day tasks, to deal with isolation, or to experience life more pleasurably. According to Pienaar and Dilkes-Frayne (2017), these narratives, by resonating with people’s diverse experiences and realities of addiction, embody opposing ontological politics that challenge the hegemony of addiction as a disease, as well as the suitability of the concept as it tends to essentialise addiction.

Besides being approached as a complex assemblage, addiction has also been considered as a ‘complex object’ in ANT (Law & Singleton, 2005). As such, addiction can take and hold shape as an ‘immutable mobile’, ‘fluid’ or ‘bush fire’. As an immutable mobile addiction is able to hold its relational shape intact as it circulates from one physical or geographical space to another. Then it moves around without losing its relatively stable networks of relations (Latour, 1999: 306–307). As a fluid, again, addiction takes and holds a relational shape as a ‘mutable mobile’. In this case, relations of addiction gradually shift, adapt and change rather than hold their form (Law & Singleton, 2005: 337–341). And finally, as a bush fire addiction takes a relational shape of jumps and discontinuities by abrupt movements and disruptions. Then the attachments of addiction juxtapose present reality against absent realities by transforming some elements from opposed realities into new kinds of mediators to present assemblages (Law & Singleton, 2005:

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