



# Recovering assemblages: Unfolding sociomaterial relations of drug use and recovery

by Aysel Sultan (2022)

Reviewed by Tom Strong



Tom Strong is a professor and counsellor-educator who recently retired from the University of Calgary. He writes on the collaborative, critical and practical potentials of discursive approaches to psychotherapy – most recently on concept critique and development (particularly with respect to therapy and research), and critical mental health. Among Tom's books are *Medicalizing counselling: Issues and tensions*; *Patterns in interpersonal interactions* (co-edited with Karl Tomm, Sally St George and Dan Wulff); and *Social constructionism: Sources and stirrings in theory and practice* (co-authored with Andy Lock). Currently, he is co-editing the Routledge international handbook of postmodern therapies. <https://wpsites.ucalgary.ca/tom-strong/>

 ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5965-0401>

## Abstract

Tom Strong reviews Aysel Sultan (2022). *Recovering assemblages: Unfolding sociomaterial relations of drug use and recovery*. Palgrave Macmillan. 290pp. ISBN 978-981-19-1234-4, ISBN 978-981-19-1235-1 (eBook).

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Author pronouns: he/him

Two interests had me jump at the opportunity to review this book. First, I have a longstanding interest in people's efforts to recover from concerns like addiction. Joining potential clients as agents in their own recovery is a challenging-yet-resource-oriented journey in a field that can seem paternalistic in how it responds to people "in treatment". Second, I think that therapists have been slow to come around to the ideas of Bruno Latour and a somewhat related body of "sociomaterial" theory associated with assemblage theory. These latter ideas challenge the individualising views of many therapy approaches, and instead focus on people caught up in the immediacies of events and emerging circumstances. This book was a challenging but rewarding read, drawing on Aysel Sultan's PhD research on young people recovering in different contexts (or assemblages) from drug misuse in Azerbaijan and Germany.

Don't let the locations Sultan selected for her research throw you. The national contexts may seem different, but the ideas underpinning the research borrow from Australian Cameron Duff's (2014) work on applying assemblage theory to making sense of health contexts, recovery from substance misuse included. What constitutes "misuse" of substances is itself a fraught topic, but the focus here is on how young people experience and do recovery – with varying degrees of success and whether engaged voluntarily and involuntarily. Sultan's inquiry aims to sensitise researchers and helpers to the unique immediacies and ever-changing lifeworlds in which substance users attempt recovery. She didn't seek a conventional research-derived story of recovery, as is so often done from inside or outside of the experience. She draws users of her research into unique ways of making sense of recovery, including the messy details of relapses, serendipitous events, different logics of recovery (e.g., those of treatment centres or found on the street), and quirky processes and contexts of recovery. The three main curiosities that guided Sultan's research were:

- (1) What makes recovery possible – what actors (human and nonhuman) entangle in the process of making recovery?
  - (2) How do young people make and remake sense of their personal alcohol and other drug recovery in context?
  - (3) How do we conceive of recovery as an assemblage and what forms does this assemblage take?
- (Sultan, 2022, p. 5)

Context and assemblage should not be seen as synonymous words, particularly in how Sultan has linked assemblage theory (e.g., Buchanan, 2021) with Latour's actor network theory (ANT) (2005, 2013). Assemblage theory draws in part from the ontological process-oriented views of Deleuze and Guattari (1987). Reminder: ontologies are realities or *how things are*, whereas epistemologies are ways of understanding or linguistically constructing *how we know how things are*. A considerable philosophy of science literature has developed around the notion that humans change (or are changed by) their realities through how they make sense of and act on them. If this sounds like human understanding and technical progress unfolding according to plan, that would miss how humans become entangled with the not-fully-predictable vagaries of nature and what their technologies have wrought (Barad, 2009). In relation to how this theorising relates to drug use and recovery, Sultan wrote: "Drugs thus mobilize body and space, which then create an irreducible entanglement" (2022, p. 150). Such entanglements mean adapting to what is over and above our wanting and doing, to paraphrase Gadamer (1988). Further, our entangled circumstances are constantly in flux, making our realities<sup>1</sup> moving targets to which we are constantly adapting (Nail, 2018). Each recovery effort or trajectory is unique in this regard for being shaped by influences caught up with the "recovering" person's efforts.

For Sultan, assemblages show drug use and recovery efforts are experienced differently and done in ways that cannot be generalised across people and time as is so commonly done in social science research. Recovery is often pursued in unpredictably evolving circumstances with influences beyond the agentive efforts of the recovering person. Indeed, some research participants inform Sultan of what recovery is like while trying to wean themselves off the drugs they have been using, while other influences (e.g., a friend's sharing, ending up somewhere drugs are unavailable) shape on again/off again attempts to recover from substance misuse. Where Latour's ANT comes into theorising recovery is in trying to make sense of the human practices of recovery used to address emergent sociomaterial circumstances. Latour (2013) encouraged an anthropologist's curiosity to study how such unique "modes of existence" come together as matters of concern. This sensitising focus on what makes each person's recovery efforts unique in changing circumstances made my reading of Sultan's research rewarding.

Researchers will appreciate that it was no small feat that Sultan cleared institutional ethics hurdles to interview young (under 20 years of age) drug users in recovery to get their accounts of what recovery entailed and was like for them. We are rewarded with the voices of participants whose insider knowledge speaks to doing voluntary or involuntary treatment, self-initiated recovery efforts outside of treatment, successful or not, and a host of other details related to their substance use and attempts at recovery. Clearly, there were differences attempting recovery in Baku (Azerbaijan) and Frankfurt (Germany), but the focus here was on what could be learnt from the participants. Sultan's interviews give voice to participants' responses to concrete events these young persons saw as relevant to their recovery.

While therapists may be concerned with what enables a person's substance misuse, Sultan's research interests draw attention to assemblages that enable recovery. This attention decentres the common focus on the individual client's agentive efforts at recovery for an approach where assemblages are what recovers. What are the combinations of circumstance, objects, understandings and consequential developments in the recovering person's environment that come together in ways that facilitate recovery? Recovery events matter in this approach for showing how the convergence of assemblage features enable or impede recovery, including the person's experience and efforts within that convergence.

What can research participants tell us about themselves in their changing circumstances that therapists might not otherwise access? This latter question has long interested me, as a therapist and researcher, since learning from Allan Wade (e.g., 1997) that his research participants found it easier to answer tough questions about how they resisted sexual violence than related questions they had been asked as clients over years of therapy. Researcher curiosities can be different from therapist curiosities it seems, and Sultan's participants give details that would likely not come up in therapy, especially for being invited to discuss details about their recovering assemblages. This invitation was like being asked to speak from a new (recovering assemblage) discourse, an experience not uncommon for clients of narrative therapists.

There is some overlap between what Sultan's recovering assemblage discourse and narrative therapists' "the problem, not the person, is the problem" concept (e.g. White & Epston, 1990) aims to accomplish. Sultan's inquiries into recovering assemblages are informed by challenging sociomaterial ideas from which her questions of participants arose, and she was not aiming to linguistically separate her participants from the fluid contexts in which they were attempting recovery, so that they could better draw on their individual agentive efforts to recover. Sultan's research draws attention to the assemblage as the unit of change, or recovery. At a minimum, readers here could find themselves intrigued by Sultan's notion that the assemblage is the problem or solution, not the recovering person.

This book was not an easy read, and I confess that part of the reason I sought to review it for this journal was its cost. It is a well-written and theoretically sophisticated PhD dissertation written primarily with a researcher readership in mind. Community workers will find this book potentially useful in co-developing and making sense of their work. While Sultan deftly melds participant quotes with theoretical insights, these are not straightforward stories of recovery, but instead show how their accounts fit within a new approach to making sense of experiences relevant to being a therapist. I continue to hope that more ideas from assemblage theory and actor network theory make their way into narrative therapy. Therapists preferring to read how a therapeutic approach is conceptualised and used with clients will probably not find this book a useful read. As an introduction to how assemblage theory and Latour's actor network theory can be used to make sense of recovery, however, the book teems with ideas begging to be adapted for use in therapy and community work. It is the kind of book to get your library to order so that it can enable group reading and discussion, for those interested in innovative ideas on recovery.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> I note here that my Word program spellchecker is not happy with the plural spelling of reality as realities.

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