

## Abstract

**Title** Worlds apart? A study of social relationships and social networks among drug addicts  
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The primary aim of this thesis was to study social networks among drug addicts and the importance of these networks in their lives. The study is based on qualitative interviews with 29 individuals with current or previous abuse and follow-up interviews with individuals in their informal and professional social networks. The social network has been described using a "network map" and a question guide focusing on specific network functions.

The study shows that the development of the social network is dependent on a complex interaction between factors in the network itself, the individual's current life situation and his or her own choices and capacity to establish and maintain social bonds. Only a few of the informants in this study have a reasonably large and differentiated social network. The networks often include important family members and friends who also use drugs.

In the socially ascribed network of close and more distant family members, two opposite patterns that may both be represented in the same network can be discerned: one the one hand, a pattern of accumulated disintegration caused by conflict, death, divorce and other forms of separation within the network, often spanning several generations; and, on the other hand, a pattern of close-knit clusters built up of extremely strong social bonds. The results show that relationships that have existed continuously over time survive and are often strengthened by the strain brought about by the abuse. Weak links, however, are often even further weakened by circumstances relating to the abuse. The optional social network – friends, neighbours and work mates – reflect a changing life context. The majority of the informants have weak links with working life. The chosen social network consists mainly of friends and acquaintances. The friends are recruited from the social arenas that the informants have access to. The more pervasive the individual's "non-relationship" with society, the more restricted the freedom of choice. The social life of the informants who still abuse drugs consists mainly of friends who also use drugs.

The study shows that the degree of involvement in the abuse world and in conventional social worlds, respectively, determines the development of the process of ending drug abuse. Giving up drugs does not only involve the choice of abstaining from taking drugs, but also a choice between different social worlds. The loneliness and functionless existence that often result from this choice make the break away from abuse far more difficult. Important close relationships that remain in the drug world also constitute a problematic link to abuse.

To ensure a lasting drug-free life, the individual needs to develop new or re-establish old social bonds outside of the drug world, as well as the identities based in these relationships. The process of leaving a life of abuse is facilitated by the presence of family and friends who can help the abuser through the first period of a drug-free life – relationships that by themselves make a drug-free life meaningful and worth fighting for. The individual's relationship with his or her children is a particularly important incentive for change. The study also shows the importance of belonging to a social context outside of the closest circle of family members.

Professional helpers fulfil a specific function in the informants' social networks. The professional relationship may include dimensions of help and support that the abuser perceives as difficult to find and/or receive from his or her own informal social network. The professional component of the relationship ensures understanding and trust and the complementary aspect means that the individual can receive help without having to "pay back" for help received. A prerequisite, however, is that the help is offered within a genuinely personal relationship based on a positive emotional climate.