

# Exploring the Social Bases of Natural Recovery from Substance Addiction

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## Abstract

Natural recovery, or overcoming addiction without formal or specialized treatment, is a well-documented but poorly understood phenomenon. Epidemiology estimates suggest that at least 25-40% of all people who experience substance addiction recover without formal treatment (i.e., specialized treatment centers, hospital outpatient programs, A.A. or Narcotics Anonymous). Natural recovery challenges the prevailing brain-disease model by suggesting that addiction may not be a chronic, relapsing disorder for all people who experience the disorder. Natural recoverers often cite social relationships as central to their recovery. A question remains to be answered: Are there specific configurations of relationships that conduce to or impede natural recovery? A grounded theory study will be conducted to answer this question. Understanding natural recovery holds promise for improving our understanding of addiction and recovery more generally, yet research in this area is in its infancy.

## Objectives

- To understand the heterogeneity in the nature, etiology, course, and presentation of substance addiction.
- To achieve a broader understanding of the factors that contribute to the maintenance of and recovery from substance addiction.
- Place special emphasis on the role social processes in recovery, such as group membership and social identification.

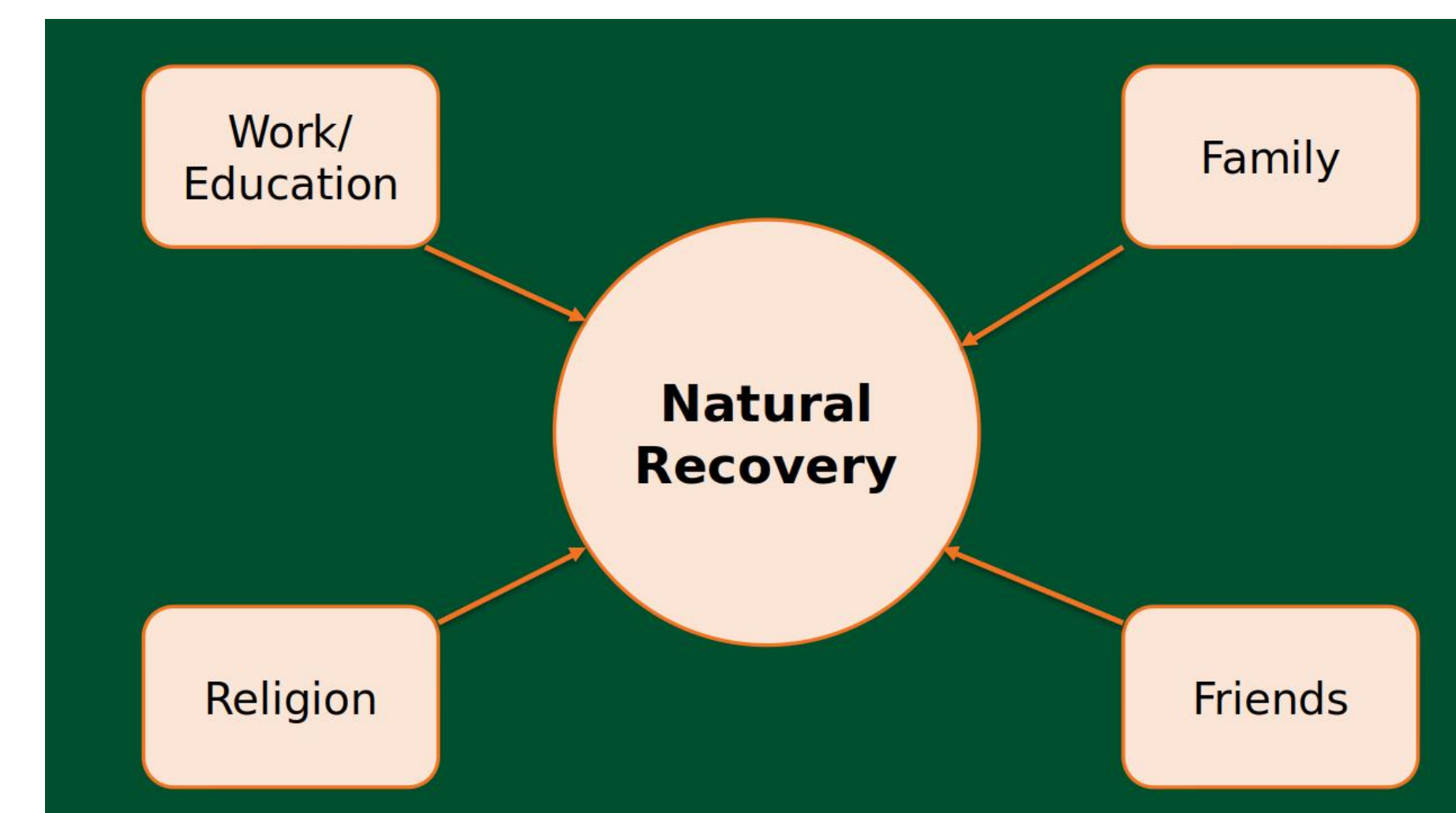


Figure 1: People who experience addiction and recovery report that social relationships create contexts in which addiction and recovery happen. Natural recovery is a special case, because the discernable cause of change is a combination of relational context and individual efforts.

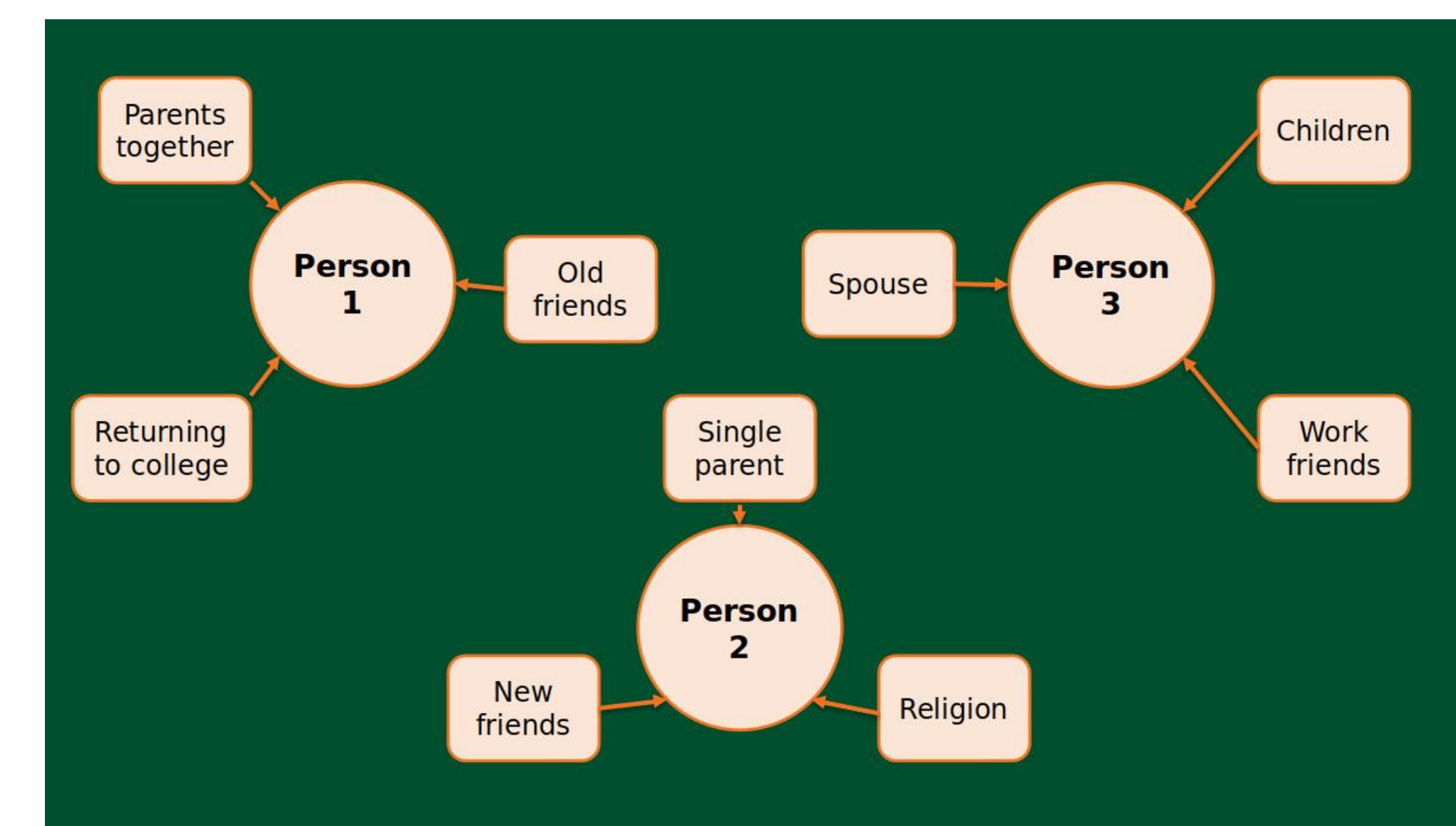


Figure 2: Relational contexts that conduce to or impede recovery may vary from person to person based on variations in relational configurations and the specific individuals of which those relationships are composed.

## Primary Research Question

Which configurations of social relationships, with their respective contexts and processes, conduce to natural recovery?

## Background Information

- Addiction is a heterogeneous and multifaceted phenomenon
- Often, substance addictions are classified based on drug of choice and some indicator of severity (e.g., DSM-5-TR counts number of symptoms), however, addictions may vary along other important dimensions
- Medical and psychiatric models of addiction selectively emphasize the role of the brain
- Medical models recommend specialized, formal treatments for recovery
- Some treatment communities (TC's) and social support groups, like Alcoholics Anonymous, favor social interventions
- Many people recover "naturally", i.e., without any formal or organized treatments
- People who experience natural recovery often cite that social relationships play a central role in their recovery

Comparing Incidence of Recovery between Treated and Untreated Groups with Prior AUD

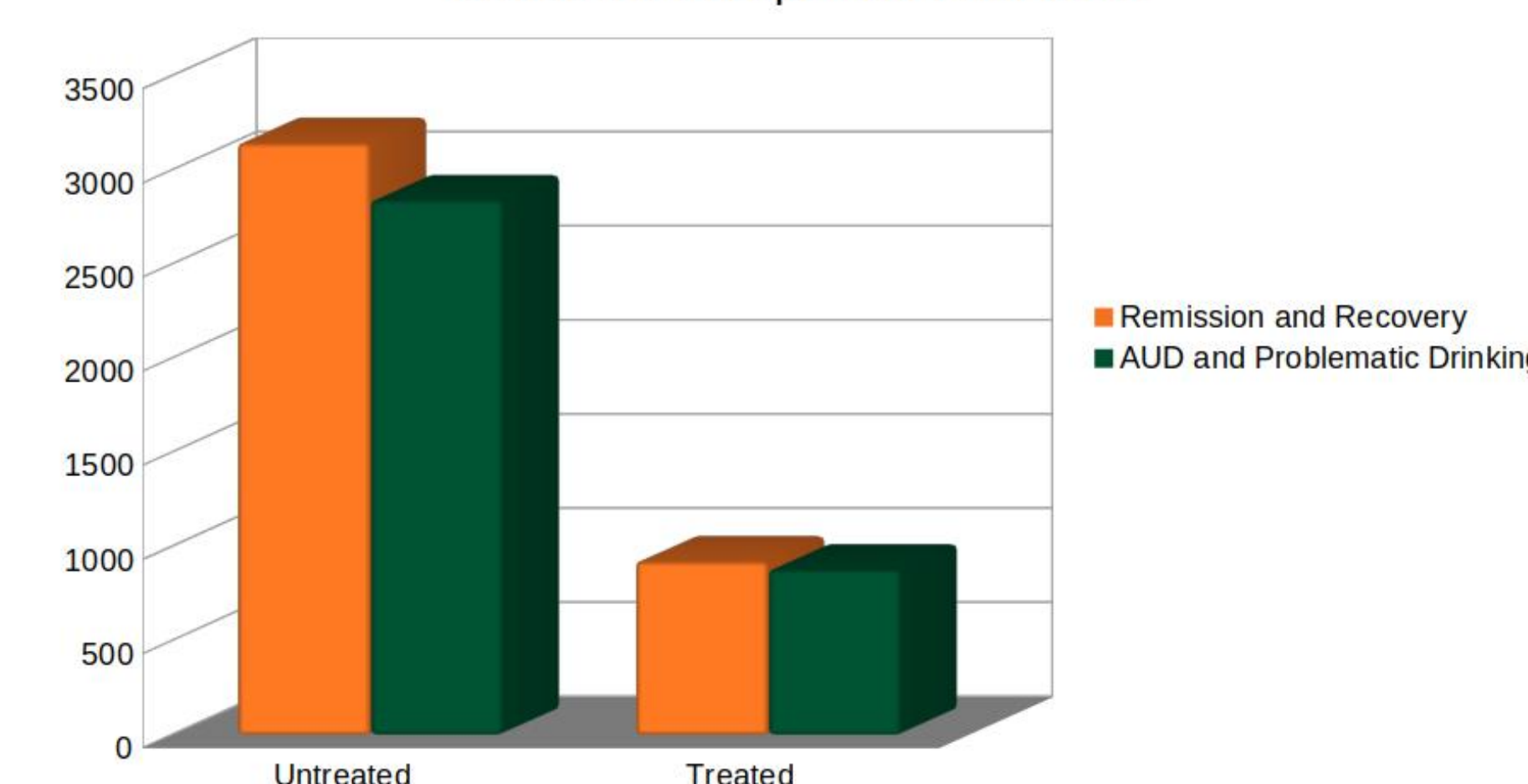


Figure 3: Data from 7,785 participants in the National Epidemiologic Study on Alcohol and Related Conditions-III (NESARC-III), reported by Fan et al. (2019)

## Method

A grounded theory study will be conducted to understand the processes and contexts of varying configurations of social relationships and their relative contributions to natural recovery from opiate addiction. Between 15 and 30 participants will be recruited through online advertisements. Inclusion criteria are: (a) At least 1 year of prior, active addiction; (b) At least 1 year of current sobriety; (c) No treatment for at least 2 months prior to starting sobriety

## Conclusions and Implications

Pathways of natural recovery are generally heterogeneous and varied, much like presentations of addiction. Variations in recovery pathways probably differ along the lines of relational configurations.

- Understanding the relationship between relational configurations and their contributions to natural recovery could improve understanding of recovery more generally
- Determining which configurations of relationships are more or less conducive to natural recovery could improve understanding of how relationships also contribute to addiction processes
- Together, this knowledge could help us classify addiction and recovery pathways according to the relational resources available to people recovering from addiction, rather than by simply drug of choice and number of symptoms

## References

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