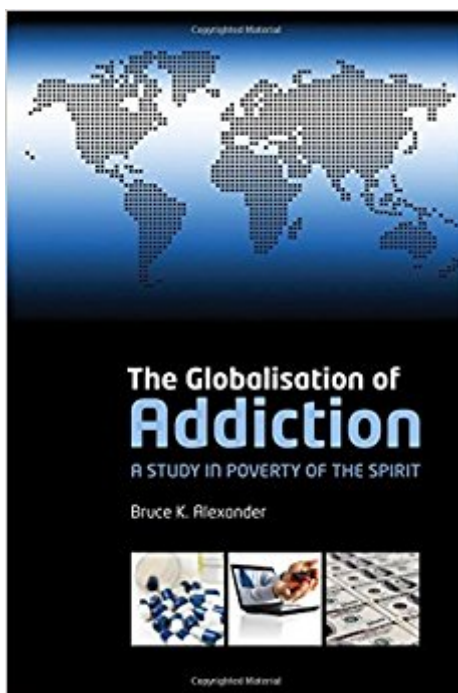


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The Globalization Of Addiction: A Study In Poverty Of The Spirit



Synopsis

'The Globalization of Addiction' presents a radical rethink about the nature of addiction. Scientific medicine has failed when it comes to addiction. There are no reliable methods to cure it, prevent it, or take the pain out of it. There is no durable consensus on what addiction is, what causes it, or what should be done about it. Meanwhile, it continues to increase around the world. This book argues that the cause of this failure to control addiction is that the conventional wisdom of the 19th and 20th centuries focused too single-mindedly on the afflicted individual addict. Although addiction obviously manifests itself in individual cases, its prevalence differs dramatically between societies. For example, it can be quite rare in a society for centuries, and then become common when a tribal culture is destroyed or a highly developed civilization collapses. When addiction becomes commonplace in a society, people become addicted not only to alcohol and drugs, but to a thousand other destructive pursuits: money, power, dysfunctional relationships, or video games. A social perspective on addiction does not deny individual differences in vulnerability to addiction, but it removes them from the foreground of attention, because social determinants are more powerful. This book shows that the social circumstances that spread addiction in a conquered tribe or a falling civilisation are also built into today's globalizing free-market society. A free-market society is magnificently productive, but it subjects people to irresistible pressures towards individualism and competition, tearing rich and poor alike from the close social and spiritual ties that normally constitute human life. People adapt to their dislocation by finding the best substitutes for a sustaining social and spiritual life that they can, and addiction serves this function all too well. The book argues that the most effective response to a growing addiction problem is a social and political one, rather than an individual one. Such a solution would not put the doctors, psychologists, social workers, policemen, and priests out of work, but it would incorporate their practices in a larger social project. The project is to reshape society with enough force and imagination to enable people to find social integration and meaning in everyday life. Then great numbers of them would not need to fill their inner void with addictions.

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Customer Reviews

"...a considerable work, highly ambitious in its scope, impressive in its multidisciplinary scholarship, clear in its structure and generous in its references...a fundamental critique of the 20th century view of addiction." nth position online Jan 09
"This fascinating and unique book explores the problem of addiction using a nontraditional approach...a refreshing look at an age-old problem." --Doody's Notes Dec 2008
"This is, without a doubt, the most intriguing and painstaking book on addiction I have read for some time...The Globalisation of Addiction is scholarly, meticulously researched, passionately critical of the free-market economy, biased, speculative, selective, and quite wonderful...highly recommended...this is one of the most remarkable addiction texts of the decade." --John B. Davies, Addiction Research and Theory 2008

Bruce Alexander is a psychologist and Professor Emeritus at Simon Fraser University, where he has worked since 1970. His primary research interest has been the psychology of addiction. He is best known in the UK for the "Rat Park" experiments, which helped to demonstrate the falsity of the outworn belief that simple exposure to narcotic drugs can cause addiction. In Canada, he has been well known as a critic of the War on Drugs for decades. His most recent work has been on the causes of the current worldwide proliferation of addiction, not only to drugs, but to a great variety of other habits and pursuits. Exploring this topic has required that he venture far beyond his training in psychology, particularly into the fields of history and anthropology.

Many years ago, Gabor Maté's article "Embraced By The Needle" convinced me that addiction had more to do with emotional trauma than chemical dependence, an insight that eventually drew me to The Globalization of Addiction by Bruce K Alexander. It was strange to read it so soon after Ernest Becker's The Denial of Death, both of which deal with the mental turmoil resulting from the absence of

psychosocial integration, or, the fulfilment of psychological needs on both individual and social levels. According to Alexander, addiction is a coping mechanism for "dislocation," which can arise from certain disastrous circumstances, such as the colonialist destruction of indigenous cultures, but is a fundamental element of free market economics even at the best of times. For the sake of open markets and higher profit margins, global capitalism demolishes the meaningful social relationships for which addictive tendencies provide an incredibly poor substitute. Dismantling the myths of essentially habit-forming drugs, Alexander explains that addiction more often than not entails no substance whatsoever but a variety of compulsive behaviours and fixations, including gambling, sex, romantic love, money, power, zealotry, video games, and starvation. While preferable to moralistic judgements and the futile War on Drugs, decriminalization, harm reduction, and therapy are therefore insufficient to address the root cause of addiction. By applying his theory of addictive dynamics to religious fanaticism, nationalism, and bureaucratic fervour, Alexander basically explains why good people do bad things. With a broad, multidisciplinary scope, Alexander draws upon an impressive range of sources, from St. Augustine and Socrates to people he knows personally, and the end result is much more human than a dry psychology textbook. His theory effectively renders obsolete the conventional wisdom, with all its false dichotomies, that treats addiction either as a moral failure or a disease. Putting his theories into practice, however, is quite a tall order. While Alexander outlines the problem of addiction in detail and suggests specific strategies for fostering communal integration, his call for the radical restructuring of society, upon which depends not only our mental health but our environment, is rather vague and optimistic. I nonetheless realize that it's only responsible to hope and try for better ways.

The three stars are for Prof. Alexander's promotion of the "dislocation" approach to addiction, and his understanding that addictive behavior is more than a discrete individual problem. To reduce addiction to one or another of the contending theories is less than helpful, he argues; we haven't after all made much of a dent in controlling addiction, much less eradicating it. "Addiction," he says, "is neither a disease nor a moral failure, but a narrowly focused lifestyle that functions as a meagre substitute for people who desperately lack psychosocial integration." All of the theories of addiction based on the behavioral, social and physical sciences, as well as on theology and metaphysics, are lacking. His broad historical perspective attempts to show that addiction is rapidly globalizing as a result of "poverty of the spirit" (his subtitle) caused by the "free market society," which "subjects people to unrelenting pressures towards individualism, competition, and rapid change, dislocating

them from social life." It is this historical reductionism that prevents me from adding another star or two. Despite his protestations to the contrary, his historicism is based on a vague sort of psycho-marxism that cherry-picks historical examples (as varied as Plato, Augustine, the city of Vancouver, the industrial revolution, James Barrie's Peter Pan, AA and the 12-steps) to come to conclusions that are rather progressive and hopeful but not very convincing. He doesn't understand the fundamental spiritual side of Western Civilization, preferring to "respect" and even "rely" on certain Christian insights while dismissing its truth claims. This "cut-flower" approach to spirituality leaves him with a healthy skepticism of reductionist explanations for addiction, but also with a vague, mostly psychological view of "psychosocial integration." Everyone should learn from his energetic analysis of the dislocation theory; not many will be persuaded that he has explained it very well.

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