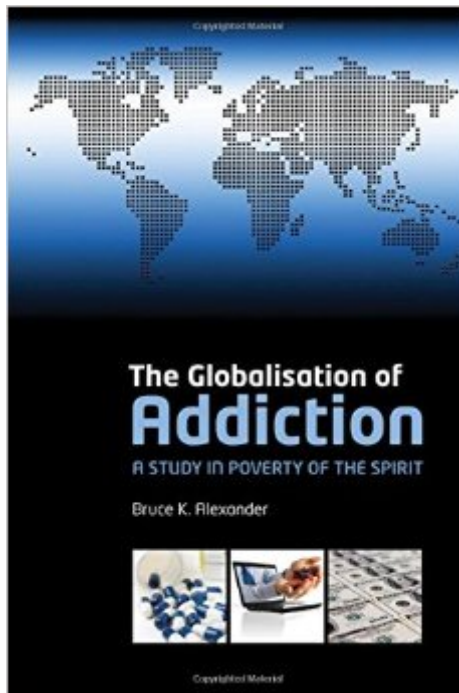


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The Globalization Of Addiction: A Study In Poverty Of The Spirit



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.

Book Information

Paperback: 496 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press; 1 edition (April 30, 2010)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0199588716

ISBN-13: 978-0199588718

Product Dimensions: 9.1 x 1.3 x 6.1 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.6 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.8 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (10 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #618,323 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #154 in [Books > Medical Books > Psychology > Psychopharmacology](#) #170 in [Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Psychology & Counseling > Psychopharmacology](#) #583 in [Books > Textbooks > Medicine & Health Sciences > Administration & Policy > Public Health](#)

Customer Reviews

I do not easily give superlatives in my praise of books but this one is truly exceptional. It presents a very valuable and well-written account and I can only recommend it most strongly. I think that the study could prove of momentous importance in how we view the world in the 21st century. If only its message were to be taken to heart, we could spare an immense amount of human suffering.

Professor Alexander delivers a convincing case that we are manufacturing addiction by the process of economic globalization and the social dislocation that inevitably goes with it. As is made clear, addiction is not something confined to chemicals but spans a whole range from sex, through gambling to the quest for material possessions. The argument takes the author far and wide (to Adolph Eichmann, St Augustine and Socrates amongst others) and occasionally the reader might wonder quite where the argument is going but just in time the author brings it back to a sharp focus and relevance. Given the monumental task that Professor Alexander sets himself and accomplishes, it would be churlish to point to omissions. Rather, I would call these 'points that might be considered for further theorizing'. The reader looking for an integrative biopsychosocial perspective on addiction will not find it here since the book justifiably concentrates on the social dimension. One can only wonder why it is that the drugs and other activities that become addictive are ones that trigger dopaminergic neurotransmission. How is it that such neurotransmission seems to lock into a dynamic interaction with the external objects of addiction? Does a dopamine-opioid link necessarily underlie each addiction? Why, for example, do magic mushrooms, ecstasy or LSD not seem to lead to addiction?

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 social 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.

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