

## Is Addiction a Cultural Category or a Biological Reality?

**Includes Appendix A:** Dalai Lama Quote: Head of the Dge-lugs-pa order of Tibetan Buddhists, 1989 Nobel Peace Prize, b.1935.

[http://thinkexist.com/quotation/i\\_believe\\_that\\_the\\_very\\_purpose\\_of\\_life\\_is\\_to\\_be/145371.html](http://thinkexist.com/quotation/i_believe_that_the_very_purpose_of_life_is_to_be/145371.html)

This paper discusses whether addiction is a 'Cultural Category,' or a 'Biological Reality.' It presumes the word 'addiction' signifies an addiction to 'drugs or Alcohol,' whether licit or illicit and, when making use of the word, 'disease,' it refers to the context of the conceptualisation formalised, but not validated on the question of drug addiction, or drug disease. It examines several differing theories on the subject by some noted theorists such as; N. E. Zinberg and his theory on Drug Use,<sup>1</sup> J. Richard Eiser and his, 'Dynamic System,'<sup>2</sup> and Stanton Peele and R.J. Degrandpre's focus upon 'Environment.'<sup>3</sup> This paper will begin with the utilisation of an Anthropological view of 'Ethnography,'<sup>4</sup> to assist in the discussion.

Ethnography is the practice of observing community through participation. Generally an Anthropological practice described as; 'the process of observing, recording and describing another people's way of life (culture), through intimate participation in the community studied.'<sup>5</sup> It is important to begin a discussion such as this, with an understanding of Ethnography, as the question of whether addiction is a cultural category or a biological reality can only really be understood through its interpretation. The importance of Ethnography assists in a 'nose to the ground' understanding of the nature of 'man.' The 'Dopamine Theory' provides the 'reward' effect of drug-taking and is thus the main factor in addiction.'<sup>6</sup> The Dalai Lama succinctly phrased that 'the very purpose of life is to be happy.'<sup>7</sup> So the

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<sup>1</sup> ANT110 Drugs across Cultures. 2010. Lectures: 1&2. Week 1: Week 1 Introductory Lecture Notes: N. E. Zinberg's Theory. (Macquarie University. Sydney. Australia). Lines: 1-3

<sup>2</sup> J. Richard Eiser. 1997. 'Addiction as a dynamic process', *Addiction Research*, 5(5): 361-366. (University of Exeter. United Kingdom.)

<sup>3</sup> Peele, S & R.J. Degrandpre (1998) 'Cocaine and the Concept of Addiction: Environmental Factors in Drug Compulsions', *Addiction Research*, 6(3): 235-264.

<sup>4</sup> ANT110 Drugs across Cultures. 2010. Week 5: Lectures: 9 & 10: Ethnographies of Drug Use, and Drugs as Symbols: Definitions: Ethnography. (Macquarie University. Sydney. Australia). Line: 3

<sup>5</sup> ANT110 Drugs across Cultures. 2010. Week 5: Lectures: 9 & 10: Ethnographies of Drug Use, and Drugs as Symbols: Definitions: Ethnography. Line: 3

<sup>6</sup> ANT110 Drugs across Cultures. 2010. Lectures: 3&4: Theories of Addiction: Dopamine Theory. Lines: 1 - 2

<sup>7</sup> Think Exist. Dalai Lama quotes.

[http://thinkexist.com/quotation/i\\_believe\\_that\\_the\\_very\\_purpose\\_of\\_life\\_is\\_to\\_be/145371.html](http://thinkexist.com/quotation/i_believe_that_the_very_purpose_of_life_is_to_be/145371.html).

assumption can be made that, although happiness sought by each individual may differ, it is happiness most human beings desire.

Some find happiness in themselves or their families and friends, some through art or music and some, as the planet becomes so disjointed, so disconnected, look for their happiness in the bottom of a bottle, in the box of prescription medication, and some look for it on the street by injecting happiness into their veins. Happiness comes with a price, as we all, at some stage in our lives, spin the barrel whilst someone calls Russian roulette! Peele and Degrandpre experimented with the idea of environment acting as the catalyst to addiction, an ethnographic approach in the laboratory. Their experiments 'reinforced the picture that use of all drugs, depends on the users environment.'<sup>8</sup>

A cultural category as an accelerator for addiction could enforce a society's cultural norm concerning addictive compounds, if they revolved around cause and effect. In practicing strict abstinence or uncontrollable dependency, could produce learned behaviours transmissible from one generation, or environment, to the next. So, if an addict and their addiction could be reverse engineered, the result would almost always be 'an addiction aggravated by environment.'<sup>9</sup> In citing such addictions as 'disease,' paves an escapist's route of descent with sympathy, money and sometimes more pharmaceuticals/narcotics, to assist in the alleviation of either the addiction or the disease, as this was, and is, a purposeful intent. I.e.

- '1650: Sultan Murad IV of the Ottoman Empire decreed the death penalty for tobacco smoking.'<sup>10</sup>
- '1691 In Luneberg, Germany, the penalty for smoking (tobacco) is death.'<sup>11</sup>
- '17th century: In Russia, Czar Michael Federovitch executes anyone on whom tobacco is found.'<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Peele, S & R.J. Degrandpre (1998). 'Cocaine and the Concept of Addiction. Pp:235:9-11

<sup>9</sup> K. McCarthy. 2010. on the question of; 'Is Addiction a Cultural Category or a Biological Reality.' (Macquarie University. Sydney. Australia. OUA.)

<sup>10</sup> Edward M. Brecher and the Editors of Consumer Reports Magazine. 1972. The Consumers Union Report on Licit and Illicit Drugs. <http://www.druglibrary.org/schaffer/library/studies/cu/cu26.html>. Pp: 212

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Szasz. 2003. Ceremonial chemistry: the ritual persecution of drugs, addicts, and pushers. Syracuse University Press.

<sup>12</sup> A brief history of drugs. 2010. Russia. Czar Michael Federovitch. 17<sup>th</sup> century. <http://www.lycaem.org/~sky/data/drughist.html>

- ‘1941 Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek orders the complete suppression of the poppy; laws are enacted providing the death penalty for anyone guilty of cultivating the poppy, manufacturing opium, or offering it for sale.’<sup>13</sup>

All very good incentives to actuate a movement for a diagnosis of disease rather than that of addiction. This is not to say that addiction to drugs, illicit or licit is not a disease for some substance users or abusers.

Cultures are born, usually through centuries or millennia’s, and the practice of these cultures normally pre-date the modern world. When ancient cultures become polluted, to use a word, generally this pollution was an introduction by outsiders or outside influences. This is most prevalent in the case of the Australian Aborigines. Upon invasion, and throughout the centuries, most of their ‘true’ culture has been lost or fouled mostly through deliberate intent. Over time, cultures have been diluted and biologically, human beings are self-polluting, both their habitats and their bodies. ‘Australia has lost the ability to have a particular identity and instead draws upon historical and/or current cultural identities when asked.’<sup>14</sup>

All the abuses heaped upon the lonely, the lost, the peasants and the deviant are nothing more than a result of environment; in the home, at school, at work, in the mirror etc... When environmental ‘Dynamic Systems’<sup>15</sup> fail to facilitate the processes required to provide functionality, at any level of the human psyche, then the human psyche looks externally for some type of gratification, no matter where, or what it is. However, the reward effect may not have been the initial purpose for imbibition of drugs or alcohol, as a trauma event can sometimes initiate an addiction, i.e.: pain medication or anti-depressants. This explanation could pre-empt a ‘Biological reality.’

A ‘biological reality,’ in the context of an addictive response to either pharmacological (licit) or extracurricular (illicit) drug use, could imply a biological dependency pre-existed the actual event of ‘dosing.’<sup>16</sup> Upon the absorption of drugs or alcohol, there could be an activation of a hereditary gene or mind-set, produced through social/communal experiences

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<sup>13</sup> A brief history of drugs. 2010. Generalissimo. Chiang Kai-shek. 1941.

<http://www.lycaem.org/~sky/data/drughist.html>

<sup>14</sup> K. McCarthy. Do you think Australia has a particular national identity? (Macquarie University. CLT210. Assess 2. 5th June, 2010.)

<sup>15</sup> J. Richard Eiser. 1997. Addiction as a dynamic process', Addiction Research, 5(5): 361-366. (University of Exeter. United Kingdom.)

<sup>16</sup> ANT110 – Drugs Across Cultures. 2010. Week 1: Lecture 1: Factors Affecting Drug Uses and Effects. Lines: 1-7

(life lessons). A pre-existing mind-set means; some people think or behave in a certain manner, and participate in certain activities because; 'in our street, suburb, town, city or country, that's what we do, it is expected of us!' otherwise known as; learned behaviour. A hereditary gene implies: predisposed, predestinate personality types will behave in a certain manner or imbibe certain drugs or alcohol concoctions, not by choice, but by a predisposition of an unwanted inheritance. Addiction is also described as 'a behavioural pattern of drug use, as it is characterised by overwhelming involvement with the use of a drug, securing supply and high tendency to relapse.'<sup>17</sup> To which I would add that just as environment and mind-set play an enormous part in drug addiction, mind-set and environment play a larger role in abstinence.

Zinberg's theory of 'Drug, Set and Setting,'<sup>18</sup> would aptly assist in a clearer understanding of the question. The use of the word, 'Drug,' explains the 'pharmacological activity of the drug of choice.'<sup>19</sup> Set, refers to the 'attitude of the user at the time of use and their personality structure,' and helps to explain a user's genetical predisposition for addiction, through biological personality attributes. Setting refers to both the 'physical and social setting with which the use of the drug occurs,'<sup>20</sup> which also helps to identify the cultural category which comforts the user, in both the 'physical and social setting.' An ethnic society a user abides within, plays a prominent role in the choice of 'drug' imbibed.

Eiser's paper: 'Addiction as a Dynamic Process,'<sup>21</sup> focus's upon studies into how a reformed 'addict' responds to certain stressors and stimuli and notes that the subjects response is not always a constant, and a lack of control may result. Eiser states that settings and environments can be attributed to a reformed abusers loss of control, yet ultimately 'this depends on the mindset of the user at the time.'<sup>22</sup> In this, Eiser's 'Dynamic system'<sup>23</sup> refers to the fact that, 'different objects and events constitute a system if they can influence each other,'<sup>24</sup> and 'any individual within an environment constitutes a system with the

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<sup>17</sup> Peele, S & R.J. Degrandpre (1998). 'Cocaine and the Concept of Addiction. Pp:236:22-25

<sup>18</sup> ANT110 Drugs across Cultures. 2010. Lectures: 1&2. Week 1: Week 1 Introductory Lecture Notes: Zinberg's Theory. Lines: 1-3

<sup>19</sup> ANT110 – Drugs Across Cultures. 2010. Week 1: Lecture 1: Factors Affecting Drug Uses and Effects. Lines: 1-2

<sup>20</sup> ANT110 Drugs across Cultures. 2010. Lectures: 1&2. Week 1: Week 1 Introductory Lecture Notes: Zinberg's Theory. Lines: 1-3

<sup>21</sup> Eiser, R (1997) Editorial: 'Addiction as a dynamic process', *Addiction Research*, 5(5): 361-366

<sup>22</sup> Eiser, R (1997) Editorial: 'Addiction as a dynamic process', *Addiction Research*, 5(5): 362:18-20

<sup>23</sup> Eiser, R (1997) Editorial: 'Addiction as a dynamic process', *Addiction Research: Dynamic System*. 5(5): 362:22-23

<sup>24</sup> Eiser, R (1997) Editorial: 'Addiction as a dynamic process', *Addiction Research*, 5(5): 363:17-18

environment, since the environment both influences and is influenced by what the individual does.<sup>25</sup> So Eiser's, 'Dynamic system' aptly ties together the 'Ethnography' of a 'cultural category and biological reality.'

A cultural category could produce an addict, if a person within a 'drug culture,' already contains, within their biological makeup, susceptibility for addiction.

This paper has shown that to discover whether addiction is a cultural category or a biological reality, ethnographic environmental factors must be taken into account. Taking an ethnographical approach to the question provides an insight into many different cultural practices concerning addiction. As such, this paper, whilst leaning toward a Cultural Category as the more prominent player in this discussion, has deduced that separately, a cultural category and a biological reality producing an addict would be problematic, yet not unheard of, and that addiction eventuating through a combination of the both appears much more plausible. Theoretical calculations are what account for most 'ideas,' or 'perceptions,' of the question, yet bound in protective layering's most theorists do not enter the world of drug users and abusers. Anthropologists step up to the plate but most legislation concerning drugs, licit or illicit, are generally decided upon through theoretical arguments delivered by 'white room participants,' who have produced unknowable perceptions, drawn up as truths.

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<sup>25</sup> Eiser, R (1997) Editorial: 'Addiction as a dynamic process', *Addiction Research*, 5(5): 363:29-30

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## **Appendix A**

Dalai Lama Quote: Head of the Dge-lugs-pa order of Tibetan Buddhists, 1989 Nobel Peace Prize, b.1935.

“I believe that the very purpose of life is to be happy. From the very core of our being, we desire contentment. In my own limited experience I have found that the more we care for the happiness of others, the greater is our own sense of well-being. Cultivating a close, warm hearted feeling for others automatically puts the mind at ease. It helps remove whatever fears

or insecurities we may have and gives us the strength to cope with any obstacles we encounter. It is the principal source of success in life. Since we are not solely material creatures, it is a mistake to place all our hopes for happiness on external development alone. The key is to develop inner peace.”