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978-1-107-03476-1 - Power, Powerlessness and Addiction

Jim Orford

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POWER, POWERLESSNESS AND ADDICTION

Addiction exercises enormous power over all those who are touched by it. This book argues that power and powerlessness have been neglected in addiction studies and that they are a unifying theme that brings together different areas of research from the field, including the disempowering nature of addiction; effects on family, community and the workplace; epidemiological and ethnographic work; studies of the legal and illegal supply; and theories of treatment and change. Examples of alcohol, drug and gambling addiction are used to discuss the evidence that addiction is most disempowering where social resources to resist it are weakest; the ways in which the dominant discourses about addictive behaviour encourage the attributing of responsibility for addiction to individuals and divert attention from the powerful who benefit from addiction; and the ways in which the voices of those whose interests are least well served by addiction are silenced.

JIM ORFORD is Emeritus Professor of Clinical and Community Psychology at the University of Birmingham. Jim is a long-standing researcher and writer in the addiction field. Amongst his 14 previous books are successful titles on addiction, notably *Excessive Appetites: A Psychological View of Addictions* (1st edition, 1985; 2nd edition, 2001); as well as others on community psychology, including *Community Psychology: Challenges, Controversies and Emerging Consensus* (2008). He is one of the UK's leading addiction researchers and has an international reputation. In 2010 he was awarded the prestigious international E.M. Jellinek Award for his contribution to alcohol and addiction studies.

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I dedicate this book to the memory of Professor Griffith Edwards, who died in September 2012 as the book was just about to go into production. I would have liked him to read it and I would have been anxious to know his opinion. He was the single person of greatest significance in my career and was an inspiration to me as to so many others. He was a giant in the addiction field.

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Preface

This book is exploratory. There is no single body of knowledge corresponding to power, powerlessness and addiction; I have had to make it up as I went along. The idea for this book merges two streams of thought which have dominated my career in psychology. One of those is addiction studies where power is scarcely ever explicitly referred to. The other is community psychology, for which power and powerlessness are central concepts. Writing this book has, therefore, served a personal purpose in uniting the two halves of my professional life which might otherwise remain disconnected. I might go further and argue that in order to explore the relationship between power and addiction it is necessary to bring together theory and research arising from different scientific traditions: on the one hand the biomedical, public health and epidemiological and on the other the social sciences. The former have dominated addiction studies while the latter have played a much lesser role. One feature of my earlier book on addiction, *Excessive Appetites* (Orford 2001), which left me dissatisfied was its emphasis on the individual and its relative lack of attention to the social. The present book is a partial attempt to put that right.

Although power is rarely mentioned when addiction is discussed, it had long occurred to me that power and powerlessness were never far below the surface and, once you were looking for them, they often appeared. The very concept of dependence, often used as a synonym for addiction, implies a loss of power. Indeed, acknowledging one's powerlessness is considered by Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12-step groups to be a requirement for recovery. The experience of family members and others closely affected by other people's addictions – something that my colleagues and I have made a special study of – can well be thought of as an experience of powerlessness. Once the focus moves beyond the individual and the family to consider the complex network of connections involved in the supply, legal or illicit, of substances and activities to which people become addicted, then the exercise of power and the creation and exploitation of the powerless are

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impossible to avoid. All those manifestations of power, overt or hidden, malignant or benign, and others, are discussed in the chapters which follow.

In defence of the word ‘addiction’

Terminology in this field is itself controversial. I use the common term ‘addiction’ throughout this book although I try to avoid as much as possible using terms applied to individual people, such as ‘addict’ or ‘alcoholic’, labels which have been associated with stigma and which can carry pejorative connotations. I have also tried to avoid a number of terms which have become popular in official circles and which appear to be less pejorative but which in fact serve to reinforce the focus of responsibility for addiction on to the individual who experiences it at first hand, in the process shifting the focus of responsibility away from everyone else who is connected with addiction in some way. The expressions ‘drug misuse(r)’ and ‘drug abuse(r)’ are such terms. Similar in their implications are the now-popular terms such as ‘sensible drinking’ and ‘responsible gambling’ with their clearly implied opposites – drinking which is not sensible and irresponsible gambling. Other terms such as ‘drug dependence’, ‘problem drinking’ or ‘excessive appetites’, are alternatives, each with their own slightly different take on the matter. In this book I fall back on the word ‘addiction’ because it is one that is both in wide public use and is common currency in the expert literature on the subject as well. For my purposes it is also a good vehicle for introducing the theme of power and powerlessness, as I hope will become clear later. ‘Addiction’ does, however, carry a number of dangers. It can easily be taken to imply a definable illness, distinctively different from normal experience, and most likely explicable ultimately in terms of biological vulnerability, probably involving some genetic predisposition and possibly brain abnormalities. In my view the opposite of all those is true. Addiction is best thought of as a process; at any one time it is represented in the population in terms of a continuum (several continua in fact), with many more people mildly or moderately addicted than severely so; and its causes are legion, probably involving many genes which interact with numerous environmental factors in complex ways which vary by time and place. I hope it will not be thought that, by using the expression ‘addiction’, I am trying to over-simplify what is in fact a very complicated subject.

I need also to make a point about the diversity of addiction and to explain why I have concentrated on three forms of addiction, to alcohol, drugs and gambling. They constitute, for me, the ‘big three’, with many features in common. Each involves an activity which is indulged in, or

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a commodity which is consumed, to put it in other terms, for positive, rewarding purposes, supplied, legally or illegally, for such ends. Each is potentially addictive and, therefore, dangerous and excessive indulgence is associated with disruption to the person, the family, and beyond. They are not the only dangerous activities to which people can get addicted, however. Smoking tobacco cigarettes is one of the strongest and most difficult-to-break addictions and I could be criticised for not making it more of a focus. It is certainly one of the main addictions and arguably the one that wreaks the most havoc worldwide. But its harm profile somewhat differs from that of the big three: in particular, its effect on family life, which is one of the principal domains on which I have drawn, differs. There are other forms of addiction which could have been included and which might have served to deepen my exploration of the connections between addiction and power. In *Excessive Appetites* I included binge eating and sex addiction and there is now a body of work on shopping addiction and a rapidly expanding literature on internet addiction. But I judged that this was not the place to discuss what should and should not be included as an addiction and that I had enough work to do exploring how power figures in an account of alcohol, drug and gambling addiction.

The structure of the book

Chapter 1 orientates the reader to the breadth of topics to be covered in the book by means of presenting three hypothetical cases: a middle-aged man with an alcohol addiction; a young woman with an illicit drug addiction; and a woman with an addiction to gambling machines. Although each 'case' is hypothetical, they are based on an amalgamation of my research and reading and are, therefore, designed to be as realistic as possible. As well as serving to introduce the three principal kinds of addiction which will feature throughout later chapters, these three cases begin to introduce the idea that one person's addiction is connected, in relations of power, to the lives of many others, including those with whom the addicted person lives or works, other relatives, friends and acquaintances, people who deal in addictive commodities locally and at greater distance, as well as those who treat and support those with addictions. Offering hypothetical examples in this way presents a problem because it runs the risk of reinforcing stereotypes and failing to do justice to diversity. I considered trying to reflect more cultural and historical diversity in the examples presented in this chapter. But in the end I decided that to do so effectively was impossible and that it was preferable, and sufficient for making my point, to offer three

examples of people who, as will be evident to the reader, are living in the late twentieth/early twenty-first century in the European country where I myself live and work. From time to time in the rest of the book references are made to the three cases described in Chapter 1.

Chapter 2 focuses on the experiences of people who themselves become addicted, re-interpreting that experience as one of diminished autonomy or increased powerlessness. It draws on psychological theories of addiction which see it as the development of a strong and difficult-to-break habit. Concepts such as habit development, erosion of restraint, and the development of conflict and its consequences are those I have drawn on before in my earlier works *Excessive Appetites* (Orford 2001) and *An Unsafe Bet?* (Orford 2011), and they are used again here. But they are now used to support the argument that addiction has the capacity to diminish personal agency; in other words, to disempower. The chapter moves beyond a strictly psychological understanding of addiction to include consideration of what some philosophers have had to say about addiction and loss of autonomy and what might be learnt from the way in which social theorists have dealt with powerlessness more generally.

The main point argued in Chapter 3 is that the powerlessness of those who experience addiction at first hand also undermines the control over their lives exercised by those who come into close contact with addiction at second-hand – notably close family members. To make this point, the chapter draws upon both the family research conducted by my colleagues and myself and on biographies of some famous names such as the wives of the poets Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Dylan Thomas. Illustrations are also given of the disempowering influence of addiction on close friends and work colleagues and groups. This material illustrates the impotence which is often felt in the face of addiction and the dilemmas people face in deciding how to respond. These are themes that colleagues and I have addressed previously, for example, in the books *Coping with Alcohol and Drug Problems* (Orford et al. 2005) and *Addiction Dilemmas* (Orford 2012). But in the context of the present book they are used to ask in what way these at-second-hand addiction experiences can be thought of as ones of oppression or bondage and might be likened to other experiences of subordination, such as colonisation or a lowly position in a socially stratified system. The question which social theorists have often asked – how can consent to oppression be explained – is brought to bear, as are relevant psychological theories such as social dominance theory and system justification theory.

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A variety of sources, from the epidemiological to the anthropological, are drawn on in Chapter 4 to support the argument that addiction is unequally distributed among social groups, flourishing most where the power to resist is weakest. Amongst the evidence are findings of negative social class gradients and studies showing the vulnerability of minorities or groups who are socially excluded, including indigenous people and sexual minorities. Also highlighted are relevant studies of place, including those relating addiction to area deprivation, studies of the variation by area of alcohol and gambling sales outlets, and other studies which reveal the risks of harm in the way drugs are used in poor inner-city neighbourhoods. Attention is given to the work of those social scientists who have concluded that social and economic structures are largely responsible for addiction. Research on the harmful effects of addiction on neighbourhoods and communities is also considered. These various lines of theory and evidence raise the familiar structure versus agency debate which has been enjoined in community psychology and more generally in social theory, a discussion of which concludes this chapter.

The first half of Chapter 5 is devoted to considering the enormous size and power of the legal alcohol and gambling industries, including their capacity for influence via lobbying, advertising and other means. The subtle way in which they use their power to influence the policy agenda is described, with particular note taken of the various ways in which they attempt to influence research. More subtle still, it is argued here, is the way in which a number of pro-industry expansion discourses are deployed, such as the harmless amusement, ordinary business, freedom of choice, and responsible consumer discourses. The second half of the chapter considers the way in which power, often of a more directly coercive kind, is exercised in the course of trading in illegal drugs. Research from Myanmar and Britain is drawn upon to illustrate the many different roles played by people at different levels of the drug trade and the powerless position of people occupying many of those positions.

Chapter 6 draws upon evidence to suggest that successful addiction change involves social influence as well as individual cognitive change. Examples, such as company alcohol policies and family drug and alcohol courts, are given to support the theory that effectively standing up to addiction involves a combination of care and control, support and discipline. An element of coercion is often involved in the change process. Disempowered by their addictions, people submit to a process that allows others to exercise legitimate, expert or reward power. This thesis is supported

with examples including Alcoholics Anonymous, change through religious means, contingency management and motivational interviewing.

Chapter 7, the concluding chapter, attempts to pull together the themes discussed in earlier chapters, arguing that power, and the various ways it is exercised at different points in the addiction story, have been neglected in the addictions studies field. A consequence has been an exclusive focus on the behaviour of those individuals who are themselves addicted and the assumption that the responsibility for addiction is principally theirs. Close family members also assimilate a sense of responsibility. The case for viewing responsibility and addiction more widely is made by discussing philosophical, psychological and legal views on addiction and diminished responsibility; the evidence that addiction is most disempowering where social resources to resist it are weakest; the ways in which the dominant discourses about addictive behaviour encourage the attributing of responsibility for addiction to individuals and divert attention from the powerful who benefit from addiction; and the ways in which the voices of those whose interests are least well served by addiction are silenced. The chapter concludes with a number of examples, from different parts of the world, of how the voices of those most disempowered by addiction have sometimes been heard. It is argued that addiction has largely been treated as a private, individual matter and that standing up to addiction collectively is now what is needed.

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Although I have been actively working on this book for two or three years and thinking about it for a few years before that, it could not have been written without the background of many years in which I have worked with numerous colleagues from whom I have learned much and who have inspired me. They are far too many to list individually here. They include colleagues, particularly my early and lasting mentor Griffith Edwards, at the Addiction Research Unit (now the National Addiction Centre) at the Institute of Psychiatry in London; at the University of Exeter Psychology Department and Exeter NHS Clinical Psychology Department; at the Institute of Psychiatry in Mexico City; and latterly in the School of Psychology at Birmingham University and in the European Community Psychology Association.