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PREVIEW

SALVE REGINA UNIVERSITY

**THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGICAL CULTURE
ON ADDICTION IN TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICA**

**A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES

BY

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NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND

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PREVIEW

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SALVE REGINA UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effects of technology on addiction in the culture of twentieth century America. It first explains how addiction is a debilitating human condition that results in a loss of freedom in body, mind, and spirit. It then demonstrates how technology can abet and sustain the addictive experience, so that certain dangers inherent to technological culture increase the spread of the addictive syndrome. Lastly, it argues for the recovery of a spiritual attitude encouraging greater human freedom and a healthier society. These concepts propose that a universal harmony can be gained through the realization of the interdependence of all things, and spiritual beliefs from established wisdom traditions. The recovery movements from addictions, with special attention to Alcoholics Anonymous and in concert with contemporary social critics, do promote a holistic synthesis of physical, psychic, and spiritual unity that offers the best hope for an integrated life. It is suggested that this process promotes greater purpose for human existence in a technological culture and increases the human desire for liberation from the slavery of addiction.

DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to the persons who, while suffering from addictions, revealed to me as a mental health therapist, each in their own way, that the root problem of addiction is spiritual. In the process of their recovery and change, I learned from them the psychological and spiritual healing that comes from honesty, humility, and courage. Also, because of them, and as a result of this research, I am more convinced than ever that addiction is, in large part, a sacred illness that is a spiritual hunger.

This work is also dedicated to my wife and partner Lee. I am grateful for her tolerance and patient support; and to my children, John, Michelle, Mark, and Marcelle, because without them this project would not have been completed. There were many times I wanted to abandon this labor, but they reminded me of previous counsel I gave each one of them, that most things can be accomplished with dedication, discipline, and sacrifice. They have taught me again the difference between talking the talk and walking the walk.

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PREVIEW

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

General Overview

This study examines how the social implications of modern technology have intensified the impact of addictive practices on the culture of twentieth century America. The purpose is to demonstrate how destructive compulsions are encouraged by social attitudes, career practices, and the materialistic goals prized and advocated in a consumerist and technological environment. Various thinkers argue that American culture is sustained economically through constant technological innovations that tend to shape the popular life styles of a people proud of its autonomy and self-determination. Some writers contend that technology has diminished individual power of choice. This result emanates from economic structures, conformist pressures, and the dissemination of harmful cravings by omnipresent advertising. This study suggests that these factors promote addictive behavior whether through substance abuse or by inducing disturbed patterns of conduct that are disruptive of normal life.

Statistics provided by the United States Department of Health and Human Services (1990, 1993) and the National Clearing House for Alcohol and Drug Information (1994) confirm that addiction is a major social problem in America

today. Alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, gambling, and other forms of compulsive behavior affect personal, family, and professional lives. Addiction, it is generally agreed, is a debilitating human condition that results in a loss of freedom in body, mind, and spirit. This study is important because it investigates popular and academic literature to discern whether technology increases the likelihood of the addictive syndrome. Consequently, it examines whether conditions that permeate society result in harming humans individually and collectively.

Certain critics contend that contemporary society creates an environment in which whole new categories of addictive behaviors are encouraged. They further claim that a technology-based, consumerist society exacts a spiritual cost, and they suggest that the process of change requires the recovery of a spiritual perspective. On that account, this study explores how the long-standing spiritual themes on recovery from addiction complement recent criticisms of technology in order to find meaning in what is referred to as humanity's continuing search for freedom. Keeping in mind this humanistic approach, this research is primarily interdisciplinary and integrative with a view to synthesis. Because of the varying theories regarding addiction in the contemporary technological age, this method involves psychology, philosophy, theology, history, and literature. These disciplines all contribute to understanding addiction in the cultural context of twentieth-century America.

The literature on technology covers a wide spectrum, and opinions on technology's value are many and profound. Much scholarly criticism has been

devoted to various aspects of technology as it adversely affects contemporary life and the considerable control it exerts over human behavior. In examining technology and a techno-economic culture as it generates the addictive experience, this qualitative research is more holistic and inductive, focusing on actual human phenomena and experience. It tends to be phenomenological because it investigates human motives, emotions, consciousness, and purpose. It is also interpretive because it seeks to explain influences and not simply to describe data and results, although relevant information will be integrated into the themes within the text. Lastly, and beyond the dehumanizing psychological damage inflicted by technology, there is also evidence that it creates a variety of spiritual crises. This study will, therefore, take a critical view of aspects of our technological culture that generate systematic or structured exploitations of human weakness.

Many authorities claim that the solution to the current increase in addiction lies in developing a deeper spiritual consciousness for humankind. The core of this concept is a revitalization of a sense of freedom and spiritual values. These are founded on the systems view of the interconnectedness of all peoples and things in the universe, as well as a rediscovery of the spirituality found in the wisdom traditions. The addiction recovery movements, especially as established and promulgated by Alcoholics Anonymous, the writings of ecological and systems thinkers, humanistic and transpersonal psychologists, and spiritual humanists; all these sources incorporate principles that could contribute to a renewed awareness of the purpose of human existence in a technological culture. It is argued that this

renewed meaning is found in the inherent human desire for freedom and the human quest for the spiritual. This theme is expressed directly in the literature of Alcoholics Anonymous and more broadly by such authors as Fritjof Capra, Ian Barbour, Erich Fromm, Gerald May, Rollo May, Paul Tillich, and Ken Wilbur. These scholars all make reference to the necessity of a renewed individual and collective spiritual consciousness in twentieth century technological culture.

Background on Technology

There is an abundance of literature regarding the influence of modern technology. After World War II, some writers still regarded technology as a progressive social force that could reduce human suffering and improve the human condition. More recently, however, other critics contend that technology has become a regressive force that restricts freedoms while it dehumanizes and alienates people from society. In the closing years of the twentieth century, the rapid technological changes give greater urgency to the task of discovering how technology has influenced the shape of human life.

Kenneth Galbraith defines technology as “the institutionalization and systemization of knowledge, primarily through capital, for practical purposes” (1985, 12). The scope of this definition includes all technologies involved in the production of material goods, instruments, machines, procedures, and human services. Similarly, Barbour defines technology as the “application of organized knowledge to practical tasks by ordered systems of people and machines” (1993, 3). He proposes that technology can be viewed from three perspectives,

“as liberator, as threat, as instrument of power” (Ibid.). Within the optimistic view as liberator, the benefits of technology are higher living standards, opportunity for choice, more leisure, and improved communications. On the other hand, the human costs of technology as threat results in uniformity in a mass society, narrow criteria of efficiency, impersonality and manipulation, uncontrollability, and alienation of the worker. According to these critical assessments, “technology is imperialistic and addictive” (Barbour 1993, 14). Barbour finally views technology as an instrument of power “neither inherently good nor inherently evil but an ambiguous instrument of power whose consequences depend on its social context” (Ibid., 15). He then claims, “the contextualists are more likely to give prominence to social justice because they interpret technology as both a product and an instrument of social power” (Ibid., 23).

Bernard Gendron summarizes what he calls three extreme views concerning the social role and value of modern technology: “the utopian view, the dystopian view, and the socialists view” (1977, 2). The utopians contend that all social progress is due exclusively to the growth of technology. “Utopians construe the major world problems as ‘technical’ rather than as ‘political’ or ‘ideological’ ” (Ibid., 3). The dystopians, on the other hand, believe that technology is now intensifying social evils and undermining freedom. They contend that technology stimulates the use of techniques of mass manipulation, that it makes work tedious, unchallenging, and psychologically unhealthy, and that it increases the dangers of annihilatory war and ecological catastrophe. Lastly, the socialists look at both

extremes and propose that technological growth in the social context is neither automatically progressive nor merely regressive. For most socialists, results depend on the kind of economic system within which technological growth takes place and on the economic class that controls its use (Gendron 1977, 2).

In this preliminary review, it is evident that technology and its interpretations vary widely, but these working definitions should provide direction for further investigation. Critical theorists generally agree that science and technology are double-edged in the sense of creating new risks and dangers as well as offering beneficent possibilities for humankind. While recognizing technology as the fruit of human intelligence and inventiveness as well as the irrepressible human capacity to research, fabricate, and produce, this study must focus on the dangers inherent in technology and techno-economics, for it is important to recognize when inventiveness becomes harmful to human progress.

Background on Addictions

The word *addicted* is derived from the Latin "addicere", which means "to say to, to pronounce, to award, to assign by decree" (Oxford 1966, 15). The phrase to be addicted has since acquired the meaning given in the Webster International Dictionary: "to devote or give (oneself) habitually or compulsively as in slavery or bondage" (1986, 24). The fourth edition (1994) of the psychiatric *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV)* lists detailed criteria for substance dependence, substance abuse, and obsessive compulsive disorders, but this manual does not define the word addiction. These are the diagnostic criteria

used by mental health professionals to assess insurance payments from private and government sources in the treatment of addictions.

John Bradshaw broadly describes addiction as a dependency on a substance or an activity that has life-damaging consequences in any area of human functioning: physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual and social (1988, 15). Typical addictions cited by various authors involve alcohol, drugs, sex, food, money, gambling, eating, work, and the pursuit of pleasure or luxury.

The book entitled *It Works: The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Narcotics Anonymous* explains that an addiction is an attachment to any substance or process (activity) that has taken control of one's life and against which one feels powerless. This volume points out the multi-faceted nature of addiction that corresponds to the thesis of this dissertation:

It would be impossible to precisely describe addiction in a way that is agreeable to everyone. However, the disease seems to affect us in the following general ways. Mentally, we become obsessed with thoughts of using. Physically, we develop a compulsion to continue using, regardless of the consequences. Spiritually, we become totally self-centered in the course of our addiction. Looking at addiction as a disease makes sense to a lot of addicts because, in our experience, addiction is progressive, incurable, and can be fatal unless arrested. (1993, 5-6)

From the above it is clear that the definition, recognition, and treatment of addictive behavior have changed significantly in the past fifty years. It will be important, therefore, to examine the historical development of addiction in twentieth-century America, in particular its early sources, the problem of alcoholism, the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous, and the social and spiritual

influences of this organization since 1940. Equally important is the evolution of the drug culture from the early 1960's to the present, government and social policies regarding drug use, and finally the evolving criteria as defined by the medical community.

The Prevalence of Addiction

Extensive government statistics support the general contention of addiction counselors that the problem of addiction today is deep and widespread. Another impressive figure is the amount of money spent by government agencies to control and treat the drug problem. In 1998, for example, President Clinton's drug strategy envisioned halving illegal drug use and availability in ten years, and he proposed to spending a record \$17.1 billion just on drug control. The Department of Health and Human Services would meanwhile adopt separate goals and renewed measures for treatment programs. The ten-year strategy sets broad objectives that Barry McCaffrey, the White House Office Director of National Drug Control, developed as the goal-oriented strategy that would lead to intensive interagency cooperation. The strategy proposes spending the \$17.1 billion in the 1999 federal budget to treat the estimated four million chronic illegal drug users. The largest amount is aimed at programs to reduce drug use among youths (Suro 1998, A3).

Many social critics contend that addiction has become so extensive that it has reached epidemic proportions and that it represents the trademark imprinted on late twentieth century social identity. Business leader Jack Hawley concurs

claiming: “We all become snared by worldly things---goods, possessions, relationships, personal comfort---that we think are important but really aren’t. It’s a pattern of dependence on the wrong things. It’s an addiction. We’re not in control, the habit is” (1990, 115). From a similar perspective, Gerald May connects widespread addiction to drugs and the prevailing obsession of material goods with alienation from the spiritual (1988, 93).

Besides addiction to alcohol and drugs, there are many other addictions associated with the technological age. Widespread addiction to television, computers, prescription drugs and the otherwise normal human activities of eating, sex, shopping, and working, is evidence of obsessive compulsive disorders that characterize the latter part of the twentieth century and its “techno-economic” culture.

Addiction in a Techno-Economic Milieu

Various social critics further claim that a technological culture feeds addictions through an ever increasing system of production and consumption. Galbraith maintains that business and industry are so efficient at production that public demand must be created through advertisement to sell the mass of products whose uses can vary from questionable to harmful (1992, 67). Neil Postman supports this position when he describes a prevalent social attitude that sees all our problems as resolvable through science, material production, and the benefits of technology (1993, 147). Philip Slater further suggests that the lure of advertisements and the consumer mentality reflect the material goals of society, which is to promote the

pursuit of power, influence, and money (1983, 28-29). In that context, some corporations actually foster or support addictions. The tobacco industry has been under government scrutiny for decades because it directly and covertly introduced addictive elements into its product. Similarly, federal control has had to regulate the sale of alcoholic and pharmaceutical products.

Schaefer believes that society, organizations, and institutions represent systems based on particular methods or processes that give them special identity (1988, 6-10). As explained by Capra, "Systems theory looks at the world in terms of the interrelatedness and interdependence of all phenomena, and in this framework an integrated whole whose properties cannot be reduced to those of its parts is called a system" (1983, 43). Living organisms, societies, organizations, and families operate according to systems. Within the guidelines of that view, Schaefer concludes that these systems are closed, functional, interacting and interdependent structures that form a collective entity (1987, 25-29). Generally speaking, some systems theorists, especially family system theorists like Bradshaw and Whitfield apply addictive systems to the addicts themselves. Such scholars allege that these systems are closed, allowing few options for individual thinking or feeling. As addicts are self-centered, so the system is self-referent. Every occurrence is either for or against the system and the individual addict perceives everything as either for or against the self.

It is generally accepted that when addictions take control an addict becomes increasingly dishonest and self-righteous. The addict's deceptions are symptoms

of an addictive system. Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA), for example, assert that a primary moral symptom of addiction is dishonesty. Persons are led to increased compulsive behavior, and they continually lie to cover up their addiction. Both AA and NA contend that the characteristic result of an addiction is to put a barrier between addicts and their feelings. Investigators like Anne Wilson Schaef and William White claim that technological culture not only creates addictions that limit awareness but that same culture itself can also function as an addict.

Warnings about Technological Culture

It will be necessary to explain further the social problems associated with the massive influence of technology. Philip Slater points out, in a technological consumer society dishonesty is often refined by marketing and advertising techniques that manipulate the public to buy goods or services that are not necessary but that take up time and numb the senses (1970,103-05). Alcohol, illegal drugs, cigarettes and gambling are the more common, but in modern culture, prescription drugs, television, computers, shopping malls, designer clothes, music fads are among the many technological inventions that provide escape from responsibilities. Ian Barbour describes the result of this manipulation as the extension of technological attitudes to all of life until human beings and other creatures are treated as objects to be exploited and controlled. Barbour explains, "When a legitimate interest in material progress becomes an addictive

consumerism, human experience is impoverished and community life and personal relationships are eroded” (1993, xvi-xvii).

The literature of the numerous organizations that deal with various addictions contends that the addicts and the addictive system are always trying to get more of what attracts them. In their view, the need continually grows for more possessions, activity, money, sex, or drugs. The pursuit of comfort and luxury is never satisfied. There is a constant search for external satisfaction, and the greater the attraction, the greater the false assurance of security and contentment. According to Depak Chopra “All addictions have one thing in common: their power depends on something external, something out there in the world, something extrinsic to the individual self” (1997, 106). Obtaining the external object or experience creates the illusion of control.

Addiction and Technological Control

Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous contend that when alcoholics and addicts eventually experience the pain, loneliness, and despair of addiction, they become obsessed with the illusion of control. The belief takes hold that they can control the addiction. NA members, for example, freely admit that they had tried everything to control their use of drugs: switching drugs as if their problem was a particular drug; limiting drug use to certain times and places; and vowing to stop using altogether at a certain point. Nothing short of total abstinence had any lasting effect (1993, 5). Both AA and NA affirm that addiction controls persons who come under its influence. This control, now medically

referred to as a mental disorder of chemical dependency, relies on any denial, deception or dishonesty that blocks feeling or thinking about one's individual and social reality.

Slater, similarly, finds that addictive thinking or behavior in society is often fixated on the singular purpose of production, consumption, and profit, as evidence of technological and human progress. He claims that humans are now controlled by the machines and the means of production that they have invented, and that they now exist as objects of their own technology and production (1983, 114-30). Galbraith also considered the problem and arrived at a similar conclusion. He felt that people are becoming servants of the machine that they created to serve them. Many, in fact, are surprised or indignant at anyone who proposes to escape from this comfortable servitude. Galbraith warns that allowing economic goals to have undue influence on our lives will be at the expense of more valuable interests. "What counts", he concludes, "is not the quantity of goods but the quality of life" (1985, 7).

Jacques Ellul asserts that constant technological innovations have had innumerable effects on twentieth century consciousness. He further maintains that, because humans have not been able to keep pace with changes in their own technology and industrialization, they have been caught in a disequilibrium that they are unable to understand or reluctant to examine. He contends that belief in science and technology to solve problems has displaced established traditions and values (1964, 348-58). Likewise Erich Fromm claims that technology's benefits