The Phenomenology of Drug Addiction

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Abstract

America, much like the rest of the world, is currently in the midst of battling record breaking drug addiction. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime reported in 2018 that prescription drug abuse, cocaine and opioid addiction have recently shattered the metrics from previous years. And while remarkable amounts of resources have been dedicated to slowing down the global dependency on addictive substances (and indeed many developments have been made), the consideration of victims of substance abuse and the experiences that are relevant to drug addiction has remained extremely underwhelming. In order to bridge the gap between those suffering from drug addiction and the professionals and systems that are in place to address drug addiction, this essay will act as an inventory of the feelings, thoughts, and experiences associated with substance abuse and recovery. We have gathered qualitative data through interviews with victims of drug addiction, either presently or having recovered from past abuse. In order to corroborate the reports provided by the random individuals that were interviewed, we have conducted research into cognitive science and provided quantitative data from prior studies. The central findings of the research conducted here produce a new perspective through which to view drug addiction as an intersectional issue that is far more than simply a set of chemical reactions or criminal activity. Additionally, the paper posits several new methods and insights into recovery and rehabilitation from drug addiction, culminating in a brief guide created to provide support for victims of substance abuse.

The Lion’s Den

7am is when the alarm rang and panic began to set in. It was Saturday, but one I had been dreading for awhile. Jaden and I had been planning to go out and gather interviews from drug addicts in Los Angeles for a research project that explores new ways to help addicts recover, and now it was time to carry it out. In the morning panic usually strikes because the alarm strikes as well, but today the panic resonated with stigmas.

I urgently put on my clothes and brushed my teeth. It’s time to go. We agreed to leave at 7:30, but It’s now 8 and I can’t hear any footsteps within the house. That’s usually ok with me because sleep is my best friend and falling back to sleep sounds like a dream itself. However, it was time to go to work. It was time to hurdle danger, uncertainty, and anxiety. It was time to subject myself into a world I have only heard about. I had never asked my compatriot about how he felt going into the situation, but I surely haven’t stopped asking myself that question ever since the alarm rang.

The Prius sprinted down the highway at 65 miles per hour, hurling towards Santa Ana. We were ignorantly on our way to Angels Stadium, where a tent city we saw last year thrived along the riverbed.

We sped down the highway. I was keeping an eye out for the tent city, and when I saw the giant “A” on the side of the highway I knew it was close. However, as the stadium pulled up on the side of us, I could no longer see the city on the riverbed. Jaden looked at me and immediately took the next exit as he looked for this seemingly phantasmal city I told him about. I brought to his attention an article on my phone claiming the tent city was moved to temporary locations. In my bewilderment upon learning that homeless people were taken from already
temporary homes and moved to other temporary homes somewhere else, Jaden started to route an address that was reported on the article.

“There’s no way the city moved them all, and did not do anything suspicious. I wanna go scope it out,” Jaden exclaimed.

“Alright, make your move my guy,” I sighed. My fear will now be prolonged. I don’t know what is going to happen, and that scares me. I don’t know who I will meet, where I am going, and epics of bards that sing through highschool hallways tell me what I will find.

I saw the building come into view and pointed at it, “I think the building is over there.”

“Yeah that’s sus because the building is empty,” said Jaden. “I think we are going to have to dig around a little more, huh Ron?”

“What do you mean?” I replied.

Jaden pulled up another article on his phone. “Lets go here. It says this was another location they moved them to.”

We pulled up to another abandoned building. A sign on the door told us to go around so we followed the treasure. A gate stood before us and a stank of weed filled the air. To our left a private security car baked in the Californian sun. To our right the empty building stood ominously as it waited to be used properly. A private security officer slinked from behind the gate and asked us our business, “What do you guys want?”

“Hello sir, we are doin’ research and were wondering if we could interview any of the homeless that you have in there?” said Jaden.

“No I can not let you in here I’m sorry,” the security guard replied.

“Why not? We’re just conducting interviews for a school research project.”
“I’m sorry I still can’t let you in here, no matter your business.”

“Well can I talk to whoever runs this place?”

“I’ll get them but they’re just gonna say the same thing I just told you,” the security guard said as he slithered back behind the gate.

I looked at Jaden and he immediately looked back. He and I both knew we were on to something. However, there’s a world of information that still had to be uncovered, and I knew Jaden wanted to pounce.

A new man about the same size as the security guard glided through the slit in the gate.

“What do you guys need?” he sneered. Jaden hit him with the same line he opened up to the security guard with, which garnered the same response.

“Why can’t you let me in there then? Why can’t I see what’s inside?” Jaden asked forcefully.

“I can’t tell you because the people within this location have signed documents with us that give us the power to withhold information to whoever I want. All I would tell you is the only place I’d go to would be the Artic. Sometimes we drop off some of the residents for them to go wherever they please from there. I have turned around plenty of journalists much bigger than you are so you don’t scare me. That’s all I have to say about it.”

“That’s cool, but we aren’t reporters. We are researchers. And don’t you think they have the right to know we are out here asking about them? Can’t you go tell them we are conducting this research, and if they want to do it or not, they can come out here. They can also invite us in if they aren’t trying to walk!” pleaded Jaden

“Sorry. I don’t have to do that,” replied the man. Each word striking with a fang.
“So you don’t have to tell them anything about who is trying to reach them?”

“No.”

“Absurd…”

We left in a daze. Almost half a day wasted and all we got was the Artic. We google mapped the Artic and sat in silence the whole ride to our destination.

Stepping into the building a cool breeze ran over my face. The lighting in the room could make a photographer’s knees shake. I walked over to a table and sat down. Looking at Jaden I asked “What’s next?”

“I don’t know we’ll find out,” Jaden said.

“Hey! Your shirt is cool!” an old man at a table next to us told Jaden.

“Thanks man I like it too,” replied Jaden. “Would you mind us interviewing you for some research we are conducting on drug use?” Jaden asked happily accepting a free customer.

“Why sure, I’ll help as much as I can,” said the old man.

Vietnamese War veteran caught in nasty ties between the Golden Triangle, a notorious drug trafficking location in Vietnam, and his duties as a “technician for the cleanup crews.” PTSD and drug addiction balancing acts that led to multiple stunts in rehab. The escape from rehab to follow the promises of a mother who met her fate a year later. A wife who died.. A neighbor killed out of self defense. Hitchhiking through the haunted forests of New Jersey. Guidance to a harrowing shelter from apparitional children equivalent to the ones in The Shining. A wife who died.. Drug baths. PTSD flare up that almost led to a killing of a friend. His daughter pressing him to buy tar, but which he had sworn to never take. Smoking a joint rolled from weed. His daughter's birth.. His wife’s smile.. A seizure that led to him becoming completely sober and
the lack of use of most of his right arm. No jail time because he’s never been caught. 69 years old. Alive. Going home soon.

We left the Artic like we were never there. The wind on our backs pushed us to find new answers. The only place we could think of that we could ask the real questions was skid row. Traffic seemed to roll on like credits before a movie. We arrived and parked at a local fisheria that was around 2 blocks away from some of the first tents we saw.

The street was freshly paved, but the buildings were still empty. I could see a bus stop on the opposite side of the tents. A bank lay at the corner near the bus stop. On the other corner ran a long chain link fence that walled the street.

Jaden and I walked evenly along the bike lane, bags of food and water in hand, feeling like every step we take held no gravity. It was time to go to work. It was time for expectations to be halted. It was time for the world to pause and highlight the inner workings of South Central.

“What do you want?” a man in the distance yelled at us already making it easy for us to start a conversation.

“We have food,” Jaden said completely breaking the ice.

“Say no more,” the man said.

“Would it be ok if we interviewed you?” Jaden asked as we walked up to the man. The man graciously took some food and water and replied:

“Yeah, this is like payment for the interviews I guess,” as he turned around to walk towards his tent. I followed intensely so I would not disturb anyone or wake someone up. We arrived to a red tent 10 feet in front of us that had one man laying on top of some blankets
keeping track of the front yard, while a woman in the back was putting on makeup with plastic nails longer than her palms.

“What’s up?” said the man laying down as Jaden tossed him a taco and I gave him a water bottle.

“What’s up man I’m Jaden and that’s Ron,” Jaden said motioning at me.

“I’m Bam, and that’s Diamond,” he said motioning at the girl in the back as we passed her sustenance as well.

“I’m Swagg, Pharaoh Swagg, nice to meet y’all,” said the man who led us as he reached out to shake our hand. “What questions do you got for me?” he said looking at me directly. I however, did not know the questions by heart.

“I don’t know them man, we got them on paper,” I said as I looked at Jaden so he could know to start asking. However, at that moment I realized we only printed one sheet of questions, and there was three of them. I voiced my concern and we agreed that we would just do the interviews one at a time given the promise that it wouldn’t take that long. First up was Bam.

A young kid who sits with his mother on the porch as she smokes joints. Her tragic death. Adoption to parents on parole. John 3:16. Imprisoned for five years at the age of 21. Speed, crank, meth, pcp, shot, stabbed, jumped. A street where the strongest survive and the weak die. Phones in prison. Dreams of meeting MJ. “Teamwork makes the dreamwork.” Father passing away left depression behind. Counted blessings because only the strongest survive. The street breathes. Paranoia that comes from the nightlife fought back with a different paranoia induced by drugs. A Piru. Survive or sink. Struggle to keep a daughter safe from the world he resides in.

“What would you tell her if you could see her?”
“What would I tell her?”...
Survive. People always think they’re right, but they always have downfalls.
Each story came across like we knew him and he knew us. He was open, honest, and reflective. A genuine man who has been pushed to emotional boundaries some people can’t even feel. A father. A survivor.

“Alright, I need more food if I’m going to finish this interview,” Bam said exasperated of answering questions.

“Ok that’s fine. You don’t have to answer any more questions, but here you go,” Jaden replied handing the man two more tacos. “Diamond can I interview you next?”

“Yes sweetie!” she answered enthusiastically.

“Oh God, here we go,” interjected Swagg as he shot me a look of annoyance. “She gon’ tell you some bull.”

“What do you mean?” I asked while watching Jaden walk up to Diamond with questions in hand.

“She crazy,” Swagg said plainly. “If you want to hear some crazy shit hit her up.”

“I know a couple of people like that,” I said remembering what I used to say in high school.

“Yeah we all know those people, but you know what you don’t know?” Swagg asked.

“I don’t,” I replied simply.

“The lost angels,” Swagg said invoking my curiosity. “I’m a man of God, we know each other. We have a special connection, yessir. You know how the Earth was flooded?”

“Yeah,” I said remembering the story of Noah in the Bible.
“That was to drown the lost angels. The ones that fell with the devil.” “You know what else?” He paused. “The San Andreas fault? That’s where the devil was sent to hell.”

“You think?” I asked.

“I know,” he said. “All one-third of the lost angels came to this land to live in a completely demonic city. They never left. We’re living with them, still.”

The last line took the air out of my breath. However, I had no clue this asphyxiation would help rebirth a new mind.

Swagg was looking into my soul, “I can see them.”

Homeless with expensive things. Early mornings and late nights. Mink coats with his crew in the clubs. Bam. Family feuds. Religious mindset clouded in a codeine haze. A street ran by money no matter which cop is on patrol. Blocks that bite you when you step foot on the sidewalk. The hate for cold weather. The street has a soul. Perplexing personalities. A family who eats together but has no where to stay. Leader through force and intellect. Jack of all trades through hands on learning. Chicago born and raised. If Lebron is the greatest of all time skill doesn’t matter in the NBA. Everybody is addicted to something. Ex-wife. Marijuana is the only medicine to the anxiety. Rich ties but won’t ask for help. Family with convoluted pasts that developed strained but strong individuals. Rejected invitations to move back to the windy city. Games of thievery played like the last of the season. Difficult decisions. The home of a demon is in the soul. Dissented family. 6’4” but as crisp as Chris Paul. Deserted by the death of friends. Lonely. Fronts of peace, but civil mental warfares are fought with thoughts. Here. The weather's nice. Pray for heaven but live in hell. Right and wrong are hard to tell in the lion's den.

“Shut the hell up and smoke this blunt,” a man said as he pulled up on a bicycle.

“Pfft, nephew my ass,” Jay said pulling up to the sidewalk. His bike, nothing close to good condition, had a basket on the front. A torch was caught inside the cage. Jay picked it up and lit the blunt protruding from his mouth like a toothpick. “What you up to man?” Jay said as he dapped up Swagg.

“We’re doing some interviews with these white guys. They’re chill man don’t worry. They got food,” Swagg said pointing to my bag.

“Damn lemme get some,” Jay said as he climbed up to the sidewalk with his gold chains clanging against his neck. “Y’all need more interviews? I’m down.” Jaden was still with Diamond, and he had all the questions. However, their attention was on us.

“Hey!” Greeted Diamond upon seeing Jay.

“Hey be quiet!” yelled Swagg. “I swear this bitch pisses me off sometimes,” he said under his breath. “She’s crazy, don’t pay attention to what she says, she’s crazy.

“Why won’t they leave?” Diamond asked, obviously annoyed with our being there.

“That’s it. I’ma-” Swagg started as he sprung up and grabbed a car antennae. He started to move toward the back where Diamond was. His weapon held at his chest.

“Hey! You have company!” yelled Jay in a stern voice. Swagg immediately cowered away like a dog with its tail between its legs. Trying to recover his sense of place he looked at me and Jaden and smiled.

“Jay answer some questions,” He said with a fake smile.

“I’ma need some more food after that,” Jay said as he finished his taco. Jaden shakily handed him another one.
Three years older than me. When you’re up there’s no one around. Gas king. If there’s no addicts then there’s no business. Rampant burglary. Cannibalism with no eating involved. Drink water. Prisons running off the handbook don’t understand risks or risks that need to be made. No sleep schedule because there’s money to be made and little time to get it. Political repercussions of racial groups climbing the pyramid of power on the street. The only time people want to see you win is when you’re down. Being caught snoozing and dealing with the consequences.. Lost everything and everybody. Drug business keeps the buildings lining the street alive. Trump’s money is long. The street dances to its own beat. Business doesn’t sleep. They do their own product to survive getting rid of their own product. Don’t sleep. Grind.

“I’m a smoke another blunt that cool?” Jay asked.

“Yeah that’s cool man, do you,” I comfortably replied.

“I don’t have a blunt though so we gotta go find one.” “Yo Swagg! You got a blunt?” Jay asked.

“Nah,” replied Swagg.

“Damn! I’m trying to smoke.” Jay turned towards the corner of the street and looked down. “Everybody smokes weed,” he said smiling as he fumbled with a cornrow. “Come on,” he beckoned at me. “Let’s go.”

“I’ll stay here and see if I can interview other people,” Jaden said eyeing me.

“Alright I’ll go see if I can go interview other people with Jay,” I said. Jay looked at me dully.

“Let’s go, there’s some heads closer to the corner with some wrap,” Jay said.
We only made it one tent down the row before a man who I mistook, for a split second, as the late Bob Marley. He walked out of his tent with a boombox as long as he was tall. Shoreline Mafia was blasting through the bass. I could see the dust covers stretching like it was used to this type of pilates.

“Oh! Oh! Oh!” yelled Jay as he began to effortlessly fly over the sidewalk. He jumped off the curb and landed in the street. Life entered his eyes and he began to dance. One foot faced the East and the other faced the West. His signs flew through the air, flashing like a shooting star. The street accepted every step. Each one making an impression and kicking up dust. Every pound highlighting every tear, oil spill, blood drop, bleach splotch, puddle, and grease stain that made South Central.

The paints on the street lit up and blended with each step forward. The song eventually came to a conclusion. The artist signed off the painting and looked at me.

“Can you dance?” he asked.

“Not like that..” I replied.

Jay popped his head in and out of each tent we walked past asking for blunt wraps. I popped my head in to ask for interviews. We both were served the same answer over and over again. Eventually we got to the end of the street and saw a man organizing his clothes.

“Yo James you got any wraps?” Jay asked. The man looked up and looked at Jay, then at me.

“And can I interview you for a project for school,” I asked knowing that I would have to call Jaden over with the questions if he said yes.

“Yes and Yes,” James replied.

“What do you regret?” asked Jaden.

“Not getting out of bed..” James replied.

After that day the tent at the end of the road was gone. I never saw it again.

My fear was deemed ignorant. My mental state was altered. I could see how everything these people have been through turned them into Lions. Lions in a den. Lions with dysfunctional prides. Surviving. Grinding. Dancing. Stepping forward. Each one a real person. Not a statistic. Not a story. Not a reference point. Each one a combination of the environment and their past experience. Every brush stroke of the street shapes who they are as they seek their way through the Lion's Den on South Central.