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Book Review*

Kramer, Joel & Alstad, Diana. *The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power*. (Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books/Frog Ltd., 1993.) 385pp.

Reviewed by Marsha Rosenbaum, Ph.D.

According to coauthors Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad, the title *The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power* can be misleading. The book is actually about control, specifically the “decoding” of social and spiritual control. I recommend this provocative “sleeper” without reservation.

Within their ambitious treatise, the authors present an historical and evolutionary analysis of current global and individual problems. Put simply, Kramer and Alstad argue that in order to ensure a stable structure, societies impose a moral order that exhorts individuals to renounce selfish desires for the greater good – however that is defined. In order for this renunciation to occur, individuals must be convinced that a higher power, human or otherwise, “knows best.” Control then comes from the dictates of this higher power, bringing hidden authoritarianism to social institutions such as religion, education and morality. This in turn is the foundation of our social and self-control mechanisms. The ultimate effect of such beliefs, which pervade our society, is individuals’ collective lack of confidence in their own power and intelligence, bringing a basic self-mistrust. Creative thinking and acting are curtailed; ironically, such creativity is precisely what is needed to survive in the complex world of accelerated change we now inhabit. Therein lies the real danger of hidden authoritarianism – ultimately it ill-equips us for modern life, thus jeopardizing our future.

Kramer and Alstad argue that societies in fact create conflict within individuals by setting up unattainable ideals which results in a divided (“good’ selfless or “bad’ selfish)

psyche. In order to maintain control and preserve the social order, society seeks to both prevent and resolve conflicts by promulgating ideals of renunciation of self and of one’s own power in favor of a larger entity requiring self-control and self-sacrifice. This is where the potential for substance abuse comes in, and the rationale for the review of *The Guru Papers* in the *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*.

In the second part of their book (which can easily be read independently), Kramer and Alstad address several specific societal/individual problems, including addiction, which they see as self-control gone awry. In the chapter entitled, “Who is in Control? The Authoritarian Roots of Addiction,” the authors present a model that takes into account both the social and psychological context of addiction. They say: “Addiction has been (and still is) considered a moral failing bringing immoral acts. We, too, look at much of addiction as essentially a moral disorder – but one that results from a faulty morality, rather than faulty people. In our view the disorder comes from the person having internalized values that not only cannot be lived up to, but that involve renouncing and suppressing vital parts of what it is to be human. The part of oneself that takes on these values becomes the inner authoritarian that not only attempts to mold one’s behavior to fit the values, but judges any deviance as bad or lacking. The values contain standards for accomplishment and an ideal of what it is to be a good or worthy human being. This aspect of oneself that tries to actualize the values is perceived as the valued, worthwhile, respected – in short, the ‘good’ part. Familial and societal mechanisms of reward and punishment ordinarily support and reinforce this ostensibly good part remaining in control.” (p. 215).

Aware that addiction itself is a controversial concept, they specify that their focus is only on habitual behaviors that involve an inner battle for self control. Their interesting thesis is that in any so-called self-destructive repetitive behavior, one is never truly out of control, but rather divided parts of oneself are fighting for control.

Kramer and Alstad take on the disease model, which they argue views the individual as in the control of a disease and thus “out of control,” defining the addict as “sick” and powerless. They also critique what they call “responsibility models” which try to teach people to take responsibility for (control over) their actions, and likewise views so-called

*This review focuses on the new model of addiction in “Who Is in Control? The Authoritarian Roots of Addiction” (Part 2, Chapter 3).

addicts as “weak.” Kramer and Alstad argue that although both models may have helpful but limited benefits, neither gets at the root of what’s going on. Moreover, although seemingly opposite, they are actually similar, because they both emanate from essentially the same dualistic morality. Thus they each try to bolster, in different ways, authoritarian self-control mechanisms. For instance, 12-Step programs, which are based on the disease model, would have people “regain” control by surrendering to a higher power and to the 12 steps; this allows external controls to bolster the person’s flagging inner authoritarian (the “goodself”) so it can control the side deemed sick that rebels against it (the “badself”). Responsibility models merely take a different route to bolstering the goodself’s control against what is deemed irresponsible (the badself) – namely, through either instilling or shoring up the goodself’s ideals. In both, individuals are forced to divide themselves into an either/or, good/bad person, constantly struggling to ensure order by diligently putting the selfless, abstinent, moderate “goodself in control and suppressing that deficient “badself” which surrenders to our pleasure impulses.

Addiction is not about alcohol or other drugs, argue Kramer and Alstad. Rather it occurs when individuals experiencing internal conflict use substances to trigger the badself and shift control to it, which is experienced as relief. The goodself regains power through guilt and condemnation. This struggle, the authors argue, is in vain and self-perpetuating, for control and surrender are in fact a dialectic. A healthy individual, they say, does both.

As a long time researcher and student of addiction, I found *The Guru Papers* a refreshing analysis of predominant theories of substance abuse. Kramer and Alstad’s own model of the divided psyche, and “why it feels good to be bad” (p.185) was not only original but resonant. As an activist and advocate of drug policy reform, I consider the chapter on addiction particularly useful regarding the futility of the drug war/punitive approach to solving substance abuse problems: “Substance abuse is also an area where the problems lie not in substances, but in having people who are not whole. Now and throughout history, people have been using substances to alter consciousness in just about every known culture. There are scientists who maintain that not only do humans have a drive to alter consciousness, but so do many other animals as well. This is backed by both ethological and laboratory studies. Whether this is true or not, the idea that ideology and repression will stop most people from using or abusing substances is whistling in the wind” (p. 254). ■

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heroin addiction, methadone maintenance treatment, MDMA (Ecstasy), cocaine, and drug use during pregnancy. She is the author of *Women on Heroin, Pursuit of Ecstasy: The MDMA Experience* (with Jerome E. Beck), and *Pregnant Women on Drugs: Combating Stereotypes and Stigma* (with Sheigla Murphy); *Just Say What?: An Alternative View on Solving America’s Drug Problem*; *Kids, Drugs, and Drug Education: A Harm Reduction Approach*; *Safety First: A Reality-Based Approach to Teens, Drugs, and Drug Education*, as well as numerous scholarly articles and opinion pieces about drug use, addiction, women, treatment, drug policy, adolescent drug use and harm reduction.) She was the West coast director of The Lindsmith Center for drug policy reform (1996-2000), a branch of George Soros’ Open Society Institute.

The Drug Policy Alliance is the nation’s leading organization working to end the war on drugs and promote a harm reduction approach instead. It envisions new drug policies based on science, compassion, health and human rights and a just society in which the fears, prejudices and punitive prohibitions of today are no more. www.drugpolicy.org

On the New Model of Addiction in *The Guru Papers*

Comments by Dr. Jeffrey Rubin

Yoga means yoking or union. In “**Who is in Control? The Authoritarian Roots of Addiction**,” a chapter in *The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power*, Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad provide a profound and compelling account of the way that most of us are divided against ourselves; locked in an endless battle between warring aspects of our being. Their lucid account of why the vast majority of us are split into two – and how we might become whole – is a fascinating model of the psychology of addictive behavior. It is a *tour-de-force* that shines a powerful light on a wide range of difficulties in living, from eating disorders to substance abuse, to the self-mistrust engendered by attempts to live up to cherished and unrealistic spiritual ideals of complete awareness, total selflessness and unconditional love. The writings of Kramer and Alstad have been an indispensable resource in my clinical work with troubled souls, helping me liberate people from the self-imposed shackles of imprisoning ideals and behavior; and fostering a life of greater freedom, authenticity and passion.

Dr. Jeffrey B. Rubin is a highly respected and innovative psychoanalyst and workshop leader in New York, and one of the foremost integrators of the Western psychotherapeutic and Eastern meditative traditions. Some of his books: *Psychotherapy and Buddhism: Toward an Integration*; *The Good Life: Psychoanalytic Reflections on Love, Ethics, Creativity and Spirituality*; and the forthcoming *The Art of Living: How to Make Your Life a Masterpiece*. www.drjeffreyrubin.com