

Greed: Crises, Causes, and Solutions

Dr. Jeevan D'Souza

DeVry College of New York
180 Madison Avenue, Suite 900
New York, NY 10016

Abstract

Community and global humanitarian organizations work tirelessly to assuage the deleterious effects of human suffering and global crises. However, little is done to understand and combat the underlying, inherent root causes of human suffering. This article argues the elemental genesis of worldwide suffering is the exercise of human greed, acquisitiveness, and self-indulgence under current social conditions. This article attempts to shift the focus of community and international problem-solvers from simply alleviating the effects of human greed to combating the catastrophic worldwide epidemic of greed. It is argued that greed is an existential human problem which can be scientifically understood and mitigated through evidence-based, biological, psychological and sociological interventions.

Keywords: Greed, addiction, narcissism, acquisitiveness, self-indulgence, capitalism

Human suffering has been a perennial element throughout recorded human history. Some causes of human suffering have been due to natural disasters and unexpected circumstances. However, the lion's share of suffering has a sociological basis (North, Wallis & Weingast, 2009). While many community and international organizations are dedicated to alleviating human problems and suffering, little is done to understand and combat the root cause of suffering, arguably human greed and self-interest. This article aims to shift the attention of these problem-solving organizations to the catastrophic epidemic of greed which can be understood and attacked scientifically. Greed can be defined as the selfish desire to possess wealth, substances, objects, people, power, status, appreciation or attention far beyond what is required for basic human comfort (Robertson, 2013). This article argues that greed is the direct outcome of dissatisfaction, emptiness, and discontentment. To fill this emptiness and discontentment, the greedy individual then acts in ways to acquire more resources, admiration and power, often at the cost of the happiness of other individuals. Greed therefore has the ability to cause profound human suffering. (Fromm, 1939) famously stated 'Greed is a bottomless pit which exhausts the person in an endless effort to satisfy the need without ever reaching satisfaction'.

Human greed has been a topic of debate and concern in society ever since the start of human civilization (Nikelly, 2006). Human greed has been responsible for much of human suffering at both the community and global level. At the community level, this article argues some possible outcomes of greed and self-indulgence can include obesity, hoarding, substance abuse, failed relationships, domestic violence, theft, murder, incest, rape, and other crimes. At the global level, this article argues some possible outcomes of greed and self-indulgence can include wars, invasions, massacres, extreme poverty, social instability, over-population, climate change and economic crises. This article analyzes the top global crises facing the world today and demonstrates how they are the direct or indirect outcome of human greed, narcissism and self-indulgence. The analysis of the top global crises reveals that human greed and acquisitiveness in our highly populated and technologically advanced world is a very serious problem. This article aims to investigate the reasons for human greed at the biological, psychological and sociological level and proposes solutions to effectively combat it to enable a flourishing world.

Crises

The World Economic Forum (WEF) has been attracting political, academic, business and economic elite to discuss global issues at their annual meetings in Davos, Switzerland for over three decades to discuss global issues (Graz, 2003). In 2004, the WEF established the Risk Response Network (RRN) to develop a list of the top global risks based on the opinions of recognized experts. Since 2004, the RRN has published an annual report called the Global Risks Report (GRR) which identifies top global risks.

The ninth annual GRR, published in 2014, lists 31 global risks in five areas - economics, geopolitics, environment, society, and technology. The GRR results were compiled based on the Global Risks Perception Survey (GRPS) conducted in November 2013 (Schwab, 2014). Over a 1000 experts appointed by the WEF took the GRPS to evaluate 31 global risks from the five areas (economics, geopolitics, environment, society, and technology). From the 31 risks, the GRR lists the top ten risks based on impact, likelihood of occurrence and interconnectedness to other risks. The top ten global risks from the 2014 report are listed in Table 1. Each global risk is briefly analyzed below and this article demonstrates how these risks are directly or indirectly correlated to human greed and self-indulgence.

Table 1: Top 10 Global Risks of 2014

Rank	Category	Risk
1	Economic	Fiscal crises in key economies
2	Economic	Structurally high unemployment/underemployment
3	Environmental	Water crises
4	Societal	Severe income disparity
5	Environmental	Failure of climate change mitigation and adaptation
6	Environmental	Extreme weather events
7	Geopolitical	Global governance failure
8	Societal	Food crises
9	Economic	Failure of major financial institutions
10	Societal	Profound political and social instability

The global financial crisis of 2008 is a classic example of human greed, self-indulgence and selfishness. The crisis was entirely avoidable and was caused mainly due to the failure of financial regulators, undisclosed conflicts of interest, risky investments, excessive lending and borrowing, failure of the credit rating agencies and poor corporate governance (Levin & Coburn, 2011; Angelides & Thomas, 2011). Some of the terrible effects of the crisis were widespread evictions, foreclosures, prolonged unemployment, global stock market collapses, failure of key businesses, economic activity downturn, global recession and European sovereign debt crises (Baily & Elliott, 2009). High unemployment and underemployment are a direct consequence of an economic recession (Katz, 2010). The global financial crisis of 2008 was largely responsible for widespread unemployment and underemployment of skilled and unskilled workers around the world (Baily & Elliott, 2009). It is estimated by many leading economists that if the financial regulatory systems are not tightened, global recessions can be expected periodically, leading to widespread unemployment (Bernard & Gerlach, 1998). Bank failures occur when a bank is unable to meet its responsibilities towards creditors or investors. Since the global financial crises of 2007-08, several banks have failed (DeYoung & Toma, 2013). Banking failures have a huge impact on the global economy since most businesses are directly financially dependent on the banking sector.

Economic inequality is largely a product of labor market outcomes, globalization, technological changes, policy reforms, more regressive taxation, plutocracy, nepotism and neoliberalism which are directly or indirectly linked to free market capitalism (Piketty & Saez, 2003). Unregulated capitalism leads to the Matthew effect due to the ability of the wealthy and powerful to exploit the rest of the population. Since the early 1980s income inequality in the US has been on the rise primarily due to the advent of free market capitalism perpetuated by a few elite financial institutions and political bureaucracy. Similar increases in income inequality have been visible in other countries that have adopted similar neoliberal economic policies (Alderson & Nielsen, 2002). Increasing economic inequality, severe unemployment, the financial crises of 2007-08 and the global economic dominance of large corporations has led to profound political and social instability, eventually leading to large scale protests and uprisings like the Occupy movement (Gitlin, 2012). Several other international protests like the Arab Spring movement and the Spanish indignant movement have sprung up in part due to political corruption and poor governance (Anderson, 2011). There is overwhelming scientific evidence suggesting that climate change occurs primarily due to increase in greenhouse gases caused by human activity (Change, 1996). Most greenhouse gases are emitted due to industrial activity. However efforts to mitigate climate change have proven to be very limited (Olivier, Peters & Janssens-Maenhout, 2012). Much of this mitigation failure has been attributed to free market capitalism driven by excessive consumerism and corporate profits (Klein, 2011; Newell & Paterson, 2010).

Extreme weather events include heat waves, cold waves, and significant unseasonal and unusual tropical cyclones. Effects of extreme weather can include famines, landslides, floods, draughts, and large scale destruction of property and the ecosystem. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the economic cost of extreme weather events has been on the rise since 1980 (Meehl, Zwiers, Evans, Knutson, Mearns & Whetton, 2000). Many reputable scientists attribute extreme weather to human induced global warming (Hansen, Sato, Ruedy, Lacis & Oinas, 2000). Water scarcity is primarily caused by climate change, increased pollution and human overuse of water (Postel, 1997). Water scarcity can be caused either due to physical water scarcity or economic water scarcity. Economic water scarcity is triggered due to lack of property rights, overconsumption, poor water management, corrupt governments, bureaucratic inertia and shortage of infrastructure investment (United Nations, 2006; Zetland, 2011). Food insecurity is a product of the global water crises, land degradation, land grabbing, climate change, political corruption, agricultural diseases and food sovereignty. Some of these causes can be directly attributed to corporate and political powers that acquire and misuse arable land for the sake of profits. The water crisis is primarily a product of climate change, water overuse, and increased pollution produced due to industrialization in the first-world (Postel, 1997). Land grabbing involves wealthy countries and powers acquiring land in poorer countries for the sake of corporate agriculture or industrialization. Recently several middle-eastern and western powers have been involved in grabbing land in poorer African countries (Blas & England, 2008). Political corruption in Sub-Saharan Africa is partially responsible for the cause of famines (Cunney & Hill, 1999).

Effective global governance involves developing an international body that would address global problems and risks related to the environment, the global economy, geopolitics, national conflicts, and other social and political issues. Though organizations like the World Bank, United Nations, International Monetary Fund, International Criminal Court, World Wildlife Fund, World Trade Organization, Group of 8, and North Atlantic Treaty Organization exist, the role of greed in global problems and risks is not addressed adequately. The main reason for global governance failure has been attributed to power struggles between the most developed countries which are largely controlled by the financial sector of the global economy (Barnett & Duvall, 2005). From the above discussion it is evident that the top global risks we face today can be directly or indirectly attributed to unhindered chronic human greed and self-indulgence. Unencumbered chronic greed of a few elite institutions has caused havoc and widespread suffering at the global level. Though greed is not analyzed at the community level, it is rational to infer that greed can cause negative outcomes at the community level too.

Causes

In order to propose solutions to the dangerous epidemic of unfettered greed, it is important to first understand what causes human greed. It is argued that greed and acquisitiveness have biological, psychological and sociological drives. Characteristics of greed are closely associated with biological and psychological disorders such as substance addiction, behavioral addiction, Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD), Anti-Social Personality Disorder (ASPD) and Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder (OCPD) (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Angres & Bettinardi-Angres, 2008).

Addiction research suggests that improper amounts of neurotransmitters and hormones like dopamine could be closely associated with substance addictions (Crews, Zou & Qin, 2011; Salamone, 1992; Kauer, & Malenka, 2007). Behavioral or soft addictions also have neurobiological correlations to dopamine (Brewer, & Potenza, 2008; Girault & Greengard, 2004; Di Chiara & Bassareo, 2007). There is evidence that a link exists between OCPD, dopamine and serotonin hormonal regulation (Denys, Zohar & Westenberg, 2003; Camarena, Rinetti, Cruz, Hernández, de la Fuente & Nicolini, 2001). ASPD has found to be associated with high testosterone and low serotonin levels (Sjöberg, Ducci, Barr, Newman, Dell'Osso, Virkkunen, & Goldman, 2007; Black, 2007).

Prominent psychologists such as Freud and Maslow identified greed as a mental disorder and strongly correlated greed with narcissism and meta-pathology (Freud, 1914; Schultz & Schultz, 2004). (Nikelly, 2006) uses psychoanalyses to understand the concept of greed and acquisitive behavior and infers that there are strong correlations between early negative attachment styles and acquisitive behavior. NPD is primarily a psychological problem instilled in individuals largely through negative childhood attachment styles (Groopman & Cooper, 1995), but genetic and sociological factors also aid in its development (Schulze, Dziobek, Vater, Heekeren, Bajbouj, Renneberg, Heuser & Roepke, 2013). OCPD can also originate from fears and phobias induced through childhood

experiences and sociological stimuli (Marks, 1987). Socio-cultural implications and abusive home environments could have a strong correlation with the development of ASPD (Sutker & King, 1985).

At the sociological level, authoritarian policies and exposure to constant visual and aural propaganda and advertising could reinforce existing psychological fears and fixations, making it harder for individuals to be cured from disorders associated with greed (Nikelly, 2006). Capitalism, which is driven by self-interest and the quest for profits, favors the use of a barrage of advertising for goods and services that could lead to high competition, envy and acquisitiveness (Holbrook, 1987; Lasch, 1991). Most individuals suffering from NPD do not seek mitigation since they do not consider it a problem in the first place (Golomb, 1995). In a capitalistic society, narcissism and self-interest are admired rather than shunned. High economic and social inequalities in society can have severe consequences on mental and physical health leading people to develop mental disorders and addictions (Nikelly, 2006).

Solutions

The past decade has delineated significant research linking neurotransmitters, hormones and brain activity to greed-based behaviors and pathologies. Advances in fields such as neuroscience, psychiatric neuroscience, biological psychiatry, and SPECT tomography analysis, has started to give scientists evidence-based outlines of the physiology and biological basis of emotion and behavior (Amen, 2008). Research into the physiology of emotion and behavior has used modern brain imaging technology and neuroscience to associate regions of the brain with specific behaviors. Daniel Amen, the neuroscientist and psychiatrist that popularized his version of brain mapping, cautions that the brain SPECT images are only a part of the picture. In client analysis, the 'Amen Method', also evaluates a patient's biology, psychology, social and spiritual influences (Amen, 2008). David Pearce argues in his treatise 'The Hedonistic Imperative', that humans might be able to use genetic engineering, nanotechnology, and neuroscience to eliminate suffering and combat greed in all sentient life (Pearce, 2004). Increasing funding to research in these areas and adopting programs to treat individuals who are biologically predisposed to acquisitive behaviors could have a positive impact in combatting human greed.

There is overwhelming evidence linking the relationship between abusive childhood and greed-based pathologies. Measures can be taken to ensure healthy development of children at home and in school. Expansion of family planning, incest prevention, and domestic abuse prevention programs could significantly reduce the prevalence of greed-based pathologies. The main treatment suggested for NPD, OCPD and ASPD is psychotherapy (Kohut, 2013; March & Mullen, 1998; Henggeler, Schoenwald, Borduin, Rowland & Cunningham, 1998). Free and easily available counseling and therapeutic programs partnered with biological interventions could significantly attack greed-based disorders. It would also help to suggest or mandate psychotherapy, SPECT imaging, and brain mapping to all youth who exhibit greed-based pathologies in school.

Greed has a strong correlation with fear, guilt and pain caused by psychological imbalances during childhood development (Nikelly, 2006). These fears are further exacerbated by social inequalities that directly affect self-esteem (Crocker & Blanton, 1999). Increasing economic and social equality in society by introducing social-democratic and comprehensive welfare models will reduce greed-based pathologies through collectivist socialization. Some characteristics of such a model would include free education and free universal healthcare, a large unionized workforce, progressive taxation and high public spending on social programs like social security and unemployment benefits, high financial market regulation, low corruption, and a high number of government employees (Andersen, Holmström, Honkapohja, Korkman, Tson & Vartiainen, 2007). Measures can also be taken to move economic activity from short-term materialistic products and services towards long-term moral, spiritual and human-centered services that would increase equality, empathy, solidarity, and community.

Conclusion

The combination of human greed, increasing global population, and advancing technology posits a huge impediment to a flourishing planet. While many policy makers and organizations work hard to bring about sociological and political change to alleviate suffering caused by the effects of greed, this article attempts to shift the focus to the root causes of greed. While sociological intervention seemed most plausible in the twentieth century, biological and psychological interventions should be put on the map in the twenty first century.

Scientific understanding of the human condition has increased to a great extent with the latest research in the areas of neuroscience, positive psychology, and sociology. It is argued that mankind must take advantage of these modern scientific advances in order to build a society of eudemonia and flourishing.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Dr. Michael Gurinand C. Kelly Adams for their enlightening comments and suggestions.

References

- Alderson, A. S., & Nielsen, F. (2002). Globalization and the Great U-Turn: Income Inequality trends in 16 OECD Countries. *American Journal of Sociology*, 107(5), 1244-1299.
- Amen, D. G. (2008). *Change your brain, change your life: The breakthrough program for conquering anxiety, depression, obsessiveness, anger, and impulsiveness*. Harmony.
- American Psychiatric Association (Ed.). (2000). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: DSM-IV-TR*. American Psychiatric Pub.
- Anderson, L. (2011). Demystifying the Arab Spring: parsing the differences between Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. *Foreign Aff.*, 90, 2.
- Andersen, T. M., Holmström, B., Honkapohja, S., Korkman, S., Tson, S. H., & Vartiainen, J. (2007). *The Nordic Model. Embracing globalization and sharing risks*. ETLA B.
- Angelides, P., & Thomas, B. (2011). *The Financial Crisis Inquiry Report: Final Report of the National Commission on the Causes of the Financial and Economic Crisis in the United States (Revised Corrected Copy)*. Government Printing Office.
- Angres, D. H., & Bettinardi-Angres, K. (2008). The disease of addiction: Origins, treatment, and recovery. *Disease-a-Month*, 54(10), 696-721.
- Baily, M. N., & Elliott, D. J. (2009). *The US financial and economic crisis: Where does it stand and where do we go from here*. Brookings Institution, Jun.
- Barnett, M. N., & Duvall, R. (Eds.). (2005). *Power in global governance (Vol. 98)*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bernard, H., & Gerlach, S. (1998). *Does the Term Structure Predict Recessions?: the International Evidence (No. 1892)*. Centre for Economic Policy Research.
- Black, D. W. (2007). *Antisocial Personality Disorder*. Corsini Encyclopedia of Psychology.
- Blas, J., & England, A. (2008). Arable land, the new gold rush, African and poor countries cautioned. *Financial Times*, 20.
- Brewer, J. A., & Potenza, M. N. (2008). The neurobiology and genetics of impulse control disorders: relationships to drug addictions. *Biochemical pharmacology*, 75(1), 63-75.
- Camarena, B., Rinetti, G., Cruz, C., Hernández, S., de la Fuente, J. R., & Nicolini, H. (2001). Association study of the serotonin transporter gene polymorphism in obsessive-compulsive disorder. *The International Journal of Neuropsychopharmacology*, 4(03), 269-272.
- Change, I. C. (1996). *The science of climate change. Second Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Crews, F. T., Zou, J., & Qin, L. (2011). Induction of innate immune genes in brain create the neurobiology of addiction. *Brain, behavior, and immunity*, 25, S4-S12.
- Crocker, J., & Blanton, H. (1999). Social inequality and self-esteem: The moderating effects of social comparison, legitimacy, and contingencies of self-esteem. *The Psychology of the Social Self*, Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ, 171-191.
- Cunney, F. C., & Hill, R. B. (1999). *Famine, Conflict, and Response: A Basic Guide (pp. 117-126)*. West Hartford: Kumarian Press.
- Denys, D., Zohar, J., & Westenberg, H. G. (2003). The role of dopamine in obsessive compulsive disorder: preclinical and clinical evidence. *The Journal of clinical psychiatry*, 65, 11-17.
- DeYoung, R., & Torna, G. (2013). Nontraditional banking activities and bank failures during the financial crisis. *Journal of Financial Intermediation*, 22(3), 397-421.
- Di Chiara, G., & Bassareo, V. (2007). Reward system and addiction: what dopamine does and doesn't do. *Current opinion in pharmacology*, 7(1), 69-76.
- Freud, S. (1914). On narcissism: An introduction. *Standard edition*, 14(67), 102.
- Fromm, E. (1939). Selfishness and self-love. *Psychiatry*, 2(4), 507-523.
- Girault, J. A., & Greengard, P. (2004). The neurobiology of dopamine signaling. *Archives of Neurology*, 61(5), 641-644.
- Gitlin, T. (2012). *Occupy nation: The roots, the spirit, and the promise of occupy Wall Street*. HarperCollins.

- Golomb, E. (1995). *Trapped in The Mirror*. HarperCollins.
- Graz, J. C. (2003). How powerful are transnational elite clubs? The social myth of the World Economic Forum. *New Political Economy*, 8(3), 321-340.
- Groopman, L. C., & Cooper, A. M. (1995). *Narcissistic personality disorder*. Gabbard GO. Washington, DC, American Psychiatric Press, Inc., 2327-2343.
- Hansen, J., Sato, M., Ruedy, R., Lacis, A., & Oinas, V. (2000). Global warming in the twenty first century: An alternative scenario. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 97(18), 9875-9880.
- Henggeler, S. W., Schoenwald, S. K., Borduin, C. M., Rowland, M. D., & Cunningham, P. B. (1998). *Multisystemic treatment of antisocial behavior in children and adolescents*. Guilford Press.
- Holbrook, M. B. (1987). Mirror, mirror, on the wall, what's unfair in the reflections on advertising? *Journal of Marketing*, 51(3).
- Katz, L. (2010). Long-term unemployment in the Great Recession. In *Testimony for the Joint Economic Committee, US Congress, April (Vol. 29)*.
- Kauer, J. A., & Malenka, R. C. (2007). Synaptic plasticity and addiction. *Nature reviews neuroscience*, 8(11), 844-858.
- Klein, N. (2011). Capitalism vs. the Climate. *The Nation*, 28, 11-21.
- Kohut, H. (2013). *The analysis of the self: A systematic approach to the psychoanalytic treatment of narcissistic personality disorders*. University of Chicago Press.
- Lasch, C. (1991). *The culture of narcissism: American life in an age of diminishing expectations*. WW Norton & Company.
- Levin, C., & Coburn, T. A. (2011). *Wall Street and the financial crisis: anatomy of a financial collapse*. Cosimo Reports.
- March, J. S., & Mulle, K. (1998). *OCD in children and adolescents: A cognitive-behavioral treatment manual*. Guilford Press.
- Marks, I. M. (1987). *Fears, phobias, and rituals: Panic, anxiety, and their disorders*. Oxford University Press.
- Meehl, G. A., Zwiens, F., Evans, J., Knutson, T., Mearns, L., & Whetton, P. (2000). Trends in extreme weather and climate events: Issues related to modeling extremes in projections of future climate change. *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society*, 81(3), 427-436.
- Newell, P., & Paterson, M. (2010). *Climate capitalism: global warming and the transformation of the global economy*. Cambridge University Press.
- Nikelly, A. (2006). The pathogenesis of greed: Causes and consequences. *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies*, 3(1), 65-78.
- North, D. C., Wallis, J. J., & Weingast, B. R. (2009). *Violence and social orders: a conceptual framework for interpreting recorded human history*. Cambridge University Press.
- Olivier, J. G., Peters, J. A., & Janssens-Maenhout, G. (2012). *Trends in global CO2 emissions 2012 report*. PBL Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency.
- Pearce, D. (2004). *Hedonistic Imperative*. David Pearce.
- Piketty, T., & Saez, E. (2003). Income inequality in the United States, 1913–1998. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 118(1), 1-41.
- Postel, S. (1997). *Last oasis: facing water scarcity*. WW Norton & Company.
- Robertson, A. F. (2013). *Greed: Gut feelings, growth, and history*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Salamone, J. D. (1992). Complex motor and sensorimotor functions of striatal and accumbens dopamine: involvement in instrumental behavior processes. *Psychopharmacology*, 107(2-3), 160-174.
- Schultz, D., & Schultz, S. (2004). *Theories of personality*. Cengage Learning.
- Schulze, L., Dziobek, I., Vater, A., Heekeren, H. R., Bajbouj, M., Renneberg, B., Heuser, I., & Roepke, S. (2013). Gray matter abnormalities in patients with narcissistic personality disorder. *Journal of psychiatric research*, 47(10), 1363-1369.
- Schwab, K. (2014). *Global risks 2014*. World Economic Forum.
- Sutker, P. B., & King, A. R. (1985). *Antisocial personality disorder*. In *Behavioral case formulation (pp. 115-153)*. Springer US.
- Sjöberg, R. L., Ducci, F., Barr, C. S., Newman, T. K., Dell'Osso, L., Virkkunen, M., & Goldman, D. (2007). A non-additive interaction of a functional MAO-A VNTR and testosterone predicts antisocial behavior. *Neuropsychopharmacology*, 33(2), 425-430.
- United Nations. (2006). *Water: a shared responsibility (Vol. 2)*. UN-HABITAT.
- Zetland, D. (2011). *The end of abundance: economic solutions to water scarcity*. Aguanomics Press.