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Alcohol Problems in Native America: Changing Paradigms and Clinical Practices

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Abstract

Views about the sources and solutions to alcohol problems among Native Americans have undergone dramatic changes over the past quarter century. This brief article summarizes the nature of these changes, with particular emphasis on emerging principles and practices that underlie the resolution of alcohol problems among Native peoples.

Key words: Native American, cultural revitalization movements, “firewater” myths, culturally-informed treatment

Alcoholism and alcohol-related problems have long constituted a serious problem in Native American communities (Lender and Martin, 1982), but recent decades have witnessed substantial advances in understanding the sources and solutions of these problems. These advances include: 1) new evidence of the historical roots of alcohol problems among Native tribes, 2) scientific challenges to the “firewater myths” that have permeated conceptions of the etiology of Native alcohol problems, 3) the beginning recognition of the role Native leaders played in organizing America’s first sobriety-based, mutual aid societies, 4) Native adaptations of Alcoholics Anonymous, 5) a revival of Native cultural revitalization and therapeutic movements, and 6) the development of culturally meaningful alcoholism treatment philosophies and techniques.

The Rise of Native Alcohol Problems

MacAndrew and Edgerton’s (1969) landmark study, *Drunken Comportment*, and the historical investigations that followed (Mancall, 1995; Unrau, 1996), collectively challenge the long-held view that initial Native American contact with alcohol was one of instant personal and cultural devastation. Three conclusions stand out in this new historical research.

First, Native tribes had a commanding knowledge of botanical pharmacology, and many tribes had long ritualized the use of psychoactive drugs, including potent forms of tobacco, datura, and peyote, in ways that minimized their harmful effects and maximized their benefit to the individual and the tribe. Contrary to popular perception, there were also tribes such as the

Pima, Papago, Apache, Coahuiltec, Yuma, and Pueblo that had ritualized the use of fermented alcohol long before their first contacts with Europeans. While most Native tribes in what is today the United States and Canada were not exposed to alcohol prior to European contact, some tribes had culturally managed such use for centuries before the first Europeans arrived in the Americas (Westermeyer, 1996).

Second, the initial response of Native peoples to alcohol following European contact was not one of widespread alcoholism. Rather than infatuation, most Native peoples initially responded to alcohol with distaste and suspicion. They considered drunkenness “degrading to free men” and questioned the motives of those who would offer a substance that was so offensive to the senses and that made men foolish (Andersen, 1988). Most Native people who did drink alcohol were reported to show “remarkable restraint while in their cups.” Most drank alcohol only during social or trading contact with Whites. As a result, early Native drinking, in its moderation and excess, tended to mirror the consumption patterns promoted by the English, Spanish, French, Dutch, Spanish and Russians and from whom they learned the practice. Drinking and intoxication did not reflect their normal daily life and habits, but became increasingly disruptive as it was modeled on the “frontier drinking” patterns of soldiers, trappers, and traders (MacAndrew and Edgerton, 1969; Winkler, 1968).

Third, native alcohol problems and alcoholism emerged as Native tribes came under physical and cultural assault, and as alcohol shifted from a benign token of social contact between Euro-Americans and Indians to a tool of economic, political and sexual exploitation. The new historical studies confirm an almost linear relationship between the rise of Native alcohol problems and the disruption or disintegration of tribal cultures.

“Firewater Myths”

From their beginning, Native drinking behavior and alcohol problems were framed by Euro-Americans in ways that provided ideological support for the vision of “Manifest Destiny.” White drunkenness was interpreted as the misbehavior of an individual; Native drunkenness was interpreted in terms of the inferiority of a race (Mosher, 1975). What emerged was a set of beliefs, known as “firewater myths,” that misrepresented the history, nature, sources and potential solutions to Native alcohol problems. These myths proclaimed that Indian people: 1) had an insatiable appetite for alcohol, 2) were hypersensitive to alcohol (couldn't “hold their liquor”), 3) were dangerously violent when intoxicated, 4) were inordinately vulnerable to addiction to alcohol, and 5) could not resolve such problems on their own (Westermeyer, 1974; Leland, 1976).

The scientific literature of recent decades has challenged these myths by documenting the wide variability of alcohol problems across and within Native tribes, and by refuting claims of genetic or other biological anomalies that render Native peoples particularly vulnerable to alcoholism. Also criticized have been scientific and popular reports that, by framing all Native alcohol problems as “alcoholism” and by inflating and over-dramatizing such problems, have stigmatized whole tribes (and a whole people) (Westermeyer and Baker, 1986; May, 1994; Mancall, 1995; Westermeyer, 1996). After reviewing the historical and scientific evidence, Dwight Heath (1983) concluded that the “stereotype of ‘the drunken Indian’ is not generally accurate today, and appears never to have been.”

The “drunken Indian” stereotype, and the “firewater myths” that undergird it, have long served to sustain “systems of subordination and domination” (Morgan, 1983). Such perceptions

and beliefs, by defining Indian peoples as biologically and culturally inferior, provided part of the conscience-salving justification for the decimation of Native tribes over the extended period of Indian-European contact and conflict. Several observers (see Mosher, 1975 and Holmes and Antell, 2001) have suggested that modern discussions of alcohol and Indians continue to reflect notions of inferiority and superiority, and may serve similar functions in maintaining relationships of unequal power and status. As these “firewater myths” and their political and economic functions have been exposed and challenged in recent decades, ethno-historical theories emphasizing social learning, cultural trauma and continued patterns of subjugation and domination are replacing biological theories on the root causes of Native alcohol problems. These emerging theories tend to shift the locus of intervention into alcohol problems from the individual alone to the community and the larger historical, political, economic and cultural contexts in which alcohol problems arise and are sustained.

Native Resistance and Recovery

The story of the rise of alcohol problems among Native tribes is not one of passive destruction, but of active resistance and recovery. Native leaders actively resisted the infusion of alcohol into tribal life by castigating alcohol as “fool’s water,” “the Devil’s spittle,” or “white man’s poison” and calling attention to its destructive effects on Native peoples. They advocated the legal banishment of the exploitive whiskey trade—a practice in which traders would arrive in Native villages with 30 or 40 kegs of whiskey and, once the Natives were intoxicated, take a season’s worth of skins in return for watered-down booze spiked with strychnine, red peppers, gunpowder and opium (Anderson, 1988; Kennedy, 1997).

Native leaders also birthed abstinence-based cultural revitalization and therapeutic movements that constitute the earliest organized frameworks for alcoholism recovery in America. It is only recently that the contributions of these movements to the history of alcoholism recovery in America have begun to be recognized (White, 2000, 2001). The beginning of alcoholic mutual aid societies is usually attributed to the Washingtonian revival of the 1840s, but abstinence-based support structures have much earlier and more enduring roots within Native America cultures.

Early Native recovery support structures included the Delaware prophet movements (Wyoming Woman, Papounhan, Wangomend, Neolin, and Scatttameck), the Christian Indian revivalists (William Apess and Samson Occom), the Handsome Lake movement--also know as the Longhouse Religion, the Shawnee Prophet (Tenskwatawa) and Kickapoo Prophet (Kennekuk) movements, the Indian temperance societies, the Indian Shaker Church and the Native American Church. These movements offered a culturally viable rationale for the rejection of alcohol, purification and healing rituals, a new code of living (the “Peyote Way,” the “Red Road”), a new personal identity, sober role models, a means of repairing family and social relationships, and an esteem-affirming re-connection with ancestral and contemporary Native cultures. The rich and continuing history of these movements confirms that alcoholism recovery is a living reality in Native communities and has been for more than 250 years (White, 2001).

The “Indianization of AA”

Suggestions that Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) is not appropriate for Native Americans have been countered in recent decades by A.A. Literature for Native Americans (*A.A. for the*

Native North American, 1989), Native adaptations of A.A.'s Twelve Steps, Native refinement of A.A. meeting rituals, the growth of A.A. meetings conducted in Native languages, and an annual National/International Native American Indian AA (NAIAA) convention (Jilek-Aall, 1981; Coyhis, 1990, 2000). So-called "Indian A.A." meetings often start late and end late, provide long breaks for socializing, include family members and children, impose no time limits for speakers, integrate A.A. and Native cultural ideas and slogans, replace references to the Christian "God" with "the Creator" or "Great Spirit," and replace the affirmation of "powerlessness" with a focus on the acquisition of power over personal and tribal life (Jilek-Aall, 1981; Womak, 1996; Simonelli, 1993). A significant milestone in this "Indianization" of A.A. is the imminent release of a Native adaptation of the basic text of Alcoholics Anonymous by White Bison, Inc. that includes Native frameworks and stories of alcoholism recovery. The publication of this book culminates a trend of Indian people claiming and sharing their own stories of addiction and recovery (Manacle, 1993; Red Road).

Cultural Revitalization and Healing Movements

Many of the earlier noted abstinence-based, religious and cultural revitalization movements such as the Native American Church and the Indian Shaker Church continue to flourish today in Native communities. What is equally noteworthy is the revival of earlier cultural practices such as the sweat lodge, the Gourd Dance, the Sun Dance and the Guardian Spirit Ceremony that some Native people are using therapeutically to initiate or anchor their recovery from alcoholism (Jilek, 1978; Jilek, 1994). New movements that are expanding cultural pathways to recovery include the Red Road approach to sobriety--created by Gene Thin Elk (Lakota-South Dakota), People in Prison Entering Sobriety (PIPES), and an emerging Wellbriety Movement that places sobriety within a larger framework of physical, emotional, spiritual and relational health. The Wellbriety Movement is serving as a focal point for organizing recovery support structures in Indian Country and incorporating culturally-based recovery tools into alcoholism treatment programs (Coyhis, 1999). The birth of organizations like White Bison, Inc. signals the involvement and leadership of Indian communities in a new grassroots recovery advocacy movement in the United States (www.whitebison.org; www.recoveryadvocacy.org).

Culturally-informed Treatment

Native alcoholism treatment programs have evolved administratively through the Office of Economic Opportunity in the 1960s, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism in the early 1970s, the Indian Health Service's Office of Alcoholism Programs (beginning in 1976), and, recently, a trend toward tribal sponsorship. Through these transitions, treatment programs that serve Native populations have begun to incorporate more culturally-informed philosophies and techniques. These programs are linking treatment to Native communities via tribal sponsorship, involving tribal elders as advisors and teachers, integrating Native healers into the treatment team, recruiting and training Native addiction counselors, and using history and culture as tools of liberation. They are also incorporating culturally-grounded ideas such as medicine wheel teachings; traditional ceremonies like the Sacred Pipe and spirit dances; purification and healing rituals such as the sweat lodge and the peyote ritual; and engaging kinship and community networks for long-term support for recovery (Anderson, 1992; Abbott, 1998; McCormick, 2000). Culturally-informed treatment of Native alcohol problems is

grounded in tribal values and folkways. Compared to traditional treatment, it utilizes less confrontation and questioning, is quieter (less pressure for self-disclosure and more respectful of silence), and places greater emphasis on spirituality (French, 2000).

Culturally-informed treatment seeks to understand the wounded individual in the context of the historical and continued wounding of the Native tribal culture of which he or she is a part. It recognizes that, as *The Red Road to Wellbriety* teaches, “healthy seeds cannot grow in diseased soil.” It seeks not just the healing of the individual, but the healing of the community within which that individual is nested. As such, the goal of culture-congenial alcoholism treatment is viewed as a restoration of harmony between the individual, the family, the tribe, and the world. In contrast to interventions grounded in Western medicine, it is more holistic—more focused on creating a better person in the context of family and clan than on symptom suppression. Ernie Benedict, a Mohawk elder, explains:

The difference that exists is that the White doctor’s medicines tend to be very mechanical. The person is repaired but he is not better than he was before. It is possible in the Indian way to be a better person after going through a sickness followed by the proper medicine (Quoted in Jilek, 1978).

Recovery and Community

No recent tribal response to alcoholism has galvanized more public and professional notice than that of the community of Alkali Lake, British Columbia. The Shuswap tribal community in Alkali Lake was so plagued with alcoholism that surrounding communities referred to it as “Alcohol Lake.” The change began in 1971, when Phyllis and Andy Chelsea made a commitment to stop drinking and to confront the pervasive problem of alcoholism in their community. When Andy Chelsea was subsequently elected Chief of the Shuswap Tribe, he began promoting A.A. meetings, arresting bootleggers (including his own mother), confronting the drunkenness of public officials, and staging interventions to get community members into treatment. Tribal traditions were revitalized for both the adults and children of the community. Educational and job development programs were initiated for those in recovery. Over a period of ten years, this sustained effort reduced alcoholism from nearly 100 percent of the tribe to less than 5 percent (Chelsea and Chelsea, 1985; Taylor, 1987).

The proclamation of Chief Andy Chelsea that “the community is the treatment center” (quoted in Abbot, 1998) illustrates a collectivist, as opposed to individualistic, approach to the resolution of alcohol problems. Native frameworks of recovery have always been, and continue to be, framed in terms of an inextricable link between hope for the individual and hope for a community and a people. Two and a half centuries of Native recovery movements, the current sobriety of Alkali Lake, the vitality of the contemporary Wellbriety Movement, and the infusion of tribal beliefs and ceremonies into alcoholism treatment collectively provide a compelling lesson: the most effective and enduring solutions to Native alcohol problems are ones that emerge from the very heart of tribal cultures.

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