Ocean Clarke

Dr. Marc Bousquet

Discourse Analysis On Participatory Culture

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Native American Alcohol Abuse and Treatments

The plight of Native Americans seems to go largely unrecognized by the general population of the modern United States of America. Native American tribes are relatively isolated from American society in terms of geographic propagation and cultural influence. “Native Americans exhibit higher rates of alcohol and other drug dependence relative to other ethnic groups followed by Whites, Hispanics, Blacks, and Asians. Although Native American tribes differ in their rates of substance use and abuse, the US Indian Health Service has declared that tobacco, alcohol, and drug dependence are among the most urgent health problems facing Native Americans” (Ehlers, Liang, et al., 390).

This demographic of American citizens has a unique relation to this country when analyzing the transition of territory. The concept of land ownership and imperialism drastically altered the fate of this country's original inhabitants seeing as how the forceful political and military tactics from the American government forced hundreds of thousands of natives into small pockets of land. The current status of Native Americans demonstrates the results of the same deceptive tactics implemented by the US government. The introduction of alcohol from American traders to Indian settlements could be considered the initial downturn of their post-colonial civilization. When analyzing in retrospect, alcohol seems to be a tool of colonization against the Native Americans. The tragic reality of the Native American plight in the United States has definite correlation to the alcoholism statistics. “Available epidemiological data indicate that American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) populations have disproportionately high rates of alcohol and other drug abuse, as well as associated negative health and social consequences. Yet, few publications address this significant public health issue with empirical data” (Etz, Arroyo, et al., 372).

It is estimated that nearly 20 million Native Americans were inhabiting the continent prior to the arrival of imperialists. Approximately 90% of their population was obliterated through disease, warfare and isolation. The greed of white settlers for land ownership completely inverted the rich culture and ideologies of the Native Americans. The transition from European colonialism to Post-American Revolution maintained a consistent theme of expansion and assimilation at the expense of indigenous populations. They have faced a major discrimination and isolation from American society since the dawn of the nation's founding by European settlers. Their displacement across the country is a result of political discrimination from earlier points in history, followed by slight reparations through land and political semi-sovereignty.

The Trail of Tears is a historical period taught to nearly all students in early education about American history. The Indian Removal Act of 1830 is a piece of legislation from Andrew Jackson that removed Native Americans from the southeast. The developed societies of the Five Great Nations, including the Cherokee, Choctaw and Seminole tribes, were forcibly displaced from their original settlements to areas west of the Mississippi River, solely for the sake of expansion of American territory. Tribes in the Florida region, primarily Seminoles, fought against the oppression, but with little success. Colonist would capture some of the indigenous populations and force them into slave labor. Some assimilated with the American imperialists by adopting the English language, converting to Christianity and adopting concepts of land ownership, while others migrated away to attempt to preserve their culture. The migrations were extremely difficult for the Native Americans. The unjust nature of their displacement combined with the despair of leaving behind their homelands and long-developed civilizations for unsettled territory created a bitter context which they had to accept for their own survival.

Land reserves were given to Native Americans in an attempt to recompense for the blatant injustices they suffered from displacement and genocide. The modern day Native American land reserve have select privileges such as exemption from taxation and select state laws. There is an extreme deficit of Native American participation in the national government and economy. The representation of the Native American people in U.S. mainstream media offers very little merit, recognition or acknowledgement to their genuine significance in the country. The indigenous people of the Americas suffer a post-traumatic stress syndrome from the impact of cultural destruction, genocide and continuous oppression. There have been no true efforts from the modern day American government to apologize or recompense for the atrocities committed over the last two centuries. In addition, the socio-economic status of Native Americans falls within low brackets of income if determined by the common metrics of wealth distribution and income by population density. Poverty has connection to alcohol abuse cross-culturally; however, the particular context of Native American economic status must consider the nature of their blend of assimilation and isolation within the country. Alcohol abuse will develop as a psychological coping mechanism for people affected by poverty, and in the case of Native Americans, this is especially impactful due to biological weaknesses toward consumption that they possess.

Thousands of years of alcohol consumption by Europeans create a stark differential in tolerance. A lack of genetic disposition to the toxic substance causes the effects to be much more profound in their bodies. “The present study examined the prevalence of alleles at known functional polymorphisms in the ALDH2, ADH1B, and ADH1C genes, and tested for associations between these polymorphisms and DSM-III-R alcohol dependence. ALDH2, located on chromosome 12q24.2, is the primary enzyme responsible for acetaldehyde metabolism in the liver and thus, represents a logical candidate gene for alcohol dependence. A mutation in ALDH2 (commonly referred to as the ALDH2\*2 allele) produces a largely inactive ALDH enzyme that leads to elevated acetaldehyde levels that produces an aversive flushing reaction when alcohol is consumed.” (Ehlers, Liang, et al., 392). An indigenous drinker will not only experience more dramatic effects, but also become addicted to the substance much faster than the settlers who introduced it.

Male Northern Plains Indians have the highest rate of alcoholism issues among the various tribes. The genetic disposition to alcoholism is now prevalent within the Native American demographic, yet the level of tolerance is not as strong in them. These two characteristics together create a difficult problem in terms of genetics because the tendency to drink is there but the resistance to its effects are low. This leads to a high rate of alcohol related injury and death due to the addictive tendency blended with low internal defenses. Binge drinking is common for this demographic, which demonstrates that the problem is the lack of control one may experience once the drinking starts. Approximately 1 in every 10 deaths of Native Americans are alcohol related. Alcoholism is connected to other problems within Native American communities such as domestic violence, sexual assault and long term depression. The full context of the problems that alcoholism brings into the community is as equal as the impact of the substance on individual’s body and brain. The cultural psychology and lifestyle of the indigenous people have been altered by the effects of alcoholism. “There are compelling data on AI/AN substance-related morbidity and mortality, and there is pressure from communities to overcome these health disparities and to promote health equity by capitalizing on AI/AN resources and strengths. Problems and psychosocial disadvantages among AI/AN communities have been clearly identified and described and it is critical to continue to move toward research that will directly translate into improving health status for these populations” (Etz, Arroyo, et al., 374). Research on the social and biochemical level is necessary to advance the true understanding of predictors, influences and effective treatment.

Outreach and treatment is vital to the recovery of the indigenous population. Multitudes of community initiatives are present to heal and restore the Native American populations in the United States. White Bison is an example of a non-profit charitable organization that is dedicated to the healing of the indigenous community by offering support resources to native populations affected by alcohol and substance abuse issues. “White Bison is a proud facilitator of the Wellbriety Movement. Wellbriety means to be sober and well. Wellbriety teaches that we must find sobriety from addictions to alcohol and other drugs and recover from the harmful effects of drugs and alcohol on individuals, families and whole communities”([www.whitebison.org](http://www.whitebison.org)). A combination of resources available from indigenous and non-indigenous support systems is vital to maintaining open channels of availability for treatment. It is easier for some Native American individuals to seek help within their own community, whereas seeking help from American services may be preferred by others for the sake of discretion. The foundation of the Circles of Care program is the idea of creating a system of care; a coordinated network of holistic, community-based services and support to help meet the needs of children and youth with serious mental health challenges. To create an effective system of care, Circles of Care grantees bring together the entire community, which includes representatives from agencies serving children and youth, tribal leaders, spiritual advisers, family members, and young people themselves. Together, they assess gaps in services and develop a plan for filling those “holes.” The goal is to create a coordinated system that is community-based, family-driven, and youth-guided. (www.samhsa.gov)

A study was performed to determine more effective treatments towards Native American adolescents. The study compares the Cherokee Talking Circle culturally-based intervention with the Be A Winner Standard Education nonculturally-based intervention. One group of adolescents partook in the Cherokee Talking Circle while the other group joined the Be A Winner Standard Education. Significant improvements were found among all measurement outcomes for CTC. The data revealed that the Native American adolescent culturally-based intervention has a greater impact on Native American adolescent in reducing substance abuse and related problems than a noncultural-based intervention. “Other studies have demonstrated that internalization and receptivity of information occur greater if the information is delivered in accordance with Native American values. Internalization of information occurs when cultural identity is addressed along with the information” (Lowe and Liang).

“A recent study of at-risk AI/ ANs in Los Angeles County found that, compared to all other ethnic/racial groups, AI/ANs reported a significantly younger age of onset of alcohol, marijuana, methamphetamine, and other drug use, as well as higher mean number of illicit drug injections in the past 30 days. Thus, understanding potential predictors of positive in-treatment outcomes may optimize treatment interventions and reduce substance use-related health risks for urban AI/ANs”(Spear, Denerig, et al., 337). Major contributing factors to the issue of alcohol abuse are genetics, stress and depression. Low self-esteem is a common psychological issues reported in young Native Americans. Coping with the reality of their heritage is a difficult feat, whether they have been assimilated through generations or maintained the customs and tradition within their historically designated territories. There is a constant reminder of their tragic history surrounding them, which could lead to depression; there exist definite correlations between the usage of alcohol and depression. “The adolescent social world is important to our understanding of Native American youth problems since, with few exceptions, they represent a very small proportion of students within schools; this social and cultural isolation all but force them to make higher numbers of cross-racial/ ethnic friendships” and thus be exposed to the realities of ethnic groups outside of their own, which can produce positive or negative effects because of the polarizing effect of being exposed to socio-economic reality (Rees, Freng, et al., 411).

The U.S. government has a presence in the realms of support and treatment for Native Americans. A report from the Attorney General indicates a dedication to providing treatment options for indigenous populations that seek assistance. According to the National Institution of Health’s website, “the Department of Justice is committed to supporting the efforts of tribal governments to develop comprehensive strategies to address alcohol and substance abuse and related crime. Such strategies draw people together to act in unison to build a partnership composed of tribal leaders, the tribal court, prosecutors, law enforcement agents, corrections personnel, spiritual leaders and tribal members.” This reveals a bit of hypocrisy from the American government itself, but the full context of generational progression must be acknowledged to understand how a couple centuries later the problem begins to unravel and resolve. This progressive inclusion and support for their community is much needed to remedy the vastly damaged indigenous community .“The programs showcased in this publication represent three types of policy initiatives designed to reduce alcohol abuse and increase community safety: (1) efforts that control the availability of alcohol within a tribal jurisdiction; (2) educational and treatment efforts; and (3) efforts that reduce the social and environmental factors that increase the risk of harm to the individual and community.” (americanindianhealth.nlm.nih.gov)

“Social support can be sought within participation in recovery-oriented activities (e.g., 12-step meetings, other self-help meetings, or family members and/or friends supportive of recovery)” (Spear, et al., 334). Factors for providing the appropriate level of support and direct treatment to Native American communities should include the individual characteristics such as “the years of education in AI-specific settings, utilization of traditional healing practices, and the extent to which the client has lived in a reservation setting” (Kropp, Lilleskov, 718). The proper diagnosis of current psychological status, lifestyle and overall health combined with the consideration of environmental factors will give a better gauge to determine more effective treatments.

Citations:

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