

Historical Links: Addictions Among People of African Descent

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Halifax, Nova Scotia

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Who is Robert Wright?

- A registered SW Private Practitioner with endorsements in direct practice and forensics
- Former Race Relations Coordinator of the Dartmouth District School Board
- Former Executive Director, Child & Youth Strategy of Nova Scotia
- PhD Student in Sociology – Race, Identity, Power

The Problem

- African Nova Scotians (ANS) are dramatically overrepresented among persons charged with drug offenses
- ANS are dramatically underrepresented among persons seeking substance abuse Tx
- Tx models seem to be less effective with ANS persons

The Socio-cultural Model

- Previous models for understanding addictions poorly served ANS
 - Moral model – temperance the cure - 1700's
 - Disease model introduced - private medical tx (for the wealthy) the cure – 1870's
 - Disease model formalized – prohibition fails, gov. invests, AA born – 1930's
 - Disease model entrenched – industry partners onboard 1940's
 - Gender Diff. Acknowledged - Women for Sobriety est. – 1975
 - Attention to Minority Tx. – sociocultural model - 1980's

Hx of African Substance Patterns

- Precolonial, culturally bounded, ritualized use:
 - Fireside use by nomadic traders
 - Hospitality shown to honored guests
 - Religious and ritualistic use
- Qat, Cannabis, fermented beverages, and a range of hallucinagens

European Trade Triangle



Sugar, Rum and People

- African persons stolen, shipped to America to farm sugar (and other crops)
- Sugar (and other crops) sent to Europe to be distilled and refined
- Foreign intoxicants (distilled alcohols) and trade goods shipped to Africa, disrupt local economy and cultural patterns of substance use
- Alcohol used as a mollifying agent to pacify enslaved Africans in America
- Entrenchment of culturally disrupted patterns of substance use among African Americans

Emancipation's Influence

- Classes of African Americans emerge
 - Rural poor – those who remain in subsistence farming
 - Urban poor – establish the foundations of inner city ghettos
 - Working class – largely urban, later form the foundation of the Black middle class

Early American Drug Attitudes

- By the late 1800's, perhaps influenced by prevalent use of morphine during civil war . . .
- Drugs – morphine, cocaine, cannabis – gain increasing popularity

Great Awakening – Temperance

- Religious revivals in late 1700's and mid 1800's create push back against growing drug prevalence
- Temperance movement created the foundation for the policy of prohibition
- Prohibition in US 1920-1933, in Canada 1918-1920's

Illegality of Substances

- Prohibition pushed urban drug and alcohol use underground
- Many speak easies and gin joints were established in African American ghettos
- White ethnic criminal organizations systematically recruit African American persons to traffic in narcotics

Cultural Paradox of Substance Use

- Growing prevalence of drug use and trafficking in White community detracts from social and economic engagement
- Despite devastating effects of drugs in ANS communities, substance trafficking provides significant economic input to historically, socially and economically excluded peoples

Fallacy of Re-habilitation

- Re-habilitation assumes use and addiction is the primary issue:
 - Assumes pro-social functioning pre-drug use
 - Assumes stopping use and returning is good

Concept of Habilitation

- Habilitation promotes foundational socialization as its focus:
 - Acknowledge historical and systemic devastation of traditional cultural patterns
 - Acknowledges that “drug culture” may be substantially more functional than racialized location
 - Promotes critical analysis and efforts to reclaim pre-European contact level of cultural cohesion

Sociocultural Treatment Model

- Critical curriculum that analyzes the past present and future of African Nova Scotian people
- Use of culturally appropriate & competent facilitators
- Group work focusses on community building
- Community development, political and social activism an essential component

Additional Concepts

- Cultural shame
- Cultural pain
- Racial self-hatred
- Cultural intimidation
- Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome

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