Working with African Nova Scotians in Correctional Settings: Social and Cultural Aspects of Addiction, Crime and Rehabilitation

By

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Who is Robert Wright

An African Nova Scotian

A social work clinician

A full-time graduate student at Dal

A former: child welfare worker and executive director, correctional mental health worker, race relations coordinator



Today's presentation

Historical Cultural Considerations
Patterns of African substance use
Paradox of crime and drugs
Lessons learned from the Nia Centre
Implications
Resources

Cultural Considerations in Tx

We have known about cultural and racial differences in substance use since the 1940's:

"We candidly believe that it would be most unwise to refer a problem drinker to a helping professional who was not sensitive to the kind of diversity we have reported. One cannot, for example, treat an Irish alcoholic like a Jewish alcoholic or an Italian alcoholic . . . to do so risks making tragic mistakes in understanding the dynamics of the person's problem" (Greeley, et al. 1980)

Pre-colonial African Substance Use

All African societies had some form of substance use: qat, colanut, marijuana, fermented beverages

All use was strictly confined to use in social or ceremonial settings: traders around the campfire, elders at council, senior men extending hospitality to visitors, warriors preparing for battle

Colonial Destabilizing Influences

European colonizers disrupted African patterns of substance abuse through 2 main factors:

The disruption of the social structures that constrained substance use,

The introduction of distilled alcohols which were foreign and came with no social parameters

The Trade Triangle

The Transatlantic Trade in Enslaved Africans consisted of three journeys:

- 1.The outward passage, Europe to Africa, manufactured goods (including distilled alcohols)
- 2. The middle passage, Africa to the Americas and Caribbean, enslaved Africans captives and other 'commodities'.
- 3. The homeward passage, America to Europe, carrying sugar, tobacco, rum, rice, cotton and other goods back to Europe.

The Strengthening Link

Slave trade disrupted culture and introduced distilled alcohol in Africa

Enslaved Africans in Americas were encouraged to use alcohol during down time to discourage resistance to ill treatment

Family and social life of enslaved Africans was further disrupted, robbing people of their cultural constraints

Urbanization, Substance Use and Criminal Enterprise

With the civil war, and emancipation large numbers of African Americans moved into large urban centres

The Church, the strongest institution of African society was a weaker influence in Urban centres

Urban life further disrupted the remaining sense of African community and subsistence economy that existed in rural America

Prohibition . . . not so much

The 1800's brought the opium wars, reaction to the exploding drug trade resulting in Prohibition

Prohibition drove the use of alcohol and drugs into the speak easies and gin-joints of the inner city, many in African American communities

The criminal trade in narcotics became controlled by white ethnic criminal gangs who actively recruited African Americans to traffic the poisons in their communities

The Cementing Connections

Disrupted social structures, systematic impoverishment, normalized coping use of substances, systematic recruitment into narcotic trafficking, controlled territorial distribution resulting in organization of gangs and the use of guns and violence to enforce territory . . .

Similarly other crimes associated with African Americans followed a similar pattern

The Paradox of Crime and Drugs

In well resourced communities, crime and drugs are destructive: interfere with legitimate economic options, bring shame, lower a family's standing in the community.

In poorly resourced communities, crime and drugs are constructive: bring needed funds to empoverished communities, bring honor and respect, improve a family's economic and social standing in the community.

The Nia Centre

1993 an Afrocentric Substance Abuse Prevention Programme established in Halifax Sponsored by the Mayor's Task Force on Drugs Established through a community consultation process

Lessons Learned from the Nia Centre

Community consultation

Afrocentric programming focusing on history and anti-racism

Group work based on principles of collectivity

Gender segregated for sex specific programming

Community engagement

Civic responsibility

Implications

Intervention cannot differentiate between substance use and trafficking

Practitioners must not only have clinical expertise but cultural competence and skill in community change

Anti-oppressive approach must be taken

Particular clinical issue related to history of colonization of African peoples must be addressed

Resources

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