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Fire & Ice

Natives, Alcohol and Spirituality, a
Northern Health Paradigm

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Science

The Language Between the Cultures

Native and non-native interaction is powerfully and intricately interwoven with western science. Native alcoholism and the way it has been addressed provides insight to this complex phenomena and illuminates the possibility of global sobriety. From initial contact to contemporary times, the scientific view of the Indian has evolved through stages. Each stage has dramatically impacted the lives of both peoples.

Stage One, Scientific Racism

Scientific inquiry and literature on American Indians was born in the scientific racism of the nineteenth century. This doctrine replaced the word, "nation" with the word, "race" and assumed that moral qualities of people were positively correlated with physical characteristics; further, that all humanity could be divided into superior and inferior stocks (Berkhofer, 1978).

Typical of his time, Leslie Scott (1891) wrote an article entitled, "Indian" Diseases as Aids to Pacific Northwest Settlement" in which he States:

...Wherever went the white man's appetites and wares went also his afflictions, which multiplied manifold in the savage habitat. Indians in the white man's clothing, in his houses, in his liquor drinking, were like the cultures of malignant germs which the scientist multiplies in his laboratory.... throughout the entire West the Indians were victims, but perhaps nowhere else so badly as in the Pacific Northwest; and nowhere else were the results so good for the whites...

Thus, scientific arguments provided a rationale and a justification for the genocide and ruthless appropriation of Indian lands. Political rhetoric of the early 1800's which was filled with optimism for the human race and the improvability of humankind gave way in 1850 to a strident "pessimism for inferior races and a belief in ineradicable racial weakness" (Horsman, 1975). In a popular work of the mid 1800's phrenologist Combe argued that a comparison of the heads of American Indians and Blacks demonstrated that Indian intellect was weaker but pride stronger therefore Blacks...

...were able to appreciate the superior moral and intellectual powers of the European race, and are content in some measure to live under their guidance. The Indian on the contrary has refused to profit, to any great extent by the arts or literature of the Europeans and has always preferred death to servitude.

Bailey, who wrote as late as 1922, codified the scientific racist paradigm when he stated:

“From the statistics which relate to the two so-called primitive races, the African and the American Indian, it appears that the primitive could not under any present circumstances attain the average intelligence of cultured races. This appears to be so, not because there is any detailed information as to the potentiality of the primitive mind but because mental deficiency is so profuse that their average intelligence must be inferior to that of average European intelligence.”

Because Native alcoholism was understood to be a function of inferior biological stock, the treatment was death or near death. This view, turned on Native medicine and healers was exemplified in a letter written in 1892 by Mrs. Willard, Christian Missionary who wrote:

It is here....I would speak of the Kling-get (Tlingit) fiend, the medicine man, and beg of those in authority to cause his extermination. His incantations should be held a crime and his uncut hair, his touch of power, should be shaved clean to the head; the whipping post and work under guard on public improvements would be better than a prison....(Dauenhauer, 1980)

These scientific “proofs” continued to assert innate Indian inferiority and establish complete confidence in ultimate Indian disappearance. In fact, scientific racism marched hand in hand with expansionists who at the close of the 19th century had exterminated more than twenty-five million Indian people!

Survivors of this “paradigm” became subject to the emerging cultural anthropological paradigm - at its worse a covert form of scientific racism and at its best, a harbinger of the golden age in Indian policy.

Cultural Anthropology, the Second View

In the birth of ethnography and cultural anthropology (beginning in the last part of the 19th century) the raciology and the evolutionism of scientific racism was repudiated. Boasian scholars such as Swanton, and later, Kroeber, espoused the idea of culture to explain the diversity of lifestyles of humankind. The cultural anthropological school separated biological heredity from the social transmission of culture, challenging previous work in the field.

Using empirical methodology, Boasian scholars stressed the import of replacing the evolutionary history of Natives with actual history. They were convinced that tribal change, including alcoholism, happened more as a result of diffusion among tribes than from a unilinear sequence of modifications in cultural perceptions and practices presumed by evolutionists.

~~This shift in thought produced dramatically different research. Radin (1972) wrote:~~

“the relationship of conquered to conqueror is important to both. Up to the present, all attempts that have been made to understand them, or to come to any reasonable adjustments with them have met with signal failure, and this failure is in most instances due to the scientific accredited theories of the innate inferiority of primitive man...”

Drawing on this earlier thinking, Lemert (1954) studied Haida and other Northwest tribes. His research indicated that alcoholism was not a function of race; that greatest drunkenness occurred when tribes were intensely involved in fur trade. Lemert argued that anomie, interclan rivalry and cultural conservatism were the most appropriate way to view Northwest Native alcoholism.

Lemert's findings were typical of those in the flowering of cultural anthropology in the 1950's. From this time forward, any discussion of Native alcoholism would include “culture”. The word “primitive” was no longer used to refer to Alaska Natives; empiricism became the method and major theories of deviance and social control became the philosophical underpinnings of future research.

The Sociocultural Model - A Third View of Native Alcoholism

The activism of American Indians, the Civil Rights Movement and the growth of the human sciences brought national attention and funds to the problem of alcoholism among Native people. The field exploded, producing more studies in a single decade than in the preceding fifty years. (Bates, 1980) More than half of the literature continued to be anthropological (Leland, 1970) but the sociocultural model was emerging. This model,

derives from the view...that human behavior is the complex resultant of any interplay of biological and historical factors including interactions among systems that can be distinguished as those of the culture, the society and the individual...”(Berkhofer, 1970).

The contribution of the sociocultural model include; freeing Natives from the “ethnographic present” of anthropological research. No longer were Native people frozen in time. The model led to awareness that the effects of ethanol include social, economic, historical and cultural factors as well as chemical, physical and biological factors. Using history as a methodological tool, socio-cultural theorists have shown how attitudes, values and ways of drinking have changed in various ways and at different rates in many cultures. (Heath, 1980) Finally, this multi-disciplinary approach of the sociocultural model showed a propensity to get within the society being studied, to see history and life from the view of the people being studied.

The application of this science looked different from previous models. Psychiatrists and physicians including Bergman (1971) and Pascaro (1976) participated in traditional Indian ceremonies and reported that Native science or way of coming to knowledge was efficacious, rigorous and humane. Native alcoholism and health sciences united. Alcoholism was viewed as a medical problem properly treated with technology. Publicly funded community programs struggled to integrate Western and Native healing techniques.

A second significant event that occurred was the emergence of the first generation of college educated Native scientists. This small group used the sociocultural model to talk with non-Native people about Native issues. Their work looked to external forces - historical, economic and political, as causative agents of Indian problems. The work was concerned with continuity, tended to be highly descriptive and combined realistic and spiritual themes.

The New Empiricism, a Fourth Model

Early sociocultural research produced a wealth of descriptive and explanatory studies but few claims were made for scientific rigor (Heath, 1980) and the need for definitive studies pushed empiricism to the fore (Nobel, 1976). The nascent cross-cultural scientific exchange was effectively halted as the study of "Native People" moved toward the harder sciences.

As a result of the new more rigorous and robust scientific empiricism, fundamental issues were raised regarding previous work. First scientists recognized that Native social problems are a complex phenomenon about which little is known; second, data collection and interpretation problems presented manifold problems and finally, the appropriateness of theoretical models was called into question.

"...it is not clear that the disease we call alcoholism is the same in both white and Indian societies or even that there is one unified pathology we call alcoholism. Those indicators, both behavioral and physiological, which have been used to diagnose alcoholism in the White society have been found to be determined in part by sociocultural factors. The behavioral indicators have been most frequently used to diagnose the presence of alcoholism in Indian populations. Since the association between these behaviors and either a physiological predispositions to drink has not been demonstrated, there must be an effort on the part of clinically oriented researchers to observe and measure the causative agents of alcoholism more directly if, in fact, this is possible..." (Nobel, 1976)

Lacking a precise definition or clear understanding of the variety of Native cultures meant that the new empiricism was confounded in its earliest efforts. And the increasing reliance on sophisticated analysis produced a new set of problems:

~~“There is a growing concern about where quantitative techniques are carrying us...our data manipulation techniques are carrying us...our data manipulation techniques have become increasingly complete mathematically sophisticated and governed by strict assumption, but, paradoxically, our interpretive frameworks which make such data meaningful have grown looser, more open ended, fluid and contingent...there seems to be rather widespread skepticism surrounding the ability of conventional data collection techniques to produce data that do not distort, do violence to, or otherwise falsely portray the phenomena such methods seek to reveal...” (Van Mannen, 1979).~~

Thus, in the early 1980's alcohol research and the science that guided the research were again in search of a paradigm that would work. Van Mannen observed:

“...there is something of a quiet reconstruction going on in the social sciences...There has come of age that significant realization that the people we study (and often seek to assist) have a form of life, a culture that is their own and if we wish to understand...we must first be able to both appreciate and describe their culture...”

Toward a New Paradigm

The sterility that characterized the findings of much of the “New Empiricism”, triggered a movement back towards holistic and qualitative research in Native alcoholism. Theories of Paulo Freire, South American educator, and research by UNESCO prompted researchers to look at culture in a very different way. Freire observed:

Research is a cultural action, if it has a humanist character, it is eminently dialogical and dialectical. In culture based research, “MEN DO NOT ACT ON OTHER MEN AS OBJECTS”.

Freire concluded that research should not be

“our research on you, but rather a research project in which, together, in dialogue, we will come to know each other better and the reality in which we find ourselves so that we can more effectively transform that reality”.

For the first time scientists began to recognize that Native people have a voice, and by extension, a way of knowing or science. Methodologies and approaches have evolved from this recognition. Popular writer, Milam, typifies the movement towards synthesis. While arguing for medical dominance of the field he nevertheless recognizes that the “ism” in alcoholism necessarily involves a human or family system not merely the alcoholic. Participatory research, systems theory and family therapy all focus on relationships, development and the strengths of an existing system.

~~In Canada application of Native science has sparked a fire in Indian alcohol treatment.~~
Tache a small reserve in British Columbia has used it's mobile treatment model to move from 100% of the people being affected by alcoholism, violence and death; to a state of 65% sobriety over the past three years!

The other spark is the Alkalai Lake reserve which has recovered, in roughly fifteen years, from 100% alcoholism to 95% sobriety. According to Maggie Hogson, Director of Nechi Training Institute, the spark has now, jumped over to Alberta and other parts of Canada. The key to this phenomenal success lies in a careful integration of western treatment methodology and Native traditional ways.

These methods complement, native science and offer the possibility of intercultural scientific exchange. Native Alcohol work, usually the unwelcome relative to "harder" science, may draw on its theoretical underpinnings of wholism to assume leadership in the new paradigmatic shift. The first step is to ask Native People, what is Indian science?

INDIAN SCIENCE

*"...This is what Raven did for us...The shelter
is the tree..."*

Indian science, often understood through the tree, is holistic. Through spiritual processes, it synthesizes or gathers information from the mental, physical, social and cultural/historical realms. Like a tree the roots of Native science go deep into the history, body and blood of the land. The tree collects, stores and exchanges energy. It breathes with the winds, which tumble and churn through greenery exquisitely fashioned to purify, codify and imprint life in successive concentric rings - the generations. Why and how the tree does this is a mystery but the Indian observes the tree to emulate, complement and understand his/her relationship to this beautiful, life-enhancing process.

The Meaning of Science

To the Indian, the tree is the first spirit or person on Earth. Indeed, the tree which oxygenated Earth's atmosphere, is the precursor to our human existence. Because of its antiquity it is a respected Elder but the greatest power of Native Science lies in the reasons behind the trees existence.

When discussing the origins of the tree Chief Donawaak, Tlinget Elder says:

"This is where stories begin, there is no story before this...When Raven spirit and Black Raven are working on this land, they put coves in it where you can come in when it's blowing - a place where you can come ashore.

My Great Grandfather who told this story to me said - the cove is where you're going to be safe. If you pass that harbour you're not going to go very far...you will tip over or drown. But if you come to the cove you will be safe. This is what Raven did for us. The shelter is the tree. You could get under the tree and stay there overnight. All this is what the Raven did...(Colorado, 1985)

From these words we see that Native science has a sacral basis and that its teachings are grounded in the natural world. The Navajo and the Natural World are one; he expresses that unity in this way:

The foundation, you have to know your roots, where you are coming from. It is understood that we all come from God, God created us. But you have to understand in your own Indian way, where your roots are. You see a tree that is weak, about to give up. Sometimes you find people like that. Why is that tree just barely making it. Because the roots are not strong. If the roots are solid and strong, then you see the tree is strong and pretty. It can withstand cold, hot weather and winds. The human, has to have those roots because we are growing too. The Great Spirit put us here with nature. We have to understand the nature. That is why we understand how an animal behaves. That is why we have to talk to them. We don't pray to them, we talk to them because they breathe the same air we do. We are put here with them. We are also a part of the plant life. We are always growing, we have to have strong roots.(Colorado, 1985)

Indeed all of life can be understood from the tree.

...just after the earths crust was formed Raven (the Creator) made the tree. Why did he make this tree? He made it to shelter us. Even before Raven broke light on the World, people took shelter from the tree. And after he broke light, look what your sitting on, what's above you, it comes from the tree.

And that's where the Tlingit gets his canoe, his house, his clothes - everything. The Raven put it there for him (the people).

And look, what's growing under that tree? The grass. In the spring the Bear comes down to eat that grass and the wolf, the moose and the mountain goat. All these things, they come. And the berries, growing there - salal, salmonberry, huckleberry and beneath them, the plants, - the medicine. All that, it comes from the tree...(Colorado, 1985)

So the roots and their functions form the basis of Native scientific methodology. Seeking truth and coming to knowledge necessitates studying the cycles, relationships and connections between things. Indeed a law of Native science requires that we look ahead seven generations when making decisions!

Principles of Native Science

Laws and standards govern Native science just as they do western science. In an Indian way, Bear who is the North, represents knowledge, healing and comfort. The Bear is also fierce, his claims are non-negotiable. Western Science understands Bear in terms of rigor, reliability, and validity.

In the spring Bear marks his territory on the tree. Stretching as far as possible, Bear uses his claws to score the tree. Other bears, passing by are challenged to meet this standard. If they cannot reach the mark they leave the territory. For the Native scientist the tree is not merely science but science interwoven inseparably with life. We meet the mark or die. Like the Bear passing through, no one watches us; the science relies on utmost integrity.

Native science assumes its character through power and peace. Vine Deloria, (1986) noted Lakota scholar discusses it's principles:

Here power and place are dominant concepts--power being the living energy that inhabits and/or composes the universe, and place being the relationship of things to each other...put into a simple equation: Power and place produce personality. This equation simply means that the universe is alive, but it also contains within it the very important suggestion that the universe is personal and, therefore, must be approached in a personal manner...The personal nature of the universe demands that each and every entity in it seek and sustain personal relationships. Here, the Indian theory of relativity is much more comprehensive than the corresponding theory articulated by Einstein and his fellow scientists. The broader Indian idea of relationship, in a universe very personal and particular, suggests that all relationships have a moral content. For that reason, Indian knowledge of the universe was never separated from other sacred knowledge about ultimate spiritual realities. The spiritual aspect of knowledge about the world taught the people that relationships must not be left incomplete. There are many stories about how the world came to be, and the common themes running through them are the completion of relationships and the determination of how this world should function.

Deloria notes that there is no single Native science, each tribe or Nation follows ways specific to a locale. However, the tree and the Bear are nearly universal. From South America to the Arctic, the tree and all that it implies has been guiding and shaping the thought of Native people since the dawn of humanity. Those who follow this natural science do so in search of balance, harmony or peace with all living relations. Iroquois call this SKANAGOAH.

The Goal of Indian Science

Skanagoah, literally interpreted as "great peace", is the term used to describe the still, electrifying awareness one experiences in the deep woods. This feeling or state of balance is at the heart of the universe and is the spirit of Native science. For the western educated, audience, the notion of a tree with spirit is a difficult concept to grasp. The English language classifies reality into animate and inanimate objects, with most things falling into the inanimate classification. Native languages do not make the same distinction. As Deloria says, the universe is alive. Therefore, to see a Native speaking with a tree does not carry the message of mental instability, on the contrary, this is a scientist engaged in research!

Put another way, western thought may accede that all natural things are imbued with energy. Much like the electromotive force in a capacitor, the force of the energy is transmitted without there being a direct flow of energy. If you had a piece of wire, electricity would travel from one end to the other uninterrupted. But if you put a capacitor in the line, the force is transmitted from one side to the other without there being a direct flow of electricity from one side to the other. This is how energy is transferred from tree to tree and tree to person without there being a direct flow of energy. The spiritual energy of a tree isn't transmitted directly but rather it's life force is felt. Like a capacitor, the thickness of the dielectric, the physical distance between the person and the tree, is not important; the exchange still occurs.

This exchange suggests that human beings play a vital part in Skanagoah. Western thought teaches the value of the specialist, especially to the masses who are mostly generalists. In an Indian way, we may think of the Bear as a specialist, indeed, if I compete with the Bear in his own environment and on his terms, there is no way I can match his proficiency. But the generalist, in this case, human beings determine the continuance of Bear's habitat. We are related, we are all one, life and death, good and bad, we are all one. The Indian acknowledges this and so discovers the most liberating aspect of Native science; LIFE RENEWS and all things which support life are renewable.

The struggle through Native alcoholism has repeatedly brought two peoples together. Let us hope that the fire of sobriety sparked in northern communities, spreads south and that our sciences lead the way.

The Bear Has Made His Mark...

Can you Reach It?



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