Understanding the Introduction of Alcohol into Aboriginal Culture

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Goals of Presentation

• To provide a brief history of Aboriginal peoples in Canada
• To understand how policy and legislation contributes to patterns of alcohol use.
• To identify factors for building cross-cultural relationships

January 1, 1900 – A snapshot

• Aboriginals = 2% of Canadian population
• Governed by Indian Act of 1876
• Indian lands and property: Controlled by INAC
• Indian Act: To protect from white culture and to assimilate into white culture
• Potlatch (redistribution of wealth and gifts) and religious ceremonies are banned
• Residential schools: Rampant abuse, Aboriginal culture taught as inferior
Aboriginal Rights

- 1900 – *Dominion Elections Act*: sets rules for voting.
- 1920 – men and women over 21 can vote, except for minorities and Aboriginals.
- 1938 – Race still used as exclusion criteria, but not for those serving in the army.
- 1960 – Aboriginals allowed to vote.
- 1961 – *R v Gonzales*: Aboriginals denied right to have liquor off-reserve.
- 1971 – s. 94 of Indian Act repealed: Aboriginals can have liquor off-reserve.

History

- Alcohol is oldest and most widely used psychoactive drug and legal in most countries.
- First civilized settlements were created to ensure a regular supply of grapes, grain, and poppies.
- Recipe for beer dating back to 5400-3500 B.C. ([Inaba & Cohen, 2000](#))
- Introduced to Aboriginal peoples 300 years ago in exchange for fur, land, etc. ([Maracle, 1993](#))

There is no aboriginal word for "alcohol".....

The old people used to call it “poison water.” Sometimes they called it “firewater” because it burns, it starts on fire. In Mohawk they call it “the mind-changer.” They call it that because the native people did not have alcohol before the Europeans came here to Turtle Island. ([Descending Cloud – 70-year old Cayuga man from southern Ontario](#)).

Alcohol is gahtonejabeemeeenee Gahtonejabe, that’s the Stoney word for “crazy.” *Meeneemeeans “water.” So it means “crazy water,” the water that makes you go crazy. ([Lazarus, Stoney tribe](#)).

([Maracle, 1993](#))
Indian Act

- 1869 – First Indian Act passed in Parliament.
  - Made it illegal for status Indians to buy or possess alcohol.
  - Indian prohibition lasted 117 years and not entirely abolished until 1985.
- Law did not stop or prevent Aboriginals from drinking, but it changed the way they drank
  - Law forced them to drink in bushes and back alleys, forced them to guzzle beer, wine, or liquor as quickly as possible to avoid arrest.

  - (Maracle, 1993)

- “I remember one incident...I was about five or six...We didn’t have electricity...My parents were drinking homebrew, and then I remember my mother got scared ‘cause she said, “Cops, cops” in Cree to my father. They were knocking at the door saying, “Open up. Open up.” My mother, she turned the wick down to where the wick fell into the oil, and it was just pitch dark in the house...They literally knocked the door down on the floor and they searched the whole place...they didn’t find the booze.”

  - 31-year old Cree from northern Alberta
  - (Maracle, 1993)

Contributing Factors towards Substance Use

- Client problems occur within a sociological, cultural, and historical context
  - Sociological: The physical separation between cultures, denial of rights and freedoms
  - Cultural: Residential schools (loss of language, customs, stories, intergenerational trauma, etc.)
  - Historical: The exchange of land and possessions for alcohol
Cultural Identity Developmental Models

- Stage one: Lack of awareness of the importance of culture
- Intermediate Stages: Psychological discomfort, self-examination, over-identification with own culture
- Final Stage: Self-acceptance, appreciation of culture, seeking opportunities for interaction

Summary

- Consider the social-historical-cultural context of alcohol in your client’s life… and in your life
- Consider the client’s and your own process of identity development
- Cross-cultural client-practitioner relationships require empathy, respectful curiosity, and humility

References:

- Indian Act (http://laws.justice.gc.ca/)