



"Tied together like a woven hat": Protective pathways to Alaska Native sobriety

<https://arctichealth.org/en/permalink/ahliterature9329>

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Source: Harm Reduction Journal. 2004 Nov 17;1(1):10

Date: 11-17-2004

Language: English

Publication Type: Article

Keywords: Alcohol abuse
Alaska Native culture
People Awakening Project
Protective factors
Qualitative study
Resilience
Sobriety
Triadic influence theory

Abstract:

BACKGROUND: The People Awakening Project (1RO1 AA 11446-03) had two purposes, completed in Phase I and Phase II of the project. The purpose of Phase I was to complete a qualitative study; the research objective was discovery oriented with the specific aim of identification of protective and recovery factors in Alaska Native sobriety. Results were used to develop a heuristic model of protective and recovery factors, and measures based on these factors. The research objective of Phase II was to pilot these measures and provide initial validity data. **METHODS:** Phase I utilized a life history methodology. People Awakening interviewed a convenience sample of 101 Alaska Natives who had either recovered from alcoholism (n = 58) or never had a drinking problem (n = 43). This later group included both lifetime abstainers (LAs) and non-problem drinkers (NPs). Life histories were transcribed and analyzed using grounded theory and consensual data analytic procedures within a participatory action research framework. Analyses were utilized to generate heuristic models of protection and recovery from alcohol abuse among Alaska Natives. **RESULTS:** Analyses generated a heuristic model of protective factors from alcohol abuse. The resulting multilevel and multi-factorial model describes interactive and reciprocal influences of (a) individual, family, and community characteristics; (b) trauma and the individual and contextual response to trauma, (c) experimental substance use and the person's social environment; and (d) reflective processes associated with a turning point, or a life decision regarding sobriety. The importance of cultural factors mediating all these protective processes is emphasized. For NPs, the resilience process drew from personal stores of self-confidence, self-efficacy, and self-mastery that derived from ability to successfully maneuver within stressful or potentially traumatizing environments. In contrast, for many LAs, efficacy was instead described in more socially embedded terms better understood as communal mastery. One style of mastery is more associated with individualistic orientations, the other with more collectivistic. Future research is needed regarding the generalizability of this group difference. **CONCLUSIONS:** Results suggest that preventative interventions should focus on intervening simultaneously at the community, family, and individual levels to build resilience and protective factors at each level. Of particular importance is the building of reflexivity along with other cognitive processes that allow the individual to think through problems and to reach a life decision to not abuse alcohol.

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