

Confounding Culture: Drinking, Country Food Sharing, and Traditional Knowledge Networks in a Labrador Inuit Community

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This article presents evidence from one Northern Inuit community showing that networks associated with the exchange of traditional knowledge and subsistence foods among households overlap with alcohol co-use patterns. The findings presented here are based on a large social network research project that included 330 interviews with adult residents of a single community over the course of more than five months. These data belie depictions of alcohol use as solely pathological in indigenous communities. The fact that relationships at the center of traditional/cultural activities are simultaneously relationships through which ostensibly damaging behaviors are enacted necessarily presents a more complex picture than is often depicted in literature on Aboriginal mental health and well-being. Culture, we illustrate, is not a separate sphere of life where individual and collective well-being is produced by activities deemed healthy, excluding those behaviors understood as damaging. Instead, the sources of cultural continuity and resilience are embedded in activities that may also be considered harmful. The implications of these findings for culturally-based interventions are discussed.

Key words: alcohol, culture, Indigenous, traditional knowledge, social networks

One of the more vexing, ongoing health and social problems in North American Aboriginal communities is alcohol abuse. Said to be both a cause and consequence of numerous social ills, alcohol abuse and Indigenous people have a long and difficult history, intertwined with racism, exploitation, and pernicious cultural stereotypes (Cameron 1999; Frank, Moore, and Ames 2000; Leland 1979).

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Recent thinking on Aboriginal health suggests that culture plays a key role in fostering resilience, acting as a protective factor against an array of damaging behaviors (Dickerson et al. 2012; Gone and Calf Looking 2011; Hawkins, Cummins, and Marlatt 2004; Walters, Simoni, and Evans-Campbell 2002). In this view, traditional cultural practice such as land-based activities linked to spirituality and ancient traditions—activities such as hunting, food gathering, the sharing of locally obtained foods, and traditional craft production based in these same activities—are said to provide resources for well-being (Garrouette et al. 2003; Kirmayer, Simpson, and Cargo 2003; Parlee, Berkes, and Gwich'in 2005; Stone et al. 2006). This, along with self-government and collective local control associated with cultural continuity produces resilience on both individual and collective levels that resists negative behaviors, including suicide and substance abuse (Chandler and Lalonde 1998; Hallett, Chandler and Lalonde 2007; Lazrus 2015).

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