

Should traditional healing practises seek validation in a biomedical world?- A Native American Case

The World Health Organisation defines 'traditional medicines' as 'plant, animal and/or mineral medicines, spiritual therapies, manual techniques and exercises... to treat, diagnose or prevent illnesses' (WHO, 2002, p.1, found in, Fiedeldej-van dijk et al, 2016, p.3). These healing practises are an every day normality for Indigenous groups across the world but receive little recognition within the biomedical realms that influences the wider population and development of medicine. To 'validate' traditional healing practises within a biomedical world means to give affirmation to the beliefs and cultural ideas surrounding traditional medicine and to transcend these ideas into a wider cultural acceptance amongst the already established scientific beliefs that pioneer modern medicine. This essay will focus on Native American healing practises as an example for the reasons why traditional healing practises should be seeking validation within a biomedical world.

Across many indigenous belief systems, disease is viewed notable as its own definition, 'dis-ease.' Becoming unwell is to either experience a sense of disharmony by being disconnected to one's inner self or a spiritual battle between good and bad which for many groups includes curses and witchcraft. For Native Americans especially, illness is invited in when one is 'out of step with the universe and its sacred rhythms' (Portman and Garrett, 2006, p.458). Traditionally, spirituality and a connection to 'the creator' is central when it comes to healing practises and traditions within Native American communities. According to Portman and Garrett (2006), 'native american healing traditions cannot be taken out of the context of their relationship to the four constructs of spirituality' (Portman and Garrett, 2006, p.455), which they define as, the 'creator/mother earth/ great father', community, environment and the self. It is thought that practises that do not include a spiritual relationship could be ineffective at treating diseases and infections (Portman and Garrett, 2006). Native American perceptions of medicine also differ from the popular views held by those in the biomedical world. According to Portman and Garrett (2006), the meaning of medicine is more culturally entwined with day to day experiences rather than scientific treatment. For example, across Native American tribes, medicine is referred to as 'the essence of life or an inner power' Portman and Garrett, 2006, p.459). This inner power is found through emotional experiences. For example, to a Native American medicine can be an old memory that still makes one smile and feel joy. It can also be a catch up with an old friend or even random acts of kindness. Medicine can also be found in painful and hurtful memories as well. It is found in every memory, place, person or event that occurs in our daily lives. This perception of medicine is one that is uncommon across the wider cultures of North

America and to many, it can be argued that it is a difficult view of medicine to have, as to a wider society, medicine is usually found to be a case of therapy or substance picked up from a doctor. This is why for many native people's, their view of medicine may not be accepted in a biomedical world because it is broader and more holistic than a biomedical definition and has a different, less limited existence to Native American people and their culture.

One of the biggest healing rituals used within Native American tribes is the Sweat Lodge Ceremony. This is a purification ceremony where the group or individual gathers within a small lodge where a fire is lit and rocks are heated to let off steam. These huts get very hot and to Native Americans, this allows one to meditate and become purified. For many this is an effective form of healing especially for mental health conditions as it allows one to take time out of the chaos of the physical world and be at peace with oneself through stimulated meditation. According to Herring (1996), it is used for therapeutic purposes not only just within Native American tribal communities but as a treatment plan for native patients visiting biomedical physicians as well as it is 'centered on attempts to offer culturally responsive services to Native Clients in a way that is congruent with their cultural way of life' (Portman and Garrett, 2006, p. 463). This is an example of the biomedical world and the traditional beliefs held by native americans fusing together to provide effective treatment with a sense of cultural respect. This fusing together of biomedical and traditional beliefs is beginning to take a rise in what was predominantly a biomedical world. Doctors and patients are now starting to address the cultural issues that arise when forming appropriate treatment. However, does this begin to validate traditional healing methods and alternative approaches or is this simply the biomedical world beginning to approach cultural sensitivities? In the biomedical world scientific fact and evidence is the thesis surrounding our perceptions of treatment and the causes of disease and infection. This is why traditional healing rituals and this connection to spirituality that is preident within especially the Native American culture is termed as 'alternative' and is not given much attention by those living fundamentally within a biomedical world. It is however across cultures, both geographically and socially, more common than one would perceive. Arguably, the common mis-lead belief then that these alternative methods are ineffective is to disregard the cultures held by millions across the planet. However, this is simply not true. In fact, through studies, it has been found that '25 to 50 percent of the substances in the traditional non-biomedical pharmacopoeia of indigenous healers have been shown empirically to be effective as measured by conventional scientific and biomedical standards' (Singer and Baer, 2007, p.104). It is only recently that research is beginning to be funded as to how to bring more of these cultural and traditional healing ideas into the norm. One can argue that if research proves that these methods are in fact effective, than the

stereotypes and disregards for one's culture can begin to change as the world begins to validate these healing methods.

The Sun Dance Ceremony is a healing ritual that usually lasts for three days. It involves making vows to guardian spirits and the creator as well as fasting food and water. Participants pray for others and in return receive visions and medicine men use this to treat sickness (Portman and Garrett, 2006). It is a community healing ritual at its core, so the main goal is to create harmony within the tribe so any disputes or problems in the community are encouraged to be resolved. This is a time where especially the sick come forth to be healed. The Sun Dance Ceremony is one of the more traditional rituals that has been carried out by the Native Americans for centuries, however due to the colonisation of the Americas, there was a time where it was outlawed by the founding government. 'The dance was outlawed near the end of the 19th century due to the ignorance of the non-natives' (Portman and Garrett, 2006, p.465). Like many of the perceptions of the native peoples, the sun dance was also seen as 'savage' and it wasn't until the Freedom of Religion Act of 1978 that it was lawfully allowed back (Portman and Garrett, 2006). To the early colonisers, the Sun Dance Ceremony was thought of as 'dramatic self-torture' as 'warrior participants went without water and food, danced to exhaustion and sometimes slashed their flesh' (Garbarino & Sasso, 1994, p.226). It can be argued that it is because of colonialism that traditional healing methods are still not thought of as useful or effective in the developed world today. Colonialism not only outlawed many of these practises but created a social stereotype of the native people which has been so embedded into popular culture that it is still an asset of social activism today; to collapse the stereotypes and limitations of native rights that colonialism started centuries ago. This is why, one could argue, that it is a much harder fight for traditional healing methods to be validised in a biomedical world. However as the native voice is getting more recognition today and as society and culture becomes more diverse and liberated, it should be that traditional healing methods of indigenous groups should get more appeal within societies across the globe as social attitudes begin to change.

Research done by Statistics Canada in 2011 and 2015 showed that indigenous people are diagnosed more with chronic health conditions by '8%.' (Statistics Canada, 2011, 2015). Research also shows that indigenous people are more prone to substance abuse due to post colonial factors such as less employment, little benefits and both institutional and standardised racism (Fiedeldey-van dijk et al, 2016). The 1992 age-adjusted mortality rates also show that more Native Americans die from disease and substance abuse than non-natives. For example, 340% for tuberculosis, 447% for alcoholism, and 154% for diabetes mellitus as well as accidental deaths at 168%, 34% for

homicide and 42% for suicide (Marbella et al, 1998). It can be argued because of these shocking rates, more research should be funded into the reasons as to why there is an obvious difference between Natives and non-natives. It should be highlighted that the obvious distinguishment between these two groups is that one has a more oppressed culture than the other. The non native group live in a world where their traditions are upheld in popular culture therefore the norm is to address disease and infection in a biomedical world. However if native culture was given more validation amongst the wider population then perhaps these rates would be different as it will allow native people to feel comfortable seeking help and escape the stereotypes and racism they may face everyday. 'Cultural intervention practises serve a critical function to express collective identity and address imbalances in health and well-being' (Fiedeldey-van dijk, 2016, p.2). Sharing and being proud of their 'collective identity' is crucial to being a Native American and feeling like one can express their identity without fear of racism would also help in terms of ones mental health and well-being as 'culture is vital for healing' (NNAPF et al, 2011, p.9). It is commonly known that belonging to a group or culture means that one is less likely to turn to substance abuse as a way of escaping their reality. Therefore the debate becomes one about oppression and the native identity rather than just about validating traditional healing methods within a biomedical world. 'How indigenous people think of themselves and where they socially, ethically, geographically and historically place themselves provide a certain knowledge/perception and evaluation/affect that define and sustain culture' (Fiedeldey-van dijk et al, 2016, p.2).

Due to the oppression and racism that natives still face in North America today, many still find it hard to co-exist within their native culture whilst experiencing life within the wider, more diverse American population. Because of a fear of racism, it can be argued that some find it difficult to be open about their native culture and traditions outside of their tribes and reservations. This includes natives approaches to seeking medical advice. In 1998 a study done on an Indian Health Service Clinic in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, found that 'out of 150 patients, 57 (38.0%) reported seeing a traditional healer in addition to seeking care from a physician' (Marbella et al, 1998, p.183). The study also found that native patients tended to rate their healers medical advice higher than a physician's by 64%. Natives have reported feeling a sense of unease when it comes to biomedical physicians and would rather seek support from their tribes healers. In fact only 14.8% of patients who see both physicians and healers said they would tell their physician about their alternative medical support. The other patients however reported that they think their physician 'would be skeptical or uncomfortable with the patients use of a healer' (Marbella et al, 1998, p.183). As well as native patients feeling as though they cannot be open about their culture and medical traditions to a

biomedical professional, the type of health care they receive also calls for concern as several patients report receiving conflicting advice from their healers and physicians (Marbella et al, 1998). It can be argued then that it is crucial for the well being, health and safety of native peoples, if the biomedical world were more accepting of native traditional healing methods so that treatment of individuals was not be at risk. If there was open communication between the physician, patient and healer than a physician can have a better understanding of how to treat a native patient whilst being respectful to their culture and beliefs. This has also been proven to be a successful benefit for every party involved as was found with the use of the Sweat Lodge Ceremony and therapy for mental health conditions (Herring, 1996). One can argue that by giving native healing traditions more recognition then these statistics can also be improved which in turn will improve the healthcare received by natives, which ultimately will improve the health and well-being of millions of native people living in North America today.

In terms of whether traditional healing methods should be validated in a biomedical world, especially for Native Americans, it can be argued that by doing so, this will help save the lives of millions of indigenous people. In a time of political uncertainty, stigmatisation and racism and the ever changing diversity of culture and society, by recognising that traditional healing methods are just as important and effective as biomedical treatment, indigenous people can begin to overcome the barriers and limitations of rights that they face everyday. If a wider population could understand, respect and accept different cultural traditions then perhaps this will begin to dissolve racism not just for native people but for collective groups as a whole as more fight for their rights. This movement can and should involve traditional healing methods recognition in a biomedical world. The statistics that were stated earlier in this essay clearly show that addressing medical problems with a cultural sensitivity means that more indigenous people can have access to adequate healthcare and this will bring down the mortality rates of these groups. Kirmayer, Gone and Moses summarises this well when they write, 'historical suppression of their cultures has been recognised by Indigenous peoples as a cause of suffering' (Kirmayer, Gone and Moses, 2014, p.311). To conclude, it is therefore important to overcome the issues of keeping traditional healing methods outside of the biomedical world by allowing room for it by validating these people and their methods so that the health of these populations as a whole can be improved. 'There is a continuum of spiritual and physical needs of a patient, and healers and physicians working together could effectively cover that continuum' (Marbella et al, 1998, p.185).

Word Count: 2471 words

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