Commentary

DIFFERENT PATHWAYS TO KNOWLEDGE ABOUT DIFFERENT PATHWAYS TO RECOVERY: A COMMENT ON THE PEOPLE AWAKENING STUDY

The People Awakening (PA) study [1] illustrates the value of studying drinking problems in culturally diverse groups with methodologies that fit the research questions and the cultural context of inquiry. The study's qualitative, participatory methods were well suited for an initial exploration of how Alaskan Natives (AN) initiate and maintain sobriety. It is unlikely that quantitative or experimental methods would have been accepted initially or that they would have provided the rich data set upon which the authors developed their heuristic model of recovery.

The study thus exemplifies evidentiary pluralism [2], an approach that selects research methods in service of content questions, and not the other way around. Hypothesis-generating studies such as the PA project that use qualitative methods are appropriate when knowledge is developing, and the goal is to form proper questions for future research. Forcing quantitative or experimental methods prematurely can delay knowledge development, whereas well-conducted qualitative studies can propel it forward.

As one example, recall MacAndrew and Edgerton's [3] early anthropological research that documented cross-cultural variations in post-consumption social behaviors that had been ascribed previously to the pharmacological action of ethanol. Their findings set the stage for experimental research on alcohol 'expectancies' that discredited earlier notions about loss-of-control drinking and laid the foundation for assessment and treatment approaches such as relapse prevention that were concerned with context (e.g. [4,5]).

The PA study also reminds us anew how limiting it is to build models of recovery based on clinical samples alone [6–8]. People resolve drinking problems in different ways, and treatment is but one influential contextual element. By studying natural resolutions, the cultural and other contextual elements that motivate and sustain positive change begin to emerge with clarity not possible in studies of problem drinkers who seek help.

The generality of several specific findings merits wider investigation. First, 'experimenting with sobriety', the third of five developmental sequences in the PA model [1], predates stable sobriety and typically involves several periods of abstinence followed by a return to abusive drinking. However, unlike in 12-Step models of recovery and relapse, this phase is not viewed as a failed resolution attempt, but as an opportunity to experience 'what life could be like without alcohol abuse'. The problem drinker makes contact, albeit for a limited time, with the benefits of sobriety and can begin to develop the resources and motivational configuration necessary for eventual sustained success. Setting aside the negative prognostications that often accompany this sequence and reframing it as an important rehearsal period may facilitate the often lengthy resolution process.

Another set of intriguing findings concerns the distinctions drawn between Stages I and II sobriety, the model's fourth and fifth sequences. Stage I was universal, and involved active coping with urges to drink during the early final resolution period. As in the treatment literature, common strategies included avoiding alcohol, engaging in activities incompatible with drinking and finding a sobriety partner. Only some participants had progressed past this stage to Stage II. They reported synthesizing sobriety into their lives, experiencing 'life as it is meant to be lived', and were no longer preoccupied with their recovery process or about backsliding. This transition from relatively fragile to stable sobriety has not been reported in the mainstream recovery literature, probably because no one has looked for it.

In characterizing Stage II sobriety, the PA study provides another insight. These participants' lives were intertwined with their families and communities in positive ways, and they were said to be experiencing *ellangneq*. This native Yup'ik concept means to 'wake up' and involves heightened sensitivity to and involvement in the natural and spiritual worlds and with fulfilling one's responsibilities to the 'extended kinship structure'. While identified as an AN-specific component of the recovery process, the social relational quality of *ellangneq* has much in common with other accounts that emphasize the role of the family and social network in motivating, sustaining or, alternatively, undermining recovery [9].

The authors emphasized the parallels between *ellangneq* and mindfulness as practised in Buddhism and its secular derivatives, and others are more qualified to comment on that dimension [10]; but the positive connectedness with kin and community that the concept encompasses seems universal in the broadly defined recovery literature. Ironically, alcohol and drug treatment programs (as well as drug control laws and policies) that take people away from their families and communities may be abandoning working with one of the most powerful forces for recovery. The PA study offers a fresh glimpse of how people can heal themselves within the

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context of kinship and without intrusion from such external mechanisms of control [1].

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