

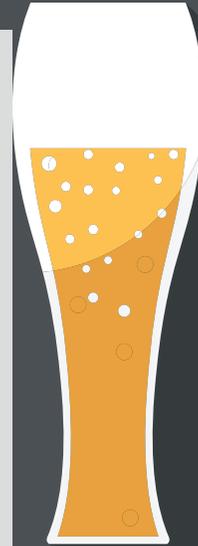
# Social Science to Service: Successes and Disconnects

By Peter L. Myers, PhD



It should not come as a surprise to anyone practicing in the addiction field that addiction science is rife with “cross overs” from the social sciences, particularly psychology. The question becomes how do we, as clinicians, best use traditionally anthropological findings to serve our patients. The answer begins with looking at examples of how psychoactive substance use is woven throughout the fabric of social life across various cultures and ethnic groups. For example, among the Itseo of Kenya, “beer parties” are an important social event that are used to organize work groups to accomplish much in a short time. Accordingly, what we call “neighbors” are known to the Itseo as “those with whom we share beer.”<sup>1</sup> The Kofyar of Nigeria similarly place a heavy cultural emphasis on beer making and consumption. Traditionally, bride price and rent can be paid with beer, and words for periods of time are based on the brewing cycle.<sup>2</sup>

Even among those who do not use alcohol as a form a currency, alcohol and drug use are ritualized across the globe. In numerous cultures on all continents, it is considered disrespectful and unfriendly to decline a drink.<sup>3</sup> Making a verbal toast before drinking is pervasive, and in the Republic of Georgia, skilled toastmasters enjoy celebrity status.<sup>4</sup> Countless cultures also engage in reciprocity in ordering of drinking rounds.<sup>5</sup> Substance use consistently most frequently takes place in a specialized, public place that is a focal point for community activity; a “third place” outside of work and home.<sup>6</sup> For example, even opium dens essentially served as a form of social club featuring eating and discussion, along, of course, with opium consumption; this reality is contrary to our image of a dark den filled with stuporous “dope fiends.”<sup>7</sup>



Anthropologists recognize the cultural shaping of intoxicated behavior, known as “drunken comportment.”<sup>8</sup> Drunkenness is considered by some as a “time out” that allows for public behavior otherwise forbidden. Ethnographer Mac Marshall (1983) also documented “pseudo-intoxicated” behavior in a dozen cultures, where the drinker starts staggering even at the first sip. He noted that despite this overt display of premature drunkenness, the rowdy drunken brawlers studiously avoided damage to the hut of the ethnographer.<sup>9</sup>

Anthropologists also recognize the association between substance use disorders and stressful or failed acculturation. This association should be considered when working to promote recovery in minority communities. William Madsen conducted a study of a Mexican community in South Texas. He found that this community abandoned its home culture but did not successfully integrate with the Anglo community. They were reviled by traditionalists as “agringados”, or “like the gringos,” a term for Anglos. Another study found that First Nations communities across Canada, which have been stripped of their culture and are living in poverty, are devastated by high rates of suicide, alcoholic liver disease and psychoses, and youthful solvent

abuse.<sup>10</sup> Jacobs and Gill (2002) wrote about a Skid Row-esqe culture of Inuits far from home. The powerful social networks in their “counter-culture” made it difficult to recruit them to treatment.<sup>11</sup>

Counselors and trainers should be aware that culture is rapidly changing, resulting in the sentiment that the past is a foreign country. Cultural trainings go quickly out of date and can be fatally anachronistic. It is crucial that we are diligent to prevent considering ATOD-related culture in only broad brush parameters and miss the differences in subgroups such as of social class, cultural beliefs and norms, population density, and region. Treatment providers must act as anthropologists and work to learn about their clients’ beliefs and the resulting effect on their behavior and use use of psychoactive substances.

**ENDNOTES**

- <sup>1</sup>Karp, I. (1980) Beer Drinking and Social Experience in an African Society. In I. Karp and C. Bird (Eds.). *Explorations in African Systems of Thought*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- <sup>2</sup>Netting, R. (1979) Beer as a Locus of Value Among the West African Kofyar. In M. Marshall (Ed.), *Beliefs, Behavior, and Alcoholic Beverages - A Cross Cultural Survey*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- <sup>3</sup>Heath, DB. (2000). *Drinking Occasions*. Philadelphia, PA: Brunner-Mazel/Taylor & Francis, pp. 111–15.

- <sup>4</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup>Doughty, PL. (1979). The social uses of alcoholic beverages in a Peruvian community. In M. Marshall (Ed.), *Beliefs, Behavior, and Alcoholic Beverages - A Cross Cultural Survey*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. p. 67.
- <sup>6</sup>Oldenberg, R. (1999). *The Great Good Place*. New York: Marlowe.
- <sup>7</sup>Westermeyer, J. (1974). Opium Dens: A Social Resource for Addicts in Laos. *Arch. Gen. Psychiatry*, 31(2): 237–249; Westermeyer, J. (1982). *Poppies, Pipes, and People: Opium and its use in Laos*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Knipe, E. (1995). *Culture, Society, and Drugs*. Prospect Heights: Waveland Press.
- <sup>8</sup>MacAndrew, C and Edgerton, RB. (1969). *Drunken Comportment: A Social Explanation*. Chicago: Adline Publishing.
- <sup>9</sup>Marshall, M. (1979). *Weekend Warriors: Alcohol in a Micronesian Culture*. Explorations in World Ethnology. Palo Alto: Mayfield Publishing Co.
- <sup>10</sup>Samson, C, Wilson, J, & Mazower, J. (1999) *Canada's Tibet: The Killing of the Innu*. Survival International, London: UK. Retrieved at <http://assets.survivalinternational.org/static/files/books/InnuReport.pdf>; Young, TJ. (1991). Native American Drinking: A Neglected Subject of Study and Research. *J. Drug Educ* 21(1): pp. 65–72.
- <sup>11</sup>Jacobs, K & Gill, K. (2009). Substance Abuse in an Urban Aboriginal Population. *J Ethn Subst Abuse* 1:1, pp. 7–25.



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