

SOCIETY FOR ANTHROPOLOGICAL SCIENCES

First H. Russell Bernard Graduate Student Paper Prize

The Society for Anthropological Sciences (SAS) awarded Nicole L. Henderson (University of Alabama) the first H. Russell Bernard Graduate Student Paper Prize for her presentation, “Medical Disease or Moral Defect? Stigma Attribution and Cultural Models of Addiction Causality in a University Population,” at the 115th AAA Annual Meeting in Minneapolis. Henderson’s research is summarized here in honor of her award-winning paper.

Congratulations to Margaret du Bray (Arizona State University) and Avery Mc-Neece (University of Alabama) for winning the Student Travel Awards for their respective presentations, “Anger and Sadness: Emotional Responses to Climate Change in Four Island Nations” and “Making a Bill: How Ways of Speaking Impact Behavior in Healthcare Settings.”—Toni Copeland

MEDICAL DISEASE OR MORAL DEFECT?

By Nicole L. Henderson

At present, people in the United States are undergoing major shifts in opinions as efforts to move substance use disorder into a strictly medical context have risen to the forefront of political and medical discourse. This changing atmosphere creates an ideal setting for studying how culture influences the ways individuals think about substance use and people with substance use disorder. People develop beliefs about mental illness through a variety of life experiences. These beliefs are compiled in a “folk psychiatry” and are guiding factors of public attitudes towards individuals with mental illness.

This study used cognitive anthropological theory and methods to systematically research the contents of these folk psychiatric models. In this orientation, culture is viewed as a set of shared cognitive models that allow individuals to organize



Stephen Chrisomalis presenting Nicole Henderson's award.

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and understand the world around them. Here, cultural models are important factors shaping how people understand and respond to those with substance use disorder.

This project found that among 212 undergraduate students at the University of Alabama, there is a shared cultural model that is organized around five themes: biological, self-medication, familial, social, and hedonistic. *Biological* causes refer to innate properties of individual users or the substances. *Self-Medication* refers to physical and psychological stresses and the use of drugs or alcohol to cope with them. *Familial* causes include experiences of the individual within their family, while *social* causes originate from the individual's peer group. Finally, *hedonistic* causes accentuate short-term, pleasure-seeking behaviors.

Cultural consensus analysis confirmed shared agreement about the relative importance or influence of these causes in the development of substance use disorders. The traditional focus of cultural consensus analysis is agreement, but newer techniques of analysis have enabled the more detailed exploration of the points

at which groups *diverge* from this overall agreement. Residual agreement analysis identifies patterned subgroup agreement beyond that of the shared group consensus. Here, this method uncovered two subgroups that view addiction causality in alternative ways, either as a medical disease or a moral defect. The “medical” perspective more heavily emphasized the biological and self-medication causes and downplayed the social and hedonistic causes, while the “moral” perspective was the direct opposite.

Henderson’s research also explored the relationship between adherence to these alternative emphases and the perception of substance abusers. Stigma has been a major focus of research on mental health and illness; however, relatively little is known about what influences people to attribute stigma. In a multiple regression analysis that controlled for demographic variables, individuals who prioritized the social/hedonistic causes attributed higher levels of stigma towards individuals with substance use disorder than individuals who prioritized the biological/self-medication causes.

Given these findings, it is important to note that many educational programs seeking to reduce drug-use among children and teenagers still advocate for what is, essentially, a moral model of causality. In a sense, through attempting to teach students not to use drugs, these programs teach students to stigmatize people with substance use disorder, which may or may not be inadvertent. In this way, the social processes and institutions that were originally created to reduce and control substance use may actually promote the stigmatization of drug-users. ☺

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