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Bingo halls and smoking: Perspectives of First Nations women

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine bingo halls as a frequent site for exposure to secondhand cigarette smoke for First Nations women in rural communities. Thematic analysis of interviews with key informants, group discussions with young women, and observations in the study communities revealed that smoky bingo halls provided an important refuge from everyday experiences of stress and trauma, as well as increased women's risk for addiction, marginalization, and criticism. The findings illustrate how the bingo economy in isolated, rural First Nation communities influences tobacco use and second-hand smoke exposure, and how efforts to establish smoke-free bingos can be supported.

1. Introduction

High rates of exposure to secondhand cigarette smoke exist in many Aboriginal communities in Canada where rates of smoking are higher than the general population (McKennitt, 2007; Assembly of First Nations, First Nations Information Governance Committee, 2007), and the number of Aboriginal women of childbearing years who smoke far exceed those of non-Aboriginal women (Reading, 1999). Aboriginal households report that 32% (compared to provincial rates of 18%) of households with children under age 11 experience daily or nearly daily exposure to second-hand smoke (SHS) (Angus Reid Group, 1997). In response to concerns by some women living in First Nation reserve communities in northern British Columbia (BC), Canada, we began to study the problem of smoking and SHS exposure particularly as it related to women and young children. In the course of this research local bingos held in community halls were identified as an important social activity for women that put them and their children at risk for exposure to SHS, and a public space where smoking was negotiated and often contested. As such examining women's experiences at bingo provided an opportunity to understand the complex ways that relationships, policies and power play out in this setting, and influence smoking practices and exposure to SHS exposure. The purpose of this analysis was, therefore, to examine practices and factors influencing exposure to SHS in bingo halls through women's experiences.

2. Background literature

The study of Aboriginal communities and women living in these communities requires an understanding of power relations within contemporary and historical social contexts. To draw attention to these contexts, we use an intersectional lens. This theoretical perspective interrogates how multiple social inequalities of race, gender, social class, place and other dimensions of difference are simultaneously generated, maintained and challenged at the institutional and individual levels, shaping the health of societies, communities and individuals (Hankivsky and Christoffersen, 2008; Weber, 2006). Although Aboriginal women have traditionally held a highly respected identity as life givers that has maintained egalitarian societies for many years (Anderson, 2000a, 2000b; Kulchyski et al., 1998; Baskin, 1982; Armstrong, 1996; Annett, 2001), this identity has been systematically diminished through the processes of colonization (Deiter and Otway, 2001). Social disruption through residential schools, as well as the loss of land, nationhood, traditional lifestyle, and cultural identity have marginalized Aboriginal women, and

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contributed to the unhealthy situations that many Aboriginal women experience and deal with today (Fiske and Browne, 2006; Smith et al., 2005). Their roles, position and power have been eroded to the point that Aboriginal women are one of the most disadvantaged groups in Canada (Dion Stout and Kipling, 1998).These historical influences, along with contemporary experiences of economic and social disadvantage, and disrupted family relationships have contributed to high rates of substance use by both men and women including cigarette smoking.

Efforts to reduce exposure to SHS are influenced by a number of factors in First Nation reserve communities. Although tobacco control policies restricting smoking in public venues have been in effect in Canada for several years, they are not consistently practiced in First Nation communities. Tobacco control legislation introduced in several Canadian provinces included exemptions for First Nation reserves. However, these exemptions were struck down in court in one province and resulted in challenges to the decision by First Nations bands on the basis that provincial law had no jurisdictional authority in federally protected lands (CBC News Online, 2006). While many band councils enforce smoking bans in some public venues in reserve communities, bingos and casinos are often exceptions (Lehotsky, 2006; The Edmonton Journal, 2008). In BC, while there has been no court-based challenge to provincially legislated smoking bans, the implementation of smoking bans in public spaces is not consistent in all communities. Without definitive policies in many First Nation communities, smoking and exposure to SHS in public venues continues to be a part of everyday life. In particular, community halls where bingo is played expose participants to SHS on a regular basis.

Bingo has been a popular activity in communities in Canada for many years. Its popularity has grown out of its position as a socially acceptable pastime and a family friendly community fundraising activity. Sports teams, churches, and small community organizations have often used bingo as a means of fundraising. However, with its growing popularity bingo has also been constructed as a form of gambling that is associated with addiction, crime and exploitation of marginal populations. There is a gender discourse surrounding bingo as a form of gambling that is more closely associated with women. For example, there was concern that women attending bingo in the post 1950s era would neglect their roles as "housekeepers, mothers, and consumers" because of their addiction to the game (Morton, 2003). In addition, there are accounts of social workers policing the activities of single mothers in Northern Ontario who played bingo for recreation and to subsidize their income in order to deduct the mothers' bingo winnings from their family benefit cheques (Hillyard Little, 1994).

Although gambling has been a part of traditional Aboriginal culture over many years, its meaning and role has changed over time. Wardman et al. (2001) report that bingo has become an important economic resource for many Aboriginal communities, and they speculate that Aboriginal populations' preference for bingo might also be related to access and availability of the game. Because bingo is so much a part of community life in many First Nation reserve communities and a space where women (and children) are exposed to cigarette smoke it is an important context in which to explore how SHS is constructed, negotiated and contested in public spaces with respect to the women and children who attend bingo.

3. Methods

This analysis is based on data collected in a larger ethnographic study to understand how smoke and exposure to SHS influenced the lives of First Nation young mothers (16–35 years of age) and their children. Using a community-partnership model, the focus of the study was determined by representatives of the community, and team members from two health centers serving five of the six communities (DS, WW) and a community-based research assistant (RM) actively participated in the research. Approval for the project was obtained from a university-based ethical review committee. The communities were informed of the project and invited to participate through both letters of introduction and presentations at band council meetings. The project commenced with the knowledge and support, and where required approval, of each of the band councils.

3.1. Study setting

The study communities included six First Nation rural reserve villages in the Gitxsan territory in the northwest region of British Columbia. Populations in each village ranged from 480 to 2000 and they are clustered within a 60 km radius. The average annual income ranges from $9100 to $14,688 for women, and $8144–$10,816 for men in this region (Statistics Canada, 2008). With an unemployment rate of 30–50%, many families depend on various forms of social assistance. Furthermore, in these rural communities there is a lack of safe, affordable transportation as well as limited resources and opportunities for socializing (e.g., no cafes, restaurants or libraries with evening hours). Only one village provides day-time daycare year round. Other resources (e.g., special programs, dentists, and grocery stores) are located in larger neighboring towns up to an hour away by car, although many cannot afford cars and roads are often treacherous to impassable in winter. In addition, the lingering effects of residential schools are widely recognized in the region and were evident in experiences of substance use, abuse, and depression to cope with losses.

In each community, hereditary chiefs working with elected band councils set policies for their respective communities and administer local services. The band councils operate independently of one another on local issues. Although hereditary chiefs collaborate on a tribal council to address a range of issues with external bodies (e.g., related to land claims, aboriginal fisheries, and the devastation of remaining Gitxsan lands caused by logging), issues deemed to be under the direct jurisdiction of individual band councils are not addressed collectively.

Community halls, managed and operated by band councils, provided a centrally located venue for events in each of the communities including bingo. For all the study villages, bingo was one of the main social activities. Held several times per week in each community, bingos provided a critical source of revenue in a region that lacked a strong economic base. In the study region, bingos were regulated informally—regular bingo nights in each community were well known and "encroachment" on one another's night was discouraged. This helped bring in people from surrounding areas and "new money" to bingo revenues. When bingos were run by band councils or community organizations (e.g., the Ice Arena Committee) attendance at bingo was viewed as a demonstration of community support by locals, and participants took consolation in the belief that proceeds from bingo (and tobacco sales) would be used to the benefit of reserve communities (e.g., to maintain community halls and recreational facilities, purchasing sports equipment for children, etc.). On occasion local families or groups external to communities rented community halls to sponsor a bingo as an additional source of income. In these cases, there were sometimes complaints about a lack of transparency in the way proceeds were used.