

Cultural Guardians: The Sociological Significance of Women Traditional Healers in Community Health and Well-being

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Abstract: This research article delves into the sociology of women traditional healers, highlighting their pivotal roles, challenges and contributions within their communities. Traditional healing, deeply rooted in cultural beliefs and historical contexts, has served as a vital healthcare system for centuries, often complementing modern medical practices. Women have been instrumental in these practices, acting as primary caregivers, herbalists and spiritual guides, yet they face significant societal stigma, legal barriers and economic constraints that undermine their contributions. The article examines the historical evolution of traditional healing, the cultural significance of women healers and the impact of colonialism on their status. Through various sociological perspectives, including functionalism, conflict theory and symbolic interactionism, the research underscores the importance of recognizing the unique challenges faced by women healers, such as marginalization and stigmatization. Furthermore, it emphasizes their essential role in promoting community health, preserving cultural heritage and integrating traditional practices with modern medicine. The findings advocate for future research to explore the intersectionality of race, class and gender in traditional healing, aiming to foster an inclusive healthcare environment that values the contributions of women traditional healers.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Traditional Healing

Traditional healing encompasses a variety of practices rooted in the cultural beliefs and historical contexts of specific communities. Traditional healing practices have been an integral part of many cultures for centuries, providing holistic care that often complements modern medical practices. It includes the use of herbal remedies, spiritual healing and community rituals aimed at restoring health and well-being. This research article aims to explore the

sociology of women traditional healers, examining their roles, challenges and contributions to their communities.

1.2. Traditional Healers

Traditional healers are individuals who provide health care services based on the knowledge, cultural beliefs and practices of their communities that are rooted in the cultural beliefs and traditions of a community. These healers often utilize herbal remedies, spiritual guidance and holistic approaches to address physical, emotional, spiritual ailments and indigenous methods (World Health Organization, 2013).

1.3. Overview of Women in Traditional Healing

Women have historically been pivotal in traditional healing practices, serving as primary caregivers and utilizing herbal medicine to address health issues. Despite their significant contributions, they encounter societal stigma, legal barriers and economic constraints. Their roles extend beyond healthcare; they act as community leaders and educators. Women traditional healers possess extensive knowledge of medicinal plants, often aiding marginalized populations lacking access to formal healthcare. Studying these healers reveals insights into gender dynamics and cultural practices, challenging the historical marginalization of their contributions and fostering a more inclusive understanding of healthcare (Bourgeault et al., 2015).

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

2.1. Evolution of Traditional Healing Practices

Traditional healing practices have evolved over centuries, influenced by cultural, social and environmental factors. In many societies, these practices were the primary means of healthcare

before the advent of modern medicine. The knowledge of medicinal plants, healing rituals and spiritual practices was often passed down through generations, with women frequently serving as the primary transmitters of this knowledge. Women have been key figures in these practices, often serving as midwives, herbalists and spiritual guides (Mbelekani et al., 2017; Nelms & Gorski, 2006). The transition to biomedical approaches has not diminished the relevance of traditional healing; rather, it has led to a coexistence of both systems, with many individuals seeking traditional remedies alongside conventional treatments (Kleinman, 1980).

2.2. Role of Women in Historical Healing Practices

Historically, women have been pivotal in traditional healing, serving as midwives, herbalists and spiritual healers, thus acting as custodians of medicinal knowledge (Bourgeault, 2002). Their roles extend beyond healing to include cultural transmission, counseling and community leadership. Women diagnose illnesses, prescribe herbal remedies, perform rituals and provide spiritual guidance, often enhancing their credibility through their caregiving roles (Bourgeault et al., 2015). Despite their significant contributions, the recognition of women healers is frequently diminished by patriarchal structures that favor male practitioners, highlighting the need to acknowledge and value their essential roles in healthcare systems (Struthers, 2003; Rooney et al., 2023)

2.3. Cultural Significance of Women Healers

Women traditional healers hold significant cultural status as vital links to ancestral knowledge and practices, embodying their communities' heritage. Their roles extend beyond healing to include community rituals and education, emphasizing the preservation of cultural identity (Hernandez, 2015). Revered as primary healers in Indigenous communities, they utilize local flora and fauna for treatment, highlighting the need for sociological understanding of their practices and challenges (Struthers, 2000) Traditional healing varies across cultures, viewed holistically, encompassing physical, emotional and spiritual well-being. In African cultures, healers mediate between spiritual and physical realms, while Asian practices like Ayurveda emphasize interconnectedness (Mokgobi, 2014; Kumar et al., 2017).

2.4. Impact of Colonialism on Traditional Healing Practices

Colonialism has significantly impacted traditional healing practices, particularly marginalizing women healers. Colonial powers dismissed indigenous knowledge as primitive, imposing Western medical practices that disrupted the transmission of healing knowledge and altered gender dynamics, allowing men to dominate medicine. This legacy continues to affect the recognition of women traditional healers today. Despite their vital contributions, women healers have historically faced devaluation, often labeled as "quacks" (Hunt, 2016). Such marginalization has led to a loss of knowledge and a decline in their status, highlighting the urgent need to reclaim and recognize their essential roles in healthcare.

3. SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

3.1. Functionalist Perspective

3.1.1. Role of Women Healers in Community Health

From a functionalist perspective, women traditional healers play a vital role in promoting community health. They serve as accessible healthcare providers, particularly in rural areas where medical facilities may be scarce. Their understanding of local health issues and cultural practices enables them to address the specific needs of their communities effectively.

3.1.2. Social Cohesion and Support Networks

Women healers often act as central figures in their communities, fostering social cohesion and support networks. Their roles extend beyond healing; they are often involved in community rituals, education and conflict resolution. This multifaceted involvement strengthens community ties and enhances collective well-being.

3.2. Conflict Perspective

3.2.1. Gender Power Dynamics in Healing Practices

The conflict perspective highlights the power dynamics that shape the experiences of women traditional healers. Despite their critical roles, women often face systemic barriers that limit their authority and recognition. In many cultures, traditional healing is male-dominated, with women relegated to subordinate positions. This gendered hierarchy reflects broader societal inequalities and reinforces the marginalization of women healers.

3.2.2. Marginalization of Women Healers

Women traditional healers frequently encounter marginalization within both traditional and modern

healthcare systems. Their practices may be dismissed as unscientific, leading to a lack of support and recognition. This marginalization not only affects their professional standing but also impacts the communities that rely on their services.

3.3. Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

3.3.1. Meaning and Identity of Women Healers

The symbolic interactionist perspective focuses on the meanings and identities associated with being a woman traditional healer. For many women, their role as healers is intertwined with their cultural identity and personal agency. They often derive a sense of purpose and empowerment from their work, challenging traditional gender roles and asserting their place within their communities.

3.3.2 Patient-Healer Interactions

The interactions between women healers and their patients are rich with meaning and significance. These relationships often involve deep trust and respect, as patients seek not only physical healing but also emotional and spiritual support. The healing process is thus a collaborative endeavor, shaped by cultural beliefs and personal experiences.

3.4. Intersectionality in Healing Practices

Intersectionality is a key concept in understanding the diverse experiences of women traditional healers. This framework considers how various social identities—such as race, class and ethnicity—intersect to shape the challenges and opportunities faced by these healers. For example, indigenous women healers may encounter unique barriers related to their cultural identity and socioeconomic status, which can impact their ability to practice and gain recognition (Crenshaw, 1989).

3.5. Social Capital and Community Trust

Social capital plays a vital role in the effectiveness of women traditional healers. The trust and relationships that healers build within their communities can enhance their ability to provide care and support. Women healers often rely on their social networks to disseminate health information and gather resources, which can be particularly important in areas with limited access to formal health care (Putnam, 2000). Understanding the dynamics of social capital can help to illuminate the strengths and resilience of women healers in their communities.

4. SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES AND FRAMEWORKS

4.1. Feminist Theory

Feminist theory serves as a critical framework for analyzing the experiences of women traditional healers, emphasizing the role of gender in power dynamics and social structures. Scholars argue that traditional healing practices are often undervalued and marginalized in patriarchal societies, leading to the stigmatization of women healers (Tong, 2009). By applying feminist theory, researchers can investigate how gender influences the recognition and legitimacy of these practices. Furthermore, feminist theory advocates for traditional healing to be acknowledged as a legitimate form of healthcare deserving recognition and support, challenging patriarchal narratives that have historically marginalized women healers (Bourgeault et al., 2015).

4.2. Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism focuses on the meanings and interpretations individuals attach to their social interactions. In the context of women traditional healers, this perspective allows for an exploration of how these healers construct their identities and navigate societal perceptions. Through their interactions with clients and the community, women healers negotiate their roles and challenge stereotypes associated with traditional healing (Blumer, 1969).

4.3. Structural Functionalism

Structural functionalism examines the social structures and institutions that contribute to societal stability. This perspective can be applied to understand the role of women traditional healers in maintaining community health and cohesion. Women healers often serve as vital resources for their communities, providing not only medical care but also social support and cultural continuity (Parsons, 1951). Their contributions are essential for the functioning of traditional healthcare systems.

5. CASE STUDIES OF WOMEN TRADITIONAL HEALERS

5.1. Indigenous Women Healers in Australia

Indigenous women healers in Australia, often referred to as "traditional healers," play a crucial role in maintaining the health and well-being of their communities. They utilize a holistic approach to healing, integrating physical, emotional and spiritual dimensions. Their practices are deeply rooted in

cultural traditions and are essential for the preservation of Indigenous knowledge systems.

5.2. African Traditional Healers

In many African cultures, women traditional healers are vital to healthcare, often serving as the first point of contact for health issues. They provide services ranging from herbal medicine to spiritual healing, significantly impacting health outcomes and cultural continuity. In South Africa, the government recognizes their role as essential within the healthcare system (Mokgobi, 2014). In Busoga, Uganda, these healers address mental health through holistic approaches, integrating herbal remedies, spiritual practices and counselling (Lahon & Bage, 2023). Despite their importance, women healers face challenges regarding legal recognition and integration with formal healthcare services, highlighting the need for supportive policies.

5.3. Indigenous Women Healers in North America

Indigenous women healers in North America are vital custodians of traditional knowledge, employing herbal remedies, spiritual practices and community rituals to foster health and well-being. Their roles are crucial in preserving cultural heritage and promoting holistic health, as evidenced by studies of Ojibwa and Cree women healers who serve as spiritual leaders within their communities. Despite their significance, these women face challenges such as cultural appropriation and marginalization. Their practices, deeply intertwined with cultural identity and spirituality, emphasize the importance of holistic approaches to health (Kirmayer et al., 2009; Cajete, 1994).

5.4. Asian Women Healers and Their Practices

In Asia, women traditional healers are often involved in practices such as Ayurveda, Traditional Chinese Medicine and folk healing. These women play a crucial role in their communities, providing care that is deeply rooted in cultural beliefs and practices. For example, in India, women practitioners of Ayurveda are gaining recognition for their contributions to health care, yet they still encounter barriers related to formal education and professional recognition (Kumar et al., 2017).

6. CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN TRADITIONAL HEALERS

6.1. Societal Perceptions and Stigmatization

Women traditional healers frequently confront societal stigma and negative perceptions regarding their practices, often deemed inferior to biomedical approaches. This marginalization undermines their authority and effectiveness, deterring individuals from seeking their services and adversely affecting community health (Bourgeault, 2002). Despite their vital contributions, these healers lack formal recognition and support from modern healthcare systems, limiting access to resources and training. Gender stereotypes further exacerbate their challenges, as they may be viewed as "witches" or "frauds," which diminishes their credibility (Bourgeault et al., 2015). Such stigmatization not only restricts their practice but also perpetuates discrimination within their communities (Lahon & Bage, 2000).

6.2. Legal and Institutional Barriers

Legal and institutional barriers significantly challenge women traditional healers globally. In many countries, traditional healing practices lack formal recognition and regulation, resulting in inadequate support and protection for these practitioners. This legal ambiguity can lead to the criminalization of their practices, exposing them to harassment and persecution. Consequently, women healers face discrimination and stigmatization, further marginalizing their vital contributions to healthcare. The absence of legal protection limits their access to resources and undermines their ability to operate legally, ultimately hindering their effectiveness in providing essential health services (World Health Organization, 2013; Hunt, 2016).

6.3. Preservation of Traditional Knowledge

The preservation of traditional knowledge is a critical challenge for women healers. As globalization and modernization continue to influence health practices, there is a risk of losing valuable indigenous knowledge. Efforts to document and transmit this knowledge are essential to ensure its survival and continued relevance in contemporary healthcare.

6.4. Economic Challenges

Economic challenges also impact women traditional healers, as they often lack access to resources and funding to support their practices. Many women healers operate within informal economies, making it difficult to sustain their livelihoods and may lack access to financial resources and training. This economic vulnerability can limit their ability to provide care and contribute to their communities and

limit their ability to expand their practices and reach a broader audience (Giddens, 2013; Putnam, 2000).

7. CONTRIBUTIONS OF WOMEN TRADITIONAL HEALERS

7.1. Health and Well-being of Communities

Women traditional healers play a vital role in promoting the health and well-being of their communities. They provide accessible healthcare services, particularly in rural and underserved areas where conventional healthcare may be limited. Their holistic approach to health addresses not only physical ailments but also emotional and spiritual well-being (Cajete, 1994). It can complement modern medical practices and provide patients with a more comprehensive understanding of their health (Kirmayer et al., 2009).

7.2. Preservation of Cultural Heritage

Women traditional healers are essential for the preservation of cultural heritage and traditional knowledge. They serve as custodians of medicinal practices, passing down their knowledge to future generations. This transmission of knowledge is crucial for maintaining cultural identity and resilience within communities (Hernandez, 2015).

7.3. Integration with Modern Medicine

The integration of traditional healing practices with modern medicine has the potential to enhance health outcomes. Collaborative approaches that recognize the value of both traditional and modern practices can lead to more effective health care solutions (Mokgobi, 2014). For example, some health care systems are beginning to incorporate traditional healers into their frameworks, recognizing their role in community health.

7.4. Community Health Outcomes

The contributions of women traditional healers to community health outcomes are significant. Their knowledge of local health practices and resources can improve access to care and promote health equity within marginalized communities (Kumar et al., 2017). By addressing the unique needs of their communities, women healers can play a vital role in enhancing overall health and well-being.

7.5. Empowerment of Women

The practice of traditional healing can empower women by providing them with a sense of agency and autonomy. By preserving and practicing traditional

knowledge, women healers assert their agency and challenge societal norms. Women healers often occupy respected positions within their communities, challenging traditional gender roles and contributing to gender equality. Their work not only benefits individual health but also fosters community empowerment and social change (Tong, 2009).

8. IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should investigate the experiences of women traditional healers, emphasizing their resilience amid societal changes. It is crucial to examine the intersectionality of race, class and gender within traditional healing practices to understand the challenges and contributions of these healers. Additionally, studies must focus on the recognition and integration of women traditional healers into formal healthcare systems, addressing legal and regulatory barriers. Exploring diverse cultural contexts and the impact of institutional frameworks on their practices will enhance collaboration between traditional and modern healthcare systems, ultimately fostering an inclusive environment that values traditional knowledge.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

To support women traditional healers, policymakers must recognize and regulate traditional healing practices, ensuring legal protection and resources for these practitioners. Initiatives should promote the integration of traditional healing into formal healthcare systems, fostering collaboration between traditional and biomedical practitioners. Acknowledging the contributions of women healers is vital for advancing health equity and improving health outcomes. By integrating traditional practices into healthcare and safeguarding women's roles, policymakers can amplify their voices and value their essential contributions to community health.

10. CONCLUSION

The exploration of women traditional healers reveals their indispensable role in the healthcare landscape, particularly within their communities. These healers not only provide essential medical services but also serve as cultural custodians, preserving and transmitting traditional knowledge that is vital for maintaining cultural identity. Despite their significant contributions, women traditional healers face numerous challenges, including societal stigma, legal barriers and economic constraints, which undermine their authority and effectiveness.

The sociological perspectives applied to this study highlight the complex interplay of gender dynamics, power structures and cultural significance surrounding women healers. From functionalist views that emphasize their role in community health and social cohesion to conflict perspectives that expose the systemic marginalization they endure, it is evident that a multifaceted approach is necessary to understand their experiences fully. Furthermore, the application of feminist theory underscores the need for recognition and validation of traditional healing practices as legitimate forms of healthcare.

As we move forward, it is crucial to advocate for the integration of women traditional healers into formal healthcare systems, ensuring that their knowledge and practices are respected and supported. Future research should continue to investigate the intersectionality of race, class and gender in traditional healing, aiming to illuminate the unique challenges faced by these healers and promote their contributions to health equity. By fostering an inclusive environment that values traditional knowledge, we can enhance community health outcomes and empower women traditional healers to reclaim their rightful place in the healthcare continuum.

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