"Idiots and Distracted Persons": Shifting Views on Mental Health in Eighteenth Century

Colonial America.

Jessica Tiry, 194 Historian as Detective

In 1770 Governor Wentworth, sent a letter to Earl of Hillsborough, pondering the idea of "what regulations it may be proper to adopt in future regarding Idiots and distracted persons, is now under consideration...—" Earl explained and discussed just what colonial officials, as well as Parliament were going to do to rid these "idiots and distracted persons—" from normal society, because they were feared, and believed to potentially spread diseases to normal citizens.[1] Mental illness would not be understood in the manner of governmental conversation until the latter eighteenth century; previous generations simply would have never put much attention into people affected by mental illness. Colonial America witnessed a period of new growth and knowledge into the strange minds of human beings.

The colonial period during the eighteenth century brought shifting views of mental health not solely focused on religious standpoints, but medical aspects as well. Eventually Americans would view mental illness as a result of actions made by the individual. There were several influences which led to the shifting views on mental health, and each influence was connected and opened the path for another influence. These major shifts encompassed changes from

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[1] In the eighteenth century, mental illness was not recognized in terminology commonly used today. Idiots and Distracted persons are like mental illness, however the terms used in this paper cannot be compared to modern terminology as their terminology was used to explain diseases they sourced from religious beliefs.

1. Earl of Hillsborough to Governor Wentworth. *A Letter from Earl of Hillsborough regarding a former law relating to idiots and distracted persons.* (New Hampshire: The National Archives, 1770). 2.
2. Earl of Hillsborough. *A Letter...regarding a former law relating to idiots and distracted persons.* 2.
3. Angus Gowland, "The problem of Early Modern Melancholy," *Past and Present Society* 191 (2006): 77-120, accessed September 16, 2020. doi: 10.1093/pastNgtj012.

religious, political, and medical influences which tracked along one another in the eighteenth century.

Most historians agreed that up until the colonial period in the eighteenth century, mental illness was viewed as a hysteria brought on through religious beliefs. Encompassing mental illness as the result of actions made by a person, there are several arguments that brought upon these shifting views in colonial America, yet all these arguments build upon one another to explain how colonial America became the point of change in mental health. In *Madness in America,* Nancy Tomes and Lynn Gamwell encompassed a broad inclusion of all four of the sub arguments as an accumulation of factors to the changing acceptance of alternate explanations.[2] Tomes and Gamwell help to lay the foundation into offering these four arguments—other historians will build upon. *Madness in America* is a critical source because Tomes and Gamwell create a playing field, which allow other historians to play off, in order to support the thesis.

Other scholars have put direct focus into the different aspects which shaped the shifting views. Tarrell Portman and Michael Garret, take on the perspective through Native American influences, they discuss Native American religious constructs, and how these constructs became the first influence into allowing the possibilities of medical contributions to explain the illnesses of the mind.[3] Following Native American influences both John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, engage in other social constructs in the primary field of sexual activity involving same sex partners. Their book, *Intimate Matters*, discusses how colonial constructs never allowed for the inclusion of same sex sexual practices; colonial America never saw same sex

[2] Nancy Tomes and Lynn Gamwell, *Madness in America: Cultural and medical perceptions of mental illness before 1914,* (Seattle: Marquand Books, Inc. 1995).
[3] Tarrell A. A. Portman and Michael T. Garret, "Native American Healing Traditions," *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education* 53 (4) (2006): 453-469, 17, accessed October 8, 2020, doi: 10.1080/10349120601008647.

practices as mental illness, just sin.[4] Jeffery S. Jacobi also contributes into the same sex sexual

activity aspect of Native American influence towards mental illness, Jacobi addresses Native

American perspectives on same sex sexual activity to explain why Native Americans tried to

influence acceptance to these practices within colonial beliefs.[5]

Another area of scholars, place focus on minor influences, specifically how minor

influences also contributed to major intellectual shifts on mental illness in the eighteenth century.

Rick Kennedy enters the conversation by providing insight to the kind of man Cotton Mather

was, in America and Britain. Kennedy offers insight into how Cotton Mather was an influential

man who brought ideas of enlightenment to the colonies but was considered stupid in Britain.

Considering the beginning of the enlightenment, humoral medicine is brought to light, not solely

because of Cotton Mather, but the idea of allowing medicine to help explain illness alongside

religion.[6] Faith Lagay brings insight into what humoral medicine was known as and lays the

constructs of the humoral theory.[7] The ideas of Cotton Mather, and the introduction of humoral

medicine made a gateway for the introduction to Benjamin Rush.

The final group of scholars, place focus on major influences which spark from other

influences already stated by scholars. This is where Fernando Forcen and Dr. S Weir Mitchell

offer insight. Forcen discusses where Rush attended medical school, and just how important

philosophy was into medical studies. This was why Rush was so readily able to tie mental illness

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[4] John D' Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters,* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1988).
[5] Jeffery S. Jacobi, "Two Spirits, Two Eras, Same Sex: For a Traditionalist Perspective on Native American Tribal Same-Sex Marriage Policy," *University of Michigan Journal of Law Reform* 39 (2006): REFORM 823, accessed October 13, 2020, https://repository.law.umich.edu/mjlor/vol39/iss4/3.
[6] Rick Kennedy, "Mather, Cotton (1663-1728)," *The Bloomsbury Encyclopedia of the American Enlightenment* trans. Mark Spencer (2014), accessed October 9, 2020, http://proxyb.lib.montana.edu/login?
[7] Faith Lagay PhD, "The Legacy of Humoral Medicine," *AMA Journal of Ethics* (2002): 4(7), accessed October 13, 2020, doi: 10.1001/virtualmentor.2002.4.7.mhst1-0207.

to religion.[8] Dr. Mitchell offers commentary into a primary source document between Rush and

other Government officials. His commentary not only shows how much Rush's work brought

acceptance into the exploration of the medical world, but also how much influence Rush's work

carried into politics and passed laws. These conversations are what ultimately led to the creation

of hospitals, where mentally ill would be quarantined from society.[9] Michael K. Helen wraps up

the arguments by dipping into the role of natural law in the colonies, and how natural law was

the tip of the iceberg which led colonists to conclude that wrongful actions caused a person to

become an "idiot" or "distracted."[10]

     The first supporting argument provides a basis for Native Americans as the first influence

to support new ideas. Native American beliefs were balanced around spiritual and medicinal

plant practices.[11] Natives based their medical practices on four principals, these spiritual beliefs

brought Native medical practices to be considered folk medicine. Continued information from

the article, "Native American healing traditions," further explains these principles. The first

principle was spiritually, Native Americans believed the earth was a provider to be respected.

The second principle was community, Native Americans believed in taking care of their own

people. The third principal was environment: everything that happened in daily life was meant to

happen in balance of nature, and when this balance broke, illness occurred; colonists would cling

onto this third principal only, as the other principles conflicted with their own beliefs. The final

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[8] Fernando Espi. Forcen, "The Edinburgh Medical Garden, Benjamin Rush, and the Seeds of Pharmacology," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 174(3) (2017): 215, accessed Ocober 13, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp.2016.16080877.

[9] Benjamin Rush, trans. Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, *Historical Notes of Benjamin Rush,* (1903): 2011-03-22, (Pennsylvania Magazine: 1903).

[10] 1. Helen K. Michael, "The Role of Natural Law in Early American Constitutionalism: Did the founder Contemplate Judicial Enforcement of Unwritten Individual Rights," North *Carolina Law Review* 17 (1990): 421, accessed October 13, 2020, http://scholarship.law.unc.edu/nclor/vol69.iss1/17.

    2. Earl of Hillsborough, *...idiots and distracted persons,* 2.

[11] Portman and Garret, "Native American Healing Traditions," abstract.

principal focused on inner self.[12] Native Americans used these four principles to construct their

beliefs on medicinal practices, and the idea of creating a balance with the earth intrigued

colonists.[13] This is the real starting point for the spark, when nature was offset sickness would

occur, when balance was created again, all would be healed. Native Americans greatly

contributed the ideas of logic, opening the door, for how treatments and views on mental illness

would change.

Native Americans also contributed to early uprises in same sex sexual practices. The

colonial era, as stated in *Intimate Matters,* "...[the] colonial era [being a] dominant language of

sexuality was reproductive, and the appropriate focus for sexual activity was on courtship or

marriage."[14] Colonists never accepted the idea of relationship for intimacy, let alone with the

same sex; and what makes same sex practices an important focal point for mental health is the

point colonists made to keep this bizarre behavior as a sin, and crime, rather than render it an

illness. Early legislation placed any sexual activity outside of marriage a crime, and according to

Virgina Legislation in 1715, punishments consisted of; "...pay the sum of five-hundred pounds of

tobacco and cast.... [and if not] be able to pay the fines or offenses...receive [on their] bare backs

twenty-five lashes..."— while Native Americans did not influence the colonials to accept same

sex sexuality, they helped to enforce development for colonial opinion—which led colonists to

ultimately keep homosexuality a wrongful sin, not mental illness.[15] Jeffery Jacobi's article states,

"Traditionally, many tribes allowed two-spirit individuals to have relationships with members of

the same biological sex, although most tribes still valued heterosexual relationships more than

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[12] Portman and Garret, "Native American Healing Traditions," abstract.
[13] Portman and Garret, "Native American Healing Traditions," abstract.
[14] D' Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters,* XV.
[15] N.d, *An act for punishment of fornication, and several other sins and offenses,* September 1662-1715, (1696): 5/1380, (Virginia Legislation: The National Archives, 1696).

homosexual relationships."[16] Despite colonist's views, Native Americans embraced same sex sexual practices alongside medicinal plant practices.

While Native Americans were the first primary influence, it would take a person affiliated with their own religion and lifestyle beliefs to further bestow developing ideas to open-mindedness; Cotton Mather would become a minor influence. He was a well-known Puritan Minister in the Massachusetts colony. Cotton Mather's main purpose in life was to be a "scholar-pastor", as put by Rick Kennedy's article on Cotton Mather, "who wanted to help people integrate knowledge and experience into practical devotion to God."[17] Mather helped to continue the influences of logic from the Native Americans, and because he was a prominent religious figure in the early 1700s, colonists trusted his preaching's. On top of the already developing influences from the Natives, colonists' minds in Massachusetts opened more because of him.[18] His primary reasons of influence came through the words in his preaching's; he was not a large influence like Native Americans, but he still influenced colonists around him. His most famous sermon presented in 1693, *Warning from the dead: A Blessed Medicine for simple Madness,* encompassed the acceptance of science also explaining the universe alongside religion.[19] Mather did copy many enlightenment documents from Britain, but he wanted colonists to understand, his influence was simply playing messenger to allow colonists minds to become more open to all possible explanations for mental illness.[20]

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[16] Jacobi, "Two Spirits, Two Eras, Same Sex: For a Traditionalist Perspective on Native American Tribal Same-Sex Marriage Policy," 825.
[17] Kennedy. "Mather, Cotton (1663-1728)," 2.
[18] Kennedy, 2.
[19] Although this sermon was preached before the actual eighteenth century, Cotton Mather was a prominent figure in the already starting enlightenment in Britain. Most of his ideas for his sermons came from conversations and ideas from Britain, he wanted colonists to understand and become accepted, and not just spoon-fed later from the mother country.
Gamwell and Tomes, *Madness in America,* 17-18.
[20] Kennedy, 5.

Cotton Mather may have copied many enlightenment documents from Britain, but he did prove to be a rather observant man amongst the mentally ill. In a diary entry in 1707, Mather wrote, "One thing I will mention. In a Prayer at a Meeting of some Christians, I mentioned the sad condition of our Frontiers, that [notwithstanding] the extreme obligation which their dangerous and afflicted and [situation] laid upon them, to be a very religious People, yett [*sic*] there was much Irreligion and Profaneness and Disorder in many of them."[21] Cotton Mather took on the perspective of changing mental illness through encompassing religion and science. While he was only a messenger to the ideas of science, Mather was able to be a minor influence on the shifting views, because of his credibility as a religious figure of the time. His preaching's were his form of passing on already known ideas to colonists so they could understand and draw their own conclusions. Cotton Mather helped colonists in his surrounding area to become their own people, not just another part of Britain.

From the influences of the Native Americans and Cotton Mather, the father to modern medicine arises. Benjamin Rush was a major influence in furthering the acceptance of medical explanations to mental illness in colonist's minds. Rush was born in Philadelphia and attended college at the Edinburgh Medical School in Britain. He was already familiar with natural law, which made him better equipped to understand Native ideals to balance with nature. Rush swayed more to the science aspects of explaining mental illness. To help colonists better understand the philosophy and ideals of the Natives, he wrote a book—*Medical Inquires and Observations upon the Disease of the mind*—in which he created diseases for sins that offset natural law, and how cures for said diseases. Rush identified some of the commons sins as:

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[21] Cotton Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather (1681-1709), (*New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co.1701), (1701): 593.

"Derrangement"[*sic*] "Dissociation", and even "Dissociation accompanied with pleasure."[22] Not only did he define such diseases, he also explained the importance of understanding mental illness through a medical lens, Rush concluded his book with these words; "...to my wishes, the interests of medicine by this work, I hope the labors in the cause of humanity will not be alike unsuccessful; and that the sufferings of our fellow creatures, from the causes that have been mentioned, may find sympathy in the bosoms, and relief from the kindness, of every person who shall think it worthwhile to read this history of them."[23] Rush influenced others through his book by explaining how mental illness can be prevented through knowledge, and showing kindness to those who fall ill, can help them to heal faster.

Rush was a major influence because of the impact he had all throughout early America. His book was not his primary mode of influence, as Rush contributed to many newspaper articles. One from 1790, "The Columbian Centinel," mentioned information about drunks, and the newspaper contributed a section of this article to words from Rush; "...And unless repentance should prevent, they will share in the punishment prepared for the devil and his angels."[24] Benjamin Rush truly was the father to modern medicine and contributed so many ideals to the colonists on the aspects of what was considered mental illness of the time, which was, what made him a major influence on the changing views in colonial America.

Another factor Rush contributed to—was the humoral theory. Derived from the biblical story of Adam and Eve falling into sin; this disease occurred when one of the four humors in an

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[22] All the names for the disease are listed in a complete table of contents, with a description of each section listed in the table of contents as well, all the names mentioned are sourced directly from Rush's table of contents.
Benjamin Rush, *Medical Inquiries and Observations upon the diseases of the mind, (*Philadelphia: Kimber and amp; Richardson..., 1812), table of contents.
[23] Rush, *Medical Inquires and Observations upon the Disease of the Mind,* 366-367.
[24] Miscellany, "The Drunkard's looking glass," *Connecticut Gazette.* December 4, 1790, (Columbian Centinel: Boston, Massachusetts, 1790), (1790): 94.

individual became imbalanced.[25] This imbalance was caused when a person made incorrect

lifestyle choices or sinned. The four humors (blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile) were

named after the four known elements of the time, and each sin affected a different humor.[26] Rush

helped to update this theory by offering one of the most popular forms of therapeutic treatments

in the Eighteenth century—bleeding lancets.[27] Rush's treatment worked by applying a spring-

loaded knife over a patient's arm, the patient then bled into a bowl, until filled. Once this bowl

was filled the patient would be cured, while the patient watched their disease bleed out into the

bowl, as pictured below.[28]

As the century continued, mental illness also became involved through government

decisions. As Rush had put it, "...I hope it will inspire us with the virtuous principles of

republican governments."[29] Mental illness had now reached the point of governmental influence,

and the fore comings of the first hospital. The biggest reason hospitals were created in the

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[25] Gamwell and Tomes, 15.
[26] Lagay, "The Legacy of humoral medicine," abstract.
[27] Tomes and Gamwell, 19.
[28] The picture and some more Indepth information on the bloodletting therapy method can be sourced from this video:
    1.   N.d, "Mutter Minute: Lancets and Bloodletting," *(*Mutter Museum: College of Physicians in Philadelphia). Video 1. http://muttermuseum.org/videos/m%C3%BCtter-minute-lancets-and-bloodletting/.
    2.   Focht, Chris, *Bleeding Lancets, late 18th century*.
[29] Rush, trans. Mitchel, *Historical Notes of Benjamin Rush,* 139.

eighteenth century was because of public fear. Earl of Hillsborough's letter on "Idiots and distracted persons", discussed how these people needed to be kept away from normal society and housed somewhere until they could return to normal. Governor Wentworth stated in his response letter to Earl of Hillsborough, "...whose dangerous views tend to disturb the public peace...."[30] Mentally ill were tolerated but feared because of their violence. All the influences and public opinions is what brought upon the creation of hospitals, as a way for colonists to feel safe from the strange minds of those affected by mental illness.[31] The first hospital was established in Pennsylvania in 1751, and the first known "asylum" would be established in Williamsburg, Virginia in 1773, to create "enclosures."[32] The first known asylum was built to place mentally ill in confinement.[33]

Public opinion of mental illness was not only portrayed by government officials, or through major influences such as Benjmain Rush. Colonist's opinions on mental health were often portrayed through newspaper articles, written by fellow colonists. In considering how natural law was a huge influence among colonists, it was natural law that became the final influence which led colonists to conclude their beliefs on mental illness.[34] As put by Helen Michael, "Natural law is the peculiar science of judges," and colonists used just that to conclude their opinions on the mentally ill.[35] Proof of colonists' ideals to natural law would play out in an

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1. Earl of Hillsborough, ".... idiots and distracted persons," 1-4.
2. Governor Wentworth, "Correspondence from Governor Wentworth Stating that civil unrest in New Hampshire has been calmed in discussing legislation regarding the custody of the mentally ill," September 20, 1770. (New Hampshire: The National Archives, 1770), (1770): 2.

[31] Gamwell and Tomes, 20.
[32] John Murray, et al, "An act for making further provision for the support and maintenance of idiots, lunatics and other persons of unsound mind," April 11, 1772, (Virginia: The National Archives, 1772), (1772): 2.

[33] Gamwell and Tomes, 20-21.
[34] Michael, "The Role of Natural Law in Early American Constitutionalism: Did the founders Contemplate Judicial Enforcements of Unwritten Individual Rights," 426.
[35] Michael, 426.

article on marriage written by "Boston-evening post;" "...we acknowledge a right to keep men or women...unless in the case of idiots or incurable lunatics...."[36] Mental illness resulted when someone disobeyed natural law and sinned, and through medical perspectives, the introduction of treatments and hospitals were created to help cure the strange and violent minds of the mentally ill.

Intellectual shifts in the eighteenth century forever changed the direction of how mental illness was viewed, no longer was it just a person consumed by hysteria. Mental illness was the result of wrongful actions made by a person; and "Idiots, impotent, distracted, and idle persons," were some of the many names used to call mentally ill in acts, and fornications during the eighteenth century.[37] Each influence played into the domino effect, tipping another over until the conclusion was reached. The colonies broke off from Britain, and became their own, allowing themselves to be influenced by others, and they recreated views on mental illness; perhaps it was this same notion which led to the American Revolution.

Although medical explanations and treatments have drastically changed over three centuries, stigma towards those affected by mental illness has not changed. An article written by Peter Byrne—a senior lecturer at the East Kent NHS trust, receiving a degree in psychology in Ireland—states; "Mental illness, despite centuries of learning and the 'Decade of the Brain', is still perceived as an indulgence, a sign of weakness."[38] All colonial America did was open the gates for medicine to be an answer to problems into the human mind, stigma and treatment of

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[36] N.d. "The Lord's Protest," May 25, 1772, (Boston-evening post: Boston, Massachusetts), (1772): 1.

[37] N.d, "Legislative Acts/Legal Proceedings," November 5, 1797, (Bee: New London, Connecticut), (1797): 1, Act. 2.

[38] Peter Byrne, "Stigma of Mental illness and Ways of Diminishing it," *Advancements in Psychiatric Treatment,* 6 (2000): 65-72.

these people were never changed—maybe these people will always be viewed as "idiots and distracted persons."[39]

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[39] Earl of Hillsborough, 2.

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Focht, Chris. Bleeding Lancets, late 18th Century.

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