Harshad Keval, Asesha Morjaria-Keval
Canterbury Christ Church University
Kent and Medway NHS Partnership Trust

“Reconstructing Sikh Spirituality in Recovery from Alcohol Addiction”
Alcohol addiction, Recovery, Sikh Identity

• Introduce the paper, our ideas, provide a context
• Emphasise the importance of psycho-social, cultural contexts
  – Brief outline of original research
  – Why we decided to revisit and develop
• Resituate the experience using sociological ideas
• Nuanced, richer sense of Sikhism
Alcohol use / misuse

• Variety of research indicates some significant issues
• More use generally; more use alone
• Findings suggest alcohol use has culturally embedded place in many Sikh groups
• Hospital admissions increased (Sikh men presenting with alcohol related liver disease)
• Explanations suggested:
  – Cultural, masculine, practices – bonding, working, socialising
  – Acculturation stress – being in host country – alcohol used as coping mechanisms
  – Race, racism, discrimination, hostility – Intersection of race, ethnicity, class and culture? (Direction for future research...?)
Components of original model

- Importance of amrit (purification rite)
- Religious adherence and sewa
- Pathway to recovery – mansukh to gurmukh
- Purification and redemption for the self

- Community Psychological study (Morjaria-Keval 2006)
- 18 south Asian men, 10 Sikh men, 25-60.
- Changed their drinking behaviour, abstinent from 5 months to 18 years
- Semi-structured interviews, detailed personal accounts, participants experiences, beliefs, views – interested in their experiences and how they made sense of these issues.
Components of original model

- Importance of amrit (purification rite)
- Religious adherence and sewa
- Pathway to recovery – mansukh to gurmukh
- Purification and redemption for the self

- “Spontaneous Recovery”
- This was a major theme of original research
- ‘Unofficial’ help and support centres
- ‘Spontaneous’ recovery needed researching
- Obstacle, issues, ‘hidden’ recovery that policy and practice might miss
Some Sikh ‘ground’ rules (very shortened version)

• Guru Nanak – purpose of life is to realise one’s connection with the eternal spirit – facilitate one’s reunion with this spirit

• Receive gods grace, released from cycle of birth and death

• Suffering caused by: forgetting existence of god; mind lacking control, indulging in worldly pleasure....

• Moral principles provide guidelines, through scriptures...

• Path to salvation is
  – a) love
  – b) sewa (devotion to duty for others)
Re-working concepts...

• What is religion / what isn't
• What is culture/ what isn't
• What is recovery / what isn't
• What is a sikh / what isn't

Moving away from Binaried understandings – dichotomies we use to make sense of our world, by limiting the options – so we don’t go mad

They are useful BUT they are not how we ‘DO’ social, cultural, religious, ‘ethnic’, in a word, ‘real’ lived life.
Processes, NOT states – but not just Psychological, or ‘Divine’ – They are Cultural and Social

Sikhism, and its role in recovery is also a process...How?
mechanisms

• Needed to re-situate original paper and data

• Emphasise the socially fluid, culturally dynamic ways in which spirituality, here in Sikh forms of recovery, work at the spaces between ‘other worldly / this worldly’ relation

• Facilitates personal change, through social continuity
Religious ideas appear divinity based, higher ‘planed’...

Scriptures, Rituals protect core values

Context – South Asian, Sikh Diaspora is multi-national, global, historical phenomenon

How is Sikh belief system(s) mobilised for recovery?

But embedded WITHIN community, within ethno-religious framework

Acknowledging grounded, social, cultural nature of these mechanisms.

the question Sociology brings to this discussion is:
How is recovery ‘done’ in Sikhism?

• The ‘doing’ of roles, beliefs, values, attitudes – which are moral constructions...
• ...are about mechanisms of continuity and change
• Psychological, social contexts to addiction, and Sikh spiritual frameworks connect to these contexts
• Tensions in religious, faith life in secular, western, global commercialised existence...
• ...but the Sikh framework doesn’t clash with modernity...it works through it!!!
Actually,

How is Sikhism ‘done’ in recovery?

• The ‘doing’ of roles, beliefs, values, attitudes – which are moral constructions...

• ...are about mechanisms of *continuity and change*

• Psychological, social contexts to addiction, and Sikh spiritual frameworks *connect* to these contexts

• Tensions in religious, faith life in secular, western, global commercialised existence...

• ...but the Sikh framework doesn’t *clash* with modernity...it works *through it***!!
Spirituality / Materiality

- *Amrit* - vows, initiations, purification – ‘nectar of immortality’
  *(sugar and water, rep. universal source of life + intense love (sweetness) of God)*

- From *Amli to Amritdhari* → 5 Ks physical reminders of religious boundaries – commitment to self, God, duty

- Built in allowances → possible to have different ‘membership’ – informal, private, abstinence pledge.

- *Built in commitment to social good, community, Gurdwara – Amrit is repair of alcohol addiction, AND social / community ties*
Reconstructing identities

- Narrating ‘new’ versions of older selves – *biographical continuity through re-construction*
- *Stripped of old self, new layers of Sikhism, ‘Community service’ is paramount layer…*
- ...inherently facilitates better recovery...but *Without guarantees –*
- Require constant dedication, possibility of relapse
- Previous selves: fragmented belonging partial commitment

- ‘Authentic’ ‘Original’ Sikhism through Amrit REINTEGRATES Self, and Self into Society
The spiritual IS the social...

• Can’t break free of the karmic cycle without social and community embedded-ness

• ‘Re-birth’ is actually a re-imagining of a more pure, ‘authentic form’ of Sikhism, rid of the previous adornments of material life.

• Amrit is bridging mechanism between ‘other-worldly’ and ‘this worldly’ realms

• Path to spiritual enlightenment is also a 2 way path to stronger social and cultural connections – Sikh Identity
Service provision impacts

- Beyond an academic understanding
- Think through integration of unofficial mechanisms
- Potential misconceptions at service delivery / support access (‘spiritual’ defined as ‘other’, therefore not effective, not legitimate)
- Need to undermine long held ‘cultural’ models...
- ‘...they’ll deal with their own kind in their own way...’
- Counter isolated practices, provide support – integrate Gurdwaras (e.g. examples in Canada)
- Focus academic, practitioner, policy work on the detailed picture of Sikh systems
We would like to Thank:

- University of Chester, CSARS, and ‘Religions’ journal, especially Dr Wendy Dossett and Professor Cook for the opportunity to share ideas and enter into a dialogue
- The Alcohol Education Research Centre
- All the participants.

Thank you, questions