



Communicating About HIV/AIDS in Africa: Religion, Public Health and Interdisciplinary Intersections

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Introduction

The term “interdisciplinary” has come into its own in the HIV/AIDS arena. The recognition of HIV/AIDS as a multiplex disease, complexly embedded in the social paradigm has resulted in many calls for inter-, multi-, or trans-disciplinary research. At the same time, the practitioners and professionals directly involved in the HIV/AIDS epidemic are also increasingly being pushed into an encounter with each other - through multisectoral action groups, combined HIV/AIDS programs or joint committees.

In such meetings (of research or practice), despite a group being brought together with a common purpose against HIV/AIDS, there is frequently a break-down of communication between the individuals and discourses at play that disrupts this potential for cooperation. This may be evident as a mild sense of “irritation” between participants, or in complete communicative break-down. In fact, an area that most clearly demonstrates this tension is the interface between religion and (public) health.

In the face of what appears to be a great deal of overt appreciation for interaction and cooperation in the HIV/AIDS arena, a large number of the tensions, misunderstandings and problems that occur, could be accrued to “interdisciplinary communication” that is happening with increasing frequency.

During field research in Zambia, when asked what religion contributes to the fight against HIV/AIDS in his community, a religious leader struggled to express himself to a room full of local health practitioners saying, “religion contributes love” and sat down. On seeing the uncomprehending looks from his audience, he stood up and tried again, “love is support and hope”. Finally he threw up his hands and exclaimed “love is home-based care and clinics” - at which point the audience nodded and agreed. ARHAP-WHO 2006.

The question then becomes, how are these “people in the know” engaging with each other? Does the fact that this communication is happening in interdisciplinary or multisectoral spaces, where individuals are speaking at each other from different experiential and theoretical backgrounds, affect what is being said, understood and acted upon?

Aim

HIV/AIDS discourses emerge through a variety of filters – ideas and plans for HIV/AIDS in Africa that emerge into the public space in a complex bundle, laden with discourse elements which influence action, and ultimately success or failure against the epidemic. It is rather astounding, then, that there appears to be virtual silence on the topic of interdisciplinary or multisectoral communication in the multiplex HIV/AIDS arena, particularly on the Africa stage. In particular, or consequently, there is virtually no targeted theory or guiding principles on just how such interdisciplinary research or multisectoral practice should be carried out, or improved upon - the lack of which is both startling, and concerning. Therefore:

The purpose of this study is to explore the increasingly common context of interdisciplinary and multisectoral communication in the HIV/AIDS arena in Africa, and specifically the interface between religious and public health professionals, in order to build theory that can guide understanding and ultimately practice.



Zambian religious and health leadership discuss national assets that can work against the HIV/AIDS epidemic. ARHAP-WHO, 2006

Working in the relationships between disciplines, fields of practice, institutional capacities and competencies... is not primarily an intellectual space, but a physical, existential space that is in between all those things we know. The space in which we are trying to do scholarship is filled with haunting ambiguities and confusions in which hope and horror are intermingled. Gary Gunderson, 2003

Theoretical Framework

This research is wide-ranging, but is focused around the following areas of academic enquiry:

- Interdisciplinary research theory and academics
- The science-religion debates
- Religion and (public) health
- Practice-research engagement
- Communication, hermeneutics and power
- Discourse and cultural studies
- The social construction of HIV/AIDS
- Development communication
- Health communication
- The ARHAP collaborative network

Scholarship is a special kind of culture – one that selectively but formally carries with it the culture from which it emerged and that does so explicitly in values proclaimed, implicitly in methods used. At the same time, scholarship is also a process for creating culture which, once created, it protectively wraps in a carapace of truth, certified by God or science. Grew in Humphreys 2000

Method

A variety of research methods are necessary in order to gather a “cross-sectoral” selection of data. In addition, the intention of the study is to explore new territory and to contribute to theory-building. It is therefore important that the research design and methodology be appropriately flexible and responsive to what is collected or uncovered during the research process. The methodology includes:

- Theoretical synthesis
- Data capturing
- Discourse analysis
- In-depth interviews with key informants

In multiple, fragmentary, and often contradictory ways, we struggle to achieve some sort of understanding of AIDS, a reality that is frightening, widely publicized, yet finally neither directly nor fully knowable. AIDS is no different in this respect from other linguistic constructions that, in the commonsense view of language, are thought to transmit preexisting ideas and represent real-world entities yet in fact do neither...rather, the very nature of AIDS is constructed through language. Paula Treichler 1999

Towards Conclusion

Therefore, this study does not question how we communicate messages about HIV/AIDS to “the masses”, but rather how “we” communicate about HIV/AIDS to “each other”. Each instance of speaking past each other, of being silenced or of miscommunication are perilous in this time of epidemic crisis. Communication is not merely an exchange of information, but lies at the heart of crucial issues of decision-making and implementation.

I believe this study can make a significant contribution to the field of interdisciplinary HIV/AIDS research by filling in a substantial gap in our current knowledge, and by working towards the improvement of our practical engagement with each other and with this multiplex and often humbling epidemic.

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