

Mine migrant workers' understandings of HIV/AIDS: A case of Monyakeng

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Introduction

This study examines mine migrant workers' understandings of HIV/AIDS in a South African gold mine. It does this against a backdrop of attempts by the mining industry to curb the spread of HIV/AIDS among the work force and to provide those who are sick with antiretroviral drugs. In examining mine migrant workers' understandings of HIV/AIDS, as a consequence, the study explores the extent to which the mainstream messages of the HIV/AIDS in this business unit can be said to be effective. The study conceptualises understanding as work, that is, praxis, and ascertains how mine migrant workers negotiate and configure their practices in light of these messages.

Aim

In exploring mine migrant workers' understandings of HIV/AIDS this study attempts to make a contribution to the existing literature on HIV/AIDS in South Africa's mining industry. Mine migrant workers' understandings of HIV/AIDS and how they link with notions of sex, health and the body are an area of study that is left unexplored in the literature on HIV/AIDS in South Africa's mining industry. This premise guiding this study is that attempts to curb the spread of HIV/AIDS require an in-depth understanding of the complex ways in which people understand HIV/AIDS as well as the multifaceted notions of sex, health and the body that these understandings imply.

Method

- Interviews have been the preferred method of data collection.
- These were in-depth, semi-structured and open to allow for conversation, clarity and probing.
- The interview process focuses on mine migrant workers from Lesotho, Mozambique as well as the Eastern Cape province of South Africa.
- These men are chosen through a snowball sampling which deliberately seeks to tap into existing relationships and networks.
- Participants in the interview process are men of all age groups drawn from the diverse occupations that mine migrant workers occupy. The study therefore does not focus on men who only work underground but also includes those who do administrative work on surface.
- In order to minimise the possibilities of people withholding information related to sex, the study follows a life history format of interviewing in which the preliminary focus is on interviewees' individual family backgrounds.
- Other informants who will be interviewed include the local branch of the National Union of Mineworkers, staff members at the mine's health centre as well as the mine's HIV/AIDS co-ordinator.
- The cases chosen for this study are not for statistical purposes. That is, the study is not attempting to follow a research strategy which seeks to extrapolate from the sample to the population. Instead, it seeks to follow what Burawoy calls a "second mode of generalisation, which seeks to illuminate the forces at work in society as a totality rather than to reflect simply on the constancy and variation of isolated cases" (Burawoy 1985: 18). This second mode is the extension from the micro to the totality that shapes it and is premised on the notion that "every particularity contains a generality" (Burawoy 1985: 18).
- The interview process is supplemented with participant observation to help ground observed phenomena in the field.

Results

- Preliminary results seem to suggest that there exists two groups of mine migrant workers and therefore two particular ways by which these men understand HIV/AIDS.
- The study refers to the first group of men as instrumentalists. Instrumentalists, it suggests, attempt to build their world view(s) on the conventional message of HIV/AIDS which find expression in the ABC message.
- Though men of literacy seem to dominate this group, a significant number of other men represented in this category have little or no literacy at all.
- In an industry commonly associated with illiteracy possession of literacy seems to bring with it an expectation to express knowledge of the things that are usually not expected of an average mine migrant worker.
- This study refers to the second group of mine migrant workers as skeptics. Skeptics represent and discuss HIV/AIDS in relation to sexually transmitted diseases that are known to have existed in the past. Their key argument is that HIV/AIDS is a consequence of broken relations between men and women.
- Thus while instrumentalists build their world view(s) on the symbolic power of medical institutions at the mine, skeptics, on the other hand, configure theirs on a quest for healing.

Conclusion

An examination of mine migrant workers' understandings of HIV/AIDS and the variations it shows between instrumentalists and skeptics seems to suggest that the rationality underlying mainstream messages of HIV/AIDS limits an effective way of addressing the sexual health of mine migrant workers. This, it would seem, requires an epistemology that takes into consideration the constraints of structures as well as both the direct and mediated experiences of these men. Such an epistemology, it is hoped, will help return the body to its socio-cultural and political contexts in which it belongs and make relationality, a key feature informing human social interaction, a focus of its attempt to restore health. Thus in dealing with disease it becomes imperative to envision alternative societies.

Acknowledgements

Key Readings

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