The Role of Culture and Sexuality Practices Among Youth

Research Question:
How do various cultural practices and tradition increase young people’s risk for HIV/AIDS and what are the social, cultural, economic, and political factors that make young people vulnerable to HIV/AIDS?

[Cross-cutting issues: Poverty and the Role of the Media]

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LOOKING BACKWARD; FACING FORWARD

Too often when we think of culture and tradition, we only look backwards: the old way instead of the new; restrictions that hold us back and aren’t relevant for today. But that is too narrow-minded.

The dictionary explains “tradition” as the process of handing down information, opinions, and customs by word of mouth or practice; e.g. an inherited way of doing things. By contrast, the dictionary defines “culture” more holistically, referring to artistic expression, language, our environment, and intellectual activity. But cultures can and do change, and when that happens new traditions are formed. One example is the way in which we are now being taught to use condoms when having sex. The hope is that in the future, this will become our everyday practice — a new tradition within our youth-culture.

In villages, the traditions remain strong. But even there, we find change. For example, our traditional culture teaches us that you must be married before having a baby. Nobody ever talked about getting HIV because it wasn’t known long ago, and even today it doesn’t become obvious like pregnancy does, at least not for many years. Also many older people in the rural areas still believe that HIV comes from a curse (6). This is a problem because that isn’t true, and HIV is much more dangerous than pregnancy. But we young people at UNAM and the Polytechnic are educated, and we believe differently. So when we become parents, we plan to talk to our children more openly about these things and leave out the superstition.

Living according to our traditional culture can save you from getting AIDS by making sure that you don’t have premarital sex, but it can also contribute to the disease’s spread through traditional forms of circumcision, scarring and tattooing. Amongst the worst cultural practices in some parts of southern Africa (including Namibia) is the belief that if you have sex with a virgin, you can rid yourself of the virus (7).

Churches have a crucial role in maintaining culture – but also in creating new norms, traditions, and interpretations. For example in Namibia, for many years the Church just condemned issues of sexuality and this contributed to the spread of HIV in Namibia (5). AIDS was interpreted as a punishment from God; as the consequence of bad moral behaviour. But what of the people who did nothing “wrong” and got infected anyway? Or how do you explain that with some other people who actually made mistakes, as yet they are AIDS-free? (4. This is why some elders still believe that the people who get the virus were bewitched.) As the AIDS pandemic worsened in Namibia, more and more churches started speaking out, mostly emphasi-
ing care and support. In this way, they started accepting all people who are sick and needy (not just people with HIV and AIDS). Still, in some ways it is too little too late, and the churches’ position on HIV-prevention issues feels a lot like the same old traditional values that don’t resonate with young people very much any more. Churches must speak out more, especially the leaders.

We also need our national leaders to serve as role models. In African culture, everyone looks up to their leaders, whether in the village or nationwide. Unfortunately, however, most of our African leaders are mostly not educated in school; that is, they are educated only in tradition. So sometimes, they even make things worse. For example, just two years ago the President of Libya, Moammar Kadaﬁ, said, “If you are straight [not gay] you have nothing to fear from AIDS.” And then he went on to say, that, “the disease (of AIDS) is a result of psychological warfare, with western countries trying to sell anti-retroviral drugs in order to make money (1).” This is very dangerous because it spreads lies and leaves people confused.

Our media messages often confuse people as well, because they get trapped between competing cultures and value-systems. The media may tell us to use condoms when having sex, but some people interpret this as encouraging young people to have MORE sex, which can actually increase your risk of HIV. This is because condoms are not 100% safe. The media also gives us a mixed message about people who are already HIV+ positive. They tell us that AIDS kills, but they also say people who already have the HIV virus can live a long and normal life. As a result, most of us just turn-off when we hear things on the media about HIV & AIDS. Our leaders make it worse, by not being educated and just telling us to follow the old traditions.

We must counteract lies with truth. To have the greatest impact, we turn once again to our leaders – heroes we look up to. Why can’t we have heroes in Namibia who will dare to be open about their status and set an example? For example, we found these two quotes from two world-famous basketball players (2):

“I think sometimes we think, well, only gay people can get it—’It’s not going to happen to me.’ And I’m here saying that it can happen to anybody, even me, Magic Johnson.” (November 8, 1991)

“Through education we can learn more about prevention of HIV and AIDS and together we can help stop the spread of this epidemic.” Dikembe Mutombo

FINDING A NEW PATH BETWEEN DIFFERENT CULTURES

As young people we live in two cultures: the old way (of our parents and grandparents in the rural areas), and the new way (where we are more independent, and mix with other people across gender and with different backgrounds.) What we need is a way to balance between the two, to form a new kind of hybrid culture. We want to take the good things from our tradition and combine them with the good things in modern culture. The new culture of modernity is communicated to us through the media and our peers. Now, we have freedom and want to be cool. But this makes us vulnerable to negative influences, as well.

Sometimes we experience a conflict between the two cultures, and then we have a tough time making the decision of what to do. Or we go ahead and act, without thinking which approach – the old or new – is the right one for a particular situation. This can be tricky.

For example, if our parents are still alive or when we visit our home-areas, then we have to follow the old way – even though at University or in the working world, other norms are followed. Obed Isaacs explained that this often happens most often with gender roles, where our traditions teach us that women have a secondary role, but our country’s law and what we are taught at school say that women are equal. So how should we act when we spend time together, as a man and a woman? By way of one small example, the women in our group say that they want men to open the door for them to show respect, but in the tradition the women walked behind. Still other women say that, as equals, they can open their own door. So how should we know what to do?
Author Erika von Wietersheim writes (8), “The enormous pressures to prevent AIDS from killing more and more people in Namibia...forces us – more than anything else before – to look at our cultural norms and values.... Whereas western culture emphasizes the individual, traditional African culture emphasizes community. The central statement of African philosophy of ubuntu, stresses that my identity is due to my relationship with others, particularly with my family, elders, and even the spirit of our ancestors.”

The reality is that all modern Africans live in two cultures – both tradition and western. Culture, traditions, and values are good if they empower people to be happy, strong, and caring. The opposite is true if the cultural norm or practice promotes unhappiness, weakness, and selfishness. Because of this, von Wietersheim says that it is important to teach children from a very early age to express their feelings, wishes, and opinions (8). This encourages children to set positive goals for themselves, and helps them identify and understand different emotional outcomes with which to make their choices at decision-points along the way.

If you believe that you can reach your goal through hard work and self-sacrifice, you are likely to think about this when facing a risky decision that could bring you short-term pleasure but long-term harm. The problem comes when children are not encouraged to believe in their dreams, because their elders think that it will cost too much money for them to get a University education or they don't want their children to leave behind the traditions with which they were raised.

Only if young people believe that their long-range goals are reachable, will they be willing to make short-term sacrifices (for example, not to have a boyfriend or girlfriend) along the way. Children also have to be encouraged to base their decisions on truth, not rumor or superstition (9). We have to develop the skills to discern the difference between truth and fiction. For example, some people like to say that foreigners are spreading scary stories about HIV & AIDS in order to spoil sexual pleasure. But think about this statement: it doesn’t make sense! We have to be careful of people who use myths for their own selfish purposes.

This is the heart of the problem: How do you decide between two or more cultures – the old way or the new way? Your culture or mine? Tradition or modernity? Religious Christians have a decision-making method that clearly separates right from wrong. But those of us who are not “born-again” don’t have that screen through which to make those decisions. We have to consider each situation more carefully.

Karin Shiimi said, “We learn best from the mistakes of people who are close to us. For example, one of my best friends became pregnant when we were in Grade 12. Her boyfriend denied responsibility and the girl's family rejected her. She couldn't go on with her education; it was terrible. But I learned from her experience to be more careful.” Jeanine Teega added, “I believe that we all have free well from God, and so we have to choice. Our religious heritage can serve as a guide, but basically you have to make up your own mind, when to say no or yes.” Rudolf Kushokosha suggested that “We should choose which culture to follow in each situation, based on the consequences of the decisions – if the outcome will be negative or positive. You have to project yourself forward, with each issue you face: Will this result in something good, or will this cause something bad to happen?”

But how we analyze a situation as Rudolf suggested, depends on the situation or background we have. People who lack an education may not have the skills that this approach requires. Poor people may make decisions based on immediate needs – such as feeding themselves or their children – and not think about the long-term consequences. If you are hungry, then it is more important to feed yourself and your family than to worry about the Christian values you were raised with, or the chance that you might get a baby or HIV from unprotected sex for money with a sugar daddy.

One problem with HIV is that it doesn’t give you a second chance. Sadly, it often takes one of our friends or neighbors dying, in order for us to wake up to the seriousness of this issue. What a heavy price to pay! If this is true for everyone, then soon it will be only the only orphans and other people who are directly affected by this disease who will remain to take on an AIDS-free leadership role for the future. We were reminded by Narwin Oosthuizen of the old adage, “Wise men learn from other people's mistakes; only fools learn from their own.”

You can argue that because we are studying at UNAM and Polytechnic we should know what it takes to protect ourselves and therefore live accordingly, but still, each of us knows people who persist on
having risky sex. Why is that? Maybe it is because sometimes you feel lonely being so far from home, and you want to really belong to someone else, a girl or a guy. Then those psychological needs overtake your cultural values, even though you know right from wrong. “But aren’t almost all young people like that?” As a social work student, Simon Hatutale pointed out, “Young people want to experience things for themselves, sometimes even drugs or driving fast or getting drunk. Even if they don’t make this a habit, many people want to have these experiences at least once.” After all, the group members agreed, most of us come from disadvantaged backgrounds and we want a taste of the rich life, on the fast lane.

As young people, we want to make our own decisions about expressing our sexuality. But we realize that we can’t do that in a vacuum, absent from the influence of old, traditional norms and the modern environment in which we live. UNAM professor Lucy Edwards (3) says that individuals should have the right to make their own sexual and reproductive health choices, so long as they follow three central guideposts: 1) that decisions should be based on mutual respect between the partners; 2) that decisions should be made responsibly, meaning with thought about the future; and 3) that decisions should be free from discrimination, coercion, and violence. Within this framework, different cultural norms and traditions can intermingle without conflict.

WE OFFER TWO RECOMMENDATIONS

1) Our leaders need to educate themselves, educate others, and set the right example. One way they could demonstrate this is by getting tested for HIV. Similarly, churches need to be more open and accepting, and use the power of the pulpit to educate the community.

2) Our traditional culture must change before it is too late. Our parents and traditional leaders should recognize that we live in two different cultures, and they should help us find a way to negotiate between them. Simply telling us to turn away from modern influences won’t work any more. Our tradition has some good values to live by, and so does the modern culture. But how should we choose the good ones from the bad? Our education about how to behave starts at home, meaning that parents need to learn how to talk to their children about sexuality, and not just leave this to the media and their peers.

Although HIV & AIDS hangs over us like a very dark cloud, we realize that it has a silver lining, too. That silver lining is that AIDS provides us with an opportunity for young people to work together, and to use our knowledge across disciplines, across gender, and across different cultures to beat back this disease and build a better future for everyone.

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