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**‘Person to person on
communication on HIV and AIDS’**

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Abstract

Review of years of mass communication campaigns on HIV and AIDS suggests that it has become necessary to ask whether campaigns that move beyond awareness with the intent to effect behaviour change require new approaches. But there remains a paucity of theory-based interventions that say how such interventions should be carried out. It is in this context that this paper radically suggests that the challenge of communication on HIV and AIDS should not be seen as one of finding ways to bombard individuals with messages in ways that result in communicators on HIV and AIDS being able to direct the behaviors of the targeted. It is suggested that any 'success' gained by this means would be mere success of propaganda. It is rather held that what is required in the education challenge that relates to communication on HIV and AIDS is to enable the other to choose in freedom. It does this by suggesting that communication on HIV and AIDS can best be engaged when the existential questions that relate to it are addressed. This is offensive to the normalized practice of communication by which each is compelled to deny the differences between self and other. This involves revolutionary insistence that the individual must be appropriately recognised and dignified in any attempt at communicating about HIV and AIDS. This in turn permits advancement of the worth of going against how Africans have been historically denied and presented as beings for whom questions of existence are somehow foreign and unusual.

Introduction

Noar, Palmgreen, Chabot, Dobransky and Zimmerman (2009, pp. 35-36) suggest, in a systematic review of ten years (1998-2007) of mass communication campaigns on HIV and AIDS, that it has become necessary to ask whether campaigns that move beyond awareness with the intent to effect behaviour change require new approaches. Greater implementation of interpersonal, group, computer and internet, and other techniques and technologies could be a way to establish multicomponent campaigns that work, but there remains a paucity of theory-based interventions that say how such interventions should be carried out. Where behavioral theory, for example, has been able to establish determinants by which behavior change may be effected, it has been unable to convert this into sets of practices by which individuals may be persuaded towards healthy behaviors. For this, Noar et al. (2009, p. 36) suggest “theories specifically related to message design are needed.”

In some respects this paper is a response to Noar et al. (2009), but in radically different ways than they intimate. In the first instance, it is argued that the challenge of communication on HIV and AIDS should not be seen as one of finding ways to bombard individuals with messages in ways that result in communicators on HIV and AIDS being able to direct the behaviors of the targeted. It is suggested that any ‘success’ gained by this means would be mere success of propaganda. It is rather held that what is required in the education challenge that relates to communication on HIV and AIDS is to enable the other to choose in freedom.

This paper responds to Noar et al. (2009) but also to a broad trajectory by which communication for health and development undergoes a Kafkaesque metamorphosis by which it becomes mere propaganda – the mere expression of a

will to control, than real education based on real meeting between individuals who would communicate in ways that foster the good. It does this by suggesting that communication on HIV and AIDS can best be engaged when the existential questions that relate to it are addressed.

It is necessary to move beyond seeking to make communication mere tools, techniques and practices of propaganda. For this, this paper aims to, first, remind the reader of the obvious: Within the infinitude of limitation and possibility that relates to communicating to another about existential issues, the individual chooses. In the possibilities and limitations of situations in which HIV and AIDS is addressed, the individual chooses. Second, and related to the first aim, it is argued that communication for the prevention of HIV and AIDS should give specific consideration to the individual who acts with choice and freedom within his or her world of limited options. This second aim is offensive to the normalized practice of communication by which each is compelled to deny the differences between self and other (Schutz, 1971; Schutz, 1982). The underlying challenge is to note the necessity to ask questions of existence in relation to communication on HIV and AIDS.

Nothing here denies that we ought not not communicate about HIV and AIDS.

Nothing here should.

But this approach goes against how Africans have been essentialized as collectivists for whom questions of existence are somehow foreign and unusual. As a consequence this paper involves revolutionary insistence that the individual must be appropriately recognised and dignified in any attempt at communicating about HIV and AIDS.

Adopting a golfer's adage and so 'playing the ball where it lies' a very brief discussion of communication, propaganda and education will be the next move taken. This first and tentative step should not be read as defining the focus and intent of the paper but merely as outlining the conceptual terrain within which its observations become worthy. I trust the reader will, as necessary, imaginatively expand upon the thin description that is offered in this regard.

Where we lie

Where we lie is a world that has been much recognised and named in terms of technological advances (and their perceived important implications). Accordingly it is often given that we have moved from an industrial age to an information age in which everything from identity formation to corporate competitiveness is much discussed in terms of the influence of changes in how information is gathered and processed. Critically, it is then said that in this information age individuals are increasingly subjected to information regimes that undermine the ability of whole populations to act with authenticity. The information surfeit is critically considered to produce realities and processions of simulation and simulacra as individuals increasingly fail to 'manage it' and to choose in freedom ways that grant worth and dignity. Communication is reduced to mere propaganda by which real experience is sidelined as informationally-driven, mediated norms and practices take eminence. Here, propaganda can be recognised as those processes by which individuals receive answers while in contradistinction education can be seen as those processes by which individuals learn by being freed to ask questions and to act thereby in the dignity of choice and freedom.

It may be suggested that research in communication has praxeomorphically prioritized what has been recognizable in practices by which norms of seeing and acting have been established. Accordingly, the dominant mechanical, linear, informational model formalizes how everyday speakers of English conceptualise communication as a conduit function (Axley, 1982, p. 429) by which messages are taken from a sender to be received by a receiver, with the possibility of noise. And indeed, the idea of the transfer of information is central to much thinking in the social sciences (Adler, 1996). It is also central to how communication theory has developed, particularly in the so-called American tradition. This may explain why in the face of questions concerning the efficacy of communication on HIV and AIDS the answer is to provide more and imagined better information, by authenticated experts, by newer and supposedly better means of information dissemination.

The form of observation that prioritises information in the formation of attitudes and actions is traceable to earlier discussions of the role of information and communication in the construction of what is deemed good, desirable and worthy of action. Socrates in dialogue with Meno (Plato, 1956), for example, ended up recognising that the good and excellent is learned and developed in and as practices and their habits.

What is new, perhaps, is that in contemporary society discourse on the power of information is often, not always, under cover of discourse on the encompassing potentials of technology. So, Bourdieu (1996), for example, has argued that television increasingly defines the agenda away from the cultural content the book and previous developments had encouraged. In the search for broader viewership television has adopted a mode of selecting the least divisive, sharp-edged messages

that speak to everyone by speaking to no one. The result of television becoming such a key disseminator of information, the proverbial story-teller of our age, is that television levels or homogenizes the masses and their issues while paradoxically engaging in a demagoguery that depoliticizes and reduces real concerns to anecdotes and scandals to increase audience ratings. As much as television may moralise, opine, and give the impression that something revolutionary may be said, it hardly appears with the force to change anything. To use the logic of Jacques Ellul (1965), television can then be seen to involve a process of propaganda by immersing society in a wash of meaningless hyperbole that limits individuals from really engaging with their real concerns. The information dissemination shapes individuals in such ways that agentic expression of freedom and choice is vitiated by the fact of boundedness in the limitations of what is given and thus known.

The more the techniques of distributing information develop, the more the individual is shaped by such information.... And because rational propaganda has thus creates an irrational situation, it remains above all, propaganda – that is, an inner control over the individual by a social force, which means that it deprives him of himself. (Ellul, 1965, p. 87)

What is significant about propaganda is that it involves false human contact, contact that is “merely simulated; the presence is not that of the individual who has come forward, but that of the organisation behind him. In the very act of pretending to speak as a man to a man, the propagandist is reaching the summit of his mendacity and falsifications, even when he is not conscious of it.” (Ellul, 1965, p. 24) So propaganda may, for example, be seen as directed by logics and processes by which technological processes and organisational dynamics verge over and against

human agency. Often this is with the paradigmatically entrapping appearance of being merely natural and deserving to be taken for granted. In this way propaganda and its operating systems of information creep in and waylay human choice and freedom towards acts of denial of the self and of others.

In the context of HIV and AIDS, whole practices of communication have been organised to direct the choice and freedom of others by 'informing' the adoption of healthy attitudes and behaviours. Whatever name is given to this set of practices concerning communication, the intent to limit and control the other strongly calls for the raising of questions as to whether communication thus conceived can enable meaningful recognition of individuals. This is particularly important in the African context where individuals have been historically denied (Fanon, 1970; Fanon, 1986; Fanon, 1963; Gordon, 1995).

Perhaps because the *zeitgeist* now reflects growing recognition of the African (as seen in the increasing trend to move beyond colonialist and apartheid misanthropy towards broadening horizons of democracy and participation), the revolutionary insistence of this article that says Africans must be addressed as existential individuals will be more palatable than it has been.

This article proposes that raising questions of existence allows communication to be re-imagined in ways that prioritise the choosing individual. But it is first useful to offer outline statements concerning existential thought and the African.

Existential thought and the African

Is existential thought not a European approach from the last century? Does such an application not represent a colonial hangover? Are existential ideals not, at best,

bourgeoisie concepts that do not relate to the poverty stricken African context? Beyond such denialist questioning, Gordon (1997, pp. 4-5; 72-73) says Black Existential Thought has been most centrally located in critical race problems relating to questions of designation or what Fanon referred to as overdetermination. For Gordon, an answer that permits questions of existence to be discussed in the context of the Black can be found by distinguishing existentialism as relating to a particular literature that emerged from Europe and existential thought as relating to “philosophical questions premised upon concerns of freedom, anguish, responsibility, embodied agency, sociality and liberation (Gordon, 1997, pp. 3-4).

Before being African, the African is human. Each African faces concerns about existence from unique, biographically determined, value-laden perspectives.

Establishing that Africans have a collectivist culture should demand accepting that each African chooses in freedom how to live in manners that produce and reproduce his or her culture (way of going on). A common Shona exaltation, that is found in Ndebele, Zulu and other Bantu languages, is that a person should seek to become a person in the company of other persons; *ivamunhu pane vamwe vanhu*. Those who seek to find meaning for statements such as *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* by taking them out of the existential project of human existence read poorly and so they deny that a person is a person.

The choice and freedom exercised by the African in producing and reproducing culture are the stuff of Subjectivity and its associates, Encounter and Meeting, by which the existential being is noted. This possibility can be detected in the claim that human being and human doing are the basis for and of social reproduction and social transformation by the embodied being (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 970). To

deny that the individual in choice and freedom gives meaning is to beg the retort: Deny that people raise the social and then deny that the instance of acknowledging sociality invites noting the agentic individual (cf. Gordon, 1995:50).

Existential thought has relevance in addressing how the African of today, as of any other human being to whom dignity is granted, engages in social behaviours which construct and give meanings to realities.

Meaning and the individual

Meaning is of the individual through choice and freedom. The communicator of the message of HIV and AIDS ought to give recognition and respect to the individual for whom the message of prevention is intended. The role of the communicator (who aims at stemming the HIV and AIDS pandemic) can at best be that of facilitating individual choice in a manner that fosters recognition of existential questions, such as those regarding responsibility, self-identity, that emerge when communication is seen as the mode of existence of one whose “real living is meeting” as Buber (1987, p. 11) has said.

A significant implication of this line of thinking is that the individual is seen to have nothing that per se compels him or her to risky HIV and AIDS behaviours. Existential thought stands opposed to today’s approaches to HIV and AIDS, which take responsibility from the being to the context. For better or for worse, a significance of the idea of choice, for the purposes of this argument, is that the limitedness of options in a given context does not mean the infinite range of possibility open to a person is reduced. The individual, in historical context, has neither essential nature nor self-identity other than that involved in the act of choosing (Sartre, 1956, pp. 713-

714). Thus for any given being, the likelihood of engaging in high-risk HIV and AIDS behaviours remains the infinite likelihood of all that individual's potentiality, i.e. it may not be statistically or otherwise calculated and manipulated.

For the human being, even not choosing is choosing (Jolivet, 1950, p. 101). This is to agree with Kierkegaard (see Stacks, 1977, p. 44) when he suggests that human existence and human actions are comprehensible only in terms of the possibility of possibility.

The ways in which knowledgeable agents choose in freedom how to 'go on' do not need to be presented as always being to their individual or collective advantage as Willis (1977) showed in the context of working class British children and as Steinberg (2008) can be read to have shown in the context of a Black African man living in a rural community of South Africa, in this time of HIV and AIDS. To grant human dignity to the other in communication on HIV and AIDS, is to grant dignity to a being who both creates and destroys worlds (Cummings, 1955).

With exposure to the same information on HIV and AIDS, Africans have continued to show diverse responses. Indeed, in the transition from receiving, understanding, and then to acting on information on HIV and AIDS, the individual has the freedom to choose. Without this assumption there would be no logic in telling people to abstain, be faithful and condomise.

Positing choice, freedom and the subjective is not to engage in denial of the object world of encounter in relation to which the individual chooses to go on. If this was to posit a sovereign being, a creator without limitations, there would be no sense in

speaking of the need to communicate about HIV and AIDS as people could simply 'wish' the epidemic away.

In varying degrees, in varying contexts, the individual has limited options from which to choose.

...choosing and having options are not identical: choices may work in accordance with options, but one may choose what is not a live option. The choice, then, turns back on the chooser and lives in the world of negation. There the choice determines something about the chooser, though it fails to transform the material conditions imposed upon the chooser. (Gordon, 2000, p. 76)

An important consequence of recognizing that choice and options are not the same is that we can reckon with choice as discretionary and reflective of the meaning giving individual who acts in freedom.

We can have further clarity concerning the idea of choice by contrasting it with the idea of the decision as 'made after the fact' of choice when problems, solutions and participants come together in the stream of time. This can explain how it is that the decisions individuals make are not, so to speak, necessarily of their choosing. And this accords with the fact that human beings have a rationality that is altogether too bounded for their choices to lead neatly into 'how things play out and come together' or are decided in the flow of time. The idea that one can weigh the rationality of decisions is only indicative of the capacity of individuals for retrospective sensemaking (Weick, 1995, pp. 100-105), it does not justify blaming and stereotyping those who engage in high risk HIV and AIDS.

Nevertheless, “*It is ours to choose the world and future; we are held responsible for it... [even if] we must do it in conditions of fundamental uncertainty.*” (Deetz, 1995, p. 71). The challenge for one who would communicate on the existential concern of HIV and AIDS is to midwife the infinite possibility that is heralded by each (communicating) individual (Kierkegaard, 1947, p. 149). The virtuous challenge is not to seek to limit the very human possibility of possibility. Virtue is not “whatever makes modest and tame”, it is not what makes “the wolf into a dog and mankind himself into mankind’s favourite pet” (Nietzsche, 2006, p. 135) when, to state the obvious, each person is a person.

Information on HIV and AIDS, no matter how it is framed and delivered, only informs the individual of risks. Information cannot domesticate the choice and freedom of the other (Giddens, 1986, pp. xxvi-xxvii). Meaningful communication on HIV and AIDS should be premised on recognition of the other who is characterised by freedom and choice “*which makes its own possibilities.*” (Sartre, 1985, p. 63). The individual can develop the critical consciousness to both read and question the given reality (Freire & Faundez, 1989) in an enterprise of teaching and learning that is genuinely emancipatory.

The literacy to read and question the world is only possible when the choice and freedom of the individual is recognized. When people recognize their literacy in reading and questioning the world they recognize their possibilities to write new realities for themselves. Learning to read and write, through and in questioning, can thus be seen as an exercise in responsibly taking up one’s agency. Communication on HIV and AIDS that achieves this would have exceeded itself by enabling individuals to, in term of Nietzsche (2006), *surpass themselves*.

Those who would engage the people to change situations need to have the existential tact to act with the respect required. They need to grant the dignity of the people as individuals who have choice and freedom. This demands that the one who would teach comes to accept that he or she is also a learner. The student is also a teacher. The dialogical ideal holds that together, in participation, when each affirms the other, a relationship which is productive can arise. Sen (1999) has argued that granting the freedom of the individual is a condition for both ethical and productive relationships that are able to change the material conditions of the people.

Even in this most dark of times, we can go beyond objective answers and the propaganda they render by embracing the real questions by which individuals can reveal new dawns. If we have the courage of hope to dialogically snatch at the eternal butterfly that is human possibility and if it should happen that it feels that all we grasp is the 'eternal chrysalis' of what is objectively spoken, may we nevertheless not give up on the understanding that "these two are never really identifiable one with the other." (Buber, 1987, pp. 17-18) Stated differently, as we advance in earnest communication to allow others to adopt healthy lifestyles, we should not deny or lose sight of how it may be that our communication objectively renders itself differently from what our best intentions may have formed. By this the communicator of this most precious of messages may continue to enjoy the grace of respecting and dignifying the self and others as creators and destroyers of worlds (Cummings, 1955) who so deserve unconditional positive regard.

Conclusion

It is impossible to meaningfully outline existential thought within the limits of a single article, especially one such as this which is otherwise occupied with another set of

concerns that relate to communication on HIV and AIDS. Neither is it possible to even outline the context of the communication or merely to state the full character and consequences of recognising the existential with regard the question of communication on HIV and AIDS. Here and elsewhere, where the matter at hand is weighty and most fully deserving of life and death consideration, *sorrow and beauty* challenge the reader to not ask from this or any other writer *complete solutions and high morals* even as these are patently required (Camus, 1957).

Nevertheless we are challenged to go on and make the most of what is possible. It matters that in our brave if fatefully incomplete ways we can say important words that affirm shared humanity. Beyond seeking to control, direct and thus deny the choice and freedom of others, even where the aim may be most noble, we can choose to recognise and dignify all humanity in the occasion of the great need to communicate about HIV and AIDS. Beyond propaganda there can be real education in the real communication by which individuals are enabled to question and thus choose (and see that they choose) in freedom to create and destroy worlds.

This writer stands, therefore, with others who fight against the scourge of HIV and AIDS. He does this in a manner that makes him vulnerable to hurt and error as even the most rightly scientific approach to the truth is problematic (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 63). Indeed, all this also means that the truth and our liberty to get to it are problematic and dangerous, good and to be cherished. So without shame, this writer grants that he has

...no other claims but those which he shares with his comrades in arms:
vulnerable but obstinate, unjust but impassioned for justice, doing his work
without shame or pride in view of everybody, not ceasing to be divided

between sorrow and beauty, and devoted finally to drawing from his double existence the creations that he obstinately tries to erect in the destructive movement of history. Who after all this can expect from him complete solutions and high morals? Truth is mysterious, elusive, always to be conquered. Liberty is dangerous, as hard to live with as it is elating. We must march toward these two goals, painfully but resolutely, certain in advance of our failings on so long a road. What writer would from now on in good conscience dare set himself up as a preacher of virtue? (Camus, 1957)

One who would attempt to get to truth and liberty, at all cost, is liable to be labeled a heretic (Kuhn, 1970) who is proud and/or conceited since truth cannot be grasped as completely as a project towards it would require. This writer in taking up this challenge has to be content much more with raising questions than answers, or stated differently, with raising answers that have the character of questions. In this obstinacy the writer may be content with the inability to form neat lines of logical argument that require the deliberate crushing of the limits of one's access and transmission capabilities as regards truth, even where the ethical imperative is to live and hence communicate the truth about HIV and AIDS. Indeed, as Nietzsche's (2006, p. 9) Zarathustra has said, "I say to you: one must still have chaos in oneself in order to give birth to a dancing star. I say to you: you still have chaos in you."

Truly in these matters more than most that are imaginable there is much sad truth in the observations that theory is always under-supported by the facts and by the exposition of those facts. It is impossible to prove the relevance of existential philosophy to the African and to communication on HIV and AIDS. Accordingly, the reader of this paper will have possibly been left with more questions than answers.

The writer is of the view that a meaningful gain will have been made to the extent that this article contributes to getting others to raise such questions.

Raising existential thought in relation to communication on HIV and AIDS accepts that the role of the communicator who aims at stemming the HIV and AIDS pandemic cannot be of limiting the choice and freedom of the other. It can best be seen as a role of facilitating individual choice in recognition of existential freedom.

At the limits of knowledge and communication, it is a challenge to of courage to go beyond fear and trembling. This speaks the need for courage that “slays also giddiness at abysses” lived in this time of much death and suffering, and it does so while claiming the existential questions to be raised here concern the old ethics questions of how life should be lived for “and where do human beings not stand at the abyss? Is seeing itself not not seeing itself--seeing the abyss?” (Nietzsche, 2006, p. 125)

In this historical time, we would have done badly if in addressing HIV and AIDS we do not thereby enable ourselves to move forwards in the quest for meaningful recognition. Adopting approaches to HIV and AIDS in the African context that challenge individuals to speak to each other as people and that so humanise us all is a worthy heritage by which posterity can speak of us. This is a worthy goal of both practice and research. Not only may this challenge ways in which the African has been known and essentialized, this also frames a promise of widening and deepening democracy and hope by the embrace of the possibility of possibility.

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