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Lovelife counselors' perceptions of the impact of HIV and AIDS on the sexual conduct of adolescents

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2007-03-02T12:00:55Z
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/2202

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CHAPTER 1 : INTRODUCTION

1.1 RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

The Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) are pandemics that have not affected South Africa only, but also the rest of the world. AIDS is a disease that leave many children orphaned, and the economy of a country crippled, amongst other misfortunes that it brings (Voeller, Reinish, & Gottlieb, 1990). Many people are not just infected by this pandemic, but multitudes are also affected, most of all the South African adolescents.

According to Craig (1996) and Papalia and Olds (1998) adolescence is a transition stage between childhood and adulthood. Adolescence is a stage during which adolescents are developing cognitively, physically, and socially (Berk, 2001; Craig, 1996). It is also during the adolescent stage when adolescents develop their sex-object preference, gender identity, sex roles, and dispositions to act in sexual contexts (Lerner & Spanier, 1980).

Adolescents are the target group in this study as they are in a stage whereby they are trying to discover who they are, where they belong, where they are going in life, and most of all their sexuality. All these processes and changes make them particularly vulnerable to contracting HIV and AIDS as they are prone to the influence of many negative things, including practicing unsafe sex (Reproductive Health Outlook, 2004).

HIV and AIDS infections occur mostly in adolescents that are between the ages of 15 and 24 (AIDS Foundation of South Africa, 2005; Jogunosimi, 2001; MacPhail, 1998; Reproductive Health Outlook, 2004; The South African National Department of Health (DoH), 1998; UNFPA, 2003). South African

adolescents are the ones who increasingly engage in unprotected sex which make the infection rate more prevalent in that age group. The adolescent stage is very important in the fight against HIV and AIDS infections, as this is the stage during which adolescents start having sexual intercourse.

Lear (1997) highlighted the importance of understanding how adolescents negotiate their sexual relationships. This understanding will aid towards the implementation of effective preventive strategies against contracting HIV and AIDS. The author thinks that HIV and AIDS might have an impact on how adolescents conduct themselves sexually because it is a fatal disease that people should protect themselves against. The author further assumes that young people are no longer free to have sexual relationships because of the fear that they might contract HIV and die from the disease.

It is a big challenge for adolescents to abstain from sexual relationships, or even practice safe sex. Adolescents hold attitudes like *"I like it natural"* (meaning that they would like to have sex without the use of a condom). The other thing adolescents like to say is *"We trust each other"* (meaning that the two parties who are involved in a relationship trust that the other partner is HIV negative and is faithful to only him/her) (UNFPA, 2003, p. 2). LoveLife, in its campaigns, always stresses the importance of abstinence from sexual relationships, being faithful to one sexual partner (who is HIV negative), and condomising. This campaign is very essential to be adhered to in the fight against HIV and AIDS (Jogunosimi, 2001; Kaiser Family Foundation, 2001; Moolman, 2004; UNFPA, 2003).

The focus of this study is on the perceptions that loveLife counselors have on how HIV and AIDS has impacted on the sexual conduct of adolescents. This study forms part of a larger project that deals with the psychosocial impact of HIV and AIDS. The loveLife counselors were chosen as the informants as they directly work with adolescents. The counselors also play a vital role to impart

information, to the adolescents regarding HIV and AIDS. The author chose the loveLife counselors as they have a lot of knowledge concerning adolescents and how adolescents conduct themselves sexually.

The loveLife counselors were pivotal in the study also because the intervention and preventive methods that the loveLife organization decides to put in place to reduce the spread of HIV and AIDS among adolescents are based on the counselors' perceptions.

The information received from the loveLife counselors was secondary, as their perceptions on how HIV and AIDS has impacted on how adolescents expressed their sexuality, was sought. Secondary information was important to give a guideline on how the situation was like amongst adolescents, so that proper and effective interventions can be planned when working directly with adolescents.

Sexual relationships and HIV infections are at an increase among adolescents and, therefore, the study of HIV and AIDS and sexuality among adolescents is more appropriate. The understanding of adolescents towards sexuality, in light of HIV and AIDS, is vital so as to put more effective prevention strategies to reduce the spread of HIV and AIDS.

1.2 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The aims of the study were as follows:

- examine the loveLife counselors' perceptions about how HIV and AIDS has affected adolescent sexual conduct;
- explore the loveLife counselors' perceptions whether the prevalence of HIV and AIDS has an influence on young people's sexual conduct; and

- examine whether the loveLife counselors think adolescents are making use of condoms during penetrative sex, or being faithful to one sexual partner, or delaying initiation of sexual involvement.

The objectives of the study were as follows:

- explore the perceptions of loveLife counselors about the impact of HIV and AIDS on adolescent sexual conduct;
- examine whether loveLife counselors think HIV and AIDS has changed how adolescents conduct themselves sexually; and
- investigate the loveLife counselors' perceptions on the impact of HIV and AIDS on adolescents' attitudes towards sexual relationships.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions were as follows:

- what are the perceptions of loveLife counselors on how HIV and AIDS has impacted on adolescent sexual conduct?
- do the loveLife counselors think adolescents have changed the way they express their sexuality, that is, are adolescents using condoms, being faithful to one sexual partner or abstaining from sexual relationships?

1.4 OUTLINE OF THE REPORT

The Social-Learning- and Ecological Approaches as well as the Health Belief Model will be discussed in chapter 2. The present situation of HIV and AIDS in South Africa will also be included as well as factors which influence the spread

of the virus. The study was centered on adolescents, and, therefore, a more detailed understanding of adolescence will be discussed. Studies that look at sexuality and how adolescents perceive sexuality will form part of the literature review, in chapter 2. In chapter 3, the research design and methodology will be explored. The results as well as the discussion will follow thereafter in chapter 4, before the conclusion and recommendations are made in chapter 5.