



# **HIV/AIDS**

## **IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA**

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPLICATIONS OF  
CULTURE & CONTEXT

**EDITORS**  
**JEAN BAXEN & ANDERS BREIDLID**



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## Introduction

This book is the result of a research project in South Africa on how the HIV/AIDS pandemic is perceived by various stakeholders in a South African context. The study suggests that it is important to focus on how and where the production and reproduction of HIV/AIDS discourse takes place. The reason for this is that the ‘how’ and ‘where’ shape and give character to individual and collective responses to HIV/AIDS, but are also, critically in this book, implicated in the ways in which both individuals and groups make their identities. The book, therefore, highlights the social and cultural practices shaping communities’ responses to and uptake of the pandemic. Using a variety of social theory approaches, it analyses various contexts in which discourse production about HIV/AIDS takes place and shows how various stakeholders respond to and reproduce the various resulting discourses in different ways. By exploring the complex and sometimes contradictory spaces where HIV/AIDS discourses are negotiated, the book’s chapters present a picture of the HIV/AIDS problematic that transcends the current simplistic approaches to the pandemic that often emphasise the need for a more knowledgeable populace.

It emerged very early on in the project that any exploration of HIV/AIDS needed to take account of its interrelatedness with sex, sexuality and disease, and ways in which the pandemic was embedded in these discourses. Thus, chapters are not limited to experiences of the pandemic. Rather, some explore identity construction in the context of HIV/AIDS, foregrounding how the dominant discourses of gender, sexuality and disease act as dominant mediatory tools that communities draw on to understand, interpret and make meaning of their individual and collective identities.

The book is therefore as much about identity construction as it is about HIV/AIDS. It explores how a pandemic of this nature offers different possibilities for making the self, amid constraints imposed by dominant structures and discourses. Some chapters highlight the tension between modernity and tradition, while others illustrate how this becomes a resource for the shaping of new identities. Other chapters show how positions are taken up either to maintain or protect a ‘fixed’ identity. The outcome is a book that demonstrates the complexity of the relationship between identity and context.

A distinguishing feature of the book is that all the chapters are based on data collected from the same seven communities. A point of difference among chapters is either in the emphasis on primary or secondary school sites, or the population sourced. Methods for conducting the study included interviews, and observational and survey data. The overarching aim in collecting data was to solicit experiences, views and perspectives across the seven community sites that could provide material for a sociocultural understanding of how the pandemic manifests itself as a social phenomenon. An additional aim was to develop a research landscape for the project that would include a variety of research sites (churches, schools, mosques, homes and tabernacles) and respondents (religious leaders, school heads, teachers, children and youth) as well as a spread of socioeconomic and sociocultural contexts in which research was carried out. Chapters in this book thus emphasise the need to go beyond asking questions about what knowledge people in different communities hold about the pandemic to asking questions about how they make meaning of their individual and collective identities in a context riven with multiple and often contradictory messages about HIV/AIDS.

Methodologically, this book proposes a shift away from quantitative knowledge, attitudes and practice-related studies that seek to investigate the knowledge base of members of different population groups to approaches that emphasise views and experiences from an insider perspective. It examines experiences of those living and working in the context of HIV/AIDS and, through the use of qualitative methodologies that take into account the sensitivity and stigmatisation of the topic, seeks to shed light on aspects of the pandemic that need to be taken into account if interventions at all levels are to prove effective. The book shifts the discourse away from an emphasis on medical and catastrophic discourses and suggests a more hermeneutic approach to researching HIV/AIDS that addresses the contexts in which people make meaning of their lives in relation to the pandemic.

Data collection was confined to communities in the Western Cape Province of South Africa. Permission to conduct the research was given by the Research Unit of the Western Cape Education Department.

Sites were identified through random and purposive sampling strategies. This included selecting primary and secondary schools representing different communities. Two steps were followed in this process of selection. Firstly, and in order to select communities, all primary and secondary schools in the Cape Metropole were grouped according to the racial categories used during the period of apartheid to determine the school and geographic locations of the respective communities. This involved categorising schools using the racial categories of black, white, coloured and Indian. These were further divided into secondary and primary schools. Once the step of racial categorisation was complete, schools were then randomly selected within each category and school level. Additional schools were selected in the coloured and black categories. Since there are only four Indian schools in the Western Cape, only one was included in the research.

One of the primary aims of the project was to gain insight into the views of, responses to and experiences of the pandemic of different communities. It made sense, therefore, to include more communities hardest hit by the HIV/AIDS, hence the skewed number of schools per racial group. It has to be noted that 23 white primary schools were approached to participate in the study. None was available, citing busy schedules as the primary reason for non-participation. Table 1 shows the final number of schools in each racial category.

**Table 1: Racial categorisation and number of schools**

Racial category	Number of schools	
	<i>Secondary</i>	<i>Primary</i>
Coloured	2	2
Indian	0	1
Black	2	3
White	1	0

Once schools were identified, letters seeking permission to use each selected school in the research project were sent out. School visits were thereafter conducted to hold discussions with the school management team and staff. These discussions highlighted



the broad project aims and objectives. Importantly, though, each investigator sought additional permission from his/her respective respondents, who signed letters of consent each time.

The book is divided into four parts.

In part 1, the editors set the scene for a sociological reading of the HIV/AIDS landscape by exploring the limitations in the educational research agenda. Claiming that research in HIV/AIDS is predominantly based on the disciplines of economics, medicine and epidemiology, Baxen and Breidlid call for research that takes account of the cultural and social context in which meanings and interpretations of HIV/AIDS are rooted, produced and reproduced. This, they argue, would allow for a more nuanced reading of the articulation between knowledge and practice.

Underlining that the disease is as much social as it is biomedical, the editors call for differentiated interventions that take cognisance of how cultural and contextual factors shape responses to and interpretations of the pandemic, which in their view seem to fuel the pandemic.

In part II, two such contexts in relation to HIV/AIDS are explored, namely the school context and the religious context. In chapter 4, Bernice Adonis with Jean Baxen examine school culture and discuss how it acts as a filter to the knowledge taught about HIV/AIDS. According to their findings, school culture is important in the mediation of knowledge and information about HIV/AIDS, as it influences what and how teachers teach and, more importantly, how teachers position themselves in relation to the content of their lessons. Teachers whose beliefs and values were similar to those of the school, and who lived in close proximity to the school, seemed to align themselves and the school's culture with their respective communities' practices, thereby entrenching these practices and thus making it difficult to insert a different discourse from the dominant one. Teachers were restrained when their values and those of the school were different. For the most part, teachers suppressed their personal positions and complied with the culture of the school. This, Adonis and Baxen argue, offers little agency for teachers to work outside the 'acceptable' discourse for fear of the personal and professional consequences.

Aysha Hattas' focus in chapter 5 is on religious leaders and their responses to HIV/AIDS. In particular, she examines their attitudes to sex and sexual behaviour in relation to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. While the study is not representative of the opinions of the religious leaders in toto in the Cape Town area, it reveals how within this multi-faith group of religious leaders, two types of discourses emerge. The first — what Hattas refers to as a 'closed' discourse — is one that adheres to more traditional religious principles, and within it, leaders are unwilling to acknowledge the existence of HIV/AIDS in their communities. The 'closed' discourse is resistant to change and does not allow for any religious adjustment to address the pandemic, viewing condom use, for example, as not only unacceptable, but actually immoral. The 'open' discourse, while still adhering to basic religious principles, acknowledges the changing context of religious beliefs and allows for modern interpretations and choice. In contrast to the 'closed' discourse, the 'open' one addresses the challenges people face in the wake of HIV/AIDS and

thus creates a window of opportunity for addressing critical issues that militate against behaviour change and the deceleration of the pandemic.

Part III begins with Hilda Rolls' chapter 6, which explores how primary school children construct their sexual identities. She argues that children's sexual identity construction is context specific and situational, and illustrates how games, chores and entertainment act as discursive spaces for sexual identity construction. Children, she proposes, position themselves in particular ways, meaning that engagement in these social activities supports the shaping of masculine and feminine identities. According to Rolls, parents and siblings are important role models who contribute to sexual identity construction and, by implication, either reproduce or rupture dominant constructions. She acknowledges the dominance of heterosexuality and describes the difficulty and challenges one learner faced in not subscribing to the dominant biological construction of gender. Children's sexuality cannot, according to Rolls, be viewed as a separate entity, but must be viewed as an integrated process where the children continually construct and deconstruct their sexual experiences in interaction with significant others.

Mamatso Matsoso-Makhate with Gerald Wangenge-Ouma analyse factors shaping secondary school learners' sexual identity construction in chapter 7. According to their findings, the students 'perform' as opposed to 'are' their gendered roles. They reproduce dominant practices where males are perceived as 'initiators' and females as the 'pursued', even in circumstances that allow for the subversion of such roles. Matsoso-Makhate and Wangenge-Ouma put forward the argument, though, that dichotomising feminine and masculine roles obscures the complex ways in which the traditional gendered discourse is both maintained and subverted. According to them, heterosexuality was the discourse from and through which boys, and particularly girls, made their sexual selves. While girls both maintained and subverted the dominant discourse by using networks in initiating relationships, in performing their 'expected' gendered roles they almost always gave boys the power to make the choice of whether or not to pursue a relationship. Thus boys, somewhat paradoxically, still maintained the role of initiator, leaving little room for girls to make different choices or reproduce a different discourse. Boys, the researchers found, adopted a taken-for-granted orientation to their sexual identity construction. It was the girls who often complied with 'expected' practice, leaving boys to continue their actions unaltered and unquestioned. The fact that particularly the girls performed their 'expected' gendered roles has far-reaching implications, especially in the context of HIV/AIDS, as it undermines the girls' agency.

In chapter 8, Julia Nupen with Gerald Wangenge-Ouma analyses young people's perceptions and understandings of risk in the context of HIV/AIDS. Their findings point to many young people having unrealistic conceptions of invincibility and invulnerability with regard to HIV infection, even in the face of experience of the disease through relatives and friends. These conceptions influence how these young people make relationship choices and their participation in risky sexual behaviours. The way young people make sexual choices and their thoughts about risk in relation to HIV/AIDS are integrally linked to the context in which they construct their sexual identities and make meaning of their lives. This, as the authors find, is always in relation to the 'other'. Their chapter points to the importance of context and how it always acts as a frame of reference for constructing sexual identity. This context is volatile and offers many possibilities for making different sexual identities. However, while this might be so, the

authors found that this context is also regulated by dominant discourses that disallow a different uptake of sexual identities. The authors maintain that understanding the ways in which context shapes and is shaped by those who inhabit the spaces is important in understanding both the risk factor in relation to HIV infection and the implication this has for designing effective interventions.

Following along the same vein as the other chapters in this section, Marit Petersen in chapter 9 examines the ways in which young women in particular interpret and enact gender roles within sexual relationships. By exploring how gender dynamics influence sexual choices among adolescents in two different settings (one predominantly black and the other a mixture of coloured and white) in the Cape Town area, Petersen finds that those adolescents in the predominantly black and poor setting are open to particular susceptibility that is encouraged by the way they position themselves in relation to hegemonic masculinities, patriarchy and 'expected' gender roles. She finds that, more often than not, these female adolescents complied with what she describes as a 'closed' hegemonic script. The coloured and white youth from the more affluent setting were better able not only to make different choices, but also to articulate these choices in situations where gender equity was more acceptable. Petersen calls this the 'open' script, which allows for different possibilities in making a sexual identity. Importantly, though, choices were available in both settings. However, those in the poor, predominantly black setting were more aware of the consequences of non-compliance, while youth in the more affluent setting seemed naive about the consequences their choices might have in relation to HIV infection and risk. Both groups were under risk, but for very different reasons. Like those of Matsoso-Makhate and Wangenge-Ouma, Petersen's findings point to the importance of understanding ways in which location shapes and is shaped by the actors and how this often reproduces practices that offer limited possibilities for particularly women to act differently or make choices that ensure their sexual well-being.

Jean Baxen and Anders Breidlid



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# HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa: Understanding the Implications of Culture and Context

Edited by Jean Baxen and Anders Breidlid

With a foreword by Crain Soudien

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Popular understanding of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Sub-Saharan Africa is riddled with contradiction and speculation. This is revealed in HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa, which explores the various contexts in which debate about HIV/AIDS takes place and examines how the pandemic is perceived by scholars, religious leaders and traditional healers, among others – in communities in and around South Africa. Using a social theory lens, the book focuses on not only the cultural and contextual practices, but also the methodological and epistemological orientations around HIV/AIDS in education that shape community and individual interpretations of this disease.

The book avoids a simplistic approach to the pandemic, by exploring the complex and sometimes contradictory spaces in which HIV/AIDS discourses are negotiated, and thus goes some way to present a more hermeneutic profile of the HIV/AIDS problem. HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa is as much about identity construction as it is about HIV/AIDS. The authors recognise the interrelatedness of sex, sexuality, identity and HIV/AIDS in the shaping of individual and collective identities and have thus gone beyond merely asking questions about what people know.

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