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Are You Human?

Abstract: There is abundant evidence that Africans know the basics of HIV and AIDS – that the challenge of achieving desired behaviour change is not merely about getting them ‘into the know’. This chapter presents the seemingly tame view that meaningful communication for behaviour change as regards HIV/AIDS involves contending with questions concerning the humanity and dignity of self and other. It encourages existential questions in relation to the African. These questions are often seen as strange and unwise even though HIV/AIDS fundamentally drives individuals to ask, ‘Are you human?’ The chapter argues that if we continue to fail to ask existential questions as regards Africans, the conditions and practices by which Africans of courage may face the epidemic in a new renaissance will continue to be under-theorized and neglected.

Keywords: communication; existential questions; HIV and AIDS; human

As suggested by Mary Fisher (1992), the key question HIV/AIDS poses is ‘Are you human?’

Startling encounters with illness and death beg questions about how each unique life, including one’s own, may be meaningfully recognized in ways that advance the freedoms of both self and other to create new histories. The possibility of illness and death poses questions as to how life may be dignified in how one and one’s others face the duty to not choose to renounce freedom. In the face of HIV/AIDS, we are challenged to ask how we may promote recognition worthy of the self and of others.

In South Africa it is widely held that Africans are collectivists for whom questions of existence do not apply. In terms of this dominant view existential thought is bracketed as concerned with individualistic, Western and bourgeois concerns, and Africans are marginalized from basic questions concerning human existence (Ikuenobe, 2006; Ramose, 1999). This may be one reason why some find it unimaginable to think that, here too, HIV/AIDS begs the question, ‘Are you human?’

Yet a person is a person first, and only then is a person socially given to be an African or a Westerner, and so on. All persons choose how to be human in relation to others with whom they interact. In other words, all real living persons exist in really choosing to meet the world of their encounters. This gives new existential meaning to the ubuntu maxim umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu which has often been under-read to suggest that Africans ascribe to a collectivist orientation in terms of which a person is only a person as determined by the collective (Chasi, 2014).

Adopting an existential approach in the African context involves becoming a contributor to a literature of liberation which holds, at least for Frantz Fanon and Lewis Gordon, that the alienated and denied cannot overcome their marginalization by getting incorporated into the practices and emergent structures that characterize their oppression. In other words, the overdetermined cannot articulate a path to freedom by mimicking how they have been historically dehumanized. (Re)establishment of the conditions for humanization involves violence against the logics and practices of dominance. Real education on HIV/AIDS involves questing for liberation. Without undermining the benefits of play in processes of learning, it is fair to say that the search for truth benefits from moving away from word games that detract from real engagement with lived-concerns. Real engagement with the world of