

Full Length Research Paper

Cross-cultural perspectives on adolescent perceptions of HIV/AIDS vulnerability: An American and African comparison

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The aim of this investigation was to examine African and American adolescents' claim to HIV/AIDS invulnerability frequently expressed stance that they are not susceptible to the transmission of HIV/AIDS. Participants were selected from diverse countries comprising USA, Kenya, South Africa and Tanzania. The method of data analysis consisted of frequency, percentage, chi-square and probability. The measuring instrument was a questionnaire dealing with HIV/AIDS transmission, infection and prevention. The results showed that the majority of participants held the perception and belief that indeed they were invulnerable to HIV/AIDS infection, even though some of them engaged in behaviour that predisposed them to contracting HIV/AIDS. In conclusion, it was argued that HIV/AIDS public education ought to underscore this misconception to advance the cause against HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Keywords: Adolescents in denial, HIV/AIDS transmission, low HIV perception, HIV/AIDS invulnerability, existence of HIV/AIDS, university students.

INTRODUCTION

There is an increasing number of studies showing that many adolescents hold the view, that they are immune to being HIV/AIDS infected, believing that only others out there will contract HIV/AIDS. Partly in view of this stance, Mwale (2008) advances the argument that, if there is personal vulnerability to HIV infection, the person concerned will be on guard against HIV infection. Those who take the position of invulnerability are likely to engage in HIV high risk sexual behavior. There is a belief among adolescents that only others can contract HIV, but not me. Failure to acknowledge one's vulnerability will lead to one ignoring the advice for safer sex or make use of condom once engaged in sexual activity.

According to Kibombo, Neema & Ahmed (2007) perception of one being susceptible to contracting HIV/AIDS works as catalyst for undertaking the necessary precautionary measures. In their study of 5112

adolescents' and their perceptions of HIV/AIDS noted that those concerned about contracting HIV and have a low self-perceived risk, use such state of affair for avoiding sexual behaviour, that place them on the verge of contracting HIV. Their study showed that one in five of the participants, did not think they were in danger of contracting HIV.

Sutton, Hardnett, Wright, Wahi, Pathak, Warren-Jeanpere, Jones (2011) made a study of 1230 African Americans' HIV/AIDS knowledge and perceptions of risk. There were 79% participants who considered themselves to be at low HIV risk/infection. Adefuye, Abiona, Baloguin & Durrell (2009) investigated risk behaviours and perception of risk among 390 college students and concluded that perception of HIV risk was rather poor as they were of the view that they did not stand a chance of being HIV/AIDS infected

Opt, Loffredo, Knowles & Fletcher (2010) examined college students knowledge and perceptions of HIV/AIDS and sexual practices in which it was observed that despite their knowledgeability about HIV/AIDS, they were not just as concerned about their becoming infected. Based on a sample of 300 college students, Mongkuo, Mushi, Thomas (2010) made a study of perception of HIV/AIDS and socio-cognitive determinants of safe sex practices among college students, in which participants were knowledgeable about HIV/AIDS and its transmission, understanding of risk behavior associated with HIV/AIDS as well as HIV/AIDS prevention. More importantly, they were willing to associate with HIV/AIDS infected persons, interested in participating in HIV/AIDS education. Such factors served as predictors of students' practising safe sex.

In a comprehensive report produced by the University of California (2011), it is reported that, young people have the myth that they are immune to HIV infection, and that it can only happen to others. In a large sample of 650 American college students, Inungu, Mumford, Younis & Langford (2009) made a study of HIV knowledge, attitudes and practices which showed that 86.8 of the participants did not perceive themselves as likely to be infected by HIV. In view of this, the researchers drew the conclusion that there is a coexistence of misconception regarding the transmission of HIV/AIDS and the denial of participants contracting HIV. This calls for proactive approach to resolve such challenge among college students (Inungu et al., 2009)

In a South Africa investigation, van Wyk (2006) made a study of 290 undergraduate students' perceptions, attitudes and awareness towards HIV/AIDS with the results that they were informed about HIV/AIDS. This was not all, as they were some who were not well informed about HIV/AIDS and others who denied the existence of HIV/AIDS. In a Nigerian study based on 370 college students, Ching, Eke-Humber, Eaddy & Collins (2005) investigated HIV knowledge, perception and sexual behaviours. The overall results showed that participants' knowledge of HIV/AIDS was not sufficient; they engaged in sexual activity that was rather risky and perceived themselves to be of low susceptibility to HIV/AIDS infection. Ebeniro (2010) studied 324 Nigerian university students, and reported that 6% of the participants neither had knowledge of how HIV/AIDS is transmitted, nor did they believe that there was such a thing as HIV/AIDS.

In a Kenyan investigation of persistent gap between HIV/AIDS knowledge and prevention investigation, Njogu & Martin (2003) reported that the majority of participants considered themselves less vulnerable to contracting HIV/AIDS, when they engaged in sexual activity. In a similar investigation of youth, Kabiru and Orpinas (2009) observed that, in a sample of 931 high school students, the majority of them were of the view that their chances of contracting HIV/AIDS was rather low if not nonexistent.

The tendency for adolescents to hold the perspective that HIV/AIDS poses danger to anyone else except them,

is a fallacy and misconception. Everyone remains vulnerable to HIV so long as he/ she engages in what is referred to as HIV risk behaviour. It is important therefore for everyone to know the facts and the various ways of protecting oneself from being infected.

In the City of Lagos, Nigeria, Durojaiye (2009) reported that over 70% of the participants, did not think that they were at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS. This was in spite of the fact that that close to 70% of them were involved in sexual activity with multiple partners. It was nevertheless gratifying to know that those who thought that there was possibility of being infected, made use of condoms on a regular basis. With those who had low perception of contracting HIV/AIDS, there was no commitment to behavior change (Durojaiye, 2009).

METHOD

The sample of the present study comprised adolescents drawn from high school students based in Nairobi, Kenya and university students consisting of American, Kenyan, South African and Tanzanian participants both males and females. The total number of participants added up to 581 with a distribution of 157 Kenya high school students, 102 Kenya university students, 164 South Africa university students, 100 Tanzania university students and 58 American college students.

Measuring Instrument

The questionnaire comprised one question soliciting a response on the basis of three options, namely "Yes, No, Don't Know". All that was expected was to tick the option that was descriptive of what they knew about HIV/AIDS. The question read as follows: "Do you think you stand a chance of getting AIDS?"

Procedure

Since the researcher could not be in all places at the same time, arrangement was made for university lecturers to be responsible for administering the questionnaire to their respective students. This was to be done after meeting what was expected of them by their institutions in administering such a questionnaire. The responding to the questionnaire was preceded by the lecturer concerned explaining to the participants what was expected of them. They were also advised that they had the choice of responding to the questionnaire, if they so wished.

In addition to the question, participants were to fill in their gender and date of birth. For the purpose of confidentiality, participants were not permitted to write their names or institution of affiliation. On completion of the questionnaire

Table 1. Frequency Percentage Chi-Square and Probability

Do you think you stand a chance of contracting HIV/AIDS?

No.	Country	Freq.	%	χ^2	P
1.	America	41	72	33	0.00
2.	Kenya	37	45	21	0.001
3.	Kenya High School	96	76	53.8	0.001
4.	South Africa	93	80	42.7	0.001
5.	Tanzania	31	78	8.6	0,001

the lecturers collected the papers which were sent to the researcher in New York for scoring and analysis.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics in the form of frequency, percentage, chi-square and probability were used as a method of data analysis as displayed in Table 1. The response to the question for America was 72%, Kenya high school was 96%, Kenya university was 45%, South Africa 80% and Tanzania was 78% who did not think it was possible for them to contract HIV/AIDS. In terms of chi-square, the results were as follows: χ^2 (2df, N155)=52.8, <p 0.001 Kenya high school; χ^2 (2df, N100)=21, <p 0.001 Kenya university; χ^2 (2df, N162)=42.7, <p 0.001 South Africa; χ^2 (2df, N98)=8.6, <p 0.001 Tanzania; χ^2 (2df, N56)=33.6, <p 0.001 America.

All the values of the chi-square were statistically significant in favor of those who said they there was no chance of their being HIV/AIDS infected. There was only one difference in the significance of chi-square values, and that had to do with Kenya university students who were of the view that the possibility of being infected was understandable.

In summary, the analysis of data has shown beyond doubt that adolescents at high school level as well as university level have a united stand that there is no way they would want to think that they are potential candidates for HIV/AIDS. This is contrary to expectation in terms of the questionnaire, but that is a statistical reality reflecting the way participants perceived themselves in relation to HIV/AIDS transmission. Without being too interpretive of the results, it is a formidable phenomenon that such a diverse group of adolescents would think thus. Notwithstanding all that is known about HIV/AIDS, not only in their specific countries, but worldwide.

DISCUSSION

In view of research findings showing that many adolescents express the view that they do not believe that they are potential candidates for HIV/AIDS, the reality of HIV/AIDS sought to explore whether such findings would be replicated in a rather large and diverse sample of participants drawn from four different countries representing developed and developing countries, namely USA, Kenya, South Africa and Tanzania. The findings of the present investigation showed that all participants, except those of Kenya University students, considered themselves invulnerable to the transmission of HIV/AIDS. Thus confirming what other researchers have reported in the literature review. What was rather interesting was the fact that some of those who did not think they were susceptible to contracting HIV/AIDS engaged themselves in sexual behaviour that predisposed them to HIV/AIDS transmission.

In comparison and contrast, the findings of this investigation, are in agreement with what other researchers have reported as well as being in disagreement with findings that stated the contrary. Njugo & Martin (2003). reported that in their study, most of the participants thought they were less susceptible to becoming HIV/AIDS positive; in a large sample of 931 participants, Kabiru & Orpinas (2009) observed that all the participants had no hesitation in expressing that they were invulnerable to HIV/AIDS transmission.

Facente (2001) argues that while many adolescents are versatile about HIV/AIDS risk and consequences of contracting it, they still cling to the belief that they personally are unlikely to contract it. Those expressing such a view were engaged in risk sex activity, and yet 80% of them believed that HIV/AIDS posed no danger to their lives. In a study of 390 African American college students, Adefuye et al. (2009) concluded that participants did not

think they were likely to contract HIV/AIDS; similar results were reported by Opt et al. (2010). Inungu et al. (2009) investigation of 650 American college students, 86.8 did not perceive themselves as likely to be infected by HIV. This led the researchers to the conclusion that there is a coexistence of misconception regarding the transmission of HIV/AIDS and the denial of participants contracting HIV. The cited research findings have been confirmed by the findings of the present investigation.

In contrast, there are studies whose findings have not reported such denial. Kibombo et al. (2007) findings based on 5,112 Ugandan adolescents showed that only one fifth of the participants did not think that they would contract HIV/AIDS, meaning that the majority did not associate with those who claimed to be invulnerable.

Consequently they did whatever was necessary to avoid engaging in sexual behaviour that would predispose them to HIV/AIDS infection. Ching et al. (2005) findings showed males to be of greater susceptibility for HIV infection than their female counterparts. Ebeniro (2010) reported that 6% of the 322 participants did not believe in the existence of HIV/AIDS, while the majority believed otherwise. "The belief that HIV could happen to some people and not themselves is a prevalent thought among the students" (Ebeniro, 2010, p. 290); the implication being that there will be need for the use of condom and engaging in multiple ex partners relationships. According to Lenono (2007), on the basis of adolescents' accepting their susceptibility HIV/AIDS impacts on their sexuality activity, which manifests itself in the reduction of contracting infection and their adhering to the principles of use of condom, being faithful and abstinence.

CONCLUSION

So far there is no cure for HIV/AIDS, though research matches on in the quest for such cure. Therefore sensitisation and educational campaigns should focus on keeping young people to absolutely realistically sensitive to their personal risk, and remove the illusion of invulnerability in order to bridge the gap between knowledge and behavior change (Njogu & Martin, 2003). The prevention of contracting HIV/AIDS must go beyond promotion of awareness and educational programme. It should entail sensitizing adolescents to personal risk, enabling them to engage in informed decision making. According to Duroijaye (2009) emphasis in education program should take into account: abstinence, avoiding multiple sexual partners, regular use of condoms, change of risk perception and communication processes. Thus promoting safer sex as a means of arresting HIV/AIDS transmission and infection. Summerfield (1990) stressed that one way to

combat invulnerability among adolescents is to ensure that due attention is paid to adolescents' belief of their being less susceptible to HIV/AIDS infection. In view of the coexistence of misconception between HIV/AIDS transmission and the denial of adolescents. Inungu et al. (2009) call for proactive approach to resolve such challenges among college students.

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