

Assessing the Efficacy of Needs Assessment in HIV/AIDS Campaigns in South Africa

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ABSTRACT This paper aims to examine the efficacy of needs assessment and its relevance to HIV/AIDS communication by theatre in South Africa. Given the high prevalence levels of HIV/AIDS in the country and the failure to communicate HIV/AIDS messages, it has become necessary to redesign theatre's campaign strategies in order to achieve greater success in changing high risk sexual behaviour among communities ravaged by the pandemic. Using a qualitative research methodology, as well as a non-participant observation strategy, this paper seeks to evaluate the efficacy of needs assessment by a comparative analysis of the results of two major theatre interventions by a theatre group in the Western Cape and another group in the Eastern Cape Province. The findings indicate that greater success was achieved by the theatre group in the Eastern Cape who utilized the needs assessment strategy in their campaign. Based on the findings, the researcher argues that theatre stands to achieve greater success in HIV/AIDS campaigns if more attention is paid to needs assessment.

INTRODUCTION

South Africa is undergoing a health crisis as a result of the persistent high prevalence levels of HIV/AIDS infection. According to STATSSA (2017), the total number of persons living with HIV in South Africa increased from 4.94 million in 2002 to 7.06 million by 2017. For 2017, an estimated 12.6 percent of the total population is HIV positive.

The urgency in the need to combat the disease has led to the development of new strategies aimed at reducing the high prevalence levels of HIV/AIDS. Campbell (2003) postulates that HIV/AIDS threatens to wipe out decades of development gains in the world's poorer countries, as measured by life expectancy. For instance, average life expectancy in Sub-Saharan Africa, which would have been 62 years without AIDS, is now 47 years. In Botswana, it has dropped to 36, a level last seen in 1950. In Lesotho, a person who turned 15 in 2000 has a seventy-four percent chance of becoming infected before his/her fiftieth birthday. Added to this is the fact that there has been a lack of breakthrough in biomedical research regarding a cure for AIDS. The absence of a potential cure for AIDS means that efforts to change high risk behaviour can

only be achieved through HIV/AIDS communication (De Clemente and Peterson 1994).

Theoretical Framework

Hedebro (1982) states that one of the major concerns in developmental studies today centres on how communication can be organised to increase participation, achieve self-reliance, promote equity and close communication gaps. Research has established that for health communication to succeed in third world environments such as Africa, full participation of target population in the design of the interventionist instrument must be a priority. Bertens et al. (2008) has reiterated the need for collaboration between health interventionists, researchers and target population in the programme development process from start to finish. A major advantage of participatory strategy is the sense of ownership that such collaboration creates in the minds of the respective communities. Such ownership contributes to sustainable development with regards to projects in question. For example, a situation in which HIV/AIDS communication is designed with the full participation of the target audience implies that the community will be empowered to continue the process on their own terms using their own resources.

Theatre and HIV/AIDS in South Africa

In 1996, the then Minister for Health, Dr Nkolasana Zuma, under the then government of President Nelson Mandela drafted theatre as one of the agencies to fight HIV/AIDS. This was done on the strength of theatre's relevance in the fight against Apartheid. It was hoped that similar success story will repeat itself in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Research has, however, revealed that the anticipated success has yet to be realised.

Many reasons can be attributed to theatre's lack of success in achieving behaviour change. In the first place, there seem to be an apparent disparity in the way messages are prepared and distributed. Theatre commentators have often stated that some theatre groups embark on their HIV/AIDS campaigns armed with pre-packaged plays which are performed before an audience that had no input in the creation of the play. The groups write the scripts, rehearse the plays and present them before an audience without taking into account the specific socio-cultural and even economic circumstances of the given community. Mda (1994) describes this as top down communication where the marginalised communities become mere consumers of messages created by the theatre groups.

Aims and Objectives of the Research

The general aim of this paper is to analyse the significance of needs assessment as a key part of creating a full participatory strategy in successful HIV/AIDS communication. It intends to do this by a comparative analysis of two projects; one in the Western Cape where needs assessment was not utilised and another in the Eastern Cape where needs assessment was utilised. This paper intends to prove through empirical evidence that needs assessment is a major factor in successful HIV/AIDS interventions.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in two high schools at the Western Cape and Eastern Cape provinces. In each province, samples of 10 participants were drawn using a random sampling technique, in which focus groups were formed. The focus group were then interviewed on issues relating to the needs assessment in HIV/

AIDS campaigns. The following demographics in this table reveal the composition of the respondents.

Table 1: Respondents demographics

	<i>Masixole High School</i>	<i>Gaasbai High School</i>
Learners	6	8
Teachers	4	1
Performer	0	1

Table 1 illustrates that in Masixole High School, 6 learners and 4 teachers were interviewed. Yet, in Gaasbai High School 8 learners, 1 teacher and 1 performer were interviewed as part of the focus groups. Gender balance was maintained in both provinces with males and females making fifty percent of the sample. A question was posed on the issues pertaining the needs assessment. This table demonstrates the responses received from the respondents:

Table 2: Responses to the needs assessment

<i>Responses</i>	<i>Masixole High School</i>		<i>Gaasbai High School</i>	
	<i>Yes (%)</i>	<i>No (%)</i>	<i>Yes (%)</i>	<i>No (%)</i>
Learners	100	0	0	100
Teachers	75	25	0	100
Performer	0	0	100	

Table 2 points that all learners in Masixole High School agreed that a needs assessment is usually done before drama campaigns are conducted in their school. Yet, in Gaasbai High School all learners unequivocally stated that no such a thing as a need assessment is conducted. However, in terms of teachers, seventy-five percent in Masixole High School confirmed that a needs assessment is conducted, just as their learners held the same view. Similarly, in Gaasbai High School, teachers just as the learners confirmed that there is no need assessment done in drama campaigns. Lastly, the performer who was at Gaasbai High School agreed that he does a needs assessment before performance.

In order to get a deeper insight to the data that was collected, an inductive thematic analysis method was adopted. According to Thomas (2006), an inductive approach is used to con-

dense extensive raw data into brief format and to create an understandable link between the research objectives and the findings. The thematic analysis process unfolded into six phases as follows:

1. Familiarisation of the interview transcripts by reading and re-reading the material;
2. Creation of an excel data sheet in order to separate the data into different categories in line with the study objectives. Also, generation of initial codes and paraphrasing ideas emerging from the data after data familiarisation;
3. Data analysis across all participants and searching of common themes follows. Braun and Clarke (2006) points that a theme represents a patterned response or meaning within the data set;
4. Reviewing themes to check their suitability with extracts from the interview transcripts and creating a thematic map ;
5. Thereafter, naming and defining themes by refining and generating clear definitions for each theme was performed;
6. Lastly, a write up concluded the process. Braun and Clarke (2006) advise researchers to relate themes to research questions as opposed to their importance to quantifiable measures.

A question was posed regarding challenges that were faced by learners in their communities that affect the performance of their studies. Three major challenges were identified as demonstrated in Table 3.

Table 3: Challenges faced by learners in their studies

Challenge	Percentage (%)
Lack of parental support	90
Lack of sporting facilities	65
Lack of computer facilities	70

According to the table, ninety percent of the respondents from both focus groups pointed a lack of parental guidance as major challenge, which was affecting their studies. In probing further, it was established that most learners were coming from defragmented family backgrounds. This meant that at most times they are under the guidance of their aunts, uncles, and grandmothers. As result, that lack of motherly love and caring was negatively affecting their performanc-

es. Similarly, a number of learners (65%) pointed to the fact that sporting facilities were a major obstacle to their personal growth, considering that some of them were aspiring to progress in sports. Lastly, technology advancement means that it is equally important for a learner to have skills in computers. Considering that the South African government has made stride in making information accessible through the rolling out of internet in many cities, it was quiet shocking to discover that many learners did not have any access to internet. It was discovered that seventy percent of respondents identified lack of computer facilities as a hindrance to their studies. The reason being that computers can be used to get information and to access other study resources, which can be helpful in their learning. However, this negatively affected their performance as many of them attested that they usually use their personal phones to research. Hence, sometimes they would not be having money to do so, thus, leading to a lack of participation in challenging subjects such as science.

Theatre Intervention 1

From the 15th to the 22nd of April 2011, the researcher accompanied The Centre for HIV/AIDS Management theatre group of the University of Stellenbosch on tour of schools in the Boland area of the Western Cape. The tour took him to three high schools in the Boland area namely, Gansbaai High school, Kleinmond Secondary school and Hawston High school. Kleinmond and Hawston are traditionally coloured schools while Gansbaai is mixed in terms of race and ethnicity. The group presented a play titled *Lucky, the Hero* in each of these schools.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Theatre Intervention 1 (Western Cape)

Results of Focus Group and Individual Interviews

It is clear from the comments made by participants in the focus group and individual interviews that the theatre group did not involve their target population in the design of the play. Many of the participants believed that the play did not highlight key areas of the problems in their communities. They argue that major catalysts to the

spread of HIV/AIDS in their communities were not highlighted in the play *Lucky Hero*. The following are the comments by participants:

Perception of the Play

The Life-Skills teacher for Gansbaai High school is of the opinion that the play would have achieved more in the area of creating awareness of HIV/AIDS on the young audience if it contained more diverse cultural appeal in terms of language and other cultural beliefs and norms. She says Gansbaai is a very diverse community comprising of all the racial groups in the country, whites, blacks, coloureds. Unlike the other communities around, Gansbaai requires a more diverse cultural approach if any message was going to be successfully assimilated. The play, she said was presented in Afrikaans and many learners from other cultural groups did not understand the message because they couldn't speak Afrikaans. She also pointed out that the performers do not reflect the cultural diversity of that community:

Play should contain more diverse cultural appeal especially in terms of language. Many learners did not understand what the play was about because it was presented in Afrikaans.

Constituent Strategy (Audience Participation)

Learners

During the focus group sessions, the learners commented on their exclusion from the design of the play:

The group never consulted us for our input (Respondent 2).

We were never involved in the writing of the play (Respondent 5).

Life-Skills Teachers

The Life-Skills teachers interviewed also said the group did not consult them for ideas about the play or questions about life in their communities:

They didn't consult us. We would have told them our areas of problem so that they can dramatise them (Respondent 2).

We know a lot about this area. We would have guided them (Respondent 1).

The Life-Skills teacher for Gansbaai says the group should have done more research on the area:

They would have avoided the mistakes they made today. They would have known that this is a culturally diverse community.

The Centre for HIV/AIDS Management theatre group applied top-down communication strategy and did not utilise a full participatory strategy. The audience were reduced to being passive receivers of the message that was solely created by the theatre group. This is why salient aspects of target group's diversity which characterised the group were ignored.

Theatre Intervention 2 (Eastern Cape)

This intervention took place in July 2014 in Mdantsane Township of the Eastern Cape by the theatre group *The University of Fort Hare Drama Society* led by the researcher. The play titled "Let us be heard" was written by the artistic director Gcebile Dlamini award winning community theatre practitioner and the researcher. The key aspects of the play were based on the evidence presented by the needs assessment conducted in Masixole high school in Mdantsane township of East London in the Eastern Cape which was their target audience. Three weeks prior to their intervention 7 members of the theatre group including the researcher as well as the director Gcebile Dlamini were sent to Masixole high school to engage the learners in discussions with a view to finding out what their priority needs are as youth members of Mdantsane community. It turns out that lack of parental support was the major priority issues the youth of that community had. They knew from experience that issues like these are major catalysts to HIV/AIDS. The emotional fallout from the lack of parental support has driven a lot of young people in South Africa to drugs and alcohol and consequently unprotected sex and thus high HIV/AIDS prevalence in the community.

Results of the Focus Group and Individual Interviews

Majority of the participants interviewed believe that this play achieved major success as far as behaviour change is concerned. Indeed a follow-up carried out in October 2014 revealed that the attitude of most of the parents changed after the intervention. The teachers who had previously seen the learners as lazy and stupid now have a deeper understanding of the problems confronting the learners at home. Consequently the school arranged counselling servic-

es for the affected learners. The following are comments by the participants:

Perception of the Play

Learners

The play gave me an opportunity to look at myself again. In the midst of all the problems that I am going through, I now know that I must stay strong and focus on my studies and my future (Respondent 4).

I have learnt not to make parents negative attitude my problem. It will make me lose focus. I need to stay focused (Respondent 3).

The play was very educating. It has taught me not to hide my problems. Many of us are going through this problem but we are too shy to express ourselves (Respondent 1).

You can't fix your background but you can choose where you are going. The play allowed me to see my life differently (Respondent 2).

Parents

The play was very entertaining. It revealed issues that we prefer to sweep under the carpet (Respondent 2).

In as much as the play was entertaining, it was also innovative because it brought up issues we are faced with but too scared to do anything about (Respondent 1).

Teachers

The play went beyond imaginable measures in helping to uncover these issues because, yes, we know of them because we see them every day but we as black people lack the courage to come out and talk about them (Respondent 2).

The play reflects certain aspects of the negative culture that the community has embraced which is hurting our children (Respondent 1).

Constituent Strategy (Audience Participation)

Results of Focus Group and Individual Interviews (Masixole High School)

Learners

Majority of the learners interviewed agreed that their involvement in the creation of the play was instrumental to the success rate that the play enjoyed in changing behaviour in the community. They said the fact that the ideas for the

play came from them made the learners in the audience identify with the issues in the play:

The fact that we were given a chance to contribute our ideas to the play makes it very realistic (Respondent 1).

You can see that the play moved many of our fellow learners to tears because many of us suffer in silence because our parents don't really care (Respondent 5).

If you didn't come to us to get ideas for this play, it would be like any other play where people watch the play, laugh and go home. But because you came to us to help, this play has made an impact (Respondent 3).

Coming to us to find out our problem has made the play more realistic. It is like watching our lives on stage (Respondent 6).

Teachers

The teachers and parents were also in agreement regarding the efficacy of the intervention and attributes the success to the needs assessment carried out before the play was staged:

I was here when you came and asked for students to interview. I didn't understand why that was necessary but now I see it was the best action because the play is a reflection of our life as a community (Respondent 2).

Now that you mention it, it was a good idea that you came to find out what our learners problems are. The play is very true to our situation as a result (Respondent 1).

Parents

I feel so bad knowing that our children are suffering because of our attitude. Thanks for exposing this through your drama. Your play was on point because you cared to find out the problems in our community (Respondent 3).

The play shows our problem in the community. We are very poor and most of us are not employed. We depend on grants and this is very frustrating. It looks as if we don't care. I have learnt a very important lesson today. I am happy that you took the pains to find out these problems before writing the play. You were spot on (Respondent 2).

CONCLUSION

The result of the focus group as well as individual interviews conducted in both the Western Cape and the Eastern Cape indicates that

theatre intervention in the Eastern enjoyed a higher level of success than its Western Cape counterpart. The study has also revealed that theatre stands a greater chance of success in changing behaviour if more emphasis is paid to needs assessment. The use of pre-packaged plays can only achieve limited success as it reduces the audience to passive receivers of messages by theatre groups. Health communication scholars have warned of the dangers of campaigns being dominated by those with the capacity to select and frame social conditions. Without needs assessment, it is safe to assume that theatre, as the study has proved endows itself with the power to define the priority needs of their target audience as well as find solutions to these problems. The power to define problems as well as solutions to these problems should not be the sole prerogative of theatre groups. This would adversely affect the efficacy of theatre's campaigns against HIV/AIDS and other social issues.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The importance of needs assessment in health communication cannot be overemphasised. The results of this study have revealed that needs assessment is paramount to successful health communication. Needs assessment explores the experiences and priority needs of the given community. It is important to note that in most cases, communities may require different combination of intervention to change high risk behaviour. Every community has its own areas of concern and it is important to identify what the priority needs of any community are before attempting any health intervention. For instance in certain communities covered in this study, the participants identified alcohol and drug as priority concern but the theatre group went with a pre-packaged play on AIDS. According to them alcohol and drug abuse are major catalysts to

high HIV/AIDS prevalence in their community and they wanted felt that theatre should have focused on that rather than AIDS. Needs assessment is necessary to gauge important needs of target communities. Some of the participants in the study stated that had the group worked with them in the design of the play, they would not have committed the oversights on language and priority issues that were apparent during their performance. Theatre must make needs assessment a priority strategy. That way, it will avoid the pitfalls of dealing with issues that are not of priority need to target communities.”

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