

AN EXISTENTIAL PERSPECTIVE ON
A WOMAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANINGFULNESS
WHILE LIVING WITH HIV/AIDS

BY

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ABSTRACT

Key words/concepts: HIV/AIDS, existentialism, meaningfulness, existential vacuum, non-being, higher being, context, gender, culture, case study.

This mini-dissertation examines how an African woman – as an individual – makes meaning of her life amidst her HIV positive status. Her search for meaning was explored through semi-structured interviews. The case study is situated within a South African context where HIV/AIDS has become a pandemic. The methodology used in this research is explorative and qualitative in nature, thus facilitating a process of interpretation resulting in thick description drawing on existential concepts. Relevant information from the participant's counselling therapeutic process, prior to the research, is incorporated in the thick description of her living with and making meaning of HIV/AIDS.

An Existential perspective on the participant's psychological experiences concerning meaningfulness and being is discussed in terms of themes drawn on in semi-structured interviews. Special emphasis is also placed on the concept of an "existential vacuum" that an individual might experience when affected by something as life changing as HIV/AIDS. Notions of anxiety and non-being are also key concepts in this particular case study. Spirituality and the sense of a Higher Being are explored as fundamental in the domain of this individual's life, and therefore also in her production of meaning, as well as self-contemplation.

A constructionist epistemological approach is taken according to which the aims of the research are examined and interpreted. Attention is given to the participant's experiences of the impact of both African and Western worldviews on her sense of being within the South-African context. Her perceptions and beliefs, as a Tswana woman, concerning traditional customs and significant figures are discussed, for example: sangomas, witchdoctors, ancestors, forefathers, HIV/AIDS, etc. These, often opposing, points of view are explored in detail when the biological,

psychosocial, cultural and political contexts are taken into account. These are, in turn, coupled with an analysis of gender relations and their associated power relations within societal structures. Further examination reveals the expected physical and psychological phases associated with the HIV/AIDS disease.

The woman used in this case study relays her thoughts and experiences directly to the researcher and reader, as transcripts of semi-structured interviews with her are used in the text. Ethical considerations pertaining to both the participant and the researcher are also conveyed exhaustively. Issues in the interviews that are touched upon, include: How multiculturalism is perceived and experienced, the effects of stigmatisation, self-awareness and the conscience, traditional rituals and values associated with HIV/AIDS, transcendence and the responsibility for a sense of self. Arrays of emotions that are experienced under the circumstances include anger, depression, despair, defiance, hope and alienation. There is also a strong focus on the interaction between people, and especially on what is deemed as “meaningful relationships”.

OPSOMMING

Sleutelwoorde/-konsepte: MIV/VIGS, eksistensialisme, sinsrykheid, eksistensiële vakuum, konteks, spiritualiteit, nie-bestaan, geslag, kultuur, gevallestudie.

Hierdie mini-tesis handel oor hoe 'n Afrika vrou – as 'n individu – sin maak van haar lewe te midde van haar MIV positiewe status. Die gevallestudie vind plaas binne die Suid Afrikaanse konteks waar MIV/VIGS 'n pandemiese realiteit is. Die metodologie wat gebruik word is eksplorasie en kwalitatief van aard, wat ruimte laat vir 'n interpretatiewe “dik beskrywing” van die deelnemer se belewenis van haar werklikheid. Temas is afkomstig van die semi-gestruktureerde onderhoud wat met die deelnemer gevoer is. Die deelnemer het 'n proses van terapie ondergaan, voor die navorsing 'n aanvang geneem het, en relevante inligting daaruit is aangewend vir 'n “dikker beskrywing” van haar belewenisse van om te leef met en sin te maak uit MIV/VIGS.

Eksistensiële perspektiewe op die deelnemer se psigologiese belewenisse van sinloosheid asook die vorming van sinvolheid, word deeglik bespreek. Haar belewenis van 'n “eksistensiële vakuum” word beklemtoon. Hierdie vakuum kan ontstaan wanneer 'n individu geaffekteer word deur die lewensimpakterende werklikheid van MIV/VIGS. Belewenisse soos angste en nie-bestaan is ook fundamenteel in hierdie gevallestudie. Spiritualiteit en die bewus wees van 'n Hoër Entiteit vorm 'n belangrike deel van die deelnemer se soeke na en konstruksie van sin binne die multi-kontekstuele realiteit waarbinne sy haarself bevind.

Die navorsing word vanuit 'n konstruksionistiese epistemologie benader. Aandag word ook geskenk aan die deelnemer, wat van Tswana afkoms is, se persepsies en belewenisse van tradisionele figure en gebruike soos byvoorbeeld sangomas, toordokters, voorgeslagte, MIV/VIGS, ens. Haar hantering van beide Afrika en Westerse invloede op haar sinsbelewenis binne die Suid-Afrikaanse samelewing word bespreek. Hierdie gewaarwordinge word gevolglik

gekombineer met 'n analise van geslagsverhoudinge en hulle geassosieerde magsverhoudinge binne sosiale strukture. Die relevante gepaardgaande fisiologiese en psigologiese aspekte rakende MIV/VIGS word ondersoek.

Die vrou waarop die gevallestudie geskoei is, verbaliseer haar gevoelens en belewenisse direk aan die navorser en leser. Dit word gedoen deur middel van direkte aanhalings wat verkry is gedurende die voer van semi-gestruktureerde onderhoude. Etiese oorwegings wat van toepassing is op die deelnemer en die navorser word ook breedvoerig uiteengesit. Onderwerpe wat tydens onderhoude aangeraak word, sluit in: Hoe multi-kultureelheid begryp en aanvaar word, die gevolge van stigmatisasie, selfbewustheid en die gewete, tradisionele rituele en waardes wat bydra tot MIV/VIGS, transendensie en verantwoordelikheid vir 'n sin van die self. 'n Spektrum van emosies, soos depressie, angs, onsekerheid, woede, moedeloosheid, hoop en verwerping, word ook bespreek. Klem word geplaas op die interaksie tussen mense, veral met betrekking tot sinvolle relasies.

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DECLARATION

I declare that: *A woman's search for meaningfulness while living with HIV/AIDS*, is my own work, that all the sources used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references, and that this mini-dissertation or research project was not previously submitted by me for a degree at another university.

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Notes about the text:

1. The participant in this research granted permission to take part in this study.
2. Names have been changed to protect the identity of the participant.
3. The feminine third person pronoun has been used throughout in order to simplify the reading.

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