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Expanding the Application of the African Centered Paradigm Model, Use of Its Social Components as Tools in the Provision of Mobile HIV AIDS Outreach with Transgender Dropout Youth and Adults, Expanding the Empirical Study

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Abstract: *In this session we will explore adapting some of the social components of the African centered paradigm as tools to improve the provision of street outreach services to African American male and female and transgendered sex workers targeted for positive health and well being messages, HIV and AIDS Education, Testing and informal counseling in a mobile camper setting.*

Interests in the African Centered Paradigm Manifest in my Work and Life

My interests in designing an street outreach tool is manifest in my life through several important channels, first I learned about the Africentric paradigm as part of my professional preparation in the field of Adult Education. I completed a one year research study involving interviews, literature review, observation, and examination of historical documents for my dissertation and this paper is an extension of what I learned.

In this session we will explore some of what I have learned attempting to adapt African centered social components in real time to a mobile camper unit environment where street outreach is provided to commercial sex workers in a large urban setting.

Commitment to African American Values

As I stated last year in the original study, “the values I admire and seek to live by and encourage in young people include hope, hard work, determination, respect, dignity, preserving our cultural heritage, restoring Africa to its rightful place on the world stage of history, building today for a better future for our children in the next generations, overcoming racial oppression, race stigma, reversing hegemony while creating space for equality, working toward the eradication of class oppression and white privilege, patriarchy, and gender equity.

Purpose of this Paper

The purpose of this Paper is to present an example of applying some social components of the African centered paradigm to improve or enhance and make more culturally responsive our approach to HIV/AIDS outreach services to commercial sex workers at great risk of contracting and spreading the virus to their customers on the streets of Chicago. Over the last decade Public Health Departments across the country have sought to make outreach work, social marketing, awareness and education more culturally sensitive to the audiences receiving the messages.

Research Study

The research study that I completed over the last year involved enhancing a mobile camper with African art and cultural materials, artifacts and images, equipping the outreach workers with cultural heritage information to integrate into their street outreach services. The camper serves more than 400 clients that visit the mobile unit in 15 – 40 minute Individual Level Intervention and Group Level Intervention counseling sessions. During these sessions clients receive HIV prevention messages, informal counseling, social service referrals, testing, and distribution of condoms.

I interviewed each outreach worker with a series of more than 15 questions, recording the answers manually and maintaining the information and responses electronically on my lap top and desk top computers.

Findings

Through field work experiences of the outreach workers we sought to define what was missing from the prevention messages being given to commercial sex worker that spend time each week on the camper participating in prevention and intervention activities. In analyzing the program, it was realized that there needed to be more cultural grounding of the work and that the commercial sex worker clients had very low self-esteem. Similar to the high school dropouts that were served in the alternative education program from the initial study from last year, the clients that utilize the camper services, also had poor self image and self concept.

The students in the alternative high school sometimes manifest how poor they feel about themselves like they are feeling sick, and the teachers give them a political awareness and consciousness so that they can see themselves in a different more positive light like medicine. Over the decades it has become clear to the staff members that the best weapons that tend to have a profound effect upon students is political consciousness, critical thinking skills to analyze their own condition and the ability to determine on their own to do more with the lives.

The outreach workers determined that the low self esteem needed to be cured in small measures by giving the clients a shot or inoculation of social culture information and knowledge about who they were and where their people came from. The outreach workers queried clients and discovered that 90% had little or no knowledge about their cultural heritage and proud past. They recognized that most of the commercial sex worker clients identify themselves as African American, most are very low-income, 90% had dropped out of high school at an early age. At least 90% had criminal records for solicitation, some with as many as 50 arrests. Many will be the only members of their families to earn a GED of the current adult generations. Half were homeless and half had been homeless in the previous six months to a year. Through research in the field we found the term cultural inoculation and determined to incorporate it into the practice since it seems to represent what the outreach workers determined was at least part of the healing that our commercial sex workers needed in order to transition from their current unsafe sex practices, lifestyles and work to regular occupations and living situations that will allow them to return from the streets living within the “game” to normal life with some type of families.

The Association of Black Psychologist’s is currently piloting an Ex-offender Reentry Program that is showing promising outcomes related to recidivism. Their pilot program includes cultural inoculation (immersion in culturally based strategies that strengthen identity development, connection to community, or cultural practices or principles that are life affirming

for African Americans). By reviewing their program description we learned of the concept of inoculation.

I began researching applying the social components of the African centered paradigm to the outreach work being performed on the mobile camper unit by formulating three critical questions including the following:

1. How can the African centered paradigm influence the outreach services to Black youth and adult sex workers?
2. What are the key social components of an African centered approach to HIV/AIDS street outreach and prevention services delivered through a mobile unit program?
3. Can African centered paradigm social components be used as intervention tools to support street intervention in Human Trafficking?

During the course of the outreach work we did not receive funding to pursue the third question, so we are seeking increased funding to apply the concepts to the human trafficking side of our work.

The Outreach workers adapting some of the social components of the African centered paradigm created a cultural context on three levels, environmental (visual and auditory), food and nutrition, wisdom storytelling and verbal messages of empowerment through Individual Level Intervention (ILI) and Small Group Level Intervention (GLI) counseling.

The social components of the African centered paradigm that came out of last years findings when extracted from the school environment and applied to street outreach with sex workers assisted the staff members in providing focused positive messages tying their African heritage to the contemporary problems that they confront daily in their lives and to make better choices.

The outreach workers started by changing the environment of the camper adding African art, modern paintings by Black children, placing Benin sculptures, and displaying fiber (baskets) and cloth (Kinte and Mud) to the interior. African foods in the form of snacks, and finger food was provided during some nights when the camper went out for longer trips or when promoting outreach at special events. Next the outreach workers incorporated soft African tribal rhythms of drumming, and the recordings of traditional instruments to provide a sense of calm to slow down the pace of the sometimes rush in which clients enter the mobile camper. The clients responded very positively to these changes.

The outreach workers gathered stories and began telling them to the clients. Stories of African's that teach wisdom, morality, and most importantly to present patterns of ways in which ancient Africans solved everyday problems of living in society. Using the African centered lens as a critical analyses tool to help the sex workers describe and critically analyze their living situation and economic conditions; make connection to Slavery post traumatic stress and Psychological dislocation was significant. Many of the clients had no frame of historical reference to what slavery might have been like until they were guided through making connection to their own present day oppression. Critical self analysis and developing a more sophisticated understanding of their social and economic condition combined with the Theory of Self-ethnic Reflectors provides a powerful basis for raising self-esteem, self-knowledge and self empowerment.

The main problems identified through this paper include providing culturally competent outreach strategies that Transgender (Trans) African American commercial sex workers can identify with and apply to their everyday lives so that they begin to practice safer sex work even when it involves receiving less money for their services. For example, when a commercial sex

worker is approached by a regular “john” and that customer would like to skip using a condom, most of our clients accept the extra money and allow the customer to perform “bare back.”

Another problem was a lack of educational materials developed which link HIV/AIDS with other issues that impact the social environmental context of Transgender HIV risk and risk behavior. Other issues include (economic dependence on commercial sex work, multiple partners, intravenous drug use/sharing needles, unprotected sex, homelessness, isolation, total lack of support systems, and poverty). Educational materials should use culturally and contextually appropriate messages to encourage clients to protect themselves and by communicating and seeking HIV awareness, education, testing, and services.

Another problem was reducing the Transgender and HIV stigmas. This can be addressed through the participation of high profile African American Trans celebrities and HIV-positive Black Trans that are willing to be part of a media campaign. In an effort to reduce the stigma associated with HIV, celebrities can participate in the creating media images that are more reflective of the Trans community members. Some HIV positive Trans that are willing to get involved would also be very helpful.

Through ILI and GLI outreach workers also found that positive messages that did not cause fear, but rather awareness linked with positive African proverbs were positively received by the commercial sex workers.

Using a combination of African terminology in Swahili combined with street terms used within the Trans community was another approach along with materials that were sensitive to low Reading levels that worked to get the message out about practicing safer sex work. African centered art and pictures as well as 1960’s Stone Wall Trans heroes should be used to better reflect the commercial sex work communities targeted for outreach.

Establishing, supporting, and evaluating peer led or based HIV/AIDS program components were also important. We hired a Trans’ former commercial sex worker-an African American male to female outreach worker first as a volunteer and later she became as paid worker. Using African Americans from the field helps because they often live within the communities they serve, the skills that they develop are retained within the community, and in our study the peer education program elevated our Trans worker to a new career in the field of public health.

The main problems identified by means of the Literature Review included the reality that there is very little research available on Transgender commercial sex workers. There is even less linking the African centered paradigm to the Transgender community as group worthy of research and study.

Observable client level problems in this group of Trans commercial sex workers were very similar to younger dropout youth that were part of the first study last year, i.e. very low self-esteem, poor self-concept, lack of confidence, poor academic skills, a third had been wards of the state, one third had been kicked out of their family homes at a young age, some had been runaways from foster care settings, and had very low academic comprehension skills.

Most of the Trans commercial sex workers had contact with the criminal justice system, either had been arrested multiple times, were on probation/parole, awaiting trial/sentencing, were wearing court ordered monitors, and were regularly reporting and paying for probation office services, had served time in juvenile and adult detention or had served time for 90 days. Most either were currently homeless or had been without stable residence in the previous six months.

Conclusions

I have designed culturally based components for a outreach model in a mobile setting and expanded the use of the African centered Lens. The effort is made with this study to begin executing my findings as a means of taking action as required by the African centered paradigm. The significance of the study is to further the HIV education, awareness and outreach options, and strategies, in a mobile setting that will ultimately assist African American Transgender commercial sex workers in practicing safer sex, feeling better about themselves, knowing their cultural heritage, and finding new ways and means for taking control of their lives and redefining how they meet their survival needs outside of the “game.”

Transgender commercial sex workers are in need of further study. In an effort to develop culturally contextualized and competent outreach strategies to meet these clients where they are, and to impact the everyday situations in which they make decisions.

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