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Disability & Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism and AIDS: Doing the Right Thing

by Francisco Ibañez

Classism, heterosexism, ageism, racism ableism and many of the "isms" contained in the obsessive mantra of political correctness are intimately linked to HIV and AIDS. Community-based AIDS educators are aware of these subtle connections, but do not always have the energy and time to follow the threads that weave these themes into one quilt. AIDS educators need to work

within a flexible definition of multiculturalism that allows the various issues to surface, be acknowledged and resolved. We need to go beyond tolerance and good will to visit those cultural grey areas where being "polite" and "nice" are not enough.

What is culture, anyway? I think culture is not something that exists out there like a "thing". We do

culture, the way yuppies do lunch. This is how the African-American phrase "do the right thing" acquires its complex meaning (Coco Fusco 1992). We do culture when we share, among other possibilities, a tradition, a language, a discourse, a set of oppressive or liberating norms, a political stance, a set of beliefs, a lifestyle, a way of living, and an iconography. Sharing a culture does not mean thinking alike, being identical or looking alike. The complicated building of stereotypes does not shelter anyone properly and has to be demolished.

Multiculturalism reflects the everyday living of conflicts and struggles between people who are different and who are made different by systemic operations. Popular belief about multiculturalism, supported by the patronizing and manipulative social marketing schemes of government, would have us believe that we are Salvadorians, Punjabs, Chinese, Filipinos, Polish, French, Anglos, and

many other cultural groups living in one blissful land.

As a Latino gay man living with AIDS, I cannot expect everyone to come to my turf and fight my battles, but I expect to foster an understanding of the histories and migrations that have brought me to this position today. I need you to hear about my working class background and the "American dream" that led me (and many of my friends) Northbound when, in my country, there seemed to be no hope of destroying a murderous dictatorship that had been installed more than a decade ago.

I need you to hear how lonely and difficult those first years were and how each one of us got infected with HIV because there has been little or no information being delivered by the government or communities, I need you to hear that many immigrants die every year, month and week in the most tragic invisibility (sometimes even unreported by inept physicians or ashamed relatives).

Multiculturalism recognizes the existence of many cultures and looks at their value. Multiculturalism is about "families of origin" (e.g. Mom & Dad) and "families of choice" (e.g. lovers, friends, allies, enemies,

accomplices, etc.). However, multiculturalism needs to recognize that not all cultures are of the same value. A friend of mine wrote "some cultures can be called 'better' than others to the extent that they create and sustain conditions for human beings which are more pleasant, more just and more productive than others. In this sense, a culture based on slavery is worse than other social forms"

(de Castell 1990). I could not say it any better. This is why most AIDS educators working in a multicultural environment react strongly against the "moral majority", "neo-nazis", "family rights groups", "extreme right" and other groups that define themselves as holier-than-thou and advocate for the destruction of homosexuals, the exodus of "foreigners", the containment of the "Asian invasion", and other "final solutions".

Crossing from one country to another also puts immigrants at risk. Mexicans have produced AIDS educational videos—*Si fuéramos Angeles*, 1992 and

(continued on next page)

We are still molding our HIV work with Anglo cookie cutters...

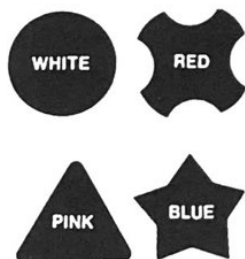


Games for People with Visual Impairments

Snakes and Ladders, Ludo and Solitaire are a few of the games produced by a company in England for people who are blind or visually impaired. The games use shapes and peg holes to identify pieces and areas of play.

The company has also designed a set of shaped buttons for clothing to identify colours and/or "fashion" (pictured below).

For information, contact C.A. Evans, CARE Associates, 3 Meadway Close, Pinner, HA5 4A2 England.



(The Right Thing, cont'd from previous page)

Mal Paso, 1991—to show the experiences and many risks faced by immigrants in the U.S. These are random examples of work that explores complex issues that should come up in HIV/AIDS prevention education all the time. How much of this has been done in Canada? I see that our impact, our voice, our power in Canadian society is still minimal, and AIDS education is just a reflection of that.

We are still molding our HIV work with Anglo cookie cutters, doing "safer sex" workshops, printing posters with young studs (black or Asian this time), and translating almost literally a language about safety that does not describe our realities (i.e. negotiation of safer sex, eroticizing the condom, a phallogentric approach, revolving around the male genitalia). I understand that funding agencies put community-based groups between a rock and a hard place where we have to reproduce what they think is effective (and cost effective). I also understand that community-based groups should take more risks.

One may say that

multiculturalism means everything. It might. Most importantly, multiculturalism is a *means*, not an *end*. When we get to the end of this road, if we ever get there, we may see something totally different. I don't have those answers. The world will not be "multicultural" and "diverse" and "tolerant" and all those other nice words. The world will be something we do not yet know and may not be able to name at this point. Let's not get frozen by the labels.

As an AIDS educator, when I think that my workshops, testimonials, brochures and political work need to be multicultural, I do not target one colour and one language. I find the "black and white" approach to multiculturalism racist and self-defeating in itself. I find that multiculturalism might be stuck on the "black or white", "heterosexual or homosexual", "us or them" dichotomies. Our work needs to be resource-

ful, flexible, and accessible.

Accordingly, in Grupo VIDA, the Vancouver-based Latin American committee for HIV/AIDS Prevention Education, our mandate is to educate people who will in turn educate others, thus producing a ripple effect *como la piedra caída en el agua que hace muchas ondas*.

The contents of AIDS work have to come from those people we presume to be representing. When I think of multiculturalism I think of endless intersections of social circumstances and, in particular, I think of those who are left at the margins: homeless white people, Latinas in prison, etc. and I think that *nadie está libre de polvo y paja*.

On a personal level, I am not able to live outside the contradiction of multiculturalism even when I turn off the lights and shed my clothes, my lesioned skin and my broken English accent. In the sheltering shadows of my bedroom, I am still unavoidably "me".

Any HIV/AIDS prevention education that does not acknowledge my horror and my fears is not, in my view,

a worthwhile education. As a gay man, as a man living with AIDS, as a Latino, and as a Canadian, I exhibit on the map of my body the marks of history, migration, treatment and pleasure. My body is the evidence of a journey. Multiculturalism is a tool, a compass, that helps me find my way.

When the morning after I face myself and others,

this is one of the few ways I have of understanding my life and theirs.

Francisco Ibañez is a Latino immigrant living with AIDS. At present he is working on his Ph.D. at Simon Fraser University. He is a member of VIDA: Latin American Committee for HIV/AIDS Prevention Education and the B.C. AIDS Secretariat. ◊



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