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Corinne Squire (2007) HIV/AIDS in South Africa [book review]

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Corinne Squire (2007) *HIV/AIDS in South Africa*. London: Routledge. ISBN 978-0-415-37210-7. 229 pages. £22.99.

Stigma is a key driver of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa, limiting peoples' access to prevention, support, care and treatment. The development of understandings of how people internalise stigma, how and why they decide to disclose their status, and the extent to which they manage to construct meaningful and positive identities in the face of their often extreme social devaluation is a key challenge for those involved in the HIV/AIDS struggle. Corinne Squire's insightful and fine-grained study of the way in which a group of South Africans make sense of being HIV-positive provides a fine contribution to debates in this area.

The core of her book is constructed around narrative interviews and focus groups involving 37 research participants in and around Cape Town in 2001 and 2004. Squire frames this material with a comprehensive account of the social, historical, cultural and political contexts of HIV/AIDS in South Africa at this time. She details how inadequate health and welfare responses, poverty, social exclusion and international neglect have provided a fertile breeding ground for HIV/AIDS. These circumstances have been exacerbated by macho constructions of masculinity and the economic dependence of women, which combine and conspire to limit the likelihood that people will use condoms or practice other forms of safer sex.

The strength of Squire's study is her ability to simultaneously detail the desperate social and political conditions in which the epidemic has flourished, without portraying her informants as helpless victims. The aim of the book is to document the agency, courage and creativity people show in developing practical and symbolic strategies, not simply to 'get by', but to construct positive and empowered identities, and a vision of a positive and hopeful future in conditions where few have access to life-sustaining antiretroviral treatment.

Squire's sensitive analysis traces how people mobilise support: from family, friends, neighbours, AIDS support groups, social services, religious groups, activist networks, non-governmental and community-based organisations. Her account of the psycho-social processes involved in coming to terms with an HIV positive diagnosis, deciding whether or not to disclose it, and who to disclose to, as well as her detailed attention to the role of religious and moral narratives in peoples' accounts is a rich and fascinating demonstration of her narrative methodology at work.

The high point of the book is her brilliant and deeply moving account of the way in which the personal and the political intertwine and reverberate in her informants' struggles to retain their sense of humanity and dignity, as well as their right to a vision of a meaningful future in personal and political worlds which often offer a stark choice between complete invisibility (through non-disclosure of status) and the tainted and abhorred visibility which may result from disclosure. She draws parallels between religious conversion narratives, and the way many of her informants spoke implicitly or explicitly of the sense of transformation and redemption that came as they moved through the stages of struggle and denial, to acceptance of their status, followed by the development of faith and confidence to 'speak out' in the face of the silence and shame that permeate the public representation of HIV/AIDS.

Busisiwe speaks of her determination to be recognised 'as a person amongst others' in her life and her death, in the face of those who would treat her as if she was 'no longer a person' (p. 1). David speaks of his determination to hold onto his view of himself as a worthwhile human being, and his sense of hope for the future, in the face of the shock and potential symbolic annihilation of a positive diagnosis. 'I used to have dreams, and I still have I'm still me and I'll always be me', he says, 'I am a normal person just like anybody' (cited on p. 174)

Through their determination to claim a common humanity with those not infected, and their insistence on their 'democratic equivalence' to other citizens, Squire's research participants position themselves as members of a

(literally) HIV positive community, refusing to be crushed by the hatred and shame with which HIV/AIDS is associated. The act of 'speaking out' about their status – for some only to the researchers, for others to support or activist groups of empathetic listeners – becomes a form of personal and political activism. This leads to the sense of affirmation through which people mobilise the confidence and strength to survive the fears and trials of coping and surviving from day to day.

I have only two minor criticisms of an otherwise excellent book. The first is the use of the misleadingly over-generalised title *HIV/AIDS in South Africa*, to refer to a study which focuses predominantly on 37 people, living in a fairly non-representative part of the country (the Western Cape). This bland and non-specific title also fails to capture what is distinctive about the book, namely its detailed focus on the central role of disclosure and recognition in reconstructing identities in conditions of threat, stigma and social rejection, as well as its brilliant deconstruction of the way in which the personal and the political come together in the experiences of survivors of a highly politicised epidemic, in a highly politicised national and international context.

This leads to my second criticism, which is that the book ends rather abruptly, without enough concluding reflection on the implications of the study's findings for the social and political contexts, struggles and processes outlined in the introductory chapters. Identities are not only shaped by social circumstances and social struggles, as Squire's study shows. They also have the power to impact back on these circumstances and struggles. What is the potential, if any, for her informants' personal struggles and triumphs to feed back into various forms of personal and political resistance and AIDS activism in South Africa and more widely? And through what psycho-social and political pathways might this feedback take place? In this regard, the book cries out for a sequel. Squire is well-positioned to conduct such a follow-up study.

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