

# NOT BORN FREE

A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF HOW HIV, RACE, GENDER, VIOLENCE AND INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA INTERSECT IN UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN HIV POSITIVE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES CONDUCTED 2 COHORT STUDIES IN 2006 AND 2012.

**Cal Volks\***. DIRECTOR OF THE HIV/AIDS INCLUSIVITY UNIT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN.

While a number of HIV/AIDS education, support, management, teaching, research and social responsiveness initiatives have been in place at UCT for the past 20 years, only 2 UCT students have publicly disclosed her/his HIV positive status on campus in that time period. This practice seems at odds with the generation that is born after 1994, after referred to as "born free".

This study was a qualitative exploration of living with HIV at UCT which took place in 2006/7 and then again in 2012 to compare if anything was changing in their experiences.

The 2 cohort studies explored the social impact of HIV/AIDS on 10 black male and female students in total over time. All 10 of the students had not disclosed publicly and 7 out of 10 had only told a few close friends. All of the 7 students interviewed had experienced other students on UCT campus saying things that stigmatize people with HIV. Most of the students had struggled at some point academically and socially while dealing psychologically and physically with HIV and 1 had to leave UCT prior to graduation.

Some students experienced the HIV intersecting with financial, academic and social difficulties and experienced with guilt about not fulfilling their parents' hopes and dreams for their children to obtain a degree and get a well-paying job and support the family. (Many of the participants' parents had not been to University and said things, to the participants, about sacrificing their education in the apartheid struggle for future generations). Many students experienced a chasm between their parents' ideas of what could be achieved now that the student was accepted to University and the students' own experiences of daily struggle in forming an identity around being an HIV positive black student (in one case gay) struggling with UCT language, workload and financially. This necessitated complex negotiation of self-identities at home and at UCT trying to incorporate these aspects. Not all

students had sought help. Not obtaining help due to fears of being stigmatized may lead to some students living with HIV at UCT failing to graduate and contributing to society. It is imperative that UCT provide sufficiently complex and varied support to these students. These students may be "born free" (ie 1994, after apartheid) but they still experience legacies of hardship stretching into their generation that needs attention.

## INTERSECTING ISSUES

- Students' parents had suffered under Apartheid;
- Students' parents had high expectations for their children at University;
- Students felt inequipped academically and financially (despite govt. and University programmes) for University.
- Students had shame about their HIV status and experienced HIV stigma at University.
- Students experienced distress around the gap between their parents's expectations and their actual University marks.
- Shame about HIV compounded shame about their University marks.
- Students did not tell parents about low marks or disclose HIV status to parents due to students' own shame or due to students' already experiencing their parents' inability to overcome their own shame (about poverty, HIV etc).

**Thabelo (20 yr old HIV positive Black Male student):** *I'm not sure they understand it's not easy to deliver some of their [his parents'] expectations.... I can't tell my mom [about the HIV].... They expected only good things.... They didn't process...[what] you go through to achieve..."*

**Sivu (19 yr HIV positive old Black Female student):** *"My subject lecturer.... She...told me...I should just de-register.... I just have that, OK, ... In order to pass at UCT you need to be in perfect shape in good health..... I just wanted my lecturers to believe in me and then for her to say all those things...."*