

HIDDEN WOUNDS: Orphanhood, Expediency and Cultural Silence in Botswana

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ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on the social impact of orphanhood in Botswana, i.e. the effect that loss of parents has on children and the implications for caregivers of taking on responsibility for orphans. Historic and ongoing changes in social structure have a significant impact on the current capacity to cope with stress caused by widespread orphanhood. Contemporary behavioural responses to stress and the coping strategies of adults affect the lives of children without parents. The experiences of orphans provide insight and understanding of how a society already undergoing rapid social change attempts to cope with the pressures added by HIV/AIDS.

Botswana has had an HIV prevalence rate of over 35% of its adult population for 8 years. In the 2001 census, 15% of all children were orphaned and 25% of 17 year olds had lost their parents. I worked with 181 children in 67 households across four research sites in Botswana. The four research sites covered a range of ethnic groups, economic activities and HIV prevalence rates. I had six formal participatory activity sessions with each child (except in my pilot study) and there were many more contact hours with some of the children who visited informally. I interviewed each caregiver twice, once at the beginning and a second time towards the end of my contact period with the household. In addition, I collected data in 17 schools through student and teacher questionnaires, focus group discussions with school management teams and interviews with head teachers.

I have used my data to develop a conceptual framework for understanding the general response among adults in Botswana to the AIDS epidemic and the implications of that response for orphans. The adult population in Botswana, barely able to cope with the stresses of AIDS, has resorted to denial, involution, expediency and cultural silence. These coping strategies inflict hidden wounds on children; the disabling that results may cause further social unravelling as these youngsters grow into adulthood. Involution, instead of preserving the sociocultural status quo, harms future generations and thus threatens the survival of the culture. The experiences of orphaned children have exposed adult coping strategies that are ultimately self-defeating.

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