

Abstract

This study titled "Identities and Struggle for Life of HIV-infected people" has the research viewpoint of how HIV-infected people have a process of building, adapting, and negotiating in their daily lives in the community. The study has chosen the upper north of Thailand which is a region with the highest rate of HIV infection in the country; the study is located in one subdistrict in Muang district in Lampang province.

The study uses the concept of "identity" as the main concept to explain how individuals build the identity of HIV-infected people, and how this identity brings about a reversal in the status of the HIV-infected in the community. After this change in the status, the study looks at how the HIV-infected struggle and negotiate to avoid their status of being HIV-infected in order to maintain normalcy of life among their community. The identity is a definition of their self, of asking "who am I?" Thus this identity is built both from the interaction among the individuals who define themselves and their capacity to respond and negotiate among each other as well. The interaction is a social process that is a common symbol of society which makes individuals capable of defining their status and position while at the same time, they are being defined by other individuals. Identity of the HIV-infected is about "how do we look at ourselves?" and "how do others look at us?" and is an important product of society in which we live and relate to others where one individual can maintain a diversity of identities.

The study found that the identity of HIV-infected emerges from the interaction among individuals and individuals with health workers involved in doing HIV blood-tests. This leads to the acceptance of people as HIV-infected which is a new status in Thai society. The feeling that one is HIV-infected results in its continuous reproduction due to their interaction of people in society, and also from the constant self-repetition that one is HIV-infected. This leads to HIV-infected people changing their view of themselves to be increasingly negative viz. as a bad person, inferior, different from others, as a person without value, lacking self-confidence, and wary that society is repulsed by them.

The HIV-infection makes the individual feel a loss of their previous status and importance in society and a sense of marginalisation. This has a significant impact on the daily life of the HIV-infected as they face the repulsion of people in society. This phenomenon is a daily occurrence even though the feeling of repulsion in society is lessening. The daily life of the HIV-infected must face with various problems including their own psychology, earning their living, and live together with people in society. In facing these problems in their daily life, the HIV-infected try and adapt through their struggles and negotiation in order to recover their previous social status in society and attempt to lead a normal life or to release themselves of their marginalised status in society. The author found that the adaptation of the HIV-infected is a psychological and physical struggle is always changing. Society views an individual with HIV-infection differently from those with a "normal" body. Those with a normal body can integrate into society more easily than those with HIV-

infection, can earn their living more easily, and feel they have better self-esteem. Thus, HIV-infected people wish they could have a normal body.

Moreover, the adaptation of the HIV-infected people is also a struggle to be able to live in society in different forms such as trying to help with community work to express their sense of belonging to the community. These attempts at community work shows that they are a member of the community and can be of benefit. The participation in a group or club of HIV-infected people assists them to gain self-confidence and feel that they have a value since they can work for the community and society. The cooperation with staff of public health helps them to gain knowledge about Aids and this knowledge is disseminated to larger society. However, the struggle by the HIV-infected people will continue in their daily life in being together with their community. As long as they face the repulsion of people within the same community, the reproduction of negative social meaning and consciousness cannot disappear from their minds.