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Psychology

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Abstract

Various groups have varied goals and adopt various structures to achieve such goals. This paper gives an observation of a local support group comprising of African women living with HIV/AIDS. The paper analyses their composition and conduct so as to identify how group influence plays a major role in the existence of the group, supported by relevant literature from scholarly sources.

Introduction

The observed group was gathered in a social hall. The patron and officials sat at the front row while the speaker took to the podium. The group comprised of about thirty African women aged between 30 and 40 and living with HIV/AIDS. The meeting was organized by a social support group funded by international non-governmental organizations to educate these women on living positively with HIV/AIDS. This would curb society's stigmatization on people living with HIV/AIDS and give the victims a positive social identity, an important concept in social psychology (Turner & Oakes, 2011). The mission was to empower these African women economically, socially and psychologically so as to realize value for life. The ultimate goal would be to see them have normal productive and longer lives. Similarly, this would see the society stop stigmatizing such persons and accept them as part of the society. This was a long lasting group as it takes time to teach and impart the required knowledge and skills on such persons. More so, follow up forums

would be required to ensure that they do not fall off along the way.

The leadership structure of the group was under elected officials headed by the chairperson, supported by the treasurer and secretary and two other officials. These officials are elected into office annually based on leadership traits they portray which Nevid (2009) argues as being their coercion abilities. The donors appoint a patron who oversees the group's activities and advises on what activities to undertake but the group remains autonomous in its decisions. The group is guided by a constitution that dictated on all course of action to be taken in any particular situation. This constitution was passed by the members and was subject to change if any amendment received support from at least a third of the members. In addition, the group had other rules that saw the execution of order by the sergeant at arms including penalizing late comers and any unacceptable conduct. This according to Turner and Oakes (2011) describes conformity to positive expectations in avoidance of rejection.

During their meetings, the group members would collect their savings, advance loans and collect outstanding debts as per the constitution. They would then share their challenges and find solutions together under the guidance of the patron. The major issue that kept recurring was stigmatization in the society with the patron advising on self empowerment as an effective solution to this. They would then be educated by the patron on various ways of empowering themselves economically, socially and psychologically. It was noted that the chairperson calls the meeting to order and leads the team to collecting their savings, repayments and advancement of loans with the assistance of the treasurer while the secretary takes the

minutes in the meeting. The patron guided the education part of the meeting with members seeking permission from her to make any contributions. Nonetheless, the patron was fair enough to allow everyone to speak out but in a systematic manner. The group portrayed a unified image since the facilitator, in this case the patron was respected by all the members and all actively participated and shared.

Indeed, this group exhibited shared social identity with the members collectively striving to ensure that each of them realizes self empowerment so as to curb stigmatization from the society. As such, they would each be involved in various activities individually and collectively, a phenomenon well described by the social identity and categorization theories discussed by Postmes, Haslam and Swaab (2005). Despite the cohesiveness exhibited in the group, it still faced the possibility of groupthink influence. According to Irving Janis, groupthink " decisions derive from a desire for consensus rather than from a critical evaluation of the issues" (Nevid, 2009, p. 628). In this group, there would be times when the members would compromise their individual decisions and since they had to exhibit need and unity as a group, the officials would always influence the members to portray these two so as to ensure a continuous flow of donor aid. These are what Bernstein (2011) identified as shared biases in groups and pressure from group leaders to make certain decisions as conditions for groupthink in what Postmes, Haslam and Swaab (2005) describe as snowball effect.

Conclusion

Generally, I noted that though there were those with faint hearts in the group who were still not convinced that they could be of any value in life, bearing

in mind their HIV/AIDS status, the success stories from other group members encouraged them to live positively and strive towards attaining self empowerment, a phenomenon described by Loersch, Aarts, Payne and Jefferis as " cognitive dissonance driven attitude change" (2008, p. 1555). The trust they had in the patron saw them willingly accept whatever advise she would give them which they would implement and realize gainful results. They also exhibited unity of purpose.

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