

The Slawson Award

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Advancing geography
and geographical learning

Felicity Thomas

Education

- BA (Hons) Anthropology and Geography, University College London (1997)
- PhD Human Geography, University of Sheffield (2005)

Current position

Lecturer in Human Geography, Queen Mary, University of London

Slawson Award

Felicity received the Slawson Award in 2003 for a project entitled *The impacts of HIV/AIDS on livelihoods, vulnerability and support networks in the Caprivi Region, Namibia*. This research provides a field-based account of the impacts of HIV/AIDS in a high HIV prevalence region of Namibia. The study emphasises the perspectives, understandings and priorities of local people themselves, examining them within a contextual analysis of people's livelihoods and their cognitive and epistemological frameworks of understanding. Recognition of the role of alternative illness narratives enables in-depth understanding of the way in which people make sense of, and respond to illness, and the implications of this for stigma, treatment, care, identity and well-being. Set within the changing context of post-apartheid Namibia, the research was located in three settlements in the politically and economically neglected Caprivi Region, where reported HIV prevalence stood at 43%. Using an holistic livelihoods and entitlements approach, a range of qualitative methods were used over nine months fieldwork, including a livelihoods survey, participatory methods, semi-structured repeat interviews, focus groups, solicited diaries and autophotography.

The study found that the capability of individuals and households to cope with the impacts of AIDS was influenced by their ability to access and mobilise assets. Resource entitlements were largely determined by influential religious and customary institutions, which played a key role in shaping understandings of moral acceptability. A wide range of influences since Independence have led to fundamental changes in sexual behaviour and expectations and a breakdown of generational hierarchies. Such changes fuel dominant religious and customary assertions that HIV/AIDS is a punishment for immoral behaviour, thus upholding HIV and AIDS-associated stigma. Socio-cultural change, increased economic heterogeneity and an upsurge in witchcraft accusations (directly linked with HIV and AIDS increase) were found to strain traditional support structures and safety nets, resulting in household welfare – particularly provision of care for ill people, becoming an internal responsibility. The necessity to continue with livelihood activities to maintain food security resulted in carer fatigue. The increasing dependency of the ill person influenced their ability to seek treatment as well as their ability to undertake expected familial and livelihood roles, resulting in stigma, isolation and rejection both within and beyond the household. Socio-economic inequalities and ongoing stigma were found to severely hinder effective HIV prevention and AIDS impact mitigation in the Caprivi.

Since the Slawson Award

On completion of her PhD, Felicity worked for a year as a Teaching Fellow at the University of Sheffield. She is now working as a Lecturer in Human Geography at Queen Mary, University of London, where her teaching covers a wide range of developmental issues including HIV/AIDS and she has been able to incorporate many of her own experiences into her teaching of research methods. To date, she has had three papers based on her PhD accepted for publication and is awaiting feedback on two further papers. She also presented her research findings at the 2005 RGS-IBG Annual Conference and at seminars in Sheffield and London. Copies of her thesis and a short report of the main research findings have been disseminated to the communities in which the research took place as well as to policy makers and national and regional libraries in Namibia.

In 2007, Felicity will take up an ESRC Postdoctoral Fellowship award at the Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London. Working with international sexual health expert Prof Peter Aggleton, the fellowship will enable her to further disseminate my doctoral research findings. This will involve a visit to the area of her doctoral fieldwork to provide research feedback and discuss recommendations for policy and programming with HIV/AIDS-affected communities, established networks in HIV prevention and AIDS care, and policy makers in Namibia. The fellowship will also enable her to apply for funding to further develop her interests in HIV/AIDS. In particular, she intends to examine how the increase in availability of ARVs in Namibia has influenced cognitive understandings and responses to HIV/AIDS, and to examine the processes which fuel HIV/AIDS stigma amongst African communities in the UK.