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More eyes on COVID-19: Perspectives from Anthropology

What people believe is a lot less important than *that* they believe it

Anthropology compels us all to see the world from many different perspectives at once. On the rare occasions, such as a pandemic, where we all need to adopt very specific habits from the intimate to the public, these different perspectives must be taken seriously and must inform policy at every level.

Health is not only biophysical, but also emotional, spiritual, environmental and social. Dignity, security, and purpose cannot be achieved alone, but through collective everyday experiences that are currently being radically altered.

In South Africa, the virus has both brought us together and shown up lines of separation that were entrenched throughout our history and have altered very little since 1994. The things that will keep us safe – physical distancing, handwashing, strong immune systems – are simply not possible for many citizens.

Nonetheless, in facing COVID-19, South Africa has a unique opportunity to prove that it will use this historic moment to do well by its population. To respond with respect, compassion, and a recognition of the basic intelligence of all of us: nobody wants their loved ones to get sick and possibly die. What, therefore, can anthropology teach us about an appropriate response to the pandemic?

Firstly, the term ‘social distancing’ should ideally be replaced with the more accurate ‘physical distancing’. This reminds us that human beings are inherently social, and cannot thrive without community. In reality almost nobody is ‘socially distancing’ in South Africa right now. Rather, a vocal ‘some of us’ have the privilege of shifting our human, learning and income-generating connection online.

If we acknowledge that hygiene and physical distancing are the fundamental requirements that currently underpin our constitutionally assured ‘right to life’ we must act strongly. Water, nourishment and *data* must then be free resources for the duration of the crisis. If everyone can eat enough, wash their hands and maintain connections to their loved ones, we are far more likely to emerge from this unbroken.

Belief must be taken seriously. *What* people believe is a lot less important than *that* they believe it. Belief informs actions from the micro to the macro and back again. Religion, news (fake or otherwise), science, statistics and government all demand belief and if people buy into something – regardless of whether or not it is also factual – they will act on it.

Be it online or in person, most people turn to sources that they trust. These may be religious leaders, community level activists, social media stars, educators, or the favourite uncle in the corner store with an interesting opinion. The people we *choose* to listen to direct our behaviour in powerful ways. Partnerships must be established at every level of society, to ensure necessary information is shared in a way that is not antagonistic to existing belief systems. The information must be consistent in translation and modelled in the actions of leadership.

The violent structure of South African society should be acknowledged. COVID-19 is not happening in an historical vacuum, and not all diseases and experiences have been responded to equally to date. The country was not shut down for HIV or tuberculosis or gun warfare or inequality, but the virus will nonetheless run its course on trails worn smooth by these conditions. Acknowledging that this may not be perceived as ‘fair’ and explaining why this time the response is different as the government tries to do better, will help people to make the sacrifices being asked of them with less resentment.

It is important to validate rites of passage. So far, we have only focused on the end of life, and guidelines have been given for funerals. Much more is needed. We must reconsider and develop new rituals for births, transitions into adulthood, marriages and separations, graduations, promotions, and even birthdays. These events help everyday life to continue to hold significance. They make us feel connected, enriched, supported – as a part of something bigger than ourselves, rather than apart from it.

Many of us need help to find meaning: ‘meaning’ makes people happier and more secure, and therefore much more likely to support safe policy and action. ‘Beating the pandemic’ is theoretically a strong motivation, but until someone we know personally dies, COVID-19 will remain abstract for most of us not on its frontlines. Meaning must be given to this rupture.

A national campaign calling for the reimagination of a just and equitable South Africa that is different from the country we left behind could be unifying and productive. It could provide a rare opportunity for *everyone* to reimagine the social contract of citizenship, the individual and the collective and to ensure that when this passes we do not return to where we were before. Anthropology can draw on an extraordinary record of life affirming processes and practices in the face of challenge to support this process going forward.

We live within environments. Our environments should also now be part of our plans. Lockdown has forced many to pay much more attention to spaces around us as we have been more present where we usually come just to sleep. Again, there is a rare opportunity to mobilise towards protection and sustainability – the ecosystems, the animal, bird and insect life, the safety not only of humanity, but of everything else in our world as well.

Finally, our understanding of value needs to be expanded. This is something that anthropology has quietly documented for more than a century. The cultural repertoires that exist within South Africa extend far beyond ubuntu. As we try to mop up the economy, it will be critical to expand the definition of ‘value’ beyond the financial towards the *human, the relational, the social*.