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'But where are our moral heroes?'

An analysis of South African press reporting on children affected by HIV/AIDS

Helen Meintjes and Rachel Bray

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‘But where are our moral heroes?’[1]

An analysis of South African press reporting on children affected by HIV/AIDS

Abstract

Messages conveyed both explicitly and implicitly in the media play an important role in the shaping of public understanding of issues, as well as associated policy, programme and popular responses to these issues. This paper applies discourse analysis to a series of articles on children affected by HIV/AIDS published in 2002/ 2003 in the English-medium South African press. The analysis reveals layer upon layer of moral messaging present in the reporting, the cumulative effect of which is the communication of a series of moral judgements about who is and who is not performing appropriate roles in relation to children. Discourses of moral transgression specifically on the part of African parents and ‘families’ for failing in their moral responsibilities towards their children coalesce with discourses of anticipated moral decay amongst (previously innocent) children who lack their due care. The need for moral regeneration amongst South Africans generally (but implicitly black South Africans) is contrasted with an accolade of (usually white) middle class individuals who have gone beyond their moral duty to respond. The paper argues that in each instance, the particular moralism is questionable in the light of both empirical evidence and principles of human dignity underlying our constitution. Children – and particularly ‘AIDS orphans’ – are shown to be presented as either the quintessential innocent victims of the epidemic or as potential delinquents. While journalists intentions when representing children in these ways are likely to be positive, the paper argues that this approach is employed at a cost, both in the public’s knowledge and attitudes around the impact of AIDS, and more importantly, in the lives of children affected by the epidemic.

[1] Sunday Times, 3.3.2003

> "It sometimes feels as if there are two epidemics: one being described by the press and government agencies, the other being lived and resisted in the communities most affected by the effects of HIV infection and disease" (Watney, 1989b:18)

> "I mean how do you write about AIDS orphans in a different way – How do you? I mean, - 'AIDS orphans are all alone, and they don't have any resources'. What else can you say?" (South African journalist quoted in Stein, 2002:24)

> "We must examine how language itself produces what we think we know; if we are to intervene, language is one place where that intervention must take place" (Treichler, 1988:232)

Introduction

When an article by journalist Emily Wax, first published in the Washington Post in August 2003 (Wax, 2003) was posted shortly afterwards onto the CABA (Children Affected by AIDS) forum list-serve, a flurry of electronic conversation ensued.

Wax's article – a story of two sets of siblings orphaned by AIDS[2] – is an evocative account of some of the potential implications of the death of parents for children in Africa (in this case, in rural Kenya). These children, Wax argues, "are part of the lost generation… A generation that is growing up without parental guidance", a state she links to the likelihood of unfulfilled potential on the part of the children, and of worsening political instability for the State and continent. She describes, in dramatic terms, the children's exploitation, abandonment and neglect by relatives; their dropping out of school, their hunger, their isolation – among other things.

Responses from those subscribed to the CABA list ranged from critiques of Wax's presentation of the situation of AIDS in Africa as one of passivity and hopelessness (Giese, 2003; Monk, 2003; Williamson, 2003), to reiterations thereof (Samson, 2003). More striking, however, was the string of well-intentioned responses that "pooled resources" (Feldman, 2003) to ensure that the particular children documented in Wax's story would receive school uniforms, books, clothes and food, at least for "the coming semester/term" (Arum, Odhiambo, & Ondiek, 2003). One writer, delighted at the collaborative response, articulated her wish "for a nice little trust fund to be set up that would go directly to a boarding school for all 8 of

[2] Or so the reader is led to assume.

these children to grow and flourish. To safely reach adulthood together" ('Maureen', 2003).

In one fell hyperspacial swoop, communications across the list-serve encapsulated the issues that had been of concern to us – and others – for some time, and neatly documented themselves in the intransience of type-face and the immediacy of the internet. The media is powerful, through (among other things) it's spin on stories, it's ability to communicate the unfamiliar or distant, it's global reach. The responses to Wax's article in the *Washington Post* illustrate the way in which readers' interpretation of messages in the print media can prompt well-intentioned but not necessarily appropriate action, in this case to assist children. Eight orphaned children in Kenya may have their lifetimes altered – possibly with a trust fund that inserts them into entirely different circumstances to those they might even have experienced were their parents living. However, the destitute circumstances of the eight children in the story are not unique. Targeted assistance, in particular of material goods, to these particular children in isolation of others does not take sufficient account of the context of their challenges. In addition, it could put their safety at risk by generating neighbourhood jealousies (Giese, Meintjes, Croke, & Chamberlain, 2003).

Appropriate responses to children in the face the epidemic are critical. South Africa currently has resident the highest number of HIV-positive individuals of any country in Africa, with an estimated 5 million people living with HIV or AIDS in 2004, of whom roughly 245 000 are likely to be children under the age of 15 (Dorrington, Bradshaw, Johnson, & Budlender, 2004). High levels of adult morbidity and mortality do – and will continue to for many years – affect the country's large child population (estimated at roughly 39% of the total), even with widespread antiretroviral treatment intervention (Authors' analysis of 'Community Profiles 2001 Population Census'). For this reason, what is conveyed both explicitly and implicitly within media text about the impact of HIV/AIDS on children deserves examination in terms of its impact on public knowledge, policy design and interventions.

Despite an extensive multidisciplinary literature examining discourses of HIV/AIDS in the global media[3], most researchers to date do not comment on the

[3] Most studies analyse media reporting in the global North – in particular Britain, Europe, the United States and Australia – with only a few isolated studies examining reporting on AIDS in the South African/African media. Existing studies of AIDS in the African media generally employ quantitative content analysis methodologies that enable commentary on trends in type, frequency and extent of reporting, prominence given to particular themes,

representation of children in media reporting on AIDS. Existing references to media reporting on children and AIDS are isolated to brief comments as opposed to full analyses. No researchers have undertaken any in-depth analysis of the particular ways that the media represents children affected by HIV/AIDS. This paper thus sets out to analyse English-medium South African press reporting on children and HIV/AIDS, in an effort to closely consider the messages being communicated to the local public about the impact of AIDS on children. We examine what is emphasized, and what is omitted, with respect to the effect of HIV/AIDS on children's lives, and explore some of the implications of patterns found in the reporting.

The relationship between media coverage and public opinion, and the role of media language and content in shaping public attitudes, discussions, responses – including towards HIV/AIDS – has been repeatedly documented and discussed (Beamish, 2002; Hughes & Malila, 1999; Kitzinger, 1993, 1995; Lupton, 1994; Schindlamayr, 2001; Williams, 1999, among others). Lupton (1994:9), for example, concludes that "the way in which the phenomenon of AIDS has been represented in the entertainment and news mass media has played an important role in the development of shared cultural meanings about AIDS"[4].

This said, social scientists vary in the degree of agency they accrue to the reader, and thus the extent to which media text is treated as constitutive of social relations and mainstream ideologies (Rapport & Overing, 2000). As Askew and Wilk (2002) point out, readers are also engaged in producing meaning and hence have the potential to interpret a story in a variety of ways, perhaps resisting or challenging the perspectives of the news writer. Yet she clearly regards the media to have authority in this relationship: "media producers apply a host of strategies

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main subjects, etc rather than conducting discourse analysis (Finlay, 2003; Kasoma, 2000; Linda, 2000; Mchombu, 2000; Odhiambo, 2000). Work by Page (2003) and Connelly and McCloud (2003) is an exception to this. Like analyses of media elsewhere, none of these studies on African media pay more than cursory attention to reporting on children in the context of HIV. Where mention is made, it is with regards to 'AIDS orphans' rather than to children infected with HIV.

[4] South African journalist Jo Stein (2002: 16) makes an important point however when she states that it is not media "in and of itself, but in relation to a complex set of social players and historical variables, which determines what issues gain currency as social priorities". In other words, the nature of the relationship between media coverage and government or public policy is not straightforward. The historical, cultural, political and socio-economic context to the AIDS debate all play a part in shaping media coverage and (the individual and group) responses to such coverage.

… that predispose and guide audiences towards readings favouring existing power structures" (Askew & Wilk, 2002:5).

Of primary concern to our study therefore is the *possibility* that the South African news media plays an influential role in creating or maintaining a general understanding of the way in which AIDS affects children, which in turn may contribute to the nation's responses in terms of social policy and resource distribution.

Considerable attention has been given by analysts to the nature of the constraints placed upon news-making bodies and their impact on reporting (see Bell, 1991; Lupton, 1994; Stein, 2002). In this respect, it is not our intention to go over 'old ground'. Rather, we begin by acknowledging the differences between what journalists would like to produce and what they are able to, given limits to time, budget, access to (re)sources and literary freedom. The same can be said for editors whose decisions are influenced by the need to sell a product and maintain a particular political position (Stein, 2002). We thus recognise that the nature of the 'news market' is critical in allowing more or less space for certain topics, as well as determining the breadth of interpretation of issues raised.

Methods

The analysis that follows is drawn from articles published in the South African press. A range of English-medium South African newspapers – some of them local, some of them regional and national, including both dailies and weeklies, were systematically monitored over two periods of three months each, from March to May 2002 and again over the same period during 2003. In addition reporting during the week around World AIDS day in 2002 (1st December) was monitored.

Newspapers included the Business Day, Cape Argus, Cape Times, the Citizen, City Press, Daily News, EP Herald, Independent on Saturday, the Mail & Guardian, the Natal Witness, Saturday Star, Sowetan, Sowetan Sunday World, Sunday Independent, Sunday Times, Sunday Tribune, The Star, and the Weekend Argus. Nine of these papers are dailies, eight are produced weekly.

In the 2002 monitoring period, additional English-medium papers that were monitored were the daily papers Business Times, Daily Dispatch, and the Pretoria News. In the 2003 period, The Sunday Sun was monitored in addition to those listed.

The articles were sourced at the time of their publication by the Media Monitoring Project (MMP) and Perinatal HIV Research Unit (PHRU) at the University of Witwatersrand, as part of larger media analysis studies, on children in the case of the former, and HIV/AIDS in the latter. The choices made by the two agencies account for the slightly different – though largely overlapping – sample of papers.

A total of 150 articles were identified as relating to children and HIV/AIDS during the monitoring period. Of these however, 44 included only a tangential reference to children affected by HIV/AIDS. One hundred and fourteen articles have therefore been analysed in detail for the purposes of this paper.

Our analytical approach followed a form of discourse analysis conducted on all articles, columns and editorials touching on issues relating to HIV/AIDS and children that were published during these periods. Analysis focussed on the verbal and linguistic text of the articles rather than accompanying images. A central theme was identified for each article, as well as a series of sub-themes. Both explicit and implicit messaging was considered – via careful examination of metaphor, and other lexical choice, as well as through content included and excluded. We were thus concerned to identify particular and recurring discourses, shared ways of talking and thinking about children and HIV/AIDS.

In this regard, we follow Pennycook's (1994:128) definition of 'discourse' to mean "ways of organising meaning that are often, though not exclusively, realised through language. Discourses are about the creation and limitation of possibilities, they are systems of power/knowledge (*pouvoir/savoir*) within which we take up subject positions".

Communication through the print media is a primary means of social exchange around issues considered to be of national or local importance (such as HIV/AIDS). In recognising that the production and consumption of text (for the print media) takes place in a specific socio-cultural, political and historical space, we can expect the content and tone of articles to be structured by particular norms and conventions. The anthropologist Dell Hymes (1972 in Rapport and Overing, 2000:118) uses the term 'speech community' to refer to those who share rules concerning the conduct and interpretation of speech, and who determine particular ways of proper speaking which its competent members will practise. Thinking about the journalists' writing on health and social issues in South Africa, as well as their readership, as 'speech communities' poses questions related to the rules of 'proper writing' about HIV/AIDS and children, and the social processes and power relationships that maintain these rules.

Who features in the reporting?

During the periods monitored, reporting relating to HIV/AIDS and children focused overwhelmingly on orphaned children[5], and on existing or 'necessary' responses to "the orphan problem". HIV-positive children also received some attention, though considerably more limited. Very few news articles during the monitoring periods considered the broader impacts of the epidemic on children. Only two of a total of 114 articles analysed made reference to children living with sick caregivers. An overwhelming majority of the reports focus their attention on the issues as they relate to South Africa: only four articles consider other countries, two Southern Africa in general, and two provide a global perspective.

Although there has been an important shift amongst experts to conceptualising the impact of AIDS on children as being more broad-based than orphaning, articles continued to use the outdated (and much maligned) terminology of 'AIDS orphans'. The majority also propagated the popular stereotype of the orphan as the archetypal vulnerable child of the AIDS pandemic (a stereotype that remains similarly widespread in much existing research and reporting by International Agencies and others) (Meintjes & Giese, 2004). References to 'AIDS orphans' as, for example, "the innocents who are perhaps the most vulnerable victims of AIDS" (*Independent on Saturday*, 30.11.2002) are prevalent in articles.

In instances where the issue being reported does not exclusively apply to children who have been orphaned, and is salient to other children, it is common for articles to focus attention on its relevance as a concern regarding orphans. An article published in the *Star*, and subsequently in the *Daily News* (in an edited form) in April 2003 on the difficulties experienced by orphans in accessing the social grants to which they are entitled provides a good example of this trend. The article is an otherwise excellent piece of reporting that stands apart from most of the articles published during the monitoring period for its timely investigation of a critical issue, its provision of evidence, and its consultation with children. However, the centreing of its argument on orphans – as opposed to poor children in general, to whom the majority of issues it reported apply equally – resulted in misunderstandings that revealed themselves in a series of articles that appeared in response. Subsequent related articles called for interventions targeting 'AIDS orphans' that would in fact be more appropriately directed at poor children (for

[5] This is in contrast to patterns noted by studies elsewhere, where references are made largely to HIV-positive children. This comes as no surprise considering the majority of other studies examine media reporting in countries where ARV treatment is accessible and rates of AIDS-related parental death therefore much lower.

example, assistance with accessing the necessary documents required for grant applications and the like)[6] (*Business Day,* 2.5.2003; *Citizen* 2.5.2003; *Sowetan*, 2.4.2003; *Star*, 2.5.2003).

Research illustrates in particular how children's vulnerabilities can be exacerbated during periods when they are living with sick caregivers or others who are terminally ill, as increased demands are made on the financial and social resources of the household. While South Africa remains some years away from a peak in orphan numbers, the country is currently home to vast numbers of children whose care is potentially compromised by residence or relationships with sickly adults (Giese *et al*., 2003). Furthermore, HIV/AIDS does not only impact on those whom it 'directly' affects: the same research study illustrates the ways in which whole neighbourhoods face increased demands on 'informal' networks of support to provide for those who need help (Giese *et al*., 2003; Meintjes, Giese, Croke, & Chamberlain, 2003).

Thus, we would argue that while the issue of children orphaned by HIV/AIDS is a critical one, the emphasis placed on this issue by journalists risks obscuring the diversity of additional ways in which children are affected by HIV/AIDS, and stands to divert public knowledge and attention away from other critical points of intervention and support.

Morality, the media, and AIDS

Throughout the literature, studies consistently document pervasive discourses of morality – including in particular discourses of moral panic – in the media's reporting of HIV/AIDS (see for example Connelly & Macleod, 2003; Juhasz, 1990; Kasoma, 2000; Kistenberg, 2003; Kitzinger, 1995; Konick, 2003; Linda, 2000; Lupton, 1994; Mchombu, 2000; Odhiambo, 2000; Page, 2003; Sacks, 1996; Watney, 1989b). AIDS epidemics around the world are shown to be framed by the media as epidemics of moral deviance, driven by (and largely located within) categories of people who are (re)presented as transgressive, as immoral, as abnormal: gay men, injecting drug users, sex workers, women who are HIV-positive who have sex and who become pregnant, 'promiscuous' people and so on.

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[6] The extent to which poor children in South Africa struggle to access the cash grants to which they are entitled because of administrative and legislative requirements are well documented. See for example, Case, Hosegood & Lund (2003), Clacherty (2001), Giese *et al*. (2003), Leatt (2004), Rosa, Leatt & Hall (2005) and Rosa & Mpokotho (2004).

Distinctions made through language and imaging are shown to set apart 'innocent' and 'guilty' victims of HIV, with blamelessness generally being situated within white, middleclass, heterosexual populations. Researchers argue that through practices of 'othering', and the accompanying blame, discourses of AIDS reporting thus produce and – importantly – reproduce hegemonic stereotypes, power relations and notions of deviance (Juhasz, 1990; McAllister & Kitron, 2003; Sacks, 1996; Treichler, 1988; Watney, 1989a, 1989b). Pre-existing ideologies and narratives are drawn upon by the media in order to make sense of a (no longer so) new phenomenon (Lupton, 1994). Referring to representations of the epidemic in the USA, McAllister and Kitron (2003:58) note that "AIDS is the disease of the peripheral, the poor, the deviant, the morally ill (and is only newsworthy when it threatens 'the mainstream'). For the most part, news coverage [in the New York Times and other prominent US papers] has reinforced these meanings". These kinds of reporting practices contribute to binding HIV/AIDS up in moralism in a way that, according to Kistenberg (2003), discourses around other diseases have not.

Discourses of morality are no less present in the South African press reporting on children in the context of HIV/AIDS. However, with South African reporting on the impact of HIV/AIDS on children centred predominantly on issues broadly relating to orphanhood and to children's care, the notions of morality and moral deviance communicated by the press take on additional dimensions to those discussed elsewhere. It is to the analysis of these that we now turn.

Innocents discarded: the moral transgressions of 'the African family' [7]

> "…there can be no more pathetic a group of children than the growing legion of AIDS orphans, who daily face a desperate fight for survival in a society which largely continues to close its collective eyes to their plight …" (*Daily News,* 3.5.2003)

The theme of children's innocence lies at the centre of the South African print media's reporting on children in the context of AIDS. Children, and particularly orphans, are portrayed as blameless victims of a situation beyond their control.

[7] While we recognise the dangers of simplification and stereotyping, we use the term 'family' throughout this paper to refer to kinship structures, because this is the term that is widely used in press reports. Note that we are not meaning the term to be synonymous with 'household'.

These children are "the innocents … with absolutely nothing to lose" (*Independent on Saturday*, 30.11.2002b), "helpless victims of a social and medical nightmare", a "band of little angels" (*Sowetan Sunday World,* 24.3.2002) who "deserve" assistance (*Daily News,* 3.5.2003).

In all likelihood journalists have good intentions in presenting children this way. By publishing articles that highlight children's needs, the press stands to provoke empathy, and perhaps action, towards improving children's lives. Moreover, we know that the consequences of the epidemic for children are multi-faceted and very serious. It is therefore appropriate that the media draws attention to children's vulnerability. The issue under debate is how this is done; what implicit messages are conveyed to the readership and what impact do these have on general understandings of how South African children and adults are responding to the epidemic.

The discourse of the 'innocent victim' is not new in media reporting on children in general (Moeller, 2002), and is briefly noted with respect to discourses regarding HIV-positive children in a number of the analyses of HIV/AIDS reporting around the world (Konick, 2003; Lupton, 1994, 1999, 2003; McAllister & Kitron, 2003; Page, 2003; Sacks, 1996). Along similar lines to others, Lupton notes of reporting in Australia, "the most innocent of all people with HIV/AIDS … are infants and young children, who are commonly positioned as devoid of any blame, shame or guilt for their infection" (Lupton, 1999:38). With 'innocence' presented as the foremost characteristic of children affected by AIDS, 'guilt' of others is implied, even in the absence of any explicit juxtaposition. And thus paradigms of morality in relation to HIV/AIDS, are reinforced.

In particular, moral judgement is (implicitly or explicitly) directed at caregivers – biological mothers as well as broader kinship and community networks – in press reports during the period monitored. As noted similarly by Sacks in her study of reporting of women and HIV/AIDS in the press in the USA, pregnant HIV-positive women were commonly framed as irresponsible and uncaring, 'bad' mothers for becoming pregnant in the first place, and in the South African situation, even more morally aberrant for risking HIV transmission to their children as a result of subsequent choices. We see reports such as that in the *Cape Times* (9.4.2003) which condemn women for being irresponsible towards their unborn – implicitly 'innocent' – children.

> "Thousands of babies born in South Africa are being put at risk of 'inheriting' HIV at birth because of their mothers' reluctance to have an HIV test … A Johannesburg obstetrician and gynaecologist said studies had shown that nearly half of the pregnant women who

> declined to be tested were HIV-positive. Concern now was for the babies of untested mothers who had 'no voice' and who were at risk"

The article employs emotive language and references an obstetrician's study (providing it with scientific authority despite a questionable point being made) but fails to take into account women's contexts in its implicit critique of their choices.

More prominent in the press reports however, was a discourse regarding the loss of morality – frequently framed as a loss of 'traditional African values' – specifically related to the provision of care for children. Critique of absent parents or others identified as having a moral responsibility to take care of children is evident throughout much of the reporting, with their failure to do so a consistent theme.

Parents – both mothers and fathers – and other relatives who 'abandoned' their children are repeatedly referred to in articles. Language choices throughout indicate a moral judgement: that those who should be responsible are failing in their duties of care. Words like "walked out", "dumped", "abandoned" communicate desertion, the discarding of children, when it is likely in most instances that circumstances are more complex than implied by the choice of terminology. The following excerpts provide illustration:

> "It is unclear whether Sindi's mother is still alive. She walked out on Sindi after she found out that her husband was infected with HIV"(*Star*, 30.4.2003)

> "The last time Nobuhle saw [her father] was the day he left her at her grandmother's home and walked out of her life" (*Star*, 30.4.2003)

> "Relatives abandoned them because they had the disease" (*Daily News,* 2.12.2002)

> "Babies dumped by their mothers … These children are left in black plastic bags and discarded in rubbish bins … Not one of the babies mentioned in the advertisements has been reclaimed by its mother" (*Star,* 16.4.2002)

The emphasis on 'dumping' babies depicts poor African mothers (in particular) as people who cannot or will not care for their children. They are described as "desperate" (*Pretoria News,* 15.4.2003) and "despairing" (*Star,*16.4.2002), and only cursory reference is made to the contexts of mothers' decisions to leave their children in the hands of others. At no point in any of the press articles was there any discussion of the complex set of social, economic, health and emotional pressures acting on poor women, nor any reference to the large numbers of women

in similar positions who are caring for their children despite the odds stacked against them.

The perceived loss of morality is also referred to directly in many of the articles produced during the monitoring period. It is common for articles to make reference to a time that they claim was different. For example, readers are told that "In the past orphaned children were cared for by uncles or aunts or grandparents" (*Mail&Guardian,* 17.04.2003) – now, it is implied, this is not the case. Or that "This country used to pride itself in the spirit of *ubuntu*. Somehow that, like some of the other post '94 goodwill, has disappeared" (*Star,* 17.4.2002). Articles describe a disintegration of 'traditional African values' – the notion of *ubuntu* being central, and in a number of instances join the president's call for widespread moral regeneration. Appeals are made for "a moral crusade" (*Independent on Saturday,* 11.5.2002b) or a "return to traditional Christian family values in our societies" (*Citizen,* 20.5.2003) to "help rebuild a caring nation" (*Sowetan,* 7.5.2002), and are peppered with references to the requirements of "African tradition and morality" (*Sowetan Sunday World,* 23.3.2003) and how "*vukuzenzele* [self reliance] should be rekindled among sections of our society" (*Sowetan,* 7.5.2002). An article in the Star newspaper (20.4.2002) reporting on the launch of South Africa's Moral Regeneration Movement focuses its attention almost exclusively on the situation of children in the context of AIDS. South Africans (read black South Africans) are urged to "go back to their roots", and quoting deputy president Zuma, "revive our social support networks and 'promote the notion that 'every child is my child' which formed a rock on which communities were built'", in order to ensure that orphaned children are integrated into families. "Family is the key to renewal", the article's headline proclaims in bold text. "We need to strengthen the moral fibre of our society, as a matter of priority, by rebuilding the family unit", the article continues. Throughout this article and others, discourses of a loss of morality are focussed on the failure specifically of the African family. In this way, in much of the reporting, morality – and specifically moral transgression – becomes racialised.

Widely applied linguistic imaging of children affected by HIV and AIDS as discarded children contributes to the directing of blame at African kinship networks in their 'failure' to perform their (by implication) tradition-defined moral duties of care. Descriptions of AIDS-affected children – and orphans in particular – as a "lost generation" (*Natal Witness,* 3.5.2003), as "lonely kids" without "loving homes" (*Star,* 3.3.2003), "throwaway kids" (*Star,* 3.3.2003), as "out in the cold" (*Star,* 30.4.2003), as "children who have been left to fend for themselves, having been forgotton by those responsible for them" (*Citizen,*2.5.2003) and other similar characterisations are frequent throughout reporting, as is the repeated conflation of

orphanhood with the experience of living in a child-headed household or on the streets.

The majority of articles referring to orphans do not make explicit that the majority of children who have been orphaned in South Africa (and elsewhere) do not find themselves living without a resident adult caregiver as a result (Ainsworth, Ghosh, & Semali, 1995; Giese *et al*., 2003; Gilborn, Nyonyintono, Kabumbuli, & Jagwe-Wadda, 2001; Meintjes, Budlender, Giese, & Johnson, 2003). More commonly, references are made to children living in so-called child-headed households, or children-only living arrangements are implied, as illustrated by the following excerpts [authors' emphases]:

> "They are orphans – some as young as nine *living on their own*" (*Star*, 30.4.2003)
>
> "Government and community organisations should urgently assist households headed by children who have been orphaned by AIDS" (*Star,* 6.12.2002)
>
> "… increasing number of children who *became primary caregivers* when their parents died" (*Star,* 30.5.2002)
>
> "orphans … will continue to live in the homes of their deceased parents. Affected children will very much remain part of the community, the only difference being that *they are looking after themselves*" (*Natal Witness,* 3.5.2003)

Orphan estimates and projections are repeatedly cited immediately alongside statements about (or implying their existence in) child-headed households, reinforcing associations between orphanhood and children's residence without adults. For example,

> "By 2010, orphans would account for 15-25 % of all children in sub-Saharan Africa, growing up *unsocialised, unloved* and uneducated" (*Sowetan,*3.4.2003)
>
> "The Bureau for Economic Research recently projected the number of AIDS orphans in South Africa by the end of the decade at about 2 million. Minister of Housing, Sankie Mthembe-Mahanyele said recently that housing subsidies for child-headed households were being introduced" (*Star,* 30.5.2002)

> "Because of HIV/AIDS, there are more and more children who are being forced to take full responsibility for their own brothers and sisters. Already, there are half a million AIDS orphans in South Africa, and the number is growing rapidly" (*Star,* 27.3.2003)
>
> "Within the next 10 years, the AIDS pandemic will leave at least two million AIDS orphans to fend for themselves as best they can" (*Independent on Saturday*, 11.5.2002b)

Thus, by using evocative language that presents children affected by HIV/AIDS as deserted by traditional structures of family/adult care and by focussing attention on children who are living without adult caregivers, the English-language South African press produces a moral dichotomy not recorded in analyses of media reporting elsewhere: that of the AIDS epidemic in South Africa constituting – and being constituted by – new crises of morality in the form of African families' failure in their moral responsibility for children, resulting in the forsaking of a generation of 'innocent' children who deserve better. Children are presented as victims of a situation within broader society. Innocent (morally pure) children are again juxtaposed with guilty (morally deviant) adults. However, in this instance, the cumulative effect of South African press reporting is the implicit directing of blame not only at those who are HIV-positive, but also at those who fail in their perceived moral duties to those who are considered to be innocent victims of the pandemic.

'AIDS orphans' as social threat: a discourse of moral panic

Moral messaging does not end here. Representations of families and communities failing in their moral responsibilities towards children, and of helpless child victims of the pandemic, coalesce in places into apocalyptic conclusions of resultant terror and the demise of society as we know it. A number of different discourses operate together to communicate a moral panic located in predictions of a South African society out of control.

In this regard, articles frequently make use of metaphors of natural disaster, when referring to the numbers of people/ children negatively affected by AIDS. We read of an AIDS "tidal wave" hitting South Africa (*Financial Mail,* 6.12.2002), "waves of children" (*Independent on Saturday*, 11.5.2002b), an "enveloping cloud of death" (*Citizen,* 8.4.2003), an anticipated "flood of sick children" (*Cape Times,* 24.3.2003) or similarly, a "flood of orphans" (*Cape Times,* 8.4.2003), among

others. Currently, readers are told, in relation to orphans we are experiencing "the lull before the storm" (*Financial Mail,* 6.12.2002). These metaphors convey a sense of a situation of vast, unexpected, unavoidable and overwhelming proportions gathering momentum – indeed, a situation out of control and heading towards a disasterous endpoint.

These metaphors of natural disaster in addition emphasise people other than those referred to in the metaphors as victims of the circumstances, powerless in the face of the onslaught of others. We return to this notion shortly.

Another linguistic technique which achieves similar effect is the application of hyperbole in describing the epidemic. Though more limited in association than metaphors of natural disaster, the descriptions such as "soaring AIDS deaths" (*Independent on Saturday*, 11.5.2002a), "mushrooming orphan numbers" (*Independent on Saturday*, 30.11.2002a) and references to the likes of "AIDS orphan explosions" (*Independent on Saturday*, 11.5.2002a) that were similarly present in some press reports, point again to a situation that is worsening rapidly and exponentially, with negative implications.

The provision of estimates and statistics in particular of orphaning without clear definition compounds popular conceptions of predicted looming disaster for society. Most articles about this aspect of the epidemic during the monitoring period include some mention of orphan numbers. However few clarify the categories of children to whom these numbers apply. Thus we see repeated examples of the following kinds of statements:

> "Twenty million of these children – or almost six percent of all children in Africa – will be orphaned as a result of AIDS" (*City Press,* 1.12.2002)
>
> "…a conservative estimate of more than two million orphans – equal to the number that would fit into 40 Absa stadiums[8]" (*Independent on Saturday*, 11.5.2002a)

Definitions of orphaning applying to estimates and projections generally relate to children who may have experienced the death of either one or both parents. The

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[8] Though this metaphor is not one that is repeated in any other articles, it is an interesting one nonetheless. The reference to a multiply-filled Absa stadium (a large sports stadium in Durban that is used largely for soccer matches) creates an image of orphan children en masse, constituting somewhat unruly crowds that require security guards and crowd control mechanisms in order for control/safety to be assured.

majority of children thus enumerated in South Africa will have lost one parent, rather than both. As has been pointed out elsewhere (Meintjes & Giese, 2004), a lack of clarity regarding the definition of orphaning to which estimates and projections pertain operates to feed incorrect notions of the nature of the tragedy – in this case, to inflate the number of children who are 'double orphans' in the popular imagination.

Predictions of vast numbers out of control are compounded by predictions in some of the articles about the nature of horror likely to ensue as a result. In these instances, representations construct binary oppositions of representations of children affected by Aids as the innocent victims of the epidemic. While a somewhat extreme example, the following excerpt from the *Independent on Saturday* in May 2002 encapsulates a number of the kinds of predictions, themes and metaphors that were present in articles addressing this theme, and which contribute to the construction of notions of the nature of the looming "AIDS orphan nightmare" (*Independent on Saturday*, 11.5.2002b):

> "Scientists, researchers and welfare agencies warn that without 'determined and dramatic' intervention, the soaring AIDS deaths, particularly of young mothers, will turn our city streets into dangerous 'no go' areas. They paint a grim, nightmarish picture of bands of lawless children, armed to the teeth and rampaging for food and shelter; waging a war of survival against each other and society at large, much like a page from *Lord of the Flies*" (*Independent on Saturday*, 11.5.2002a)

The excerpt draws on a range of metaphors in communicating an image of horror so extreme it must be fictional ("nightmarish", "a page from *Lord of the Flies*"). Metaphors of war ("armed to the teeth", "waging a war", "'no go' areas") and criminality ("lawless", "rampaging") are laden with contraventions of a moral order. They provoke fear and feed into the notion of a crisis of morality.

In particular, images of orphaned children becoming angry young criminals who hang about in groups on the streets (rather than in families where children 'belong') are present in articles dealing with predictions of threat arising from the AIDS epidemic. Readers are warned of "AIDS orphans forming gangs as more and more arrive in the cities, angry and grieving over dead parents" (*Independent on Saturday*, 11.5.2002b) and asked "where do these angry young teenagers go?" (*Independent on Saturday,* 30.11.2002b). Reference to, and use of metaphors of, criminality emphasise these young people as morally aberrant. For example, they are described "hid[ing] out" (as opposed to a more neutral "living") in city shelters (*Independent on Saturday,* 30.11.2002a), "forming gangs" (*Independent on*

Saturday, 11.5.2002b) of "rampaging" teenagers (*Independent on Saturday*, 11.5.2002a) and being "involved in theft, mugging, drug-running and under-age prostitution" (*Independent on Saturday,* 30.11.2002b). In describing orphans in this way, and failing to give them any identity beyond these predictions, the writers inadvertently dehumanise the children. These descriptions also construct them as a threat to 'normal' comfortable, secure, life.

We see then how crises of morality are implicitly located in the predictions of the nature of horror that is anticipated to follow from increasing numbers of AIDS deaths, and concomitantly increasing numbers of orphans in South Africa. As a result of an absence of care they deserve (the moral failure of 'the African family'), it is suggested that orphaned children will grow up inadequately socialised. These children, 'innocent victims' of circumstances beyond their control at the start, are expected to become morally deviant as they mature in the absence of the care to which they are entitled. In representations in the press reports, one moral transgression – the lack of provision of care for children – can be seen to feed another, in the form of the creation of a proportion of young people in society who are without good values and morals.

Moral panic is further engendered through a focus on the impact of orphans on society as opposed to the experiences of the children/ young people involved. Readers are warned for example, of imminent personal and broad public danger resulting from orphans becoming 'street children', as illustrated by the headline: "Festering gangland: Angry street kids a threat to city" (*Independent on Saturday,* 30.11.2002a). "AIDS orphans: Help us!" a second headline proclaims (*Star,* 6.12.2002), capturing in its ambiguity the binary opposition of orphans as either victim (Orphans need help) or threat (Help us the readers/ the public as we face the repercussions of large-scale orphaning).

The combination of apocalyptic imagery with possessive pronouns locates children affected by AIDS as outsiders, as constituting a problem for others, rather than as experiencing difficulties themselves. It creates a dichotomy of 'us' and 'them', 'we' readers who 'belong', and those orphans, those criminal youth, who do not. This includes assertions such as the following [authors' emphases]:

> "On a social level, unless we deal with these orphans in a planned way, *our* cities and towns could become dangerous streets of fear" (*Independent on Saturday*, 11.5.2002b)
>
> "… a festering gangland in the heart of Durban with the potential of turning *our* city streets into treacherous no-go areas" (*Independent on Saturday,* 30.11.2002b)

> "… feral AIDS orphan gangs roaming *our* city streets" (*Independent on Saturday*, 11.5.2002a)
>
> "Those orphans who have become statistics will return to haunt *us*" (*Saturday Star*, 20.4.2002)

In these ways, it is repeatedly communicated to readers that the oft-labelled "AIDS orphan crisis" (*City Press*, 1.12.2002; *Star*, 30.5.2003, among others) is not simply a crisis for affected children, but perhaps of more concern, a looming crisis for readers themselves. Concomitantly, a dichotomy of belonging and 'non-belonging' that is again infused with notions of morality, is communicated: Moral righteousness is situated with those who 'belong', the 'us' to which articles refer, the HIV-negative, those not 'contaminated' by HIV, while a fate of moral degeneration is placed upon those affected, 'orphans' of the epidemic.

Public responses: the heroes of the pandemic

Amidst widespread (if by and large implicit) reference to failure on the part of African families, and to less extensive but nonetheless prevalent predictions of public terror, there are articles which denounce a perceived absence of support for children, and rebuke those identified as responsible. In pointing out that readers live in "a society which largely continues to close its collective eyes to [orphans'] plight" and posing the question "Is this how much we care about our children?" (*Daily News,* 3.5.2003), or arguing that "something should be done to show [orphans] there are people who care" (*Business Day*, 2.5.2003; *Star*, 2.5.2003), South Africans are admonished in the press for not taking sufficient moral responsibility in stepping in where families are failing children. "Where", readers are asked, "are our moral heroes?" (*Sunday Times*, 16.3.2003). The contrast between press representations of the African family and representations of those who are documented to be responding to children affected by AIDS is striking. Representations of the first – of kin networks that have failed their children – are juxtaposed with representations of people who have gone way beyond the normal call of duty to assist children.

It is in the main the middle class (and largely the white middle class) who feature in press reports as responding to children affected by HIV/AIDS. Articles heroise these individuals for the self-sacrifice, compromise and risk-taking involved in caring for those who are implicitly not considered to be their immediate responsibility. Thus for example, readers learn of a "Cape Town-born banker … who gave up a successful financial career in London to help raise funds for AIDS orphans in South Africa" (*Star*, 30.5.2002); or an intrepid doctor who adventures

beyond hospital walls and comfort to bring aid to children: “Dr Jana Oosthuizen climbs out of the bright red CitiGolf, … humps a heavy rucksack on her back full of medical paraphernalia and heads for the tin shack that is home to five children orphaned by AIDS' (*Financial Mail*, 6.12.2002); an “American doctor” who moved across the world to South Africa to start a hospice for dying children (*Argus*, 22.3.2002); a South African businessman who reverses his decision to emigrate to Canada, “motivated [by] the spectre of millions of orphans left destitute in the wake of the HIV/AIDS devastation … to tackle what is rapidly evolving into a ‘lost generation’ scenario” (*Natal Witness*, 3.5.2003); or an emergency/foster mother who is described as “one of those amazing people who open their hearts to needy children irrespective of the fact that there isn't enough room for them all in her 3-bedroomed council house”. In each case, their status as ‘outsiders’ to the specifics of the situation is made clear to readers through reference to where they are from in relation to the children they care for.

It is entirely appropriate that affirmation and praise be directed at those who intervene. For many, personal sacrifices and risks are indeed involved. In addition, far-reaching efforts on the part of South Africans are required in order to adequately address the scale of the epidemic, including its repercussions for children. Reporting on these efforts is fitting. However the cumulative effect of the press texts analysed is to locate the moral high ground in the hands of the (white) middle class - whose actions, it is implied, go far beyond the actions of those who *should* be responding. Distinctions about who is providing support to children affected by HIV/AIDS are made not only in terms of class but also in terms of race. Commentary such as “We commend the Topsy Foundation and gardening guru Keith Kirsten for caring about the HIV-infected or affected black children the government does not want to care for" (*Sowetan Sunday World*, 24.3.2002) provides an overt example of this trend.

The silence in the press reports with regard to the role that African communities are playing in supporting children affected by HIV/AIDS is striking. That more than 90% of children who are orphaned (as well as many others that are not) live with relatives (Budlender & Meintjes, 2004; Hosegood & Ford, 2003; Meintjes & Giese, 2004) and are not cast out to the streets or left to exist as so-called child-headed households is a fact made explicit in only one article (*Sowetan*, 8.3.2002) published during the monitoring periods. In a couple of articles, the presence of a grandmother or other relative caring for a child is noted but, as illustrated earlier, by far the most predominant image presented in the press articles is of children resident without adult caregivers, having been ‘discarded’ by those responsible for them.

The creation of binary oppositions is a common strategy in the news media (Askew & Wilk, 2002:5). What is important are the associations that are created by, or reinforced, by these oppositions. In this instance, the oppositional representations bolster an overriding racialisation of morality that runs – whether intentionally or unintentionally – through the reporting on children in the context of HIV/AIDS. Moral 'decay' in African communities is offset by the heroism and self-sacrifice of those who take exceptional moral responsibility, responsibility explicitly presented as 'beyond the call of duty'. And while these people's and organisations' actions are indeed admirable in many respects, the absence of recognition of the role that poor African kin and communities are playing creates a skewed picture of the challenges that children and South Africans more broadly face as a result of the AIDS epidemic. Indeed, South Africa's particular political history makes reflections which locate moral virtue in the hands of the white middle-class somewhat alarming.

The co-existence of contradictory images of children

> "Nkosi Johnson, the boy who gave children with the AIDS a voice that echoed around the world" (*Daily Dispatch*, 13.4.2002)

In a series of articles reporting Nkosi Johnson's receipt of the Children's Nobel Prize, he is described as "a beacon of hope" (*Citizen*, 16.4.2002), an epitome of "True greatness" (*Daily Dispatch*, 13.4.2002), a "role model" (*Daily Dispatch*, 13.4.2002) and reference made to his "courage and indomitable spirit", his confidence and clarity despite being "weakened by the ravages of AIDS" (*Star*, 16.4.2002). Clearly, his actions deserve to be commended. What is interesting however, is that writing highlighting Nkosi's insight, compassion and ability indicates an expectation that 12 year old boys would not ordinarily have such qualities.

The language used in these articles presents a third powerful image of children, namely the rare and highly capable hero. Far fewer articles analysed portrayed this picture of AIDS-affected children as compared to depictions of vulnerable, innocent victims or threatening delinquents discussed above. Yet this third image deserves attention because its assertion of (albeit unusual) positive agency on the part of the child appears to contradict the helplessness and negative agency (namely criminality) so prevalent in the majority of press reporting.

Here is a further example of a set of binary oppositions orientated around notions of morality. The difference is that they make implicit reference to what is considered appropriate in childhood rather than what a family ought to be and do for children (although the two are related).

We argue that cultural notions of the developing person are so deeply embedded that writers and readers are unaware of their presence in everyday discourse. For example, reporting like that cited above on Nkosi Johnson shows that children are assumed to be incompetent unless they prove otherwise. Research in modern industrialised societies finds that competence is associated with adulthood, meaning that the abilities of children and youth are often overlooked (Hutchby & Moran-Ellis, 1998). Age specific associations start to matter in relation to children's relationship with wider social forces. Early childhood is seen as a period of innocence and vulnerability, whereas youth is seen as a period of rebellion (Dimmock, 1997). Writers, probably unconsciously, make reference to one or other of these embedded cultural assumptions relating to age and behaviour, rather than any substantive evidence from children's lives.

Our first concern is that the absence of critical debate in the articles analysed implies that neither writers nor readers question whether such images reflect reality. In what ways, for example, are children with sick parents acting to support themselves and their families? And what are the limitations placed on children in this position? No discussion around these, nor many other relevant questions, is evident in press reporting. Secondly, the absence of debate suggests a lack of thinking about the possible implications for social policy and children's lives of reporting that draws more heavily on culturally situated moral convention than on empirical evidence.

Children as sources

In all 114 articles examined for this study, five directly source the children or young people to whom they refer. The representations of children which transpire as a result are salient for the ways in which they diverge from those which prevail in much of the reporting (and which are described above).

Consider for example, an article in the *Mail & Guardian* (17.04.2003) which reported on children's school-based peer education and HIV/AIDS support activities in an area of Kenya heavily affected by HIV/AIDS. The journalist observes young children providing nuanced information about HIV/AIDS in response to questions from peers, and performing insightful dramas "full of sly observation of adult behaviour, wit and humour". In observing and engaging the

children directly, his conclusions about children's experiences and responses to AIDS contrast with the dominant imaging of children as victims of their circumstances. "While all of these children will have had bitter experience of HIV/AIDS", he notes, "there is no sense that they have submitted to its tyranny, or that they are helpless in the face of it". Another article – this time in the *Saturday Star* (15.3.2003) – reported the situation of a young man and his sister (described in the headline as 'AIDS orphans') who face eviction from their house because of bureaucratic glitches accessing their mother's pension funds after her death. Sidwell Blangwe, the 'AIDS orphan' at the centre of the article and its primary source, is presented as articulate, competent and active. "When faced with the threat of losing his home and an end to his younger sister Refiloe's education, he didn't become despondent but was spurred into taking action". Similar imaging is present in a third article about a 13 year old girl who lives with her HIV-positive mother, and who has become a vocal AIDS activist (*Daily News,* 15.4.2003). "She has not let the tragedies tarnish her zest for life", the article notes, quoting the young woman's comment that "I love music, dancing and hanging out with my friends. I dream of becoming a professional model".

In each of these instances, the positive agency of the children is highlighted alongside their qualities as resilient, capable, responsible human beings. That such contrasting images to those more common in the press – of children as pathetic, helpless victims or irresponsible thugs – are present in the few articles which source children provides good evidence, we would argue, of the value of finding ways to directly engage children in articles about children.

Conclusion

It could be argued that the public rarely examines, let alone deconstructs, the messages within press texts, and that communicating the key message – namely that 'children are suffering as a result of the AIDS epidemic so we need to act' – in whatever way possible, should be a priority for South African journalists. And that for this reason, the use of various well-rehearsed news writing strategies, including the use of sensationalism, stereotyping, essentialism, and binary oppositions, is justified. However, as Askew and Wilk (2002) have pointed out, these strategies predispose and guide audiences towards readings which favour existing power structures, and characteristically replicate existing hegemonic discourses.

We argue that these strategies are employed at a cost, both in the public's knowledge and attitudes around the impact of AIDS, and more importantly, in the lives of children affected by the epidemic. For example, portraying orphans as children without adult or 'family' care, or as victims or delinquents, or without

adequate recognition of the challenges they share with other children also growing up in a time of HIV/AIDS, can lead to inappropriate policy and programme responses. These can include inappropriately targeted responses, the foregrounding of institutional care for orphaned children, and decisions that prioritise protecting the public over meeting children's needs. If such decisions are informed by images of large numbers of criminal children, we can only expect that interventions will aim to contain, reform and perhaps punish young people (Bray, 2003).

Layer upon layer of moral messaging is present in South African press reporting on children living in the context of AIDS. The cumulative effect of the reporting – at least during the periods monitored by this study – is the communication of a series of moral judgements about who is and who is not performing appropriate roles in relation to children. In this respect, representations in the South African press differ from those documented by studies of the media elsewhere. Discourses of existing moral transgression on the part of African parents and families (read kinship networks) for failing in their moral responsibility towards their children coalesce with discourses of anticipated moral decay amongst (previously innocent) children who lack their due care. The need for moral regeneration amongst South Africans generally (but implicitly black South Africans) is contrasted with an accolade of (usually white) middle class individuals who have gone beyond their moral duty to respond. In each instance, the particular moralism is highly questionable in the light of both empirical evidence and principles of human dignity underlying our constitution.

It is not our intention to suggest that South African journalists and other media workers are deliberately – with negative intent – promoting these kinds of messages. Rather, our aim is to illustrate the ways in which a pervasive discourse around children and family life, language choice by individual journalists, and particular silences in reporting children's everyday experiences and their responses in the face of these, can operate in tandem to produce a very skewed picture.

Previous research has shown that elements of these discourses can be found in writing by academics and development organisations (Bray, 2003; Meintjes & Giese, 2004). These continuities suggest that subtle but powerful social conventions exist that restrict writing on children and family life in the context of AIDS, and that these are unintentionally reinforced by different institutions. In this regard, the media would seem to be missing an opportunity to do what they are

best at, namely to be the critical voice against such conventions[9]. As we have suggested, reporting that consults children directly or research conducted with children would enable the press to better fulfil this role.

[9] Drawing on this research, the authors in collaboration with the Media Monitoring Project and the University of Witwatersrand HIV/AIDS and the Media project have developed a resource to support journalists in accurate, sensitive reporting on children in the context of the AIDS epidemic.

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Appendix: Summary of press reports

Newspaper	*No. of articles March – May 2002*	*No. of articles March – May 2003*
Argus	2	1
Business Day	1	3
Business Times		2
Cape Times	2	15
Citizen	1	18
City Press	4	1
Daily Dispatch	2	
Daily News	1	8
EP Herald		1
Financial Mail	1	
Mail&Guardian	0	11
Independent on Saturday	4	0
Natal Witness	2	6
Pretoria News	3	0
Saturday Star	2	6
Sowetan	5	6
Sowetan Sunday World	3	1
Star	12	17
Sunday Independent	0	1
Sunday Times	2	3
Sunday Sun		3
TOTAL	**47**	**103**

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