

Abstract

Sacraments of Surveillance: Ethnography of an HIV Test Clinic

by

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Background: Voluntary HIV counseling and testing (CT) has served as the cornerstone of HIV prevention efforts in the United States since 1985. Test counseling is a relatively new behavioral intervention that lacks clear standards and boundaries for practice. CT's potential effectiveness as a prevention intervention hinges on the counselors' ability to engage clients in a discussion of their particular prevention needs.

Objective: This study examined CT sessions in light of normative models of practice and the meanings and functions of testing for clients.

Methods: Data were derived from four years of participant observation as well as audio recordings of naturally occurring test sessions and in depth interviews with counselors and clients of anonymous test sites in Berkeley, CA.

Findings: Analogies with confession rituals help to explain a number of puzzling aspects of counselor client interaction and enable counselors to reflect critically on their role in changing HIV risk behavior. The routinization of CT has meant that relationships are increasingly managed according to notions of serological monogamy. Like sacramental confession rituals, clients use testing as a purification ritual that helps to manage anxieties over intimacy and trust. This symbolic and ritual use of CT tends to negate prevention messages that emphasize barrier methods. Confessional dynamics occur in response to power imbalances created by the counselor's form-driven approach to risk assessment. The dual function of the risk assessment form -- both an invoice and a surveillance instrument -- impedes the counselor's ability to engage the client in client-centered counseling. The client's reasons for testing are difficult to articulate within the context of a risk assessment interview. This represents a lost opportunity for effective prevention counseling.