

Culture and Ebola Virus Disease Prevention in West Africa: The Nexus

Introduction

This activity will help GSU BSPH students to improve upon their global and intercultural fluency competencies. Specifically, it will improve upon their ability to:

- Show awareness of diverse perspectives
- Demonstrate respect for other cultures
- Analyze cultural norms and values
- Demonstrate self-sufficiency in “outside the comfort zone” situation
- Develop strategies for communicating with people with different languages

Purpose

When there is an outbreak of an epidemic or a pandemic, the instinct of the global community is to seek out the science behind the transmission and to use scientifically based methods to combat the epidemic. While a step in the right direction, the outbreak of the 2014 Ebola virus disease in the three West African countries of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone have shown that, it is also important to focus on the cultural norms, values and practices of populations that contribute to disease transmission and prevention during an epidemic. Health education campaigns are good, but how do they tie in with the impacted populations cultural norms, beliefs and practices? Studies show that culture influences how members of a group seek, understand, process, communicate, and act upon health information. Therefore, ignoring culture can have serious consequences.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this activity, you will be able to:

- Explain the relevance of culture to Ebola disease prevention
- Discuss the importance of culture to health education campaigns

Activity

Focusing on the Addressing Fears, Rumors, and Community Resistance Through Responsive Engagement Exhibit under exhibit 4 (*Global Response- Communication and Participation*) provide a 1-2 page response to the questions below

1. How do you think cultural beliefs and practices contributed to the rapid spread of the Ebola Virus disease in the three West African countries?
2. What challenges did these beliefs and practices cause?
3. As part of the global Ebola response, was it sufficient to only provide clear simple messages to help people change behaviors that facilitated the transmission of Ebola? Explain your response.
4. What role could culture have played from the onset in the communication effort?
 - a. Talking to the chief and community members is okay, but what about the community’s beliefs and practices?
 - b. How culturally sensitive were the health prevention messages provided through the health education campaigns? Explain your response. (See safe burial pledge, evaluating impact of prevention messages)

- c. How could cultural beliefs and norms have been used to allay fears and rumors about the epidemic from the onset?
- 5. What lessons from a cultural perspective can be learned about addressing and preventing epidemics or pandemics in different parts of the world?
 - a. What role can anthropologists play? Click on the link below, read, and write what you think (<https://culanth.org/fieldsights/from-ebola-to-plague-and-beyond-how-can-anthropologists-best-engage-past-experience-to-prepare-for-new-epidemics>)



Pharmacy in Monrovia displaying versions of *Ebola is Real* posters, October 2014. Photograph by Dan Stowell, CDC