Diplomacy Matters: Psychological Science and the Art of Negotiation
Amanda Clinton, Ph.D Sr. Director, Office of International Affairs

The United States has made many commendable diplomatic contributions in its history. For example, in 1979, American diplomats contributed to the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty. In 1990, American diplomats actively participated in efforts to unify East and West Germany and, in 2015, they helped negotiate a reduction in Iran’s nuclear program. The significant uncertainty that has characterized 2017 – nuclear proliferation, environmental degradation, ethno-political conflicts and increasing inequality – reminds us of the continued importance of diplomacy in the international arena. Psychological science is key to the art of negotiation. For this reason, psychologists should actively contribute to international diplomacy now more than ever.

Meaningful diplomacy is based on core skills including successful communication, negotiation and conflict resolution, justice-based decision-making, and knowledge of group processes. Beyond basic information exchange, communication in diplomacy should incorporate intentional word choices, speech tone, and gestures that all convey how situations are being perceived and evaluated (Wong, 2016).

Negotiation – which relies upon effective communication – is the process of achieving a compromise: two or more parties seek resolution of seemingly incompatible goals, ideally in a peaceful, respectful manner (Carnevale & Pruitt, 1992). Cognitive psychology contributes to our understanding of judgments, emotions, biases and motivations in negotiations, all of which influence outcomes (Sharma, Bottom & Elkin, 2013). For example, international negotiations can be positively influenced when participants are more knowledgeable about cultural differences and when negotiators understand that goals may be multidimensional rather than singular (Garling et al., 2000).

An approach to social justice that recognizes distribution of privilege and opportunity as a multi-dimensional concept is important in successful international diplomacy. Social justice may have its most significant impact when it is understood as an aspirational concept, a framework for actively addressing events in the world, and as a lens through which we organize, perceive and interpret events (Shiriberg & Clinton, 2016). In terms of diplomacy, psychological science offers evidence of the importance of social justice in decision-making between parties: where outcomes appear reasonable, people are more willing to accept them. That is, when the outcome of negotiations is perceived as fair yet imperfect, groups that are affected respond positively to them (Tyler, 2000).

Group processes are critical to achieving higher aims and successful outcomes that resonate with all parties involved. As explained by psychological scientists, cohesive policy-making groups often value uniformity of approaches and prefer to avoid dissent, leading to limited disagreement even where opinions vary widely (Mintz & Carly, 2016).

Psychological science is the principle contributor to the skills and processes necessary for successful diplomacy. Our ability to express our point of view and understand the views of others, to resolve conflicts and address differences of opinion in a respectful and productive manner, to find equitable solutions, and to advocate for a purpose – rather than for a party line – are all addressed in our science.

APA supports work in international diplomacy at several levels. APA is an accredited non-governmental organization at the United Nations and its volunteer representatives advocate for the role of psychological science as it relates to children’s rights, minority rights, ageing, mental health and well-being, the environment and other issues also related to the developmental goals of the UN. APA works to support human rights through policy statements and communications to government officials. One recent example is a letter to Secretary Tillerson about the Rohingya (www.apa.org/advocacy/civil-rights/diversity/myanmar-letter.pdf). APA Committee on International Relations in Psychology (CIRP) has developed statements to consider global perspectives in U.S. psychology in order to increase awareness of an international perspective for its members (www.apa.org/about/policy/global-perspectives.aspx).

Given current trends, diplomatic skills could be in higher demand in 2018 than they have been in decades. Psychologists should lead efforts to understand and apply diplomacy across fields and contexts, whether through supporting trainings on civil society in our communities and schools, applying aspects of clear communication in our own lives, or approaching our interactions with a lens for social justice. We must act as diplomats as well as researchers, clinicians and trainers and, in this way, contribute to the betterment of the space we live in. In this new year, ask yourself: How can I use psychology to contribute to international diplomacy and create positive change in my world?

References
The MOU Experience
Ireland 2017
Casey McPherson, Ph.D, Justina Oliveira, Ph.D, and Lincoln Hill, Student Selection for Ph.D

Casey McPherson, Ph.D
Participating in APA’s MOU travel program to Ireland was fantastically rewarding. The conference began with a meeting for the APA attendees that set the tone for the rest of the trip. We were a diverse group from across the United States, and everyone seemed truly interested in the work other people were doing in their respective fields. Overall my colleagues from other fields of psychology were incredibly welcoming and intelligent scholars.

Above all, engaging with professionals from a wide variety of backgrounds, countries, and disciplines was critical to the success of the event. I was particularly glad to have a diverse representation of psychologists from within each country. Too often we tend to subconsciously categorize within a particular location or environmental archetype. However, we were able to compare and contrast the critical environmental factors for our respective situations in a way that was both respectful and constructive. The program allowed us to share our experiences in a welcoming and pressure-free environment, such that we could contemplate changes in our own situations without the rigid goals and learning objectives typically associated with trainings or lectures.

Joining the MOU Program was one of the best decisions I have made. It was an invigorating experience that connected me with people from my own nation and from Ireland. I hope to continue working with these scholars and inspiring others in my field to engage in similar work in the future.

Beyond just our environments and backgrounds, it was also great to engage with a variety of psychologists. It’s easy, on a day-to-day basis, to fall into the trap of thinking of yourself as one specific type of psychologist, forgetting that all psychologists are united in their goal to help people and society function better. However, in talking with both my American and my Irish colleagues, I found many people had great interest in examining the connections within the field of psychology and how we can work together to support the well-being of all people.

In regards to program specifics, my most memorable moments were from participating in Inspire Sessions. The Inspire Sessions were especially designed to shift the conversation from what one typically expects at a conference. Rather than a presentation of a specific study with dry data and limited time for discussion, Inspire Sessions were a mixture of TED talks and round table discussions. This design encouraged participants to engage in conversation and critical thinking.

Because of how the Inspire Sessions were designed, I felt as though I was actually engaging in useful collaboration with my colleagues. One particular session, titled Walking Briskly Through the Fog, engaged our group in a discussion of the uncertainty that exists in the world. The session paralleled several discussions I had with my American colleagues, identifying the need to recognize and value diverse subfields within psychology. We also speculated about the future of psychology as a whole, and hearing the viewpoints of such a diverse group of individuals was invaluable.

As an early career practitioner and new faculty member, joining the APA-MOU Travel Program was one of the best decisions I have made. It was an invigorating experience that connected me with people from my own nation and from Ireland. I hope to continue working with these scholars and inspiring others in my field to engage in similar work in the future.

Justina Oliveira, Ph.D
I was granted the opportunity to attend the Psychology Society of Ireland’s (PSI) annual conference this past November in Limerick through APA’s Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) travel grant meant to establish cross-country psychology research collaboration. Now initially, I found the application information from APA’s newsletter list serve and thought ‘What an amazing chance for a few folks who are already established in the field!’ I didn’t initially believe that as an Assistant Professor in the middle of my third year and still working towards tenure that I would be in the mix of whoever APA would send as collaboration ambassadors. Upon considering the newsletter announcement for a few days, it dawned on me that all of us have unique contributions valuable to a cross-country or cross-cultural context. I also became more and more eager to learn from psychologists in Ireland the more I considered this idea, so I dove into writing up my application materials. Thankfully, I didn’t self-create an unnecessary boundary, but just went for it! I’d encourage anyone else that feels passionate about various events and interesting opportunities offered through APA to just apply.

My experience through the MOU travel grant led to genuine professional connections that would have been unlikely without the personal aspect such an intimate international conference provides.

A few months later, I landed in Limerick full of excitement and curiosity. This may have impacted my openness to this opportunity as I truly believe the mindset we bring to novel experiences greatly influences how we later perceive them. The best way to jumpstart the conference was first meeting Amanda Clinton, Senior Director of APA’s Office for International Affairs and the other psychologists chosen to join PSI from the U.S. over dinner. We were able to sincerely bond over our slight nervousness surrounding our next day’s conference presentations and our disbelief but excitement that we were chosen to be there! Creating this connection was our basis for our comfort levels in regards to reaching out to numerous Irish psychologists at the conference over the next few days.

To be sure, the friendly Irish disposition and lovely storytelling nature of the Irish people certainly helped ensure we were comfortable and enjoyed the conference as well. I had the chance to meet various bright-eyed graduate students with big ideas for making change in the field of psychology and had the wonderful chance to enjoy hearty meals with experts in the field who have life-long wisdom and perspectives related to how Ireland’s landscape of mental health has shifted over the years, not unlike ours in the U.S. has. Through a mutual intrigue in each other’s culture, politics, view of mental health, and hopes for the future, I made very real connections to others at the conference in a natural manner.

At this particular conference, people seemed free to be themselves and this added to the easy-going dynamic. We all wanted to simply learn about each other and from each other. The epic dinner and dance gala event during the second evening of the
conference reinforced the existing bonds we had made with Irish colleagues (we now thought of them as colleagues already), and the ties the U.S. group now had to each other. We quickly learned who could dance and who did not care if they could or not! Any leftover barriers between conference attendees seemed to dissipate after a night of dancing to everything from salsa music to Thriller and current pop songs…what an evening! Creative events such as these were purposeful from a PSI leadership standpoint, towards the goal of reinforcing deeper connections across psychologists in a very human way in addition to encouraging a little fun and high levels of energy throughout our time there.

I am happy to say that my experience through the MOU travel grant to PSI led to genuine professional connections that would have been unlikely without the personal aspect such an intimate international conference provides. At this point (one month afterwards), I am still continuing phone meetings and chat sessions with multiple Irish colleagues in addition to email exchanges related to future potential conference sessions with both Irish and U.S. PSI attendees alike.

In Limerick, I had coffee chats, actual fireside conversations, and more formal meetings with folks across educational, developmental, clinical, counseling, cognitive, and workplace psychology subfields.”

Finally, a note on interdisciplinary work across psychology's subfields is important. I have come to realize that many of us in psychology, myself included, tend to participate in conferences and professional events specific to our subfield. In my case, Industrial Organizational Psychology-related conferences on teaching and research are often my priority. This experience at PSI has reminded me that we can often grow in more expansive and meaningful ways by attending events that span every aspect of psychology. In Limerick, I had coffee chats, actual fireside conversations, and more formal meetings with folks across educational, developmental, clinical, counseling, cognitive, and workplace psychology subfields. We were all able to find common ground on issues of importance from topics related to teaching such as service-learning, to ethics in psychology and how we can better work together across our given subfields in tangible specific ways.

In regards to creating effective connections across subfields, cultures, and countries, the MOU program to Ireland this year was immeasurably successful in my opinion and I believe it reminded me to focus on international issues that face our field towards the goal of implementing steps towards better partnerships with our fellow psychologists globally.

Lincoln Hill, Student Selection for Ph.D

Though most of my professional and personal interests center on matters of culture, racial/ethnic identity, and immigration, prior to the APA-MOU trip, I hadn't yet been afforded an opportunity to travel abroad and experience cross-cultural psychology firsthand. So when one of my professors shared that the APA-MOU program was accepting applications from graduate students interested in international collaboration, I immediately applied hoping to finally have an opening to explore my interests within a different cultural context.

In addition to forging connections with practitioners, faculty, and students based in Ireland, I'm immensely grateful for having met and formed relationships with the faculty representatives from APA who provided me with professional advice and took on a mentoring role.”

In my application essay, I noted that if I were selected to attend, I would use my presence to discuss my research interests around racial/ethnic minority college students’ mental health, acculturation experiences, various policy initiatives, as well as issues pertaining to my graduate assistantship including unaccompanied immigrant children and children’s rights. Fortunately, I was selected to attend and I received much more than I initially expected.

When I first arrived at the Psychological Society of Ireland’s annual conference, I felt immediately welcomed by leadership and attendees who graciously answered all of my questions regarding psychological science, practice, and training in Ireland. During allocated networking times and meals, I met other graduate students who were just as eager to hear about my research and doctoral training as I was interested in hearing about theirs. I attended sessions on marriage equality within Ireland, learned of the cultural significance of qualitative research and storytelling, gained knowledge in applying psychological research to public policy, and made connections with others interested in college student mental health and immigration issues. In addition to forging connections with practitioners, faculty, and students based in Ireland, I’m immensely grateful for having met and formed relationships with the faculty representatives from APA who provided me with professional advice and took on a mentoring role during my time at the conference.

I am extremely appreciative to the APA-MOU travel program for granting me this remarkable opportunity to travel to Ireland for the PSI annual meeting as a graduate student. I don’t take this trip for granted and I am excited about attending future international conferences to learn and share ideas with psychologists in different cultural spaces.

About the MOU Partner Collaboration and Exchange Program

APA collaborates with national psychology associations around the world in an effort to exchange information, discuss common issues, and increase goodwill. Thirty-one memoranda of understanding (MOU) have been approved between APA and national associations to formalize interactions, recognize shared goals, and commit to continued communication and engagement.

The APA MOU Partner Collaboration and Exchange Program is designed to promote exchange between U.S.-based APA and APAGS members and members of MOU partner associations. The program sends up to six scholars to a partner association’s annual convention where the host organization facilitates meetings, presentations, social events and cultural activities. The MOU program also fosters long term connections and working relationships to enhance international relations and continued information exchange.

Thus far, APA has sent scholars to Colombia, Mexico, South Africa and Ireland as part of the MOU Program.

For more info about the MOU program and the list of current MOU Partners visit: www.apa.org/international/outreach/memorandum/index.aspx

Apply now for a 2018 grant to attend the MOU Portugal Program!

Apply now to attend the upcoming 4th Annual Congress of the Portuguese Order of Psychologists in Braga, Portugal!


To apply please visit: www.apa.org/about/awards/mou-partner-exchange.aspx?tab=1

In this article, a senior scholar, a mid-career psychologist, and an early career psychologist discuss their work and share some of their insights and perspectives on international collaborations and engagement opportunities.

**Uwe P. Gielen, PhD:**
A Senior Scholar’s Perspective

Back in the 1970s, when I completed my graduate work in social psychology at Harvard University, many American psychologists tended to overlook psychological research, publications, and applied activities taking place outside North America. However, given my international and cross-disciplinary background which included undergraduate work in sociology at the Freie Universität Berlin, Germany, together with my interest in psychological anthropology, I did not share this point of view.

Moreover, at my first full-time teaching job at York College, City University of New York, I met Leonore Loeb Adler, a pioneering cross-cultural psychologist and refugee from Nazi Germany who became one of my mentors. In time, we began to work together on various books and articles (e.g., Adler & Gielen, 1994/2001) and also became active in the International Council of Psychologists (ICP), a pioneering organization at whose annual conferences I met numerous psychologists from overseas (Gielen, Adler, & Milgram, 1992). For instance, after presenting a workshop on cross-cultural moral reasoning at the 1985 ICP conference in Newport, Rhode Island, I was invited by Emily S. C. Y. Miao (Chinese Culture University) to conduct joint research with her in Taiwan. This, in turn, led to my first encounter with a Confucian-heritage culture and its time-honored approach to moral education.

Many years later it would also help me to understand better the Chinese-American adolescents and young adults I had been interviewing. Over the years, these and other efforts led to several hundred presentations at academic institutions and at conferences taking place in 34 countries. Such endeavors, in turn, have been intertwined with my activities as an editor of two journals and numerous books featuring contributions from several hundred international colleagues (e.g., Moodley, Gielen, & Wu, 2013).

Based on these experiences, I propose that international collaboration naturally emerges from the interplay of involvement in internationally oriented psychology organizations, sustained attendance and engagement opportunities.

**Grant J. Rich, PhD:**
A Mid-Career Psychologist’s Perspective

I have been fortunate in my career to have had the opportunity to build a number of successful collaborations. For international work in psychology, joining and participating in relevant divisions is a guaranteed way to begin locating others with similar interests. For instance, APA’s Division 52 (International Psychology) was founded in 1997 and is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year. The division maintains a helpful website (https://div52.org/) and hosts a series of webinars focused on international topics. Opportunities for participation abound with APA divisions, and getting involved may mean volunteering as a peer reviewer, offering to serve in an editorial role, serving on a division board or its committees, hosting or cohosting a webinar, or writing an article or column for one of its publications.

Though my graduate program at the University of Chicago, human development (then housed in the psychology department) had strongly advocated for an internationally-informed psychology since its mid-twentieth century founding, it was my association with APA after graduation that really helped take my international and cross-cultural work to the next level. In particular, my involvement in APA’s Division 52 led to my role as editor of its International Psychology Bulletin, to my participation in international conferences, many of which I first learned about through my membership – including the International Congresses of Psychology (ICP) in South Africa and Japan, the International Congresses of Applied Psychology (ICAP) in Australia and France, and the Caribbean Regional Conferences on Psychology held in the Bahamas, Suriname, and Haiti -- and to the development of a pool of truly extraordinary colleagues with whom I have collaborated on numerous publications (e.g., Takooshian, Gielen, Plous, Rich, & Velayo, 2016; Takooshian, Gielen, Rich, & Velayo, 2016).

Before diving in, it often helps to test the waters to assess whether a potential collaboration is in order. One way to do so is by starting small. For instance, before I became editor of International Psychology Bulletin, I worked with its editorial staff to publish several articles (e.g., Ahmed & Rich, 2009). As another example, before editing our first book together (Rich & Gielen, 2015), Uwe Gielen and I wrote a small article about our experience at the International Congress of Psychology (ICP) in South Africa (Rich & Gielen, 2012). Our collaboration was so rewarding that it resulted in a 2015 book we coedited, Pathfinders in International Psychology, and recently resulted in the publication of another book we coedited with Harold Takooshian entitled Internationalizing the Teaching of Psychology (Rich, Gielen, & Takooshian, 2017). Each of these books includes contributors whom we met through Division 52 or through international conferences, and these experiences have helped us create books with diverse teams of international coauthors from each region of the globe.

My participation in international conferences as well as experience publishing on international topics also led to several opportunities to teach abroad. For instance, I spent a deeply rewarding and meaningful academic year at the American University of Phnom Penh in Cambodia teaching some of the most dedicated students I have ever met, and later spent a semester teaching at Ashoka University in northern India, in a developing program modeled on small liberal arts colleges in the United States. At each of these institutions I was able to involve students in research, in some cases leading to peer reviewed publications and/or conference presentations.

**Jill Sirikantraporn, PsyD:**
An Early Career Psychologist’s (ECP) Perspective

As a Thai-Chinese immigrant, educated and trained in the United States as a clinical psychologist, international psychology quickly became my interest during graduate school and has grown to be my main passion in the field of psychology. My capacity in teaching, research, and writing has been significantly informed by my accumulated experience with international psychology research. I greatly appreciate the invaluable and well-rounded knowledge that international psychology provides.
and cross-cultural research can offer to the field of psychology. Building upon my research interests on resilience in Southeast Asian youth developed during my graduate training, my current research and clinical interests have expanded to consider resilience across cultures, and to the exploration of posttraumatic growth in the international context.

My connection with APA Division 52 (International Psychology) has been key in strengthening my career path in international psychology. As the division’s co-chair of the Early Career Psychologists Webinar Committee, I have met many high impact researchers who engage in international psychology research around the world. Through Division 52, I have been very fortunate to have developed and maintained connections with many mentors and colleagues and collaborated on numerous research projects. For example, in collaboration with Grant Rich, our mixed-methods posttraumatic growth study in the international context has so far collected and analyzed data from Cambodia, India, and Haiti, with more potential countries to come. This project has resulted in a 2017 book that we co-edited, Human Strengths and Resilience: Developmental, International, and Cross-Cultural Perspectives, with many chapters contributed by dedicated researchers in the field of resilience around the world.

As an early career psychologist and a junior professor at Alliant International University, I have involved a number of doctoral students (Nashaw Jafari, Julie Badaracco, Marie Valsaint, and Aimele Mercado) in my research projects. The students have assisted in research tasks, co-authored, and presented at conferences with Dr. Rich and me to disseminate the study results. I strongly believe that mentorship is an excellent way to train, spark and maintain interests in international psychology for young trainees in the field. Therefore, it is my goal to continue to expand the work of international research in some meaningful way, with more collaborators and students, just as my mentors have afforded me the opportunity throughout my training years.

**Conclusion**

Collaborations are often an essential part of psychological research; this fact perhaps rings even more true in international research. Regular attendance and participation in international conferences and events, beginning big projects with small initial collaborations, and utilizing mentors cross-generationally are several strategies we have found effective for those seeking to engage in such work. Our own experiences with collaboration with each other, with students and with colleagues have not only increased our productivity in quantity and quality, but have also been personally rewarding.

**About the authors**

Uwe P. Gielen received his Ph.D in social psychology from Harvard University. He is currently Professor Emeritus of Psychology and Executive Director of the Institute for International and Cross-Cultural Psychology at St. Francis College in Brooklyn, New York.

Grant J. Rich received his Ph.D in Psychology: Human Development from the University of Chicago. He currently Practices in Juneau, Alaska.

Jill Sirikantraporn received her PsyD from Antioch University in Seattle. She currently teaches at Alliant International University in San Diego, California.

**References**


**APA’s International Learning Partner Program (ILPP)**

The ILPP is designed to promote understanding of the field of psychology and the work of psychologists in countries outside of the United States by facilitating experiential learning opportunities abroad. These programs provide unique international experiences in psychology with an emphasis on practice, education, training, research and policy.

Participants meet with leaders of psychology organizations, faculty of psychology programs, and service providers. They also visit university, clinical and community settings. ILPP attendees may participate in local social and cultural activities in the host country, as well.

**Conclusion**

Collaborations are often an essential part of psychological research; this fact perhaps rings even more true in international research. Regular attendance and participation in international conferences and events, beginning big projects with small initial collaborations, and utilizing mentors cross-generationally are several strategies we have found effective for those seeking to engage in such work. Our own experiences with collaboration with each other, with students and with colleagues have not only increased our productivity in quantity and quality, but have also been personally rewarding.
For the past 29 years, individuals from across the globe have come together on the first day of December each year to take stock of the progress that has been made in HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, and renew the global community’s commitment to working towards a future free of the devastating virus. World AIDS Day was started on December 1, 1988 at the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis, and is one of eight global public health campaigns of the World Health Organization (WHO).

We have bent the trajectory of the epidemic. Now we have five years to break it for good or risk the epidemic rebounding out of control.”

- Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of UNAIDS

On December 1, 2011 the United Nations (UN) launched a global initiative entitled “Getting to Zero” to reflect the campaign goals of zero new infections, zero discrimination, and zero AIDS-related deaths. An interim, four-year strategy was outlined in 2011, which contained 10 milestones for the global response as part of assessing progress towards the long-term vision of “Getting to Zero.” The goal of ending HIV/AIDS remains a central focus of the UN and is included in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that were adopted in September 2015. Specifically, SDG3 includes the broad goal: “Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.” SDG3 underscores that health and well-being is a fundamental right for all, akin to other basic human rights.

The UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on June 8, 2016, to fast track and accelerate efforts of the international community towards ending the AIDS epidemic by 2030. This historic global mandate acknowledged that only by meeting various Fast-Track targets by 2020 would the goal of eradicating AIDS by 2030 be possible. The Fast-Track initiative included a target of 90-90-90, whereby 90% of infected people living with the disease would know their HIV status; 90% of those who test positive would have access to treatment; and 90% of those receiving treatment would have suppressed viral loads.

As countries around the world commemorated the 29th annual World AIDS Day on December 1, 2017, it seemed fitting to assess the progress made thus far by the global community since the designation of World AIDS Day nearly three decades ago. Where are we on our Way to Zero? What challenges still remain? And what contributions can those of us in the psychological community make towards ending AIDS by 2030? We begin our discussion by briefly describing how the UN’s SDGs fit within a human-rights framework for HIV/AIDS intervention.

### Where we are by the numbers:

- There were approximately 36.7 million people throughout the world living with HIV/AIDS at the end of 2015. Of these, 1.8 million were children (<15 years old).
- 9.5 million people with HIV/AIDS were accessing antiretroviral therapy (ART).
- In 2015, 77% of pregnant women living with HIV globally had access to ART medicines to prevent transmission of HIV to their babies.
- The vast majority of people living with HIV in low- and middle-income countries. Sub-Saharan Africa remains the most affected region, with an estimated 25.6 million people living with HIV in 2015. About 66% of new HIV infections in 2015 occurred in sub-Saharan Africa.
- Globally, 60% of people who are infected know their status, and about 40% (over 14 million people) still needed access to HIV testing services.

Data from recent UNAIDS 2016 reports

### What progress has been made?

- The goal of having 15 million people living with HIV on ART by the end of 2015 was achieved nine months ahead of schedule; as of June 2016, 18.2 million people living with HIV had access to ART treatment globally.
- AIDS-related deaths have fallen from 1.9 million in 2005 to 1 million in 2016.
- 53% of all people living with HIV have access to HIV treatment. Gains were also observed in pregnant women; 76% had access to ART in 2016 compared with 47% in 2010.
- Significant progress has been made in eastern and southern Africa, the region that accounts for more than half of all people living with HIV. In this region, new HIV infections have declined by 29% in adults, with a concomitant drop of 56% in children since 2010.
- New HIV infections among children have declined by 50% since 2010.
- AIDS-related deaths have fallen by 48% since the peak in 2005.
- Of individuals accessing ART, 82% are virally suppressed, thereby greatly reducing the risk of transmitting the virus to others.
- Seven countries have reached the 90-90-90 targets, including Botswana, Cambodia, Denmark, Iceland, Singapore, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

Data from the first annual review since the 2016 Political Declaration to Fast-Track the end of the AIDS epidemic (UNAIDS, 2016).

### Sustainable Development Goals, HIV/AIDS, and Human Rights

As noted above, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by the UN General Assembly in September 2015. SDG3 underscores the universal right of health and well-being as a fundamental human right. Several targets subsumed under SDG3 provide a framework for how progress might be measured with regards to HIV/AIDS intervention and how to increase training and retention of health workers who are on the frontlines of leading the charge towards meeting the Fast-Track targets:

3.3 By 2030, end the epidemics of AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and neglected tropical diseases and combat hepatitis, water-borne diseases, and other communicable diseases

3.7 By 2030, ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services, including for family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programmes

3.C Substantially increase health financing and the recruitment, development, training and retention of the health workforce in developing countries, especially in least developed countries and small island developing States (UN, 2015)

If we are to make strides in combating the AIDS pandemic, the realization and implementation of a human-rights approach to HIV/AIDS intervention and treatment is essential, particularly given the obvious stigma and social exclusion experienced by many who are infected and affected by the disease. The International Guidelines on HIV/AIDS and Human Rights (UNAIDS, 2006) were developed to assist member States in identifying concrete steps that could be implemented to protect human rights in the context of HIV/AIDS. The overarching rationale of these guidelines was to mitigate the psychosocial impact of HIV/AIDS for those living with the disease. It was reasoned that this in turn would encourage and facilitate individuals’ willingness to get tested, which would result in initiation of ART treatment early in the disease process, ultimately reducing transmission and prolonging life. Although individual countries do not have legal obligations to implement the guidelines made in the declaration, the General Assembly encourages member States to make efforts to comply.

The General Assembly also monitors compliance in their annual review of progress made in meeting these commitments. This human rights-based approach to HIV/AIDS emphasizes the importance of having all stakeholders represented in the design and implementation of effective policies. These ideally would include elected officials, lawyers, people living with the disease, and other professionals who promote human rights-based approaches to HIV/AIDS (Patterson & London, 2002).
Remaining Challenges

Despite the significant progress made by the global health community and civil society organizations in HIV/AIDS intervention and treatment, many individuals living with HIV/AIDS still have limited access to care and treatment, and prevention efforts are not reaching those who are most at risk for infection. Approximately 30% of those living with HIV do not know their HIV status, 17.1 million individuals with HIV do not have access to ART, and more than 50% of individuals with HIV are not virally suppressed. Specific challenges that warrant further discussion include rising incidence rates in certain regions, new public health challenges that threaten previous gains, slower than expected declines in certain populations, and the persisting economic impact of the disease.

Of particular concern are recent findings that demonstrate increasing incidence rates in several populations and geographic regions. Rising incidence rates and AIDS-related deaths have been identified in Eastern Europe and central Asia; for instance, the Russian Federation saw a 75% increase in newly reported cases of HIV between 2010 – 2016 (UNAIDS, 2017). Individuals in other resource-constrained regions of the world such as sub-Saharan Africa are also faring as well. Contributing factors include HIV-related stigma, inaccessibility to ART early in the disease process, and noncompliance to medication because of real and perceived side-effects (Katz, Dietrich, Tishabala, et al., 2015). AIDS-related stigma and discrimination are major factors that prevent individuals from seeking treatment (Sidiibé, UNAIDS, 2014).

In developed nations, the significant progress that has been made in declining HIV/AIDS incidence rates among heterosexuals and persons who inject drugs (PWID) is threatened by the current Opioid epidemic. The abuse of injection-administered heroin is a significant public health issue and is currently at crisis levels within the United States, particularly in Appalachia, the Rust Belt, and New England (Rossen, Khan, & Warner, 2014).

Recent findings of HIV incidence rates in North American and European men who have sex with men (MSM) are varied; particularly troubling are increases in HIV diagnoses in Hispanic/Latino populations of gay and bisexual men whereas, incidence rates have recently stabilized in African American MSM, and have declined in Caucasian MSM (McCray, 2017).

Another persisting challenge entails the global population of HIV/AIDS-impacted children and youth who are at increased risk for psychosocial and mental health problems as a result of parental illness and death from the disease, or social isolation due to HIV/AIDS stigmatization by association. These children and youth, who are not HIV positive, have traditionally received less attention compared to HIV-infected children, although research is beginning to focus on this group of children, and rightly so. For those children who are infected with HIV/AIDS, recent data from UNAIDS (2017) indicate that youth between the ages of 15-24 years are consistently lagging behind other populations on several fronts, including knowledge of HIV and preventative efforts, testing for HIV, and treatment. Young women and girls are a particularly vulnerable population within this demographic; new HIV infections among young women in sub-Saharan Africa are 44% higher than among young men of the same age. Moreover, of the approximately 610,000 new HIV infections in youths aged 15–24 years, more than half (59%) occurred among young women in the same age bracket.

The disease also continues to impact the economic development of many communities and countries. Of particular concern is the fact that many of the countries that currently bear the brunt of HIV/AIDS also tend to suffer from high rates of other infectious diseases like tuberculosis and high levels of poverty. This is compounded by inadequate medical resources and limited workforce. Many have warned of the myriad of ways in which HIV/AIDS can adversely impact the economy (e.g., UN, 2004), including slowing and decreasing labor supply in the workforce, diverting public spending primarily to health-related expenditures that lead to slowed growth in nations’ overall GDP, and deepening the poverty of the most affected populations, amongst others.

Contributions from Psychology

“Psychology plays a critical role in HIV prevention and treatment by promoting behaviors aimed at helping to improve overall health and well-being, and providing a better understanding of critical social and cultural factors, all of which facilitate better outcomes across the HIV care continuum resulting in more people achieving viral suppression. Enhancing health equity and promoting access for all segments of society to quality health care and meaningful engagement in decision-making are values APA shares with the UNAIDS framework. Strong communities working in partnership with the public sector to scale-up evidence-based strategies tailored to those most in need are central to improving population health over time.”

- Arthur C. Evans, Jr., Ph.D., Chief Executive Officer, American Psychological Association (personal communication, November 3, 2017)

The field of psychology has been at the forefront of applying psychological science to end the AIDS epidemic for over three decades and can provide significant contributions towards helping the UN accomplish the campaign goals of zero new HIV infections, zero discrimination, and zero AIDS-related deaths by 2030. SDG 3.7 and 3.C can also be strengthened on the crucial role of psychology in improving understanding of the disease. Addressing stigma, discrimination, and implementing culturally-informed psychoeducational programs that encourage medication compliance and safe sexual practices, are tailor-made areas where psychology can continue to make a significant and meaningful difference. For instance, in the Latino/a population and other groups from more traditionally-based societies, sexual and reproductive education programs must take into account the cultural values and/or mores of those particular groups (e.g., such as concepts of machismo and/or marianismo).

Due to the diverse subfields within psychology, psychologists have a wealth of experience and expertise at their disposal that they can offer to individuals and communities affected by HIV/AIDS. These range from rigorous psychological science to pragmatic implementation of interventions guided by evidence-based clinical work. For instance:

- Disseminating accurate information through well-developed psychoeducational programs that target stigma-related barriers and dispel misinformation.
- Facilitating translational research by designing and implementing evidence-based prevention and intervention programs focused on a variety of AIDS-related topics, such as sexual and reproductive health services.
- Use of behavior modification techniques as part of a comprehensive prevention package aimed at changing risky sexual behaviors. These techniques could also be used to facilitate ART medication compliance and advocate for the inclusion of mental health treatment as an integral part of the ART package.
- Advocating for legislative change by highlighting findings from psychological research that document the adverse mental health and physical health effects of discrimination.
- Psychologists in clinical practice can provide psychotherapy and counseling to newly diagnosed individuals and facilitate supportive therapeutic interventions for affected family members.
- Meaningfully engage and partner with global leaders and communities in HIV prevention, particularly within at-risk and vulnerable communities around the world (see “Remaining Challenges” section above).
Conclusion

Progress continues to be made in the UN campaign of “Getting to Zero” but, as noted by leaders in the UN and psychological community, it is crucial that these efforts are accelerated for lasting change to occur and for the scourge of HIV/AIDS to finally be defeated. Studies have shown that in certain countries, such as the United States and Canada, improved HIV treatment (i.e., early diagnosis, access and adherence to ART therapies), screening, prevention, and treatment of HIV/AIDS-associated health problems (e.g., hepatitis C) can significantly extend life expectancy (Samji, Cescon, Hogg, et al., 2013). The improvement in HIV screening and treatment within the United States, Canada, as well as those countries that have reached the 90-90-90 targets ahead of schedule, needs to be extended worldwide, particularly in those geographic regions and populations that are still disproportionately affected and impacted by the disease.

Of note, findings from psychological research underscore the importance of including psychosocial and mental health care within a comprehensive HIV/AIDS program. If we want to “create a future where HIV and AIDS are consigned to the sorrows of the past” (Thomson, 2017), we must continue to forge ahead by building upon the tremendous advances that have been made, whilst realizing that until a cure or a vaccine is found and the goals of “Getting to Zero” are achieved worldwide, there is still much work to do.

Let us therefore seize the opportunity… to commit to accelerating our efforts to implement the Political Declaration on HIV and AIDS, to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and to creating a future where HIV and AIDS are consigned to the sorrows of the past.”

- H. E. Mr. Peter Thomson, President of the seventy-first session of the UN General Assembly

About the authors

Comfort B. Asanbe, PhD, (APA representative to UN-DPI) is an associate professor in the department of psychology at The College of Staten Island, City University of New York.

Kirsty E. Bortnik, PhD, (APA representative to UN-DPI) is a clinical neuropsychologist licensed in New York and New Jersey and on staff at the Northeast Regional Epilepsy Group.

References


