

How did one handshake change the world's perception of HIV and AIDS?

- An analysis using Foucault's tools on Knowledge, Truth and Power

People of the 1980's found themselves and the world surrounding them rocked with fear due to the spread of HIV and AIDS. The time was filled with misinformation and stigma that affected the lives of so many who had the conditions, as society was made to believe that the spread was caused through a simple touch. The spread of media and political misinformation created connections from the disease to minorities, specifically the gay community, causing them to become isolated and outcasted from society due to fear of catching the disease. But one handshake from Princess Diana challenged these fears, and misinformation, showing the world the lies that institutional powers had sold them, and the unjust mistreatment of so many patients.

Through the use of Michel Foucault's tools this essay will examine how this handshake managed to change and diminish the public perceptions of AIDS and HIV. With particular attention on knowledge, truth and power, this essay will view how societies create truths through systems of knowledge that are shaped by institutions, which have a powerful hold upon society, influencing people's perceptions, reinforcing structures of power and overall controlling individuals behaviour. In the case of HIV and AIDS, society's knowledge of the diseases was shaped and influenced by the fear-based misinformation, which aimed to stigmatize the gay community and those who were infected.

HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) and AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) are diseases that affect an individual's immune system, in particular the CD4 T white blood cells. *'HIV targets the types of cells that would usually fight off a virus such as HIV. As it replicates, it damages or destroys the infected CD4 cell and produces more virus to infect more CD4 cells.'*¹ HIV is most commonly spread through unprotected anal, oral or vaginal sex with someone who has HIV. Whereas, AIDS is the most advanced stage of HIV and the collective name of the serious illnesses spread by HIV, but in the modern UK *'most people being treated for HIV do not develop AIDS.'*² However, this was a different story when the disease first appeared.

In the 1980's people all over the world found themselves living in fear, fear for themselves, their loved ones and sickness. Despite it being believed that HIV was around for a few years prior, it first became visible in the public eye in the United States and the UK in 1981, when young gay men were suspected or diagnosed of having a rare form of cancer. This cancer was often described as being the 'gay cancer' or known as GRID

¹ [Ann Pietrangelo, and Kristeen Cherney. 2023. 'The Effects of HIV on Your Body'. Healthline \(Healthline Media\)](#)

² [NHS. 2021. 'Overview - HIV and AIDS'. NHS \(NHS\)](#)

(Gay-Related Immune Deficiency) as the first diagnosed cases all shared the commonality that the patients were all men who had sex with men. The term *'spread rapidly through news coverage and medical conversations. It shaped how the public understood the emerging epidemic: as a "gay disease" that posed no threat to anyone else.'*³ Hence, when the topic of these diseases first became public knowledge there was little to no information about the virus, all that was known was that young gay men were getting sick. Governments prioritized their prejudiced homophobic systems over public health, causing there to be no public health campaign created to help patients, offer support, prevent the spread of the virus and infections or find a cure. *"The U.S. government, particularly under Reagan, was criticized for its slow response to the AIDS epidemic. It took years before Reagan publicly addressed AIDS, which left the LGBTQ community feeling abandoned by their government."*⁴ Governments all across the worlds, were slow to respond and provide the truth about the disease, this resulted in at least 46 deaths in the UK by 1985, at which point was about three or four years after the first cases in the UK had emerged, the Department of Health finally published advice for medical professionals, an action that should have occurred years prior, that would have helped raise awareness and even saved lives.

Before more knowledge came about, it was assumed that anyone who had HIV would develop AIDS later on, which would ultimately result in their death. Hence those with HIV/AIDS found themselves living in isolation, society feared them as it was believed that touching someone with the condition ungloved would pass it on. Patients were facing death, completely isolated from society and being mistreated all because of a stigma created to marginalize, and define what is 'socially acceptable'. But this stigmatisation was challenged by one woman, Princess Diana, the Princess of Wales. Famously known as the 'peoples princess', Diana was known for her compassion and desire to spread kindness to people, using her power to spread love rather than fear, and this is what challenged the fear-based narratives.

In 1987, Princess Diana's opened the Broderip ward at London Middlesex Hospital, this was the UK's first hospital to open up a ward that was specifically dedicated to HIV and AIDS. During this opening Diana was seen, and photographed by the media, to be shaking hands with a HIV/AIDS patient without wearing gloves. During the visit she shook the hands of more patients, however they did not wish to be photographed, due to the stigma and marginalization that they faced. This photograph quickly circulated the media, and helped diminish the stigmas surrounding the disease, as it became clear that what the public had been told before was nothing more than misinformation, lies to serve an agenda rather than truth. Sir Elton John stated that *'Diana acted at a time when a HIV diagnosis was a death sentence. Around the globe grave yards were filling up, families were being ripped*

³ ['What Is GRIDS? The Early Name for AIDS Explained'. 2026. ScienceInsights](#)

⁴ ['Coming out in the 80s: A Look Back at LGBTQ Life'. 2024. Gay in the CLE](#)

*apart and public sympathy did not match private payment'*⁵ Diana acted at a time of need, stepping in when people needed compassion the most, and in doing so, she changed the world's perception of HIV/AIDS.

Michel Foucault was a renowned French philosopher, historian and social theorist in the twentieth century. He was one of the most influential thinkers in the modern humanities, changing how academics and society study and perceive institutions, language, knowledge and power. He was born in 1926 and explored how institutions, such as governments, prisons, schools and hospitals shape how we behave, and create definitions of what is 'normal' or rather socially 'acceptable'. Foucault's major works that are relevant to this essay include *'The History of sexuality'* and *'Discipline and punish'*. Both of these books examine how people are controlled via social norms, surveillance and classification in modern society.

One of Foucault's most famous tools and overarching themes throughout the majority of his works is power, truth and knowledge. Foucault argues that power operates throughout society via systems of knowledge, everyday practices and relationships, *'Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.'*⁶ He presents the notion that what is accepted by societies as 'truth' is shaped by those who have the authority to define and create social norms and distribute knowledge. This knowledge then helps to reinforce the structures of power, which heavily influences how the public, or society think and behave, even acting as a means of control in some situations. This relationship between power, truth and knowledge, creates an interconnectivity, *'Knowledge can exist only where the power relations are suspended and that knowledge can develop only outside its injunctions, its demands and its interests'*⁷, without one the other does not exist or will not work.

Foucault's death can serve as an example of how an institution twists the real truth and shares a 'social truth'. Foucault died in 1984 from complications related to AIDS, he was one of the first prominent intellectuals to die of these causes in France, and as institutions were spreading misinformation and withholding the real knowledge about the disease from the public at that period of time, the cause of his death was not properly discussed and was noted by the media of being caused by a neurological illness. This makes even his death relevant to the subject of his essay, as it can serve as a real life case study of how an institution regulated a 'truth' that wasn't actually factual, to spread misinformation just to avoid the topic of HIV and AIDS.

⁵ [Elton John, and 5 News. 2018. 'How Diana Helped Change the World's Attitude to HIV'](#)

⁶ Michel Foucault. 1976. *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 1 (Random House: Penguin), p. 93

⁷ Michel Foucault. 2020. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin), p. 27

To apply this tool to the handshake, the authorities or institutions that spread the 'truths' were the media, the government and hospitals. The particular 'social truth' in question would be the notion that HIV/AIDS patients were dangerous and untouchable. This 'truth' was regulated by the institutions as a way to control individuals, used to strike fear into the public and marginalize a specific group (the gay community) as they did not fit in with the social 'norms' of the time. Foucault stated in his book *The History of Sexuality*, Volume I that "*Sexuality is not the most intractable element in power relations, but rather one of those endowed with the greatest instrumentality.*" ⁸ This means that sexuality is not something that power fails to control, instead it is used as an instrument of control, a way of authorities defining what sexualities are 'normal' and 'healthy'. In the case of HIV/AIDS by institutions regulating the 'truth' that people with HIV/AIDS were dangerous and untouchable and caught the disease via gay sex the public were led to believe that homosexual relationships must be unhealthy and dangerous due to the risk of catching the disease.

However, this 'truth', that was designed to spread fear and misinformation rather than actual truth and information, was disrupted by Princess Diana. By being a member of the Royal family, an institution in itself that also spread 'truths' via 'social norms'. Diana was in one of the most prominent institutions in the world at the time, her influence both politically and socially was massive, that is why when the public witnessed her action. They listened, seeing first hand that the 'truth' they had all been believing was socially constructed rather than based upon scientific evidence.

The second tool that will be applied to this cultural phenomenon is Foucault's concept of Biopower. This tool is the modern form of power that has a heavy focus on managing and regulating the lives of individuals. Unlike some societies, and the traditional ideas of holding power and control through the uses of force and punishment. Biopower runs through institutions, such as education, governments and healthcare seeking to control, monitor and optimize societies, Foucault states "*The ancient right to take life or let live was replaced by a power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death*"⁹. This control could be exercised through the influence of sexuality, behaviour and public health, therefore shaping how the public understands and perceives themselves and others. Put simply, Biopower enables institutions to create and regulate social 'norms', telling individuals what is 'acceptable' and 'normal'.

This tool applies to both the patients and the general public. Biopower in regards to the general public, links back to the previous point that HIV/AIDS was used as an instrument to prove to the public that homosexuality was wrong and unhealthy. But for the patients, Biopower meant that they were completely controlled, due to the spreading of the

⁸ Michel Foucault. 1976. *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 1 (Random House: Penguin), p. 103

⁹ Michel Foucault. 1976. *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 1 (Random House: Penguin), p. 138

false 'truths', the patients became isolated, excluded from public life, due to people fearing that they could catch the disease through simple touch. Whilst the public had to be under the control of institutions, patients were under the control of the public as well, the spread of the 'truth', spread the stigma. The bigger that stigma grew, the more negatively affected the lives of the patients became. Diana's handshake resisted the rhetoric of control, restoring humanity and providing visibility to the lives of the patients, showing the world that these patients were also human and not just simply contaminated bodies that were socially disposable.

Foucault viewed the body as a political site, one where power is exercised. This is done via institutions such as schools and hospitals, as they regulate bodies, using surveillance discipline and social norms. Akin to the previous tool, modern societies influence how the public behaves and understands themselves and those around them through the use of biopower, but also bodies of institutions. The body is a target of power, as institutions and authorities seek for their citizens to be healthy, obedient and productive, *'The body is directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it'*¹⁰ Society assigns meanings to define bodies, in the case of HIV/AIDS, the bodies of the patients were marked by stigma and fear, society had defined them as something to stay away from, to not touch. Diana's ungloved touch, showed the world how the bodies of the patients were being used to spread false 'truths' but at the cost of the lives of so many. Her action, while not necessarily political, quickly became political as it changed how society categorised illness, purity and danger. Shane Snape who worked on the ward and also carried HIV said *"The Princess shook my hand without wearing gloves and that meant more to me than anything...For want of better words it gives AIDS a royal approval and helps to break down this stigma to what's attached to it."*¹¹ By having one institution of power take such a visible stand against the narratives, the perception of the world started to change, the bodies that were once untouchable became human, and the object of fear became an object of care.

The final tool which will be applied to this cultural phenomenon is how societies discipline individuals. For Foucault modern societies discipline people via social norms instead of direct force, this way people learn what is acceptable through observation and their fear of exclusion from society. This type of discipline *'combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a normalizing judgment.'*¹² For this cultural phenomenon, the 'social norm' that was used as a form of discipline was avoiding contact with the HIV/AIDS patients, for if individuals were to catch the disease they would find themselves excluded from society, just how the patients who tested positive of the disease were. Diana broke this norm publicly and due to being a highly visible public figure, the disciplinary pressure

¹⁰ Michel Foucault. 2020. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin), p. 25

¹¹ [Princess Diana Shakes Hand of AIDS Victim'. 1987. UPI](#)

¹² Michel Foucault. 2020. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin), p. 184

of pushing this social 'norm' was weakened, and new social 'norms' were created that prioritised a duty of care over fear. For Foucault this would have been incredibly important, as it serves as an example of how a public figure can reshape social 'norms' through social action, leading to create a more humane society.

To conclude, the handshake between Princess Diana and a HIV/AIDS patient not only stands as a gesture of compassion but a testament of challenge. A demonstration that proved the fear and stigma that was spread by institutional power was nothing but misinformation, a fear tactic to gain control of society. One single handshake taught the world that everything they believed about HIV/AIDS was wrong and that those affected shouldn't be treated with isolation and ignorance but with dignity and compassion instead. Diana's actions helped society question the 'truths' that had been accepted, by just simply showing humanity.

Using the tools of Foucault, this essay has displayed how knowledge, truth, and power played heavily into the influence of societies perceptions and stigmas of HIV/AIDS. The institutions; government, media and medical all played a part in spreading the fear-based narratives that attacked and isolated those who were infected. But this narrative of fear was disrupted when Princess Diana gave a handshake to an HIV/AIDS patient, an event so heavily published it revealed that these 'truths' were nothing but falsehood, showing that 'truths' are not always fixed and can in fact be influenced and changed through social action and challenging stigmas.

Furthermore, this handshake, despite how simple the gesture was, challenged the world's perception of HIV/AIDS, bringing humanity to a once fear based narrative. The handshake encouraged compassion over stigmatisation, reducing the misinformational 'truths' that were once accepted and replaced them with new 'truths' that didn't marginalise patients. Through a Foucauldian examination of this cultural phenomenon, the gesture demonstrates a powerful example of how symbolic acts can challenge dominant institutional power structures and recreate 'truths' that focus on humanity, compassion and understanding.

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