

An Epidemic of Uncertainty

A seminar by Jenny Trinitapoli

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Room Benvenuti and live Zoom
Department of Statistical Sciences

In her forthcoming book, *An Epidemic of Uncertainty*, Trinitapoli advances a new model for studying social life by emphasizing something that social scientists routinely omit from our theories, models, and measures – what people know they don't know. The book takes Malawi's ongoing AIDS epidemic as its entry-point for understanding the stakes of uncertainty. After a four-decades-long battle, the standard global-health metrics have started to point to good news: new infections are down, prevalence has stabilized, life-saving antiretroviral drugs are widely available, mother-to-child transmission is lower than ever, and AIDS-related mortality has declined. But in the wake of pandemic AIDS, an epidemic of uncertainty persists. In Malawi, adult prevalence of HIV has been steady at roughly 14% since 2000; yet at any given point in time, half the young-adult population doesn't know their HIV status. I argue that AIDS-related uncertainty is measurable, pervasive, and impervious to biomedical solutions. The consequences of uncertainty are pertinent to multiple domains of life including relationship stability, fertility, health, and well-being. Even as HIV is transformed from a progressive, fatal infection to a chronic and manageable condition, the accompanying epidemic of uncertainty remains central to understanding social life in this part of the world.