

HIV-related stigma in gay and other men who have sex with men in Australia: foremost a matter of a serostatus-based sexual divide

John de Wit,^{1,2} Dean Murphy,^{1,3} Simon Donohoe,³ and Philippe Adam^{1,4}

¹ National Centre in HIV Social Research, The University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

² Department of Social and Organizational Psychology, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands

³ Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations, Sydney, Australia

⁴ Institute for Prevention and Social Research, Utrecht, The Netherlands

Background

HIV-related stigma continues to be a major stressor for people living with HIV (PLHIV). Experiences of HIV-related stigma occur in diverse contexts and are well documented. However, research is patchy, principally because of the diversity of approaches and instruments used to measure HIV-related stigma. Of particular concern is that measures to assess stigma experienced by PLHIV typically differ substantially from measures of stigma expressed by non-PLHIV. The aim of this study is to provide a conceptually sound assessment of HIV-related stigma in gay men and produce directly comparable assessments of experienced and expressed stigma that would serve to validate self-reports. Furthermore, this study explores whether experienced and expressed HIV-related stigma are related to engagement with gay and PLHIV communities, serostatus identity, perceived risk of sex with a HIV-positive partner and reliance on serostatus disclosure to reduce HIV transmission risk.

Methods

Procedure and participants

Between 1 December 2009 and 31 January 2010 we recruited over 1,350 respondents into an online survey of HIV-related stigma. A total of 1,260 gay and other men who have sex with men (MSM) responded to the survey and were eligible for inclusion in the analysis. Almost three-quarters (72.6%) of the men believed they were HIV-negative; 17.0% were HIV-positive, and 10.4% were of unknown serostatus (either they had never been tested or were unsure of their current status). The mean age of respondents was 37.9 years. Three-quarters (77.6%) had some form of tertiary education, and two-thirds (67.5%) lived in a major city. The majority of these men (91.4%) described themselves as gay; the remainder described themselves as bisexual.

HIV-related stigma

There were 22 questions to assess HIV-related stigma ($\alpha = .90$); responses were given on a 5-point scale (1=not at all; 5=always). The items encompassed four sub-scales of stigma-related thoughts, feelings and actions:

- Attributions of responsibility (6 items; e.g., blame; $\alpha = .82$)
- Negative emotional reactions (5 items; e.g., disgust; $\alpha = .79$)
- Social distancing (9 items; e.g., avoidance; $\alpha = .85$)
- Sexual exclusion (2 items; e.g., will not have sex; $\alpha = .90$)

Community engagement

The survey included three questions to assess men's engagement with the gay community, and three similar questions to assess engagement with the PLHIV community:

- How many of your friends are gay/HIV-positive?
- How much of your free time do you spend with gay men/HIV-positive people?
- How much do you feel part of a gay community/HIV-positive community?

Responses were given on a 5-point scale (1=none/not at all; 5=all/very much). The items formed two reliable scales of engagement with the gay community (3 items; $\alpha = .76$) and engagement with the PLHIV community (3 items; $\alpha = .77$).

Conclusions

HIV-related stigma is limited in this sample of MSM and results demonstrated a good correspondence between experienced and expressed stigma. HIV-related stigma in MSM is most tangible in the domain of sex and relationship. For HIV-positive men, experienced stigma was higher among those who were more engaged with the PLHIV community and those who had a stronger serostatus identity. Among HIV-negative and unknown-status men, expressed stigma was associated with less PLHIV engagement, stronger serostatus identity and higher perceived risk of HIV transmission from sex with a positive partner.

The strong association between experiences of stigma and greater PLHIV-community engagement and stronger serostatus identity among HIV-positive men may be explained as either an effect of stigma (seeking support as a result of stigma) or a cause of stigma (being more vigilant in identifying stigma). Among non-HIV-positive men, stigma is possibly related to avoidance of PLHIV as a simple self-protection heuristic. Data strongly suggest that the adoption and promotion of risk reduction strategies that rely on serosorting may exacerbate the serostatus-based sexual divide in the gay community.

Serostatus identity

The survey included four items related to the importance of men's serostatus to their current, future, ideal and ought self:

- My HIV status is a key aspect of the person I currently am.
- My HIV status is a key aspect of the person I will be in the future.
- My HIV status is a key aspect of the person I want to be.
- My HIV status is a key aspect of the person I should be.

Responses were given on a 5-point scale (1=totally disagree; 5=totally agree). The four items formed a reliable scale of serostatus identity ($\alpha = .95$).

Perceived risk

Perceptions of risk of HIV infection when having sex with an HIV-positive partner of unknown viral load were assessed for 21 specific sexual practices ($\alpha = .92$). These practices ranged from deep kissing, to unprotected receptive anal intercourse with ejaculation and responses were given on a 5-point scale (1=no risk; 5=very risky).

Reliance on disclosure

We included seven questions related to men's expectations and practices related to serostatus disclosure with sexual partners (e.g. 'I'd expect an HIV-positive man to tell me he was HIV-positive before we had sex', and 'I always know my sex partners' HIV status before we have sex'). Responses were given on a 5-point scale (1=completely disagree; 5=completely agree) and the items formed a reliable scale ($\alpha = .89$).

Results

Experienced and expressed stigma

Overall, HIV-positive men experienced low levels of stigmatising attributions ($M = 1.9$) and social distancing (1.8). In contrast, these men experienced moderate levels of negative emotional reactions ($M = 2.3$), and, in particular, exclusion as sexual or romantic partners ($M = 2.8$). Stigma expressed by HIV-negative and status-unknown men was highly comparable with the experiences of HIV-positive men ($M = 1.5$, $M = 1.6$, $M = 1.7$, $M = 2.9$, respectively).

Covariates of experienced stigma

In univariate analyses, experienced stigma of HIV-positive men was higher when men engaged more with the PLHIV community ($r = .13$, $p < .05$) and when their serostatus identity was more important to them ($r = .23$, $p < .001$). Experienced stigma was unrelated to engagement with the gay community, perceived transmission risk and reliance on serostatus disclosure. In multivariate analyses, after controlling for recruitment source, biographic characteristics, and having HIV-negative or status-unknown regular or casual partners, the associations between increased experiences of stigma and stronger engagement with PLHIV-community engagement and serostatus identity were confirmed.

Covariates of expressed stigma

Among HIV-negative and unknown-status men, univariate analyses showed that expressed stigma was lower when men engaged more with gay ($r = -.23$, $p < .001$) and PLHIV communities ($r = -.35$, $p < .001$). Expressed stigma was higher when men perceived more HIV transmission risk ($r = .37$, $p < .001$), when serostatus identity was more important ($r = .33$, $p < .001$), and when men were more reliant on serostatus disclosure ($r = .20$, $p < .001$). In the multivariate model, which controlled for recruitment and biographic characteristics and for having HIV-positive regular or casual partners, independent associations were found for three variables: PLHIV-community engagement, HIV status identity and perceived HIV transmission risk.

Table: Stigma experienced (HIV-positive men) and expressed (HIV-negative and unknown-status men) by participants in the HIV Stigma Barometer Survey, Australia

