

ABSTRACT

The AIDS pandemic has posed a major challenge to traditional motherhood. The dual challenges of being both a patient and a caregiver mean that there are many women who are facing unique physical and psychological difficulties. This study aims to explore the lived experiences of HIV-positive mothers and to gain an insight into the impact that the diagnosis of HIV had on the lives of the research participants. The study was exploratory and, thus, a qualitative research design was adopted. Semi-structured, individual interviews were conducted with eight HIV-positive mothers living in a government funded HIV care centre in Johannesburg, South Africa. A thematic content analysis method was utilised to derive themes relating to the subjective experience of mothering subsequent to the HIV-positive diagnosis. The results indicated that motherhood, for many HIV-positive mothers, was a fairly ambivalent experience characterised by a pervasive sense of loss and closely allied to various emotional and psychological challenges. Shared mothering, a lack of independence and strong institutional influences all contributed to the way in which the participants experienced motherhood and how they perceived themselves. The fears of future illness and death were prominent concerns which further fuelled the ambivalent nature of HIV-positive motherhood. Stigmatisation and rejection on the part of friends and family resulted in the participants' experiencing a deep and pervasive sense of loss. This, in turn, was experienced as a strong assault on both their egos and their sense of self. Various psychological and emotional challenges, as a result of a general lack of social support and a combination of contextual stressors, were, therefore, particularly common experiences before arriving at the care centre. However, the mothers all reported that they had received invaluable emotional, social and instrumental support from the care centre. HIV care

centres offer a place of refuge and protection from ostracism within the community context.

Although the mothers manifested a yearning for their pre-diagnosis sense of independence and general functioning, nevertheless, despite the tensions inherent in being a HIV-positive mother, it was found that care centres play an insulatory role and help to act a buffer against the various challenges associated with living with HIV.