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Factors affecting the social responses of a group of white South Africans to HIV/AIDS

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Worldwide, social responses to the HIV/AIDS epidemic have been largely negative, with widespread revulsion to the illness manifesting in hatred, discrimination, rejection, exclusion, marginalisation and fear of those infected, such that witch-hunts, harsh criminal legislation, seclusion camps and other extreme reactions to the illness have been seen (Cameron, 2005).

South Africa, despite having enacted a number of laws and policies to protect the rights of people living with HIV/Aids, has not been immune from the negative social response to the disease, with many HIV-positive South Africans having recounted stories of how being HIV-positive has led to alienation from family and friends, difficulties in accessing education and healthcare services, job loss, emotion and verbal abuse, and even physical violence (Campbell, 2003; Preston-Whyte, 2004; Stadler, 2004; Stein, 2004).

Negative social responses to HIV/AIDS can be seen as having a detrimental effect on the ability of affected communities to deal with the challenges posed by the disease. For example, fear of the shame and disgrace attached to HIV/AIDS is often at the root of the failure of people to undergo testing, to reveal their HIV-positive status, to seek out treatment and routinely take medication. Cases have been cited of HIV-positive women who continue to breastfeed, despite the knowledge that this may endanger their child, in order to avoid being identified as having HIV, and of HIV-positive people who continue to engage in unprotected sex, for the same reason (Campbell, 2003; Preston-Whyte, 2004).

Thus, it is important to tackle the challenge represented by negative social responses to people infected with HIV/AIDS. In order to do so, it is necessary to understand the nature, causes and consequences of responses to the disease. Towards this, this research study has attempted to examine the factors shaping negative social responses to HIV/AIDS among a selected group of white South Africans.

Factors that emerged as influential include notions of blame, deviance and morality, as well as pre-existing prejudices, particularly along racial lines.