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An exploratory study of HIV positive employees' perceptions on the prevalence of HIV-related stigma in workplaces of Johannesburg, South Africa

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Abstract

Stigmatization caused by being HIV positive acts as a barrier to the prevention of the HIV epidemic. The purpose of this study was to explore and understand HIV positive peoples' perceptions of their experiences of the prevalence of stigmatization, caused by being HIV positive, in the workplaces of Johannesburg, South Africa. The three objectives of the study were: to explore how HIV positive employees perceive the prevalence of HIV-related stigma in the workplaces of Johannesburg, South Africa, and what their meaning-making is around the topic; to discover if HIV-related stigma is still prevalent in the workplace in 2020; to explore how various aspects of an HIV positive person's identity contributes to overlapping stigmatization; to discover what interventions are in place and what affected employees feel are needed; and to discover if HIV is associated with COVID-19 in the workplace. This study utilised a qualitative research design. Additionally, an interpretive approach and an intersectional lens was utilized. The study utilized online, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews to gather data. The researcher utilized a pilot study to refine the semi-structured interview questions, and thematic analysis was used to analyse the data collected. 3 overarching main themes emerged from the data: *Enacted stigma*, *Felt stigma* and *Symbolic Stigma*. 7 sub-themes emerged from Enacted Stigma: social exclusion; work exclusion; being judged; being gossiped about; refusing to eat food prepared by HIV positive employees; refusal to participate in contact-based activities with HIV positive employees; friendship losses; and loss of opportunities. In addition, 6 sub-subordinate themes emerged from enacted stigma, namely: *Insufficient HIV-related Interventions at Work*; *COVID-19 and HIV*; *Forced Disclosure*; *Gender (Women and HIV*); and *MSM and HIV*. 3 subordinate themes emerged from Symbolic Stigma, namely: *Religion; Morality; and Sexuality*. Additionally, 3 subordinate themes emerged from felt stigma, namely: *Fear; Secrecy; and Dishonesty*. This study illustrates the need for the development and implementation of evidence-based HIV-related programmes at workplaces that support and assist HIV positive employees, as well as awareness campaigns targeting all employees.

Keywords: COVID-19 and HIV, Enacted Stigma, Felt Stigma HIV, HIV-related Stigma, HIV-related Stigma in the Workplace, Intersectionality, Interpretive, Pilot Study, Symbolic Stigma, Thematic Analysis, Qualitative.