

STEREOTYPE CONTENTS AND SUBTYPES ABOUT PEOPLE WITH HIV

by

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ABSTRACT

People with HIV, in addition to having to deal with the physical consequences of the disease (van Dyk, 2001a), are also subjected to stigmatisation, discrimination and stereotyping. The stereotype about people with HIV can be conceptualised within social cognitive approaches and intergroup approaches in social psychology.

While the focus of social cognitive approaches, such as schema theory is on the processes to do with stereotyping, intergroup approaches including social identity theory consider aspects of stereotype content, taking a collective perspective. Existing social psychological literature regarding reactions to people with HIV has mainly focussed on stigmatisation (Aggleton & Parker, 2002; Parker & Aggleton, 2003) and the consequences of discrimination of people with HIV (Gilmore & Somerville, 1994).

The present study aimed to explore the stereotype content and subtypes about people with HIV. It employed a combined free response technique with a stereotype checklist, modified to suit the South African context. Frequency analysis was used to establish which attributes were considered stereotypic of people with HIV. Subtypes were determined by subjecting the list of stereotypes to exploratory factor analysis and mean subtype strengths were compared.

A second aim of the study was to determine possible ethnic differences in stereotype subtypes, by comparing the subtype strengths of the ethnic groups Black and White.

Results indicated the presence of a measurable stereotype, consisting of 34 negative stereotypic attributes. Exploratory factor analysis of the list of attributes yielded three meaningful subtypes about people with HIV: the Needy Worrier subtype, the Contagious

Sufferer subtype, which did not differ significantly in strength from one another and which were both significantly stronger than the Neurotic Risk-taker subtype

Subtype strength, as well as separate comparison of the distribution of ratings within the attributes also differed significantly between black and white participants. Generally, white participants' ratings were significantly stronger on the Contagious Sufferer subtype and the Neurotic Risk-taker subtype.

The results of the study generally supported the expectations and hypotheses. The results were then discussed and explained from both social cognitive and intergroup perspectives. An interpretation of the findings discussed the negative stereotype about people with HIV as a self-fulfilling prophecy, indicating a possible mechanism of maintaining and aggravating the largely negative perception of people with HIV (Gilmore & Somerville, 1994). Implications of the results were discussed with regards to possible reasons for the negative stereotype as well as social consequences for people with HIV and society as a whole.

Suggestions for future research building on or extending the information gained from the present study were introduced.

In conclusion the present study found a distinguishable negative stereotype about people with HIV, subdivided into three stereotypes. Together with the discussed ethnic differences in stereotype subtype strength and content, the present exploratory study provided a relevant contribution to stereotype content research in general, and about people with HIV in particular.