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Constructing identities to evade stigma in relationships with one partner living with HIV: Experiences of black African heterosexual couples

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Background: Through effective use of Anti-HIV medications, minimal risks of HIV transmission possibilities are evident and significant number of relationships containing one partner living with HIV (Serodiscordant Relationships (SdRs)) now exist. However, HIV is still overlaid with non-recovery prospects and associated with unacceptable behaviours such as having multiple sexual partners, engagement in gay sex and drug use. Hence, HIV remains a stigmatising and discrediting condition and couples in SdRs are motivated to construct identities to conceal HIV within their relationships. Nevertheless, how couples construct identities in order to avoid anticipated stigma within SdRs are not evident in current HIV literature. Therefore, this proposed oral presentation focuses on how couples do not unintentionally reveal their true relationships to people who might stigmatise them.

Methods: Following multi-centre ethical approval, 25 in-depth interviews were conducted in Genitourinary Medicines (GUM) clinics in London with 19 heterosexual participants in SdRs from Black African backgrounds. Data was analysed through phenomenological reflection and writing. Age of participants ranged 30-58 years (12 females - 30-45, 7 males - 31-58). MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software was used for data storage and retrieval.

Results: Significant themes emerged from this study including construction of identities through close regulation of activities within SdRs so that potential stigma is evaded. The

proposed presentation shows that multiple SdRs identities are conceivable including protected identity, true identity and false identity through disclosure tactics.

Discussions: Identities in SdRs is contextualised in terms of liquid modernity, which is an amorphous phenomenon. In this sense, identity of SdRs are transformed from a given to a task wherein couples take on the responsibility of making their own identities.

Implications for nursing practice: Understanding how couples in SdRs manage their identities has implications for providing support for Black African heterosexual couples, particularly with potential benefits of engagement with both people living with HIV and their partners.

Speaker Biography

Mohamed Kemoh Rogers completed his PhD from City University of London in 2016. He is Senior Lecturer in Nursing Sciences, School of Health Sciences in the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK. He leads modules at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. He was previously Senior Lecturer in Public Health with Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge and Chelmsford, UK. His research interests include lived experiences of living with chronic infectious conditions using Interpretive Phenomenology and Strausian Grounded Theory with Symbolic Interactionism as theoretical framework. He has made several presentations at national and international conferences. His publications are mainly on aspects of Serodiscordant Relationships (SdRs).

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