TITLE: Counteracting complex intersectional self-stigmatisation through empathetic group work

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Introduction/objective(s)

People living with HIV (PLHIV) can lead deeply complex lives often shaped by profound inequality. Intersecting stigmatised identities, socioeconomic factors such as unemployment, and comorbidities contribute to heightened vulnerability compounded by living with a hidden disability. Mental ill health is common and has been linked with internalised stigma. Whilst effective psychosocial support can help PLHIV mitigate the effects of stigma, in the UK access to mental/social support is variable and there are no well-established interventions that target internalised stigma and multifaceted biopsychosocial issues associated with HIV. This paper provides insights from a peer-led ‘retreat’ intervention which offers PLHIV opportunities to build support networks and explore the diversity of challenges they face in a safe, confidential environment. The study project sought to understand the therapeutic processes inherent to retreats as a way of improving our understanding of complex internalised stigma.

Method

A key principle for this study was for PLHIV to design, implement, monitor and evaluate the intervention from its inception. This ethically sensitive coproduced project obtained ethical approval from The Open University Human Research Ethics Committee HREC reference number 4315. An intervention was co-delivered across four 2.5-day residential retreats (>120 participants over 36 group sessions) and qualitative research data gathered via participant observation/ note-taking and audio-recorded/transcribed i) group sessions (x2) and ii) in-depth semi-structured interviews (x10). Transcripts and notes were thematically coded through an abductive iterative process over the course of the 18-month long study.

Results

Research findings revealed the social context for members’ participation including social isolation, trauma and discrimination. The core features and healing principles which emerged included peer-leadership, trust, openness, group dynamics, self-reflection and bonding processes.

Discussion

Findings are discussed with reference to theory on biographical disruption, empathy and humanistic psychology.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


Wells, E. et al (2023) ‘HIV Diagnosis as Both Biographical Disruption and Biographical Reinforcement: Experiences of HIV Diagnoses Among Recently Diagnosed People Living With HIV’, Qualitative health research, 33(3), pp. 165–175
