Reviewer's report

Title: Modified Social Ecological Model: A tool to guide the assessment of the risks and risk contexts of HIV epidemics

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Reviewer: Graham Hart

Reviewer's report:

This paper offers a modified social ecological model to both understand better and generate interventions for the prevention of HIV infection.

The paper follows a long line of papers, books and book chapters that are concerned with the socio-structural context and determinants of HIV epidemic spread, only a small proportion of which are cited. This limited reference to the literature also applies to the chosen examples of injection drug use and MSM risk. Whilst one understands the need for brevity, there is a notable lack in the review of the extensive literatures in these fields that address the micro, meso and macro dimensions of the HIV epidemic. A more complete literature review would be welcomed.

I'm concerned too that the paper does not offer a significant progression of the argument that explanations for risk and exposure require multi-level understanding of contextual factors. This has a long history in the social science of the epidemic, and although this is a neat account of the theoretical framework, it does not develop further our understanding of these factors. The authors need to more clearly state how this paper progresses the field.

Finally, one of the recommendations of the paper - that every epidemiological study should characterise social and structural factors - is challenging given that this is not a paradigm within this discipline. Operationalization of this, in the absence of complementary social and behavioural research, is difficult and not explained by the authors. This, and other policy implications of adopting this approach, need to be more clearly stated.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests