Reviewer's report

Title: The people living with HIV stigma index: an exploratory study measuring stigma and discrimination experienced by people living with HIV/AIDS in South Africa

Version: 4 Date: 18 December 2013

Reviewer: Susan Herrmann

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Title: The People Living with HIV Stigma Index: an exploratory study measuring stigma and discrimination experienced by people living with HIV/AIDS in South Africa

Authors: MML dos Santos, SE Mellors, A du Toit, GG Wolvaardt, E van der Ryst

Reviewer: Susan E. Herrmann

Date of review 18 December 2013

The authors have carried out a thorough review of this interesting paper and improved it markedly. I appreciate their attention to my comments since it made it easier to re-review this paper in this short time frame.

1. This is an article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests.

2. The quality of written English: Acceptable

3. Statistical review: Is it essential that this manuscript be seen by an expert statistician? No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

4. Accept after minor essential revisions (which the authors can be trusted to make)

MINOR ESSENTIAL AND DISCRETIONARY REVISIONS

Abstract

While the paper is now quite strong the abstract needs improving. I suggest leaving out the first two sentences. Start with the persistence of HIV/AIDS related stigma. I note that the Stigma Index is a questionnaire – use this word as well as the word ‘tool’ which you repeat. Be consistent with capitals throughout the paper with regard to the Stigma Index.

One might expect to see the research design described here in brief e.g. a cross sectional study (which also indicates that data collection took place at one time point). You conducted both descriptive and inferential analysis of the data. You have the opportunity to point to your strongest statistical findings (include p-values) in the results section.
I note that the terms ‘internal’ stigma and ‘internalized’ stigma are used interchangeably.

The concluding sentence contains a typo and I would suggest replacing the words ‘can ultimately’ with either: will or can or should. ‘Work discrimination’ might be better expressed as discrimination experienced in the workplace.

Introduction
The sentence on the line 15 second paragraph could be combined with the sentence on line 10 of the same paragraph.

It is probably important to note that Mokoae and colleagues were referring to ‘perceived’ stigma in their study, and this could be a good place to introduce the term/concept (considering your own findings). I also would avoid the generalisation of ‘not very helpful’ – with a more specific comment concerning their findings.

Page 2. Remove the word ‘even’ from line 5. Remove the words ‘in the 2005 survey’ from line 9.
Line 16 should be discrimination ‘against’ not ‘on’.

Line 22 - ….which is reinforced by cultural heritage and feed stigma since women carry the blame for many things among them the spread of HIV.

Line 25. Delete ‘One of the consequences of stigma’ and rephrase the sentence (and here you might cite Makoae who observed that in their study people ‘coped’ by concealing their HIV serostatus which may lead to non-disclosure to sexual partners etc.)

Methods
Delete the ‘as described above’ in the first sentence. Perhaps ‘qualitative type’ could be rephrased to ‘open-ended questions’ were assigned response categories …..etc etc.

While the detail about the Index is very useful, some of the description in the first part of the methods section would be better placed in the statistical analysis section which contains insufficient information as it stands. I presume that use of the questionnaire results in a score? I am confused by the idea of a ‘scale’ in the absence of other information, do you mean a score obtained by summing up one or more of the 11 items listed in Table 2? And perhaps this should be Table 1 since it is the first table you refer to in the paper?

Please give more information about which tests were done on which data. I am presuming that the t-tests and ANOVA were used to analyse interval data. It appears that you also used a Chi square test later but this was not described in the data analysis section. Standardise the use of p-values (e.g. p=0.000000), the convention used by statisticians is p<0.0001.

Page 7. Line 6 replace ‘were’ with ‘was’. Line 9 delete the comma before ‘or’.
Line 20 add comma after clinical practice.
Results
Page 9. Do you mean ‘few participants self-identified as gay or lesbian’? Line 14 Rephrase.
Page 12. Line 18. The percentage of participants who opted to avoided …later in the sentence delete ‘even’.

Discussion
Page 18 last sentence does not make sense.
Page 20. Teachers were identified as …Do you mean that they ‘enacted’ discrimination or behaved in a manner that discriminated against PLWHIV by …?
Page 21. Reference 40 used at end of sentence line 18. Is this sentence meant to refer to your study or Wolitski’s?
Page 23. A comment about ‘reproduction rights’ might be timely here and/or this might go into the abstract as a notable finding and an example of enacted stigma. What are the origins of this? Who has the ‘power’ to do this? Line 19. I think ‘prevalent’ is incorrectly applied and I would consider rephrasing the sentence.

Finally, you have collected a wealth of data and you say that the Index is a powerful tool. Given this assertion, I think you must have some recommendations for specific interventions and future research. Currently your remarks are broad e.g. many issues related to health, education and work discrimination…Can I suggest that based on your observations you suggest specific interventions/research?

Finally, check formatting of references.

Declaration of competing interests:
'I declare that I have no competing interests'