

HIV/AIDS Conspiracy Theories: Gender, Power and Prevention

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Project Description: This qualitative pilot study aims to examine the ways that HIV/AIDS conspiracy theories might present barriers to HIV prevention efforts with African Americans, and to explore differences in these theories by gender that have been raised in prior research. The study investigates, through in-depth qualitative interviews the types, meaning and implications of HIV/AIDS conspiracy theories among 20 HIV- and 10 HIV+ African American men and women in the Bay Area. Additionally, we plan to conduct in-depth interviews with a diverse sample of 10 HIV prevention providers working with African Americans in the Bay Area in order to investigate provider perspectives on the impact of conspiracy theories on the delivery of HIV prevention programs, as well as these providers' own conspiracy beliefs, which may affect the delivery of prevention services.

Significance: HIV/AIDS conspiracy theories range from theories involving government involvement in the creation of the virus, to beliefs that testing and medications themselves can be used as instruments to wipe out “undesirable” populations. The research on HIV/AIDS conspiracy theories conducted to date has consistently found that approximately one quarter of African Americans of all socioeconomic backgrounds agree with statements such as “HIV/AIDS is a man-made virus that the federal government made to kill and wipe out black people,” and has concluded that conspiracy beliefs present significant challenges to HIV. HIV/AIDS conspiracy theories have been hypothesized as barriers to HIV testing among African Americans; as barriers to health education and health care; as barriers to needle exchange; and as barriers to participation in research. The most recent research on this topic corroborates prior findings of stronger conspiracy beliefs among men, and presents a need to examine the specific relationship between gender and conspiracy beliefs in order to better understand the specific impact of these theories on HIV prevention.

Interesting Findings: We held a community meeting with a group of prevention providers prior to conducting individual interviews. This meeting presented information about this research project and generated engaged dialogue among prevention providers about the effects of HIV/AIDS conspiracy beliefs, as well as feedback on the interview instrument during its development. The community meeting exemplifies the instrumental role of research-community collaboration in research on sensitive topics such as beliefs about the origins of HIV/AIDS.

We have interviewed 17 HIV- men and women so far. Data indicate that participants are willing to discuss their theories about the origins of HIV/AIDS. Data analysis will attend to the political economies of HIV/AIDS raised in these interviews and to themes of gender and power--and their connection to individual and collective vulnerability to HIV/AIDS among African Americans.

Project Recruitment Dates: December 2005 – May 2006

Project End Date: August 2006