

The eroticizing of HIV

Viral fantasies

Jaime García-Iglesias, 2022
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Review by

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How can chasing the HIV virus be considered sexy? This question is addressed by sociologist Jaime García-Iglesias (2022) in his ethnography on bugchasing, defined as the erotizing of HIV among some individuals of gay communities.

This book reveals bugchasing as an elusive phenomenon that includes a wide range of practices. For some practitioners, it is an online hobby that provides them the possibility of socialising with others in order to cope with their grief of partners who died from HIV/AIDS. For others, chasing HIV is almost a way of life as they dedicate most of their free time to it.

García-Iglesias' work provides insights into the experiences of a group of men who come from the UK, the US, Canada, Mexico, France, Germany and Australia. In total, he conducted twenty-one online interviews. The research participants were predominantly white, but they came from a diversity of age and class backgrounds.

For this review, I will focus on two of the many strengths of the book. Firstly, the author complicates the readers' understanding of bugchasing by showing contradictory views on pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), a medication that prevents contracting HIV. He shows that if some bugchasers perceive the medication as a barrier, others view it as a facilitator of their fantasy. Therefore, some bugchasers are also under PrEP, which seems, at first sight, a contradiction. This can be explained by the fact that these men are engaging in bugchasing as a fantasy and want the absence of HIV risk. For example, one participant fantasises adopting a high-risk behaviour while being protected from the effect of HIV infection. However, as PrEP can be taken on demand, some bugchasers use it temporarily to get more comfortable with risky intercourses (meaning condomless practices or intercourses with partners living with HIV). This research also thus sheds light on moments of discontinuation or stopping PrEP whereas, according to García-Iglesias, most research focuses on the start of it.

Secondly, by analysing how self-labelled bugchasers use the internet to find information and experiment their fantasy, the author offers a pertinent contribution to what he calls a sociology of sexual fantasy. His analysis suggests that no participant experiences only fantasy nor only reality when it comes to HIV exposure, but always a mixture of both. If fantasy means experimentation without the consequences of an HIV infection, the actual practice of bugchasing brings with it the risk of HIV infection.

García-Iglesias' research reveals that fantasy and the reality are equally real in terms of their significance for participants, in the sense that they both engage them emotionally, and the frontier between these two dimensions is blurred if we think of the phenomenon of PrEP discontinuation. Furthermore, the author argues that scholars in the humanities should pay more attention to the role fantasy plays on its own and not only related to risk behaviour, because this helps us to understand how people negotiate their intimacy.

In conclusion, this convincing, original, and methodologically sound research will interest a wide audience, from medical sociologists and anthropologists, to public health professionals and students working on HIV/AIDS.