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Viral Families: Exploring the Salience of Viral Genealogy for HIV-positive Gay Men

Using phylogenetic analysis, it is now possible to calculate similarity between genetic sequences of HIV, and thus to determine the degree of relatedness between samples of the virus taken from different people. While this technology has primarily been used forensically to prosecute people for HIV transmission, it may also, following theories of kinship and biosociality, have the potential to create new social relationships. These relationships may be instrumental and informational (so called 'genetic families'), but they may also entail new forms of social belonging and connection. Drawing on interview material with HIV-positive gay men, this paper explores the salience of viral genealogy for HIV positive gay men. Further, we consider how a notion of social relatedness constituted through 'shared viral strain' sits alongside other narratives of romance, community, social relatedness and infection that circulate in HIV-positive gay men's sexual and social cultures.