

Abstract

HIV/AIDS research has proven crucial in an effort to prevent and manage this epidemic. However, there is little research being done in an attempt to understand the internal worlds of those living with HIV/AIDS. The purpose of this research was to begin to explore the relationship that exists between the person living with HIV/AIDS and the virus, as an internal object, inside them. This study focused on 6 women who were on Anti-Retroviral Medication (ARVs), and who have been diagnosed for at least one year. The participants' mental representations of the virus as an object inside them was explored, as well as how they experienced and viewed the triangular relationship that exists between themselves, the HI Virus, and the ARVs. This exploratory research utilised a qualitative framework in order to understand and explore these relationships and perceptions, with psychoanalytic theory being used a lens through which to view the data that emerged. In depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants, and the corpus of data was analyzed using a thematic content analysis. In addition, the participants were asked to draw the virus inside their bodies. These were analyzed using a technique devised by Paola Luzzatto (1987) in a study exploring the internal world of drug-abusers. For the purpose of this study, a variation of the same art therapy technique was used in that the participants were asked the 'draw the virus in their bodies'. Whilst the drawings allowed for insight into the internal worlds of the participants, the drawings were also used as a point of departure. For most of the women, HIV was drawn using a red crayon, whilst the ARVs were drawn in either yellow or green. As depicted in the drawings, post diagnosis the HIV/red seemed to cover most of the body, but later when the ARVs/green was added, more of a balance was achieved. Results show that for these women, HIV was often perceived as dangerous and criminal, whilst the ARVs were often associated with security. From the perspective of Kleinian theory, the perception of the HIV and the ARVs seemed to be dependent upon the position from where they were functioning: either a paranoid-schizoid or a depressive position.

Keywords: HIV, AIDS, ARVs, internal object, object relations theory, HIV-related stigma, psychoanalytic framework, South Africa, mental representations, visual representation,