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What constitutes a 'risky' identity? : the social representation of the risk of contracting HIV among South African students.

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ABSTRACT

This research aimed to explore the social representation of a 'risky identity' with regard to HIV. 12 students participated in the research and these participants were required to take photographs regarding their perceptions of a 'risky identity'. Each participant also took part in a semi-structured interview that prompted discussion of the photographs and the different factors perceived to influence the risk of HIV infection. These interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Discourse analysis was used to analyse the data and how the participants position the 'other' as more at risk of HIV infection than the self. The analysis also revealed that the most common factor perceived to influence the risk of HIV infection is substance use. Other factors include: gender, race, age, and socio-economic status. Interestingly, the participants found it easier to attribute risk to behavioural and environmental factors, whereas they were more reluctant to associate risk with factors such as race and gender. In fact, when doing so, many of the participants emphasised the impact of environmental and behavioural factors as a means to justify their perceptions. The risk of justifying social representations in such a manner is that prejudiced attitudes remain, just in a seemingly more socially acceptable form. Subsequently, it is recommended that HIV prevention programs go beyond education to critical discussions about issues of identity and the social representations and risk perceptions influencing sexual behaviour.

Key Terms: Discourse Analysis, HIV, Risk, Perceived Risk, Power, Social Representations Theory

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