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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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CHAPTER 3: Research Design and Methodology

This chapter introduces the research design, procedure, and the data collection methods that were employed for this study. The use of discourse analysis is also discussed, along with ethical considerations and researcher reflexivity.

3.1 Research design

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory research design. A qualitative method was chosen as this method allows researchers to study selected issues in depth, openness, and detail, as well as to 'study phenomena as they unfold in real-world situations' (Durrheim, 2006, p.47). The researcher was subsequently able to gain rich and detailed information about the social representations related to the perceived risk of HIV infection, and this method also allowed for exploration of how social representations are continuously re-presented in the form of images and in conversation. Moreover, this approach proved useful given that it allows for investigation of the motivations underlying social representations, as well as for an exploration of their emergence (Flick & Foster, 2008). In summary, a qualitative approach was deemed most suitable for the study of social representations because it involves analysing everyday knowledge and processes with respect to the social construction of reality (Flick & Foster, 2008). The data was obtained in the form of photographs, as well as through the use of semi-structured individual interviews. This data was critically explored and analysed, and this assisted the researcher in achieving the aims of the study.

3.2 Research procedure

3.2.1 Participants and sampling method

In order to meet the aims of the research, 12 students at the University of the Witwatersrand were selected to participate in the research via non-probability, purposive sampling. The sample consisted of two Black males, two Black females, two Indian males, two Indian females, two White males and two White females (see Table 1). It was thought that this sample this would allow for the exploration of the different social representations regarding the perceived risk of HIV infection among males and females, as well as the role that race

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plays in social representations. Thus, this method of selection allowed for a diverse sample. However, it is acknowledged that this sample is not entirely representative of the South African population.

The reason for focusing on Black, Indian and White individuals was largely a pragmatic decision from the perspective of accessibility. According to the South African Institute of Race Relations (2009), the most graduates in 2007 were Black students (44.1%), followed by White students (40%). Indian students accounted for 8.7% of degrees awarded, and Coloured students accounted for 6.3%. Moreover, another factor that was considered is the fact that Africans and Indians were reported to have the highest incidence of HIV infection per year, 3.4% and 0.5% respectively, while Whites and Coloureds each had an incidence rate of 0.3% (Shisana et al., 2005). It is however recognised that more recent estimates of HIV prevalence show that 13.6% of Africans and 1.7% of Coloureds are infected with HIV, while 0.3% of Whites and 0.3% of Indians are infected with HIV (Shisana et al., 2009). Nevertheless, the choice of the sample from the perspective of race was mostly informed by the incidence rates as these are best for examining present underlying transmission dynamics with regard to HIV (Shisana et al., 2005).

In summary, as a result of the above-mentioned statistical findings, it was deemed necessary to explore the social representation of HIV risk within the African and Indian racial groups. Despite there being the same incidence rates for White and Coloured individuals, it was deemed useful to explore the social representations of Whites given that this racial group contrasts so strongly with all the others because of the advantages accorded to it during apartheid, and that this accessibility appears to be maintained given the high representation of this group at tertiary institutions (Mayekiso & Tshemese, 2007; SAIRR, 2009). However, it is recognised that not including Coloureds in this sample could further marginalise and restrict the voice of this racial group, and it is important to be aware of this given that it may affect the attention given to this racial group in interventions.

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Table 1: Participants

Participant	Age (yrs)	Gender	Race
A	19	Male	White
B	18	Female	White
C	19	Male	Black
D	21	Female	Black
E	18	Female	Indian
F	18	Male	Indian
G	18	Female	Black
H	18	Female	Indian
I	25	Female	White
J	24	Male	Indian
K	22	Male	White
L	19	Male	Black

3.2.2 Procedure

To obtain participants, the researcher randomly approached students meeting the basic criteria regarding gender and race at the University of the Witwatersrand to tell them about the research and to invite them to participate. The researcher explained the nature of the research to the students and the requirements of participation. Where multiple individuals in a group of students volunteered to participate, participation was accepted from those who volunteered first. Once the participants had read the information sheet and signed the consent forms (Appendices A, B and C), each person was given a disposable camera and an information sheet which highlighted the nature of the photographs to be taken (Appendix D). Upon returning the camera, two copies of the photographs were processed - one copy for the researcher and one for the participant. The participants then took part in a semi-structured interview of approximately one hour with the researcher at the Emthonjeni centre at the University of the Witwatersrand (Appendix E).

It was thought that semi-structured interviews would be useful as the format would allow for the use of an interview schedule as a guide during the discussion but would also allow

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flexibility to explore interesting issues as they arose (Smith & Eatough, 2007). The interviews addressed the nature of the photographs taken and probed interesting social representations that emerged.

3.2.3 Data Collection Methods

3.2.3.1 Disposable Cameras

Flick (1998) and Stanczak (2007) both highlight the relatively recent revival of second-hand observation methods for research purposes. The use of photographs in visual or image-based research is useful as images help the researcher to see the internal world of the participants, and they help the researcher to ask what it is that one knows about the world and how it comes to be known (Stanczak, 2007). However, while such photographs provide powerful records of real world actions, time and events, it is important to remember that 'when considering images, the line between subjective and objective-realist assumptions – that images capture something 'real' and that images are constructions – is continually moving. Indeed, images often ask us to hold both positions simultaneously to greater or lesser degrees' (Stanczak, 2007, p.7). Essentially, this conveys the complexity of photographs, as they are subjective images of that which is objective. Given this, photographs should not be regarded as mere appendages to research, but rather as important components of learning about our social worlds (Stanczak, 2007).

There are many ways of using photographs for research. These methods range from presenting participants with photographs, allowing participants to take their own photographs, and watching participants take photographs, etc. (Flick, 1998). For this research, the auto driven photo elicitation methodology was employed. This was based on the belief adopted by Samuels (2007) that photographs which are taken by participants in research projects are likely to reflect more accurately their world. Seeing as this research focused on social representations that are present in everyday interactions among people, this approach was deemed useful precisely because of the focus of this research on what the participants perceive to be risky in terms of HIV. As a result, using this approach the participants were able to subjectively decide what to photograph.

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Additionally, there are many benefits to the auto driven photo elicitation approach, which include: greater interest in the study and greater willingness to participate; establishing rapport quickly; alleviating the awkwardness of the typical question-and-answer context; and disrupting some of the power dynamics involved in regular interviews. The taking of photographs also facilitates the process of conversation and sharing information (Clark-Ibanez, 2007; Samuels, 2007). Moreover, this form of data collection is in line with social representations theory, which states that social representations do not elevate textual discourses over images and rituals in order to explain how meaning is given to new events (Joffe, 1999). Thus, it was found that this part of the research process elicited rich data regarding social representations in the form of images, and this data was used as a tool to inform the interviews.

3.2.3.2. Individual interviews

Individual interviews are a useful means of gathering information as 'there is an exchange of ideas and meanings, in which various realities and perceptions are explored and developed' (Gaskell, 2000, p. 45). As such, the interview is a joint venture in which meaning is influenced by the presence of the 'other' (Gaskell, 2000). It is easy to then see why such a technique is beneficial. It allows the researcher to develop an understanding of the participant's life and the real ways in which that person responds to social situations, as well as the way in which opinions are expressed and exchanged (Flick, 1998).

According to Gaskell (2000), individual interviews take place one-on-one with the researcher. Such a situation may initially be awkward owing to the lack of familiarity between the interviewer and the interviewee. However, as rapport develops, the participant may begin to feel more relaxed and better able to talk more expansively about things (Gaskell, 2000), as was the case in the interviews with the participants in this study. Moreover, a one-on-one interview allowed the researcher to focus solely on the participant and to probe anything of interest mentioned by the participant (Gaskell, 2000). Thus, the individual interviews proved valuable as they allowed for rich data to be obtained and they provided an opportunity for the participants to describe and explain the photographs that were taken. The way in which the participants did this was also important and subsequently analysed.

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3.3 Data Analysis

This research employed discourse analysis. 'Discourse analysis looks at how language structures peoples thought in ways that reflect a particular social system' (Collins, 2003, p. 27). As such, this form of analysis attempts to work out, from what people say, the underlying system of ideas that is structuring their thoughts, words and experiences (Collins, 2003). This is reiterated by Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Kelly (2006), who state that discourses are systems of statements that are taken up in conversations, but they are not the speeches or conversations themselves. They are the patterns of meaning that organise the various symbolic systems that humans inhabit (Parker, 1992). Hence, it can be said that discourses inform how we understand experiences and make sense of our interactions with people.

In relation to the above, Terre Blanche et al. (2006) explain that in order to conduct a discourse analysis, the data needs to be organised in a systematic way. To do this, the researcher had to become familiar with the data, as well as with identifying themes and coding the data in such a way that it could be categorised according to the different themes. In addition, the researcher explored the themes more closely in the process of elaboration, providing an opportunity for the themes to be revised and for the researcher to capture nuances of meaning. Lastly, the process involved making interpretations and providing a written account of the phenomena (Terre Blanche et al., 2006).

Given that analysts are concerned with the realities that discourses construct, (Terre Blanche, et al., 2006), the step of investigating the effects of discourses is particularly important seeing as they can reproduce power relations and occupy a political or ideological position into which the speaker is drawn (Parker, 1992). Subsequently, it was necessary for the researcher to identify the discourses underlying the social representations maintained by the participants, and it was necessary for the researcher to interrogate the effects of these constructions, as well as the meanings they conveyed.

3.4 Ethical considerations

Once the university had issued an ethical clearance certificate and a protocol number (MACC/09/002 IH), informed consent was obtained from the participants regarding their

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participation in the research (Appendix B). In the process of getting such consent, the participants were informed of the exact nature and purpose of the research, both verbally and through the use of the participant information sheet (Appendix A). They were also notified, both verbally and by means of an information sheet, that the photographs, as well as all their responses in the semi-structured individual interviews, were confidential and that any information that could disclose their identities would be removed from the research report. The participants were also made aware of the fact that while confidentiality was assured, anonymity was not an option as it was necessary for the researcher to be physically present with the participants during the interviews.

In addition to the above, in order to protect the identity of individuals that would be photographed, it was requested that the participants obtained permission from people they wanted to photograph and they had to agree to avoid capturing people's faces. However, where participants were unable to avoid this, the pictures were blurred to prevent identification of the individuals. The researcher also informed each participant of their right to withdraw any photographs they had taken and that they were required to answer only those questions they felt comfortable with. Each interview was only audio-recorded once participants had given their permission and the participants were informed of their right to terminate discussion at any time during the interview. They were also informed that only the researcher and the researcher's supervisor would have access to the transcripts and recordings, and they were told that only the researcher, supervisor and the person developing the photographs would have access to the pictures. The transcripts, audio recordings and processed photographs have since been stored in a secure location and they will be destroyed at a time after which all articles (from the final report) have been published in accredited journals. Finally, it is important to note that, in addition to the above, the participants were made aware that if the interview unearthed any unpleasant or upsetting emotions and the need for counselling arose, they would be referred to the Family Life Centre. The contact details of the researcher were provided on the information sheets consent forms so that the participants could contact the researcher, should they have felt the need to.

3.5 Researcher reflexivity and the researcher's experience

The underlying motivation of this research is the researcher's interests with regard to the influence of perceived risk on behaviour. Exploration of this, in the context of HIV/AIDS,

was based on the widespread nature of the epidemic and the far-reaching effects that this epidemic has had and continues to have. The researcher subsequently conducted this research in the hope of generating knowledge that could go some way to halting the spread of this virus. However, given the above and the clear investment of the researcher in this topic, the researcher was aware that reflexivity throughout the research process was essential. It was fully recognised that the researcher influenced the conceptualisation of the research, the data collection and the data analysis, despite attempts to remain as objective as possible.

In terms of data collection, the researcher was cognisant of the fact that being a White, young, female had an impact on the interviews. As such, in order to best establish a collaborative context for the participants, the researcher adopted a similar approach to Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman (2002). This included a relatively informal style of relating to the participants and an attempt to remain open and understanding throughout the process. Nevertheless, it was recognised that it may have still been difficult for the participants to openly discuss and capture photographs relating to their perceptions regarding the risk of HIV infection. This remains to be discussed.

Throughout most of the interviews, the participants seemed genuine and spoke frankly, although there were times when the researcher got the sense that the participants were trying to give socially acceptable answers or were trying to position themselves as being unbiased. Nevertheless, it is interesting that this seemed to be less true of the male participants. They mostly spoke confidently, assertively and more comfortably than the female participants who generally seemed to be more fearful of sounding prejudiced, but it is recognised that this was not true for everyone. Additionally, it is interesting that many of
the female participants seemed to experience greater discomfort than men when using sexual terminology and it is thought that this speaks to the way in which the different genders are positioned in society with regard to issues of sex. This is important because, if this difference is evident at the level of speech, it might be having a substantial impact at the level of behaviour. As such, the researcher was continuously aware of the importance of continued reflexivity in the interviews, and the importance of being receptive to any discomfort and/or defensiveness. Subsequently, it is noted that there were times when the researcher felt that the participants were trying to avoid sounding racist or sexist and this was kept in mind when interpreting the data. Furthermore, the researcher adopted the same approach as Frosh et al.

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(2002) by trying to remain aware of the part played by the researcher in the process of generating social representations regarding the perceived risk of HIV infection.

Exploring the interview process more closely, the participants initially selected photographs that they thought highlighted the risk factors for HIV infection best. The photographs depicted issues related to substance use, sexual relations, etc. Some of the pictures were more symbolic than others and the participants generally found it difficult to obtain some images they would have liked to have included. This was evident where PG stated that *'I had to ask them can I take you a picture? Then they have to give their consent first before I can take the picture. So most of them said no and like most of the people who said no are the people who, like I wanted, I got ideas for those pictures and everything. Like girls who wears miniskirts. And ya kind of things like that. And like most of the people said, no; or like people like hugging, being cosy, too cosy'*. The above excerpt shows that it can be difficult to capture images of specific instances or individuals that are perceived to be risky, and it seems that there is a particular element of resistance when individuals are aware that their behaviour is deviant in some way. Furthermore, for PF '*it was difficult because (coughs) you try and look for a situation that you would think people are more at risk, but, um, it is not likely that you are going to find the situations that you are, the perceptions that you have of who are at risk, in your mind'*. This extract highlights the insidious nature of risk, in that it can be hidden and thus difficult to capture. The perception that risky behaviour is generally done privately is also apparent. As such, the above seems to provide some explanation for the way in which some of the participants represented risk symbolically.

Additionally, it is important to recognise that interpreting photographs is not simply a description of photographs. It is recognised that the participants attended to certain details, decided what to show to the viewer, and anticipated certain responses. This was apparent where PH said that she '*found it really difficult to take pictures […] and be like biased towards a certain group*'. As such, this reiterates the idea that the participants may have presented themselves in particular ways. It is also interesting that sometimes there was a discrepancy in the way the participants spoke of factors perceived to influence the risk of HIV infection and the images they captured in the photographs. This highlights the importance of using this method for the research as it allowed for constructions of risk to be presented and compared in different ways, thereby generating some understanding of the

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difficulties encountered when socially representing an individual or group as being risky, and the different mediums which complicate this.

Overall, rapport generally seemed to develop quickly between the researcher and the participants and this appeared to facilitate the development of a safe environment for the participants to express their views. This was corroborated by PE who said: *'I was very open with you, and I told you exactly how I felt. Um the manner some in which we spoke as well, um never made me feel scared to tell you anything of the sort. You know I never felt undermined or that my opinion wouldn't matter which I am thankful for'.* While this was the response of only one participant, the researcher believed this was often the case, but it is recognised that the level of comfort varied from participant to participant.

Finally, in terms of the data analysis, it must be said that the process of discourse analysis required that the researcher distanced herself from the text as much as possible so that she could identify discourses (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). As such, the researcher attempted to remain as objective as possible, and she also reflected on the process of analysis, as well as the difficulties that arose in the attempt to be objective. However, it is recognised that the process of data analysis was made easier by the fact that the researcher's supervisor played an integral role in analysing the data. Overall, researcher reflexivity formed a critical part of the research process and informed its conceptualisation, the data collection and data analysis.

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