

SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS ON HIV/AIDS PREVENTION

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ABSTRACT

Objective: to apprehend the social representations of young students about HIV/Aids prevention. **Methods:** This is an exploratory, qualitative research, guided by the Theory of Social Representations, in three Public High Schools, with 70 students of both genders and ages between 18 and 29 years. For data collection, an instrument was used based on the free word association technique, with the term "HIV/ Aids prevention". The evocations were tagged coded and processed by EVOCA software, version 2005. **Results:** The data showed a higher number of young females (57.14%), blacks (84.28%), heterosexuals (92.85%), and who had already started to have sex (95.71%). The core group presented the terms "condom, disease, prevention and sex" as structuring the social representations of young people about HIV/ Aids prevention. **Conclusion:** the idea of prevention is based on the use of condoms, as an available technology, against diseases transmitted by unprotected sex. Therefore, the sexual practice among young people are expected to happen safely, pleasantly and responsibly.

Keywords: Disease Prevention. HIV Infections. Students.

INTRODUCTION

The Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (Aids), in its historical course, has reinforced that people are responsible for their lifestyles and healthy behaviors and/or not. From the outset, Aids has been the target of media speculation on facts that provide explanations about social aspects and, as such, has led to changes in attitudes and behaviors in society.

In the scope of the research, the study of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) among young people has aroused the interest and attention of researchers in the many fields⁽¹⁾. Youth is a phase of life marked by the transformation in the lives of these subjects in their multiple dimensions. However, they must behave in a way that conforms to the values and standards (pre) established by the social system⁽²⁾. In this segment, experiences related to the sexuality dimension can include both physical, psychological, emotional, relational and behavioral aspects.

However, issues related to sexuality do not always receive the attention they should,

especially regarding the availability of information so sex is performed safely. Thus, the risk of contact with Sexually Transmissible Infections (STI) becomes an important aspect, considering the significant increase in their incidence among this group⁽³⁾.

About condom use, it is noted that most young people are aware of STI prevention methods but do not understand the importance of proper use for self-protection and/or their partners. It is common to hear reports from young people that, among their family, topics related to sexuality have never been discussed. Therefore, most initiates the sexual life with many doubts⁽²⁾. This aspect contributes to the development of unsafe sex and, consequently, the possibility of having diseases.

It is estimated that 866 thousand people live with HIV in Brazil. Of that number, in 2017, 42,420 new cases were diagnosed. By June 2018, the percentage of HIV cases in the age group of 15 to 24 years was 49.6%⁽⁴⁾. According to the Ministry of Health (MS), from January 2017 to September 2018, out of 45,000 young people between 18 and 24 years of age with

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HIV, 73% were in antiretroviral therapy (ART), but 38% had insufficient adherence and 23 % had abandoned treatment⁽⁵⁾.

The number of cases of the disease in young people, as well as the difficulty in adhering to treatment, is a public health problem that mobilizes the organs involved, mainly in the search for solutions and strategies for the adoption of preventive actions. In view of this, considering the early sexual practice and the greater number of partners, young people have less frequently used condoms in “non-stable” relationships⁽⁶⁾.

This way, in view of the importance of preventive care and education regarding sexual health and sexual information for young people and adolescents, the STD/Aids and viral hepatitis division, in partnership with the Ministry of Education, created in 2003 the Project Health and Prevention in Schools (PSE). The respective project consists of integrating the education and health sectors in each municipality to develop actions aimed at promoting the sexual and reproductive health of adolescents and young people with a view to reducing vulnerabilities to STI and Aids⁽⁴⁾.

In view of the magnitude of the epidemic and the large number of young people affected by HIV, this study had, as its object, HIV prevention, which asks: “How do young people represent HIV/Aids prevention?”. It aimed to understand the social representations of young students about HIV/Aids prevention.

METHODS

The research was guided by the Theory of Social Representations (SRT) and developed as an exploratory and qualitative research. The Social Representations (SR) seek to know how the knowledge and the common knowledge of the society or of a specific group are constructed, in the same way that it tries to understand how the transmission of information occurs with regard to cultural exchanges and individual and collective experiences through time dimension and the importance of communication in this context⁽⁷⁾.

The research was carried out in three Public High Schools, two state ones and one federal school, in the city of Jacobina - Bahia. The

respective institutions were selected by convenience criteria in view of the easiness of access by the researchers. Senior students of the daytime class aged between 18 and 29, of both genders participated. The exclusion criteria were: students enrolled who had low school attendance and were under 18 years old.

The three schools totaled 250 senior students regularly enrolled in High School, however, after applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 70 students participated in the study.

The data collection was carried out from October to December 2016, through the Free Speech Association Technique (TALP), with the inducer term “HIV/Aids Prevention” and biopsychosocial identification elements whose application was performed in the classroom. In RS, this technique allows to highlight semantic universes by means of the common ledge between the words, as well as the latent dimensions in close association with the represented object⁽⁸⁾.

The application of the TALP consisted of asking the participants to register up to five short words and/or expressions that came immediately to mind when they heard the inducer term. At the next moment, they answered the second part of the instrument that included the following variables: age; race/color; religion; marital status; family constitution; sexual option and information about sex, in order to characterize the group investigated and to contextualize the social representations.

The corpus constituted from the TALP was transcribed, tagged and coded according to the standards of the *Ensemble of Programs Permettant L'Analyse des Evocations* (EVOC), version 2005.

Lemmatization is a necessary step for processing the data in the software, since the highest frequencies and the mean orders are the considered most relevant criteria to produce the reports. For the analysis and discussion of the table of four quadrants or “Diagram of Vergès”, the theoretical-reflexive basis of the TRS, in its structural aspect, was used. This approach presupposes that the elements of social representation with importance in their structure, central nucleus and prototypical character are considered as the most accessible to

consciousness, whereas the less evoked terms combine the peripheral elements⁽⁹⁾.

The study was submitted to the Human Research Ethics Committee of the State University of Bahia (UNEB) with approval no. 2,024,507 and CAAE 65437517.9.0000.0057.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For the characterization of the students, the biopsychosocial profile presented in table 1 was

Table 1. Frequency of biopsychosocial variables obtained from the individual questionnaire. Jacobina, Bahia, Brazil, 2018. (N = 70)

Variable evaluated	Absolute frequency (N=70)	Percent (%)
Gender		
Male	30	42.85
Female	40	57.14
Race/Color		
Black/brown	59	84.28
White	10	14.28
Indigenous	01	1.42
Sexual option		
Heterosexual	65	92.85
Bisexual	02	2.85
Homosexual	02	2.85
Gender identity		
Transsexual	01	1.42
Started to have sex		
Yes	67	95.71
No	03	4.28

In response to the inducer term, 338 terms with mean evocation order (MEO) of three, on a scale of one to five, were evoked. Evocations whose frequencies were equal to or less than four were neglected. The mean evocation

obtained. The number of young women (57.14%) is higher than the number of male (42.85%), as well as the prevalence of those/who declare themselves black (84.28%); in terms of sexual option, heterosexuality predominated (92.85%), while bisexuality and homosexuality had the same prevalence (2.85%); as to the beginning of sexual life, almost all (95.71%) reported having already started.

frequency established was equal to 16. The EVOC software provided the elements for the construction of the four-quadrant frame (Figure 1).

FREQUENCY ≥ 16 MEO < 3			FREQUENCY ≥ 16 MEO ≥ 3		
Condom	54	1.704	Careful	24	3.583
Disease	32	2.500	Medication	22	3.273
Prevention	25	2.920			
Sex	28	2.750			
NEAR PERIPHERAL SYSTEM			DISTANT PERIPHERAL SYSTEM		
FREQUENCY < 16 MEO < 3			FREQUENCY < 16 MEO ≥ 3		
Contraceptive	4	2.750	Knowledge	12	3.333
Carnival	4	2.500	Cure	5	3.600
Contamination	6	2.667	Exams	9	3.778
Hospital	10	2.400	Fear	8	4.125
Vaccine	6	2.500	Death	14	3.571
			Danger	8	3.125
			Prejudice	6	3.333

Figure 1. Diagram of four quadrants to the inducer term prevention in HIV/Aids. Jacobina, Bahia, Brazil, 2018. (N=70)

Source: EVOC research data. Jacobina-BA, 2018.

Figure 1, in its upper left quadrant, presents the elements that probably constitute the central

nucleus of social representation. The students evoked the terms “condom”, disease, prevention

and sex. The term “condom” stands out from the others due to the high frequency (54) and the lowest MEO of 1.704. These factors qualify it as the most important element of the representational field under analysis, in view of its hierarchy, saliency and connectedness. These aspects reveal that the term “condom” corroborates the consensual aspect in the representation of the participants.

However, there is the possibility that some elements that composed the central nucleus present less frequency to the detriment of the others that make up the four houses and constitute as a central element of representation⁽¹⁰⁾, although this is not the case. The students revealed that the “condom”, with 77.1% of evocation, falls within this definition. If, on one hand, given its high frequency, the image of the condom is linked to prevention practices, on the other hand, it can be associated with a technology with greater accessibility to avoid contamination by HIV and other STI.

The word disease, evoked 32 times, occupied the second position in terms of frequency, while the element “prevention” was in the fourth position, evoked 25 times. The finding points to the need for the issue of HIV to also be discussed with emphasis on aspects related to prevention, not only associated with the use of a technology or contraceptive method. Likewise, account should be taken of the stigma, prejudice and discrimination arising from the incipience of information by civil society as regards infection, treatment and care prospects⁽¹¹⁾.

In this aspect, to the extent that students affirm about the lack of understanding/knowledge, reason why they do not do prevention adequately⁽¹²⁾, the necessity of the importance on the discussion of this subject is reaffirmed. In view of this, it is possible to infer that the evocation of the term “condom” has an association with the dissemination of the male condom as a method directly related to contraceptive questions. However, the emphasis on and/or use of this technology should be emphasized both in prevention and double protection as well as to prevent pregnancy and prevent STI⁽⁴⁾.

In a study carried out in Pará, it was found that young people, especially those with a partner, reported condom use with a greater emphasis on contraception, that is: condom use was reported by 80.7% of the girls and 88.6% of

the boys out of 4,019 young people surveyed⁽¹³⁾. The condom was used sporadically and most of the men participating in the study aimed to prevent pregnancy, especially when the woman could not use oral contraceptives.

A research carried out with 1,011 students from a municipal school in the south of Rio Grande do Sul pointed out that men consider it difficult to introduce condoms in the marital relationship by relating them to different meanings, such as: a symbol of infidelity and distrust. In marriage, the exclusivity relationship and the fidelity pact with the wives determine the use of the condom only in special situations. In other words, the condom is a temporary method⁽¹⁴⁾.

The term “disease”, with a frequency of 32 and MEO of 2.500, appears in the central nucleus (Figure 1). The association between its evocation and the inducer term “HIV/Aids prevention” refers to the concept that students overestimate the words that have the greatest impact on the inducer term (Aids), associating it with something bad (disease). From this angle, HIV/Aids prevention, for the participants of this study, was aimed at distancing itself from a disease that still kills and brings health consequences.

Many young people are unaware and have little discussion about the prevention, manifestation of HIV infection and the clinical symptoms of the disease. The fact that they have heard about the disease does not mean that they have knowledge, since the causative agent and the signs and symptoms of HIV/Aids are still unknown by more than 70% of school children and adolescents. However, they revealed that the media and training (school) are pointed as important aspects for the construction of this knowledge⁽¹⁵⁾.

The term “sex”, evoked 28 times and MEO of 2.750, is another aspect that is related to the transmission of the disease and was associated with sex. The means and ways of HIV infection need to be clearly elucidated, given that they still raise doubts in the population, for example: if, on the one hand, they recognize blood, sexual fluids and needle use as potential risks, on the saliva, insects and mouth kissing also constitute possible ways of transmission⁽¹⁶⁾.

In the near peripheral system or upper right quadrant, the words “care and medication”, with frequencies of 24 and 22 and MEO 3.583 and 3.273, present a direct relationship between the act of greater precaution (care) to avoid the disease and the necessary knowledge about treatment (medication). The term drug was evoked, possibly, by young people believing that the drug controls HIV and increases the survival of infected people.

This hypothesis is confirmed in some studies where it is observed that the use of antiretrovirals is becoming increasingly common as a pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) therapy technology before exposure to HIV⁽¹⁷⁾. Despite the progress that has been made since the introduction of new therapies and the provision of treatment to people living with HIV, the fear of contagion is still seen as a threat to the physical integrity of the human being⁽¹⁸⁾.

It is noticed that some prevention campaigns are adopted by government agencies and mediated with a focus on young audiences. The term “carnival” evoked in the contrast zone or lower left quadrant, with frequency 4 and MEO 2.500, along with the term “contraceptive”, reveals the impact of widespread condom disclosure as a prevention of STI and pregnancy in the media.

The media has a relevant social role in providing access to information about STI, providing a contextualized discussion of the reality of young people, using clear and objective language. Such aspects, associated with correct information about access to services and rights with an emphasis on prevention, can contribute effectively to the care of self and others⁽¹⁹⁾.

Information propagated through the media can contribute both to changing attitudes and/or to crystallizing the opinion of individuals and groups in such a way that the knowledge conveyed may influence the young person or allow him to use it in line with the values of the collectivity to which it belongs. These aspects are essential in the processes of creation and propagation of social representations.

For the young people participating in this study, “vaccine and hospital” are ways/possibilities to avoid and/or mitigate HIV “contamination”. The evocation of the term

“suffering” alludes to the need and resolution of actions and services to the person with the disease, because in SR of the young, this suffering can be related to frequent hospitalizations or the association of the image of the “sick” person by the beginning of the epidemic.

For the young, it is difficult to accept the disease, because, in addition to the transformations and conflicts of the development phase itself, the diagnosis of a chronic disease can have even greater dimensions, especially in the experience of sexuality and in the relationship established with other people as a result of possible physical and psychological limitations.

From the diagnosis of seropositivity, the young person can live with the fear of future hospital admissions caused by opportunistic infections and, in some cases, develop resistance to adhere to ART. Side effects and large numbers of medications can lead to recurrent hospital admissions and trigger suffering, isolation, and depressive episodes present in the majority of young people and adolescents diagnosed with HIV⁽²⁰⁾.

Even with the medical advances, the concern of young people is visible when associating prevention to the elements “fear” and “death”. These expressions appear in the distant periphery, with MEO 4.125 and 3.571, and reaffirm that the social impact that Aids has caused for decades persists in the discourse of the population. The distant peripheral system conforms the latent terms that appear in the structure of the social representation in function of the load of senses and meanings.

When the adolescent has the confirmation of seropositivity, he begins to experience moments of distress, especially as a result of the repercussion for his life, especially, as it relates to the experience of sexuality⁽²¹⁾. In this regard, the representation of HIV/Aids still reverberates the disabling and progressive limitations in the lives of those who live with the disease. This condition can cause fear, anguish and tensions, because in the imaginary of these young people there is still much to “live” and “dying” does not belong to this phase of life.

It should be noted the existence of a high psychosocial burden, essentially, about the

relationship with other people. This includes factors linked to trust in the partner, relationship time and total confidence until the disclosure of their serological condition. This moment is delicate, tense and fraught with uncertainties, given the impossibility of predicting the partner's reaction to the revelation of the disease. In addition, if the person will be able to maintain secrecy at the end of the relationship⁽²²⁾.

The constant fear of social exclusion, which is still associated with HIV, seen as synonymous with death, means that young people do not reveal their condition of seropositivity. This is an aspect that tends to hinder treatment adherence or lead to abandonment⁽²¹⁾. In this context, this type of social representation, which characterizes the empirical knowledge built on the dynamics of interrelationships and envisages HIV/Aids from an obsolete conceptual and interpretative point of view, tends to compromise the implementation of the preventive approach, which is so important in the current scenario.

CONCLUSION

The study made it possible to identify the possible social representations of young people who, in their central nucleus, have the terms "condom, disease, prevention and sex". Social representations about HIV/Aids prevention connote the idea of prevention centered on condom use as an available technology and as an effective measure to keep away from diseases transmitted by unprotected sex.

The apprehension of SR reaffirms myths and taboos about HIV/Aids and alerts us to critical nodes that drive the spread of infection among young people. These aspects contribute to and reinforce the school as a place where debates about HIV/Aids. Therefore, as the school approaches the discussion on issues related to the field of sexualities, it can reinforce the importance of conducting research from the intersectoral policies, under the PSE label, contributing to the minimization of vulnerabilities in the formative spaces.

The issue of Aids has been relevant and current. In this regard, it is suggested that studies, academic and social dialogues be constantly conducted so that the sexual practices among young people take place in a safe, pleasurable and responsible manner.

REPRESENTAÇÕES SOCIAIS DE ESTUDANTES DE ENSINO MÉDIO DA REDE PÚBLICA SOBRE PREVENÇÃO EM HIV/AIDS

RESUMO

Objetivo: apreender as representações sociais de jovens estudantes sobre a prevenção em HIV/Aids. **Métodos:** trata-se de pesquisa exploratória, qualitativa, guiada pela Teoria das Representações Sociais, em três escolas de Ensino Médio da rede pública, com 70 estudantes, de ambos os sexos e idades entre 18 e 29 anos. Para a coleta de dados, utilizou-se instrumento baseado na técnica de associação livre de palavras, com termo indutor "prevenção em HIV/Aids". As evocações foram lematizadas, codificadas e processadas pelo *software* EVOC, versão 2005. **Resultados:** os dados apontaram um número maior de jovens do sexo feminino (57,14%), negros (84,28%), heterossexuais (92,85%) e que já tinham iniciado a atividade sexual (95,71%). O núcleo central apresentou os termos "camisinha, doença, prevenção e sexo" como estruturantes das representações sociais dos jovens acerca da prevenção em HIV/Aids. **Conclusão:** a ideia de prevenção situa-se no uso do preservativo, enquanto tecnologia disponível, frente a doenças transmitidas pela prática sexual desprotegida. Logo, espera-se que as práticas sexuais entre jovens aconteçam de forma segura, prazerosa e responsável.

Palavras-chave: Prevenção de Doenças. Infecções por HIV. Estudantes.

REPRESENTACIONES SOCIALES DE ESTUDIANTES DE ENSEÑANZA SECUNDARIA DE LA RED PÚBLICA SOBRE PREVENCIÓN EN VIH/SIDA

RESUMEN

Objetivo: comprender las representaciones sociales de jóvenes estudiantes sobre la prevención en VIH/SIDA. **Métodos:** se trata de una investigación exploratoria, cualitativa, fundamentada en la Teoría de las Representaciones Sociales, hecha en tres escuelas de Enseñanza Secundaria de la red pública, con 70 estudiantes, de ambos los sexos y edades entre 18 y 29 años. Para la recolección de datos, se utilizó instrumento basado en la técnica de asociación libre de palabras, con término inductor "prevención en VIH/SIDA". Los hallazgos fueron lematizados, codificados y procesados por el *software* EVOC, versión 2005. **Resultados:** los datos señalaron un número mayor de jóvenes del sexo femenino (57,14%), negros (84,28%), heterossexuales (92,85%) y que ya habían iniciado la actividad sexual

(95,71%). El núcleo central presentó los términos “condón, enfermedad, prevención y sexo” como estructuradores de las representaciones sociales de los jóvenes acerca de la prevención en VIH/SIDA. **Conclusión:** la idea de prevención está ubicada en el uso del preservativo, como tecnología disponible, ante enfermedades transmitidas por la práctica sexual desprotegida. Siendo así, se espera que las prácticas sexuales entre jóvenes ocurran de forma segura, placentera y responsable.

Palabras clave: Prevención de Enfermedades. Infecciones por VIH. Estudiantes.

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