

ABSTRACT

In The Silence of their Skin:
Negotiating HIV Disclosure and Young Adulthood in Trinidad and Tobago

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This participatory action research study explored youth perceptions of HIV disclosure and the utility of collaborative research to build youth advocacy skills. The study's methodological design employed a crystallized approach (Ellingson 2009) that drew on multiple genres of data to reflect divergent ways of interrogating HIV disclosure. Data was generated through in-depth interviews, photovoice and youth-led data analysis with three cohorts of young people that included HIV positive and negative participants. There were no face-to-face encounters between the cohorts of youth. This dialogic methodological design was responsive to the peculiarities of working with vulnerable and marginalized populations yet treated with youth in a non-tokenistic manner.

Examinations of the impact of HIV on youth have characteristically treated young people as two mutually exclusive sub-populations, namely youth who are HIV negative and youth who are HIV positive. This dichotomy of HIV negative and HIV positive youth however, ignore the reality that these sub-populations form integral parts of each other's social world. This study exemplified the value of building bridges between sub-populations of youth as a means of promoting social action and anti-discriminatory practices among young people. Disclosure emerged as a complex and fluid cluster of interpersonal and intrapsychic processes instead of a single act of telling. The findings demonstrated that the configuration of various psychosocial dynamics informed notions of invisibility for HIV positive youth and were major drivers of disclosure practices. Furthermore, the study elucidated HIV as a psychosocial phenomenon that impacted person-environment relationships for HIV negative youth.

Two original contributions to the literature were made: (1) a youth-in-environment theoretical perspective for understanding the penetrative impact of HIV on the psychosocial wellbeing of youth populations and (2) a responsive social work practice model with a focus on HIV disclosure within an ecological framework.

Keywords: Tracie Rogers; HIV; youth, disclosure; psychosocial implications; participatory action research; social work; social action.