

Risky groups, risky behaviour, and risky persons: Dominating discourses on youth sexual health

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Description:

Significant public health attention has been focused on the problems of youth sexual behaviour. Empirical public health research in this area has attempted to account for mostly negative sexual health outcomes (e.g. sexually transmitted infections and teenage pregnancies) by examining individual characteristics and risk-taking behaviour. Public health practice has followed suit, focusing primarily on modifying sexual risk behaviour and lifestyle 'choices'. In doing so, we may be unwittingly committed to an unarticulated and unrealistic set of assumptions about the level of agency and control that is afforded to many young people. The purpose of this paper is to begin to 'unpack' the underpinnings to conventional approaches to public health research and service provision related to youth sexual health in Canada. Drawing on the works of Foucault to show how discourses concerning risky groups, risky behaviour and risky persons have been advanced as sanctioned discourses in Canada (particularly related to HIV/AIDS risk), the authors investigate how themes of safety and goodness have been privileged as healthy, while other, unauthorized forms of youth sexual behaviour have been marginalized. The issue of teen parenthood is examined to demonstrate how these specific discourses have helped to relegate those youth who do not or cannot implant themselves in an 'approved reality' to live separately from the norm in a climate of sex-based shame. Drawing on their previous work and that of others, the authors suggest an alternative approach to understanding youth sexual health, one that favours critical, reflexive public health practices and attends to sociological theory.

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