

Women's Experiences of Victim Blame following Sexual Violence.

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Aim:

Victims and survivors are often blamed for their experiences of sexual violence and this has many negative impacts. My research explores the ways that victim blame is communicated by agencies and professionals and experienced by female victims and survivors, with an emphasis on more 'subtle' forms of blame.

Methods:

I ran ten focus groups with women through local Rape Crisis centres (RCCs) to discuss their interactions with agencies and professionals following sexual violence. At the women's request, I returned to three RCCs for follow-up groups and ran a remote focus group to 'sense check' my findings with the women who took part. Holding follow-up groups was an innovative use of this methodology, as focus groups are usually one-off interventions.

Findings:

Victim blame is wider than blame. Women felt disrespected and 'responsibilised' by professionals and were blamed for things other than their abuse, such as their coping, health, socioeconomic status and parenting ability. Blame and responsibilisation were communicated through individual staff members' attitudes and actions, poor agency resources and environments and insensitive procedures.

Women felt that their negative interactions were linked to structural inequalities such as gender, age, racial background, ethnicity, sexuality and ability more than their experiences of abuse.

Impact:

I am exploring ways to adapt my findings into strategies for change at 'pump handle' and 'root cause' societal levels (Aronson, 2002). I discussed next steps with the women involved to consider ways of engaging meaningfully with agencies; they suggested creating materials and training for professionals, as well as educational materials for general audiences. I am also considering ways to acknowledge structural inequalities while lifting the burdens faced by individual women in my clinical therapeutic practice.