

RESEARCH CONNECTION

Naming and validating sexual violence experiences through retrospective narratives and historical document analysis

By Candice Waddell-Henowitch, PhD, & Deborah McPhail, PhD



Why this research is important

Women, trans, and individuals who identify as non-binary experience sexual violence at alarming rates. Over one in four women experience sexual violence while in post-secondary institutions ([Lee & Wong, 2019](#)), and transgender and gender non-binary students report higher levels of sexual violence compared to their cisgender peers ([Martin-Storey et al., 2018](#)). As a large proportion of individuals experience sexual violence while in the formative years of post-secondary education, these settings are integral in the prevention and appropriate interventions.

What you need to know

A large proportion of individuals experience sexual violence while in post-secondary institutions. However, policies at post-secondary institutions often have vague language, a lack of conceptual definitions and rampant rape myth inferences within them. Additionally, post-secondary institutions often prioritize the reputation of the institution over the victims/survivors. This research project reflects on a two-stage process of data collection: document analysis and individual interviews. By reflecting on the words of the victim/survivor by simultaneously analyzing the institutional messaging available to them at the time of sexual violence, insight is gained into where institutions have failed in the past and how this can be improved in the future.

How the research was conducted

Trauma-informed qualitative research with a feminist perspective was used to explore the retrospective experience of ten individuals with a history of sexual violence that occurred in post-secondary educational settings. Of the ten participants, six attended the same post-secondary educational institution. This institution agreed to allow document analysis to be completed on all archived information from 1990–2010. The other two

institutions did not respond to requests for document analysis. Document analysis was completed on two institutional policies, dated 1989 and 2007), two mentions of the policy in senate minutes in 1992 and 1994, and five student handbooks (1989, 1990, 1991, 1992, and 1993).

What the researchers found

The analysis highlighted the disconnect between how sexual violence is lived by victims/survivors and how it is represented in the policies, procedures, and resources of post-secondary institutions. The victims/survivors emphasized that it was challenging to name, validate, and disclose their experiences. Many of them associated the challenge of naming, validating, and disclosing with rape myths apparent at the time, such as rape needs to be life-threatening, and that it is only rape if it is completed by a stranger. Unfortunately, the policies available at the time from the post-secondary institution did not clearly define the broad spectrum of sexual violence experiences and emphasized policy regarding frivolous and malicious complaints directed at victims/survivors.

How this research can be used

Due to the prevalence of sexual violence within post-secondary institutions, it is imperative that settings of higher learning develop policies and procedures that actively foster environments that promote safety. When developing processes and procedures for sexual violence in post-secondary institutions the concepts of naming, disclosing, and validating need to be reinforced and supported. Additionally, policies need to be explicit, should not emphasize malicious or fraudulent reporting, have consistent messaging, and be transparent. Post-secondary institutions need to ensure that they are providing consistent messaging to students, not perpetuating rape myths with silence, and prioritizing the implementation of sexual violence prevention policies. Continuing the status quo is no longer an option; the safety of students is

dependent on policies, procedures, positions, and implementation that emphasize sexual violence prevention.

About the researchers

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