NQOBA SIBINDI!
RAPE SURVIVOR'S EXPRESSIONS OF SHAME, SELF-BLAME AND SELF-STIGMA IN ETHEKWINI, SOUTH AFRICA

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Background

• South Africa has more than 50,000 rape cases reported to the police each year
• Rape survivors have increased likelihood of adverse psychological outcomes compared to women who have experienced other traumatic events (Elklit & Christiansen, 2010)
  • Lack of support systems and belief in rape myths also increase chances of women reporting depression and dysfunctional or risky sexual behavior over time (Wyatt et al, 2017)

• Our Rape Impact Cohort Evaluation (RICE) found:
  • Rape survivors have a 60% greater chance of HIV acquisition over time compared with women who did not report a rape (Abrahams et al., 2021)
  • 3-months post-rape 48.5% prevalence of PTSD, 61.2% prevalence of depression 19.2% reporting high levels of stress (Nothling, 2021)
  • The increased risk for HIV acquisition was driven by risky sexual practices in the period after the rape which were fueled by psychological distress (Abrahams et al., 2021)
Study aim and constructs

**Study Aim:**
Explore women’s experiences and expressions of shame, self-blame and self-stigma post rape, and understand the impact of these on their mental health and HIV risk post-rape. To improve post-rape care services and interventions and to inform measurements.

- **Shame is:** “The intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging” IDIs 700 women and men in USA, early 2000’s (Brown, Brene. Daring Greatly, 2012)
- **Self-blame:** blaming oneself when terrible things happen
- **Self (internal)-stigma:** widely used in the HIV literature, but not applied sufficiently to rape survivors
- **Limited work on shame, self-blame and self-stigma with rape survivors in global South**

“Shame is a silent epidemic”
(Brene Brown, 2007)
Methods

- 16 female rape survivors, 18-40 yrs in eThekwini, South Africa:
  - Recruited from the RICE cohort which accessed women who reported rape victimization within 20 days at government services (TTC’s)
  - 1-3 sessions of containment and de-briefing counselling
  - Support received from RICE was appreciated
- 2-3 IDIs, 6 life history interviews that we captured in lifeline stories (total 35)
- Invested in RA team capacity development and research team’s reflexivity

The life history approach involves working one-on-one with participants in in-depth interviews as well as using visual aids to draw a timeline of events, responses, feelings etc.

Strengths and challenges

POST-RAPE SHAME & SELF-STIGMA

Many women spoke about the idea that ‘everyone knows you've been raped’, revealing their sense that rape was almost like a \textit{label} that one walks around with, and everyone can see

“I felt bad when she [mother] told the neighbour so now everybody in the community knows. I sometimes feel ashamed knowing that people know my story.” Sinazo

“I was worried that my husband was going to see me as dirty” Thabi

“I was feeling very ashamed it was like all eyes are on me, but I recovered slowly even though I was not quick to accept” Amahle
RE-VICTIMIZATION AND BEING ‘RAPE-ABLE’

For most women connected the label of having been raped with feelings of being ‘rape-able’ after they had been raped. The notion that after rape one is ‘marked’ and that being raped again is inevitable

- “Ngazizwa ngilula (I felt easy to be raped), I felt like a person living to be raped” Thuli (after two rapes and two rape attempts)

- “If you are raped you are like someone who was bitten by a dog, now all dogs want to bite you... When you are bitten by a dog (once) other dogs also want to bite you.” Sthembile

- “I sometimes feel that other men in my area look at me in that way (huh) maybe one day they would want to take advantage of me because something like this [rape] happened to me.” Snazo

Some survivors mentioned that a ritual might cleanse them of this ‘mark’

- “Maybe as per Zulu belief it [repeated rape] is because you weren’t cleansed. You have to be cleansed and the clothes that you were wearing you must burn them.” Snazo
THULI’S LIFE HISTORY

"I did not like it when I walked and men start looking at me with eyes that look like they are thinking something and I don’t want to be touched. It makes me angry."

"Ngarizwa ngilula" (I felt easy to be raped)

"I thought the community would judge me... maybe say I made that boy to do what he did and they would look at me as isibhweni (old or useless rag)

"I was thinking about death, thinking he is going to kill me"

"I didn’t know the reason why I was leaving on earth"

"I was the one judging myself more than people judged me I did not want to mix with other people"

"I felt I was just a person living to be abused by men"

"I was wishing for death"

"I feel ashamed (ngiyazinyezo)

"I have this thing that says there is something wrong with me but other people don’t see it, but perpetrators can see it. It means something is visible that I could be doing wrong"

She wishes to see the last day of her life, she thinks it will help her to make sense of why

Make up happy stories in her head about her life, helps her to sleep

Crying to feel better

"I try to get it [my life] back into order by accepting what happened and that it

Crying when reminded of the rape "I cry just like you see"

At their family home.

She was scared

Told no one about

Perpetrator came to look for her boys, she

feared being in the same room with the cousin.

"It really traumatised me because to me he was a brother."

"I was raped in her room"

Sexual harassment at work

Sexual harassment:

Current reflections

Age 19

Perpetrator: Bwiz’s associate

Sexual harassment:

Age 33

Perpetrator: Ex Boyfriend

Age 35

Perpetrator: Mkhulu

Age 39

Perpetrator: Colleague, elderly man

Attempted rape

1st rape

2nd attempted rape

2nd rape

Age 15

Perpetrator: cousin/brother

Age 20

Perpetrator: Sister’s boyfriend, who was very old
Most women did not blame themselves for their rape

- “This is not your fault, some people they keep asking themselves ‘why me’ this can happen to anyone, from a small child to grannies” Nonku

- Only one 32-year-old survivor expressed notions of self-blame for her second rape, linking them to a lifestyle of drinking and partying since the first rape at age 14

However, shifts in self-blame appears to occur where other people blamed the woman for the rape, and in response some women began to mirror these words and views, starting a narrative of self-blame

- Anele, was initially clear that she was not to blame, however, after others repeatedly told her she was naive for trusting the perpetrator and that she shouldn’t have gone with him, over time she appeared to start blaming herself

Upon reflection a few felt that they “should have known better’ but not self-blame:

- “I don’t want to lie I did get that feeling. I felt that if I had not done 1,2 ,3 this would not have happened. ” Samu

- “I thought that if I hadn’t taken that lift (the rape) wouldn’t have happened ... I felt that regret ...” Thandi
DISCUSSION

• All the women received some sort of containment counselling when reporting rape, but does not appear to have supported them to overcome feelings of shame and self-stigma
• Many women displayed inter-connected feelings of personal shame and self-stigma, and perceived community stigma post rape
• Almost complete absence of self-blame - the sample had reported to TCCs and are probably different from women have not reported their rape experiences
• Expressing feelings of Shame, Self-Blame and Self-Stigma was not easy for our participants, nor was it easy on the research team drawing these out of them but the LH method helped to make the exercise more interactive
• Many survivors moves through multiple stages of emotional well-being, with initial post-rape feelings of shame and self-stigma, which sometimes involved isolation and withdrawal, but some, NOT ALL, managed to move through this
• Women’s journeys to healing began slowly, and some found talking to other rape survivors, or getting a new job facilitated their healing
CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

• **Research with rape survivors is traumatic but possible**, through careful consideration of the methods, and researcher training and reflexivity.

• **Although rape survivors found it very hard to identify and talk about their feelings** of shame, self-blame and self-stigma post rape, they found the **interview process healing/cathartic**.

• Implications for mental health support to rape survivors:
  • We need to understand shame, self-blame, self-stigma better to know
    • **what support to offer** rape survivors
    • **when to provide what support**, 
  • Initially rape survivors may need to be contained and de-briefed but long-term healing and mental wellbeing post rape although often neglected in public health systems, it’s the most urgent investment required!
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