

Reasonable responses to unreasonable behaviour?: medical and sociological perspectives on the aftermaths of sexual violence

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This paper is located within the moves in national and local policy levels to integrate approaches to all forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG). In this spirit I will focus on sexual violence, especially rape using this to explore the difficult alliance between not only mental health and VAWG research and practice agendas, but also between medical and sociological approaches.

In particular recent research on the impacts and consequences of sexual violence in childhood and adulthood will be summarised. Much uses a clinical mental health perspective, drawing on the language of 'psychopathologies' and 'disorders'; with the most common framing that of PTSD . Moreover, the methodological requirements of health research mean that alternative responses, especially those drawing on feminist ideas, are frequently deemed 'unproven' (see for example Wang & Rowley, 2007).

The second section will explore the extent to which some of the consequences of sexual violence can be connected to the wider social context – the gender order (Connell, 2007) – in which women and girls, men and boys, who are sexually assaulted have to make sense of what has happened, deal with the responses of those they tell and may choose to seek help. Here the research evidence suggests that the responses of informal networks and formal services can compound or mitigate impacts, and that these vary across cultural contexts.

The third section of the paper asks what more sociological framings – Goffman's 'spoiled identities', Kathy Barry's 'victimism', the 'relational self' from Brison alongside the recent focus on embodiment – have to offer, and whether much of the aftermath of sexual violence is better understood as reasonable responses to unreasonable behaviours (of perpetrators and the others) which victim-survivors encounter. The implications of drawing on these alternative concepts for mental health services and practitioners will be outlined.

References

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Wang, S & Rowley E (2007) *Rape: How women, the community and the health sector respond*. <http://www.svri.org/rape.pdf>