Towards understanding internalised abortion stigma: listening to women’s voices

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Research Projects:

- **London Abortion Study**
  - Funded by Government office for London
  - 10 in-depth interviews with young women (14-18)

- **England and Wales Abortion Study**
  - Funded by MSI
  - 36 in-depth interviews with young women (16-24)
    - 16 interviewed twice
Research Projects: Qualitative Secondary analysis

- Original research questions:
  - individual abortion decision-making
  - sexual and contraceptive behaviour
  - abortion experience
  - post-abortion feelings and emotions

- Secondary analysis questions:
  - How did women manage stigma resistance and/or stigma rejection?
Stigma and deviance

- Goffman 1963: Stigma as a discrediting attribute
- Scambler & Hopkins 1986; Scambler & Paoli 2008: distinction between ‘enacted’ and ‘felt’ stigma
- Scambler 2009: importance of distinction between stigma and deviance. Stigma invokes ‘shame’ and deviance invokes ‘blame’
- Scambler 2009: stigma and deviance are socially and culturally embedded
Abortion-related stigma and deviance

- Kumar et al 2009: abortion-related stigma – ‘a negative attribute ascribed to women who seek to terminate a pregnancy that marks them, internally or externally, as inferior to the ideal of “womanhood”’
- Cockrill and Nack 2014: abortion can signal multiple transgressions (deviance) – female sexuality; rejection of motherhood; rejection of the maternal
- Major and Gramzow 1999: abortion can be concealed and stigma thus internalised
- All also note the importance of socio-economic and cultural contexts in construction of abortion-related stigma (though under-researched area)
Working definitions

Individual-level abortion stigma:
• felt stigma includes women’s assessment of other people’s attitudes towards abortion;
• enacted abortion stigma relates to actual experiences of actions that reveal negative attitudes towards abortion
• internalised stigma signifies women’s acceptance of negativity associated with abortion;

(Cockrill and Nack 2013; Herek 2009)

Abortion Stigma: ‘The shared understanding that abortion is socially and morally unacceptable’ (http://seachangeprogram.org/our-work/abortion-stigma-defined/)
The abortion studies: internalised abortion stigma?

- What makes a difference?
  - Views of significant others (shared value frameworks and social support)
  - Context of abortion pragmatism - not moral opposition
  - Importance of personal autonomy
  - Non-judgemental attitudes from providers
The abortion studies: stigma resistance and rejection

- Stigma resistance: importance of gendered social norms – the ‘good mother’
- Stigma resistance: narratives of sexual responsibility – ‘it’s not my fault’
  - Contraceptive use
- Stigma rejection: no need for explanations; no sense of abortion as morally wrong; no sense of transgression
- SO stigma was not internalised by all women
Abortion-related Stigma is neither universal nor inevitable

- Women’s abortion decision-making, (and post-abortion feelings) indicate the importance of challenging abortion-related stigma

- Towards de-stigmatising abortion(s):
  - Providers/policy-makers should avoid talking about preventing abortion(s)
  - Everyone could help establish the ordinariness of abortion
  - Abortion story-sharing and activism

- Greater understanding of resistance/rejection needed
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