



Conceptualizing stigma in the context of sexual violence research: A systematic review

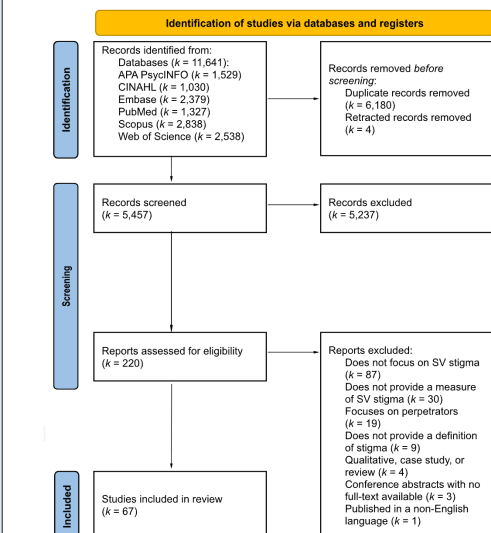
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Introduction



- Sexual violence is defined as any sexual act or attempt to engage in a sexual act through force, coercion, or without one's consent.¹
- Sexual violence is prevalent worldwide and associated with adverse mental and physical health outcomes, such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance use disorder (SUD), and chronic pain.^{2,3}
- Stigma about experiencing sexual violence has been linked with poorer physical and mental health, revictimization, and diminished engagement with support services.⁴
- Sexual violence stigma, however, has not been operationalized consistently across studies.
- This systematic review aims to generate a more comprehensive understanding of sexual violence stigma by examining how it is defined and measured in empirical studies.

Method



Results

Definitions of Sexual Violence Stigma

 Individual⁵	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Internalized feelings of shame and attributions of self-blame for having experienced sexual violence.Shame: A self-conscious, painful emotional response that is experienced as a desire to hide the damaged self from others.Self-blame: cognitive attribution in which the survivor ascribes their victimization to their own behavior or personal characteristics.
 Interpersonal⁶	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Being subjected to harmful behaviors or acts of discrimination on the account of being a survivor of sexual violence.Being treated differently by their partner, family, provider, and community members.
 Structural⁷	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Societal-level conditions, cultural norms, and institutional policies and practices that constrain opportunities, resources, and wellbeing of sexual violence survivors.

Measures of Sexual Violence Stigma

Internalized, Individual-Level

- Abuse-Related Shame Scale⁸**
 - 4 items
 - "I am ashamed because I feel I am the only one in my school/work who this has happened to."
- Others include **Attribution about Abuse Inventory** and **Self-Stigma of Seeking Help.**^{9,10}

Rape Myth, Structural-Level

- Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale¹⁴**
 - 45 items
 - "If a woman doesn't physically fight back, you can't really say it was rape."
- Others include **Rape Stigma Scale** and **Male Rape Myth Scale.**¹⁵

Enacted, Interpersonal-Level

- Social Reactions Questionnaire¹¹**
 - 48 items
 - "Avoided talking to you or spending time with you."
- Others include **Enacted Stigma Scale** and **Perceptions of Stigmatization by Others for Seeking Help.**^{12,13}

Indirect Indicators

- Self-Compassion Scale¹⁶**
 - 26 items
 - "When I'm feeling down, I try to approach my feelings with curiosity and openness."
- Others include **cardiac output** and **total peripheral resistance.**¹⁷

Method

- Peer-reviewed journal articles were identified from six databases (i.e., APA PsycINFO, CINAHL, Embase, PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science) following the PRISMA guidelines in October 2024.
- Keywords
 - "Sexual" AND "Violence" AND "Stigma" AND "Measure".
- Inclusion criteria
 - 1) published in English; 2) published in a peer-reviewed journal; 3) quantitative studies with at least 10 participants; 4) focused on sexual violence; 5) included operationalizations and measures of sexual violence stigma.
- Covidence was used for title and abstract screening, full-text reviews, and data extraction.
- Of the 11,641 articles identified in the search, 67 met criteria for inclusion.
- Directed content analysis was used to organize definitions and measures of sexual violence stigma.

Discussion

- Sexual violence stigma is a multilevel construct that can be measured at individual, interpersonal, and structural levels.
- There is a critical need for research that examines how sexual violence stigma intersects with other stigmatized identities and experiences, including those related to mental health, sexual orientation, gender, and cultural background to capture the complexity of survivors' lived experiences.
- Many existing sexual violence stigma measures rely on language and constructs that assume cis-heteronormativity.
- Future studies should prioritize the development and validation of sexual violence stigma measures that use inclusive, gender-expansive, and culturally sensitive language.

