From experiences to a model: abortion stigma in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand

Authors:
Ratcliffe SE[1,2], Huynh VMK[1], Dhillon HM[1,2].

[1] School of Psychology, The University of Sydney, [2] The Center for Evidence based Decision Making, School of Psychology, The University of Sydney.

Background:
Conceptualisations and research of abortion stigma are increasing. For conceptually sound research into abortion stigma, we require usable conceptualisations empirically derived and tested. We sought to model abortion stigma based on the perspectives of key stakeholders in abortion experiences and stigma in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand (AoNZ).

Methods:
We interviewed people who accessed, provided, advocated, and/or represented organisations supporting abortion in Australia and AoNZ about abortion stigma. Interviews and focus groups were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, thematically analysed, and conceptual models iteratively developed from the data.

Results:
We collected data from 71 people across 55 interviews and four focus groups. We developed two models depicting how abortion stigma functions: i) the abortion stigma cycle; and, ii) map of connections between themes of abortion stigma. The abortion stigma cycle involves interaction of stigma influences, manifestation, impacts, and management to perpetuate, reinforce, and amplify the stigmatisation of abortion and related people and services. The map of connections depicts how five interacting themes stigmatise abortion through: (A) positioning of abortion; (B) systemic control of abortion; (C) autonomy; (D) quality of care; and, (E) resistance. Four components were identified as influencing how stigma shapes experiences with abortion: who is involved (patient, provider, advocate, community, stakeholder, organisation), what is experienced (physical, emotional, social difficulty), when is the experience (stage of abortion; time in history), and where is the experience (context).

Conclusion:
Building on published conceptualisations of stigma, we present a conceptualisation of abortion stigma derived from empirical data. Findings suggest abortion stigma is a multi-dimensional cycle rather than a linear process and functions through a dynamic web of socio-cultural forces disempowering and empowering people, services, and structures. Future research should explore the relationships within the models using mixed-methods and data triangulation.