

# **Australia's next generation of abortion seekers: Shamed if they do and shamed if they don't**

## **Authors:**

Vallury K<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Flinders University <sup>2</sup> Torrens University

## **Background:**

The significant health and social impacts associated with abortion stigma are increasingly well documented, including healthcare avoidance, self-induction of (unsafe) abortion, poorer mental health and reduced provision of abortion care. Yet there has been almost no research into abortion stigma in Australia. Building on the findings of the Australian Abortion Stigma Study survey, a qualitative study was conducted to explore why young age emerged as a primary predictor of perceived abortion stigma.

## **Methods:**

Twenty semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with a range of 16 to 26 year olds around Australia who had and hadn't had abortion experiences. Transcripts were transcribed verbatim and coded using a novel combination of inductive and deductive coding techniques.

## **Results:**

Abortion stigma appears to be driven by the abortion seeking process making visible the 'failure' and 'irresponsibility' of an unplanned pregnancy, exacerbating the 'messy teenager' stereotype. Individuals' notions of the 'ideal reproductive timeline', dictated by social and cultural norms and status, mediated the stigma they perceived and experienced in relation to UPP and abortion (and for some, pregnancy loss). Higher social and socio-economic status were protective against abortion stigma. Limited disclosure of abortion experiences and lack of formal abortion-related education drove collective learning that abortion is taboo. Further themes regarding the drivers and impacts of abortion stigma, and stigma experiences, emerged.

## **Conclusion:**

This research provides one of Australia's first substantive contributions to (abortion) stigma theory. School based sex education and graduate and post-graduate health provide ideal but as yet untapped avenues for unlearning and re-writing the abortion narrative. Ensuring equitable access to timely and compassionate abortion care for young people will require interventions addressing the structural (social, political, cultural and legal) factors that reinforce abortion stigma.

## **Disclosure of Interest Statement:**

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