



Adult Sexual Assault Clients' Experiences of a Sexual Assault Referral Centre: A Qualitative Study

Rebecca Riley (The University of Manchester), Dr Tammi Walker (University of Huddersfield),
Dr Rabiya Majeed-Ariss (Saint Mary's SARC) & Dr Catherine White (Saint Mary's SARC)

Background

The United Kingdom has one of the lowest conviction rates for sexual assaults in Europe, at 7% (Hohl & Stanko, 2015).

A major factor in this low conviction rate is attributed to poor support and insensitive treatment by legal and health professionals (Campbell, 2008).

In response to this the United Kingdom government supported a Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) model of care. This model aims to encourage high quality forensic medical examination, independent support and counselling services.

There is limited research examining SARC services and clients' experiences of the support accessed.

Aim

To examine adult sexual assault clients' experiences of professional care, support and recovery needs in the aftermath of a sexual assault.

Methods

Clients were recruited from Saint Mary's SARC between May and September 2017.

Inclusion criteria was adults who had accessed SARC services within the preceding year.

The final sample consisted of seven white female clients.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via telephone or in person and lasted between 15 and 30 minutes each.

Interviews explored clients' experiences of the ISVA service; support needs and perceptions of the ISVA services provided.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Thematic analysis was used to organise, describe and interpret data related to the research topic.

Conclusions

Clients perceived the SARC to be a safe place that must be private and easily accessible.

Clients voiced feeling listened to, understood, believed and supported and they valued the independent nature of the specialist support accessed in addition to their personal relationships.

Further research should examine larger, more diverse samples as this study was conducted in one SARC with a small sample (N=7) of white female adult sexual assault clients.

For the development of SARC policy and practice, environmental and atmospheric factors and the location, discretion and accessibility of services should be prioritised.

The findings from this study recommend the continued use and development of the ISVA role in supporting adult clients of sexual assault.

Results

A Place of Safety

Clients discussed finding comfort in the non-clinical atmosphere; such as cups of tea and fish tanks. This reinforces the importance of providing a warm and comfortable atmosphere for clients to ensure they feel safe and supported. Security was identified as key. Clients directly attributed feeling safe at the SARC to the secure buzzer entry system.

"I felt relaxed when I got there. Relaxed enough to be able to speak to them. Yeah it felt safe, safe to be there as well."

Some clients valued the discretion and privacy of the SARC location whilst others struggled to find the building and therefore access the services. This highlights the need for balance between discretion and accessibility, whereby clients can feel confident in accessing the services whilst their privacy is respected and upheld.

"I don't think I would have found it on my own... But then on the other hand, I don't think it should be like big letters with SARC on it, so people can see who's going in and what you're going in for."

Being Impartial and Independent

Clients explored the impact of support from an impartial professional with specialist knowledge and experience as compared to more conventional sources of support, such as family and friends. Clients discussed feeling uncomfortable communicating their sexual assault to family and friends and the additional worry about making loved ones feel uncomfortable. Whereas, clients discussed feeling comfortable communicating with the ISVA because they felt reassured that their ISVA regularly dealt with this context and were accustomed to the nature of their experiences.

Clients also discussed the advantages of the impartial nature of the ISVA support; whereby the ISVA does not know the defendant, in contrast to family and friends who may be emotionally involved with both parties. One client also discussed the benefit of impartial support in relation to gaining a broader perspective on the situation through an outsider's view.

"It's [SARC] more specialised in sexual abuse and rape, where other people haven't wanted to discuss it. They don't want to talk about it because they don't think they are professional enough to deal with it and are scared to. So, I think the SARC is the place to get that help."

To Support and Understand

Clients discussed feeling emotionally supported and their experiences of this focused on feeling understood, believed and respected. Clients also discussed receiving practical support such as being accompanied to court and accessing advocacy support when dealing with the police. This demonstrates that the ISVA role is also important in bridging gaps in understanding and communication between legal professionals and the client.

"She [ISVA] explained the procedures at court and what would happen... she just, told me straight about what to expect rather than just going around the houses and sugar coating it. And also, just made sure that I knew she was there for me and that I could do it, and made me keep thinking that I was strong enough to do it."

Issues with the ISVA highlighted by the clients included being unsure what the role entailed, often until they had already started accessing the service. For some clients the service was a positive surprise. However, one client discussed feeling frustrated and confused. Apart from this experience, the majority of the clients experienced the support they received from the ISVA service as very positive.

"I wasn't really expecting anything. I'd never heard of it [SARC] before, it was just recommended that I went along... I think it was better than my expectations... I didn't know what the [ISVA] role was, really, and then she [ISVA] explained it and they've always been there for me."