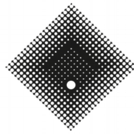

Seeing Beyond the Individual: Unveiling the Hidden Dynamics of Sexual Revictimisation in Regional and Rural Areas

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Seeing Beyond the Individual: Unveiling the Hidden Dynamics of Sexual Revictimisation in Regional and Rural Areas

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Abstract

Introduction Sexual revictimisation has detrimental health outcomes for women; yet, little is known about this experience in regional/rural areas. Guided by a Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach, we explore sexual assault counsellor perspectives on the revictimisation experiences of their clients and consider what conditions enable sexual revictimisation to be perpetrated within regional/rural spaces.

Method This paper reports findings from a workshop held in September 2021 with counsellors ($N=27$) from a sexual violence response organisation servicing regional and rural communities in Victoria, Australia.

Results Findings from this study reveal that geographically and socially isolated spaces, cultures of victim-blaming, structural disadvantage and systemic revictimisation facilitated men in perpetrating sexual violence in local and specific ways. These material-discursive forces were thereby involved in the co-constitution of sexual revictimisation as a phenomenon.

Conclusion It is imperative that revictimisation research and policy examine the multiple and complex material-discursive forces that co-constitute sexual violence experiences.

Policy Implications Investigating the complex network of forces prevalent in sexual revictimisation experiences prompts us to transcend potentially victim-blaming explanations and detrimental policy measures focused solely on the individual. Instead, this approach cultivates a deeper appreciation for the divergent dynamics, agents and processes at play. It underscores the demand for more sophisticated research and policy interventions that grasp the complexity of revictimisation experiences.

Keywords Sexual revictimisation · Sexual violence · Child sex abuse · Regional · Rural · Material feminism · Community based participatory research

Introduction

Sexual violence is a human rights violation that disproportionately impacts women (World Health Organization, 2021). Within Australia, one in five women have experienced sexual violence since the age of 15 years, compared with one in 20 men (AIHW, 2019). Research indicates women who experience child sexual abuse (CSA) face a higher risk of reexperiencing sexual violence later in life, termed sexual revictimisation (Townsend et al., 2022; Walker et al., 2019). Revictimisation is defined variably and can occur at any time; yet, it commonly refers to an initial incident of child sexual abuse (CSA) followed by subsequent instances of sexual or physical violence in adulthood (Messman-Moore & Long, 1996, 2003). For the purposes of this article, sexual revictimisation is understood as encountering two or more episodes of sexual violence during childhood, and

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then adulthood, whether by the same or different perpetrators. This broad definition is designed to encompass diverse experiences, underscoring the persistent nature of various types of violence throughout the lives of women. While any experience of sexual violence can be traumatic and life altering, evidence suggests revictimisation is associated with higher levels of anxiety and depressive disorders, including higher risk of suicidal ideation (Edwards & Banyard, 2022) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms (Jaffe et al., 2019; Ullman & Peter-Hagene, 2016). Sexual revictimisation also has a cumulative impact on victim/survivors' physical health, including a heightened likelihood of physical illnesses such as endometriosis (Harris et al., 2018) and cardiovascular diseases (Friedman et al., 2015).

Exploration of the short and long-term health impacts of sexual revictimisation make explicit the detrimental impact this experience has on the mind–body of women. However, it has also produced an overwhelming focus on the individual 'risk' factors that predispose CSA victim/survivors to further sexual victimisation. This includes mental health conditions and behavioural factors, such as alcohol and other drug (AoD) use and 'risky' sexual behaviours (Scoglio et al., 2021), that are often positioned as a mental health outcome of, or maladaptive response to, trauma.

With prevalence data suggesting CSA victim/survivors are two to three times more likely to be revictimised (Townsend et al., 2022, Walker et al., 2019), it is understandable that researchers would be concerned with pinpointing causal and mediating factors. Yet often, the impact of this research remains unexamined. Within revictimisation literature, women's behaviour is often pathologised and thus 'problematised' as causally related to revictimisation (see Orcutt et al., 2005; Messman-Moore et al., 2010; Testa et al., 2020). The individual woman is positioned as 'vulnerable' or contributing to the 'problem' (revictimisation) through her behaviour and actions (Testa et al., 2020, p. 388). Either way, the solution to the 'problem' often requires that women need to change, such as 'reducing hookups' (Testa et al., 2020, p. 395) or engaging in individual therapy and sexual assault education programs (see 'treatment' in Classen et al., 2005). While this research is well intended and has often led to enhanced support services for victim/survivors, it is still important to critically evaluate the ways in which research and the subsequent policy and programmatic response shape broader understandings of the phenomenon of sexual revictimisation. Specifically, critical consideration of the way research and policy are active in co-constituting what the 'problem' is, and thus how it should be addressed, is imperative. In other words, if the 'problem' of sexual revictimisation is implicitly located within victim/survivor's pyschosocial functioning or behaviour, then other forces such as the socio-cultural conditions that enable perpetrators to enact sexual violence become invisible. In isolating revictimisation within an individual, we are left with limited analysis on the co-constituting forces of this experience.

In addressing the critical nuances surrounding prevention efforts, it is also important to acknowledge the current landscape, where primary prevention programs aimed at reducing men's rates of sexual perpetration have shown limited effectiveness (DeGue et al., 2014; Hooker et al., 2020; Wright et al., 2020), though some studies show promise (Salazar et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2013). Despite intentions, programs often result in marginal changes related to the correlates of sexual perpetration without significantly impacting the actual rates of perpetration over time. This stands in contrast to the body of research supporting the efficacy and effectiveness of women's risk reduction programs (Holtzman & Menning, 2019; Menning & Holtzman, 2015; Senn et al., 2015, 2017). While these efforts are not without their own complexities, evidence of their success underscores why prevention efforts frequently target women. It is crucial, however, to recognise this approach not as an indictment of victim responsibility but as a reflection of the pragmatic outcomes of current research findings. Incorporating this nuanced understanding can enhance our discussion on the multifaceted strategies needed to address and reduce sexual revictimisation.

Regional and Rural Location

In recognising the ways revictimisation research implicitly victim-blames through centering victim/survivors' behaviour, this article seeks to illuminate the material-discursive socio-cultural conditions that enable perpetrators to enact sexual violence and sexual revictimisation. This is particularly important in regional and rural areas, where geographical and social isolation entangle with socio-cultural pressures and community practices to co-constitute sexual violence perpetration (George & Harris, 2014; Wendt, 2009). Research indicates violence against women may be higher in non-urban locations. For instance, evidence from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Personal Safety Survey (PSS) highlights that 23% of women living outside major cities have experienced intimate partner violence (IPV) since the age of 15, in comparison to 15% of women living in city centres (AIHW, 2019). This percentage is likely an underestimate given the PSS does not include people living in remote areas (AIHW, 2019). Researchers have also sought to draw attention to the complex socio-cultural, geographical and economic forces that contextualise violence against women in geographically and socially isolated places. This includes gendered drivers of violence against women, such as rigid and enforced gender norms, patriarchal attitudes that position women as dependents, and the normalisation of male violence and control (George & Harris, 2014; OurWatch, 2021; Wendt, 2009). There is

also Australian evidence highlighting the significant barriers that non-urban victim/survivors encounter when seeking support, including a lack of confidentiality within tight-knit communities and limited transport services or local support options (Logan et al., 2005; Campo & Tayton, 2015; George & Harris, 2014; Wendt et al., 2017).

In this study, the sexual violence response organisation we have partnered with services both regional and rural communities. We recognise that an urban/rural dichotomy oversimplifies the complexities and localised practices of particular spaces, and that what is termed 'regional' and 'rural' is characterised by specific historical, spatial, international and local relations (Owen & Carrington, 2015). Despite this, scholars recognise the terms regional and rural point to both a decreasing of population and service accessibility (Wendt et al., 2017). As geographical, social and service accessibility isolation signify important findings within this article, we follow Wendt et al. (2017) in utilising Roufeil and Battye's (2008) definitions of 'regional' and 'rural'. 'Regional' is defined as 'non-urban centres with a population over 25,000 and with relatively good access to services', and 'rural' is defined as 'non-urban localities of under 25,000 with reduced accessibility' (Roufeil & Battye, 2008, p. 3).

While a significant body of research on sexual revictimisation exists, there is limited evidence detailing the experiences of regional and rural women, including how geographical and socio-cultural factors co-constitute sexual revictimisation experiences (Corbett et al., 2022). Sexual assault studies have overwhelmingly utilised urban samples (Annan, 2006), despite 28% of the Australian population living in rural and remote areas (AIHW, 2022). Furthermore, evidence regarding rural sexual violence is often subsumed within family violence literature (George & Harris, 2014; Neilson & Renou, 2015; Wendt et al., 2017). While sexual violence towards women exists within familial settings, it also exists outside of this context, and therefore requires specific attention to better understand its existence within differing relational settings, and within regional/rural spaces (Hooker et al., 2019; Neame & Heenan, 2004; Wendt et al., 2017). There is also a lack of analysis concerning the material-discursive conditions and relations that enable men to perpetrate sexual violence in regional/rural areas.

Revictimisation studies have increasingly adopted ecological theories (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to consider contributing factors beyond individual victim/survivor variables (Grauerholz, 2000; Messman-Moore & Long, 2003; Pittenger et al., 2016; Pittenger et al., 2018; Decker & Littleton, 2018). While we recognise the significant contribution that ecological models have made to further understanding revictimisation, we see several limitations with this framework. Firstly, the theory has historically been used within research to reduce complex human behaviour into a set of observable and measurable socio-environmental factors, which has limited our understanding of victim/survivors' subjective experiences and how this experience is interconnected with their material-discursive environment (Elliott & Davis, 2020). Secondly, ecological systems theory tends to assume that the relationship between the individual and their environment is both linear and unidirectional, neglecting to consider women's experience of temporality, and suggesting that they are passive recipients of environmental influence (Elliott & Davis, 2020).

Our current research partnership with a regional/rural sexual violence support service provides a rich opportunity to further explore the situated practices, processes and conditions that co-constitute the phenomenon of sexual revictimisation. This paper reports findings from an analysis of a workshop held in September 2021 with counsellors from a sexual violence response organisation servicing regional and rural communities in Victoria, Australia. The aim of this paper is to enhance understanding of the phenomenon of sexual revictimisation in regional and rural spaces by exploring sexual violence practitioner perspectives on the experiences of their clients, and to consider what conditions enable sexual revictimisation to be perpetrated within regional/rural spaces.

Theoretical Framework

Two theoretical approaches informed the development and analysis of this article: a material feminist lens, and Carol Bacchi's (2012) post-structuralist approach, "What's the Problem Represented to be?" (WPR). Material feminism is referred to in a variety of ways, such as New Materialism (Barad, 2007) and Feminist New Materialism (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008). The term 'new' within these titles' signals to what is described as a unique 'material turn' within feminist theory that seeks to redefine understandings of relationality among the human and nonhuman world (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008, p. 6). However, as scholars have argued, there is nothing 'new' about Feminist New Materialism in the way it emphasises relationality (Rosiek et al., 2020; Todd, 2016). The concept of non-human agency, relationality between the human/non-human world and thus the understanding that material and discursive forces co-constitute phenomenon have long been presumed within Indigenous philosophies and ontologies (Rosiek et al., 2020; Todd, 2016). We will use the term material feminism to reference a diverse range of literature stemming from Feminist, Science and Technology Studies (STS) and Indigenous ontologies and philosophies.

Material feminism supported conceptualisation of sexual violence not as a discrete event occurring between a perpetrator and victim/survivor, but as a phenomenon which is co-constituted through varying agencies and material-discursive

relations between bodies, cultures, spaces and histories (for further reading on relationality and non-human agency see Moreton-Robinson, 2013, p. 340; Barad, 2007; Paton, 2020; Bellear, 2018, p. 37; Jones & Hoskins, 2016). The term material-discursive highlights that both the material (matter, bodies, physical environments) and discursive (language, discourse) mutually constitute each other and therefore must both be explored (Barad, 2007). Exploring sexual violence as a material-discursive phenomenon encouraged contemplation of the complex and multiple human/non-human forces that entangle within events of rape and sexual assault. Bacchi's (2012) WPR framework has parallels to the ontological basis of material feminism, challenging the idea that policy (and research) responds to 'pre-existing' problems, and instead is active in producing the 'problems' they seek to solve. In this way, the relationality of phenomena is emphasised and 'shifts from presumed objects to the relations involved in their becoming' (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 33). This approach supports a shift away from focusing on individual victim/survivors, to the sociocultural practices and relations that enable perpetrators to commit sexual violence and sexual revictimisation in regional/rural spaces.

To underscore the significance of our theoretical framework, and to emphasise how this framework guides our interpretation of the data, Bacchi's (2012) WPR approach will be used to explore how research and policy embed implicit problem representations of sexual revictimisation. We will then examine the way this framing excludes other issues and highlight the material effects this has on victim/survivor's lives. This approach holds that policy and research do not act 'as a response to existing conditions and problems, but more as a discourse in which both problems and solutions are created' (Goodwin, 1996, p. 67).

What's the Problem Represented to Be?

Bacchi's (2012) WPR approach enables examination of the implicit biases and assumptions that often go unnoticed within revictimisation literature when focusing on victim/survivor 'risk' factors. Sexual revictimisation, including CSA, is often framed as a 'public health problem' (Scoglio et al., 2021; Walker et al., 2019). The traumatic impacts of CSA on the health and wellbeing of victim/survivors are well documented (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Cashmore & Shackel, 2013); however, it is concerning the ways labelling something as a 'public' health problem runs the risk of complex social issues being reduced to isolated and strictly bound phenomena, which are then construed as solvable through individualised interventions (Bacchi, 2012). For instance, a recent review indicated that seven out of ten studies found 'risky sexual behaviour' to predict future sexual revictimisation (Scoglio et al., 2021). The practice and policy implications that flow from this finding include the call for public health and clinical interventions to target women's 'risky sexual behaviour' (Scoglio et al., 2021). Evidently, the 'problem' of sexual revictimisation is framed as the 'problem' of women's behaviour.

Denoting sexual behaviour as 'risky' necessarily categorises this behaviour as 'abnormal' or deviating from 'normative' sexual practices that are not considered to incite 'risk'. Thus, implicit within definitions of 'risky' sexual behaviour is a binary of 'normal' vs. 'abnormal' sexuality, where ostensibly, women should always strive to achieve 'normal' sexual status. This discourse reflects what Rubin (1984) titles the 'sex hierarchy', which details the ways modern Western societies have assigned value to sex acts and sexualities according to a hierarchical system. Initially written in the 1980s, Rubin's analysis is still applicable today. Rubin (1984, p. 13–4) states that 'according to this system, sexuality that is 'good,' 'normal,' and 'natural' should ideally be heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial. It should be coupled, relational, within the same generation, and occur at home (…) any sex that violates these rules is 'bad,' 'abnormal,' or 'unnatural'. The implicit assumptions regarding normative and deviant sexual behaviour which are evident in definitions of 'risky' sexual behaviour have material impacts on victim/survivors, and result in the heightened surveillance and policing of women's behaviour as articulated in the aforementioned policy recommendations.

Under a system of increased surveillance, victim/survivors can quickly become subject to mandatory reporting regarding violent experiences, which often positions women in debilitating situations within a social welfare system (Bumiller, 2008). In Australia, the consequences of surveillance by police and social welfare authorities are disastrous for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, who are more likely to be misidentified by police as perpetrators within IPV situations (Smee, 2021; State of Victoria, 2021), to be incarcerated (Australian Law Reform Commission, 2018), and who continue to face increasing child protection notifications (Hunter, 2023; State of Victoria, 2021). Public health policies that encourage surveillance of women's behaviour are a means to extend state control over the lives of victim/survivors and significantly limits their agency and bodily autonomy (Bumiller, 2008). Increased focus on victim/survivor behaviour also necessarily excludes co-constituting forces, such as perpetrator behaviour, or entrenched patriarchal systems of community governance, and represents the 'problem' as individual women's behaviour. In this way, research studies and policy positions do not simply represent statistical facts, nor uncover pre-existing issues, but are instead directly involved in producing the problem they seek to solve (Bacchi, 2012). As Gordon (1988, p. 27 cited in Bacchi, 1999) highlights, "Deviant behavior becomes a 'social problem' when

policy-makers perceive it as threatening to social order and generate the widespread conviction that organized social action is necessary to control it".

Leveraging both theories, we hope to provide a more nuanced understanding of sexual violence revictimisation and re-perpetration within regional and rural settings. We strive to deepen comprehension of how both space and place, entangled with socio-cultural relations, actively participates in shaping experiences of revictimisation and re-perpetration. This framework has applicability beyond the confines of a regional/rural location. Rather, it offers a means to explore the dynamic and lively interplay between sexual violence and material spaces on a larger and more global scale.

Methodology

The workshop reported on in this paper formed one outcome of a research partnership focused on improving understanding of sexual revictimisation in regional/rural areas. The project is informed by a Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach (Israel et al., 2012) and involves a partnership between the research team and a sexual violence response organisation located in a regional area of Victoria, Australia. CBPR is concerned with deconstructing oppressive power structures, including challenging the power imbalance between researchers, who often reside in established academic institutions, and community partners (Israel et al., 2012). Knowledge developed within academia has historically been afforded higher cultural authority than that derived from practice or lived experience (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2008). This is because knowledge is inherently entangled with power, or what Foucault (1977, p. 27) calls 'power-knowledge relations', where 'power and knowledge directly imply one another'. What can be regarded as 'truth' is therefore not pre-existing phenomena waiting to be discovered but is rather constituted through specific power-knowledge formations and 'regimes of truth'. Foucault reminds us that all societies have specific politics of truth, such as 'the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; (…) the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; [and] the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true' (Foucault in Foucault & Rabinow, 1984, p. 73). Who gets to 'know', what can be 'known' and the modalities of knowledge itself are therefore effects of power-knowledge relations.

The involvement of community partners is critical in directly challenging regimes of truth that are sustained and reinforced through scientific discourse and the privileging of 'experts' at the expense of other forms of knowing. Participatory research therefore becomes a space where actors can affect and expand the boundaries of what is considered important or worthy of knowing (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2008). Furthermore, if knowledge is socially constructed and materially embedded, it is crucial that those who are impacted by a research problem are involved in the research process. CBPR as an approach therefore aims to increase knowledge of a given phenomenon by collaborating with those closest to it and integrating findings into action that aim to improve the lives of community members (Israel et al., 2012). While we can be critical of and directly challenge power imbalances, we cannot fully eradicate power relations within research processes. They exist in our connections and the way we move through life. In considering this, where possible, decisions made regarding data inclusion and analysis will be made clear. We recognise that the choice to exclude certain analysis over others has significant effects. For instance, in recognising the overemphasis on victim/survivor behaviour in revictimisation literature, we have chosen to examine how perpetrator's use of violence is enabled within regional/rural spaces within the discussion section. In discussing our research findings, we aim to respect the differing ways that revictimisation has been conceptualised and responded to from a practitioner perspective, while acknowledging that all knowledge is partial and in flux.

Our community partnership has involved continual discussion and action between the sexual violence response organisation and research team to ensure collaboration in research focus, question development, method selection, data collection, analysis and planned dissemination. We have worked collaboratively to develop research questions that support the goals of the research team, our partner organisation and victim/survivors of revictimisation, including planning for collection of data that can be used for practice and policy interventions. The methods selected for our research partnership data collection have involved a range of trauma informed activities with staff from the sexual violence organisation, as well as victim/survivors. These were collaboratively designed and delivered by counsellor specialists and researchers. Collaboration between the research team, organisation staff and participants is ongoing as analysis and dissemination of findings occurs. The development of the workshop described below constituted one research activity in the early stages of the overall project. The overall research project aims to build an evidence base to elevate the voices and experiences of regional/rural practitioners, and sexually revictimised women, providing in depth knowledge for regional/rural support agencies, policy and prevention.

While anyone can experience or perpetrate sexual violence, the majority of clients attending our community partner response organisation are women. Furthermore, research indicates sexual violence is overwhelmingly perpetrated by men (AIHW, 2020). For instance, within Australia during 2018–2019, 97% of police recorded sexual assault perpetrators were male (AIHW, 2020). While more research is needed to explore the phenomenon of sexual revictimisation

within LGBTIQ+ communities, the focus of this article is sexual violence perpetrated by men towards women. Sexual revictimisation experiences explored within this paper can range from intimate partner sexual violence (IPSV) to sexual violence perpetrated by a known person, or stranger.

Method

Guided by a CBPR approach, researchers invited counsellors at the sexual violence response organisation working with victim/survivors of sexual violence in regional/rural communities to participate in a workshop to document practitioner perspectives of sexual revictimisation. Participants ($N = 27$) voluntarily attended the online workshop held via Zoom, staff did not have to participate and were offered the opportunity to opt out.

The workshop ran for 90 min and was video and audio recorded via Zoom. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the consultation and ethics approval was obtained from the lead author / researcher's Human Research Ethics Committee (HEC21036). The group discussion was facilitated by the lead author / reseacher, and staff discussed the following three questions:

1. In the work that you do, how do you support women who have experienced sexual revictimisation?
2. In what ways does living in a regional or rural location contribute to the unique experiences of sexual assault and sexual revictimisation?
3. Imagine a regional/rural community where women are thriving and living a life free from sexual violence. What's needed to create this reality?

All practitioners were female counsellors from the same sexual assault organisation and included a mix of child and adult counselling practitioners. Practitioners are based at a regional office, servicing regional and rural catchment areas. Services are offered in person, via Zoom or through outreach where practitioners will travel to meet the client. The workshop was run on a Professional Development Day, and as a cohesive group all participants were invited and encouraged to contribute. The lead author / researcher was based at the community organisation and regularly had informal conversations with sexual assault counsellors which fed back into verification of themes within the data. Data were transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

The method used within this article was 'thematic analysis', defined as 'a method of identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Thematic analysis was chosen as it offers both flexibility and the possibility to utilise a theory driven approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An explicit theoretical framework informed our interpretation (a combination of material feminism and Bacchi's (2012) WPR approach) when reading and coding the data. This included being attuned to the interrelated elements that have been explored within existing literature as contributing to violence against women, such as regional/rural cultures, geographically and socially isolated space, the economic structures of small communities and towns, colonial violence, religious influences, poverty experienced within women's familial context and women's experiences of relationships and family structures.The coding process involved one coder (the lead author), with five supervisors overseeing and examining codes and thematic analysis progression. The coder and two supervisors were present at the staff workshop. The coder and supervisors have diverse professional backgrounds ranging from graduate-level training in qualitative research methods to researchers with decades of experience in both qualitative and quantitative data analysis.

The initial codebook was developed while using Nvivo, through a combination of deductive and inductive approaches. Initially, broad thematic categories based on our literature review and theoretical framework were developed. Immersion in the data led to the identification and integration of emergent codes into the codebook, facilitating a dynamic coding process attuned to the nuances of the data. The codebook was presented to the team during frequent meetings, where iterative decision-making processes were undertaken regarding the selection of themes. Our codebook evolved to include a total of six subthemes, encompassing three distinct themes. Disagreements regarding codes and themes were addressed through structured consensus meetings where discrepancies were discussed openly.

The three major themes included *regional and rural cultures of victim-blaming, structural disadvantage and systemic revictimisation*. Several co-authors reviewed the transcript, codes and thematic analysis. A senior service sector staff member from our partner organisation participated in the review of findings to assist with the interpretation of results.

Findings

Regional and Rural Cultures of Victim-Blaming

Barriers to Disclosing

Participants reported that the socio-cultural and geographical context of regional/rural areas contributed to experiences of sexual revictimisation and sexual violence in multiple

ways. Notably, counsellors described 'tight-knit communities' with a propensity for victim-blaming and shaming women who disclosed sexual violence. For example, one counsellor explained, 'Often survivors in rural areas reside in small tight-knit communities where they are fearful to disclose the sexual assault due to constant repercussions of shaming and disbelieving from their community'. The victim-blaming enabled within these communities was in part, spurred on by the communities perceived reputation of male perpetrators, which encouraged widespread disbelief of victim/survivors when they disclosed. Residing in a rural location which was situated significant distances from other towns and services meant there was limited options for support when experiencing stigma and community victim-blaming. Furthermore, being socially and geographically isolated meant women risked repeatedly seeing or being stalked by the perpetrator when participating in community life. As summarised by one counsellor, the heightened tendency for victim-blaming within small rural communities resulted in client reluctance to disclose violence due to fear of community backlash:

> (…) everyone knows each other you can't disclose this, it's like that secret, maintaining the secret or keeping it to yourself. That just internalising and not even seeking help because who would I turn to (…) there's so much more potential (…) to gravitate towards victim blaming because you can't hold somebody whose reputation, with a so-called 'good reputation', how difficult it is to actually hold them to account.

The likelihood that the community would side with the perpetrator and ostracise women who disclosed sexual violence was commonly reported by counsellors. A perpetrator's social standing within small communities worked to absolve any form of responsibility or accountability for harm they had caused, resulting in women being socially and physically ejected from their home.

Social Isolation

The ostracization that victim/survivors experienced within regional and rural communities for disclosing sexual violence had a ripple effect on their social wellbeing. Participants explained how there existed limited alternatives for social connection due to geographical isolation, which resulted in women retracting from socialising for fear they would be confronted by the perpetrator. One counsellor described the following situation to highlight this, 'Mutual friends maintaining friendship with the perpetrator – saying they don't want to "take sides" or get involved. Woman has to stop socialising for fear he will be there as a result'. Counsellors described that within regional and rural communities, there was a general fear of social isolation, and therefore a desire to retain existing social connections at any cost. When combined with the added burden of geographical isolation, this significantly reduced the likelihood of community members intervening in sexism and gender-based discrimination:

> I think in smaller communities often people find it harder to pull each other up because (…) of the need to maintain relationships, you know. Because there is nobody else in that community that fulfils a similar role so there's just a lack of alternatives and so therefore, I think people are less inclined to speak up when they probably should.

Counsellors highlighted that it was important to develop strategies to facilitate courageous conversations between community members, and that this could be encouraged in both small and big ways to ensure people are supported and skilled to have difficult discussions regarding sexual violence while still maintaining relationships.

Structural Disadvantage

Lack of Support Services and Accessibility

Practitioners reported that regional/rural victim/survivors faced significant structural disadvantage in the form of a lack of support services, long wait times at outreach services within rural communities and rigid service accessibility, as well as a lack of safe and affordable housing and public transport options. Women's ability to access services in their local township was contextualised by specific material-discursive forces. Geographical isolation, small population sizes, limited-service providers, gendered discourses of victim-blaming combined with gossip practices meant that 'services can be related/friends with the perpetrator and increase the hurdle for v/s reaching out'. With limited public transport infrastructure, there was no way for rural victim/survivors living in poverty to travel to neighbouring towns or regional cities for service support. It was therefore crucial that women had access to outreach services separate from their own community to ensure complete, confidential and timely service support. These issues were exacerbated during COVID-19 lockdowns when outreach services completely stopped. While some services had adapted to online delivery, counsellors highlighted that service funding was largely allocated to centre-based models that required women to attend appointments in person:

> (…) a lot of the funding goes to existing services with models that are very centre based and are very kind of, still very medical model (…) and there's lots of barriers for women to access services that are 9-5 and in a

> centre where they might have to drive, have access to a car, have enough money for petrol and not be working to be able to actually access support.

Counsellors also described a general lack of funding for services such as alcohol and other drug (AoD) support, housing and mental health services. This shortage extended to preventative initiatives and treatment programs for perpetrating men. A lack of funding resulted in existing response services being understaffed and translated into long wait lists for clients, particularly for smaller communities:

> Services that are there but chronically underfunded, understaffed with waitlists (…) if they [victim/survivors] don't have safety and stability then how can they work on the core issues, you know, for their own emotional and psychological health.

Systemic Barriers and Social Entanglement

Structural issues such as limited/inflexible services and financial insecurity co-existed alongside other forces limiting victim/survivors' options beyond remaining with the perpetrator. Rural geographical isolation entangled with the fear of social isolation, limited-service support and housing to create unique barriers for women attempting to exit violent relationships. One counsellor highlighted the complexity of this situation for several of her clients, where structural disadvantages entangled with the client's desire to feel a sense of belonging within their family system:

> [What] has kept them in a relationship with a potential perpetrator is other sort of systemic factors like AoD, financial abuse, housing, staying connected with family and therefore seeing themselves as part of something even though it is really harmful to them, at least that's the better option as opposed to not being a part of a system at all and so I think those sort of structural issues on top of being in a rural location are (…) things that were often managing through (…).

Positioned within the expansive socio-economic context described earlier, systemic barriers such as restricted access to services and advocacy, in combination with the social practices of victim-blaming and unquestioning support for male perpetrators, compounded the responsibility for maintaining 'safety' among women within the community:

> (It) puts the onus on the victim because in small towns people are advised to keep away from so and so, don't hang around with so and so (…) which is reinforcing the victim blaming and the onus on women to keep themselves safe and not challenging any behaviours in a structural or other way.

Systemic Revictimisation

Institutional Failure to Respond

Counsellors described client experiences of systemic revictimisation across several structures including police, the legal system, religious institutions and the education system. For instance, police dismissed women and children's disclosures, and at times exposed them to further harm by the perpetrator. Counsellors articulated that systemic revictimisation caused extreme distress for clients involved and worked to protect perpetrators from being reprimanded for harmful behaviours.

Systemic failures on the part of police and other service providers who held responsibility for responding to violence were evident across the life course of revictimised clients. These experiences were particularly troubling for rural clients. Residing in geographically secluded areas left clients exposed to violent behaviours that went 'unseen' and unreported. Within small townships and tight knit communities, even when violence was reported, stigma and disbelief from professionals often resulted in subsequent violence and sexual revictimisation for women who sought help:

> One of my clients reported to police and to a priest as a child. Police didn't believe her despite her father's clear alcoholism, took her home and told her father about the disclosure. The priest blamed her and hit her as a child.

Young women also experienced systemic revictimisation within educational settings, including schools, where disclosures of sexual violence were met with disbelief and blame. Responses of teachers and staff to the trauma symptoms exhibited by young girls frequently exacerbated feelings of self-blame and shame for students:

> Whether it's teenage girls in VCAL[1] at TAFE or other institutions where the behaviours which are just trauma responses are judged in a way that further victimises.

Due to the extensive nature of systemic revictimisation, counsellors readily engaged in advocacy work on behalf of their clients. Advocacy work often blended with psychoeducation and was designed to reduce misunderstandings of clients' trauma responses and behaviour.

[1] VCAL stands for the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning and can be undertaken as a pathway into Technical and Further Education (TAFE).

Challenges and Ironies in Seeking Justice

The legal system did not represent a safe space for revictimised women, where protracted legal investigations could take years with no guarantee of a resolution:

> (…) I guess one of the areas that I think needs the most work because it's so extraordinarily bad for our clients is the revictimising through cross examination, through their treatment in giving statements, you know, our clients are so triggered around court movement or progression investigations (…) I wouldn't report if it happened to me, I wouldn't put myself through that and I've heard other people say that in this field.

Clients faced material difficulties when accessing the legal system, for instance without a car, or money for petrol, it was impossible to travel the long distances required to attend court. For many clients, stigmatised responses and hours of legal questioning meant when women disclose sexual violence, they are faced with navigating multiple systems that question their integrity. As articulated by one counsellor, the irony of this situation is 'Parliaments and courts protecting the "rights" of perpetrators'. Counsellors highlighted the ways legal and political systems defended perpetrators at the expense of women and children, and therefore enabled sexual revictimisation to occur:

> (…) we need a royal commission into the legal system, criminal investigation of sexual assault and family violence and the family court which allows violent and abusive men to have unsupervised access to their children – and perpetuate the cycle of abuse and victimhood.

For many women in small communities, disclosing violence to official services such as police became particularly dangerous when the perpetrator was a well-respected person in the community, such as the police officer for that town:

> (…) the difficulty of being able to go to disclose to somebody or to report to the police (…) where the actual police officers have been the perpetrators in small communities or where somebody is a very high profile person in the community, you know somebody at the school, or I mean obviously priests in small communities as well, (…) where who's going to believe me against somebody who everybody else in the town holds in such high esteem and I can think of many many many stories over the years where this has been the case.

Discussion

This thematic analysis sought to enhance understanding of the phenomenon of sexual revictimisation in regional and rural spaces through exploring counsellor perspectives on the experiences of their clients. In addition, we sought to consider what conditions enable sexual revictimisation to be perpetrated within regional/rural spaces. Findings from the workshop affirm a lot of what is already known regarding the relationship between gendered violence and rurality. While literature specifically pertaining to sexual violence and rurality remains somewhat limited within Australia (Annan, 2006; Wendt et al., 2017; Hooker et al., 2019), family violence literature has extensively examined how the social and geographical context of rural spaces may shape women's experience of IPV and family violence (George & Harris, 2014; Neilson & Renou, 2015; Wendt et al., 2017). Our research builds upon findings within rural family violence literature and highlights that specific material-discursive forces co-constitute sexual revictimisation experiences within regional/rural spaces. This discussion will point to the ways that 'rural' space, beyond existing as 'context', is co-constitutive of sexual revictimisation and how sexual violence in turn co-constitutes the 'rural'. In the following sections, a conceptual framework informed by material feminism and Bacchi's WPR approach will be devised to understand revictimisation based on counsellors' perspectives, examining the material-discursive socio-cultural relations and conditions which enable sexual revictimisation to occur. These findings support the conclusion that geographically and socially isolated spaces, victim-blaming, the perpetration of sexual violence, structural disadvantage and systemic revictimisation not only co-exist, but co-constitute sexual revictimisation experiences.

What's Rural Got to Do with It?

Tight-knit communities with a propensity for victim-blaming, and siding with the perpetrator, is not a phenomenon specific to rural spaces. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse found widespread abuse occurring within Australian religious communities within urban, regional and rural areas. The commission found that the reputation of ministers and priests as 'representatives of God' shielded them from accountability processes, resulting in children being regularly disbelieved and blamed for the abuse they experienced (Royal Commission into Institutional Response to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017, p. 23). Similarly, fear of seeking support due to services knowing the victim/survivor or perpetrator may be evident in highly insular Orthodox Jewish communities within urban spaces in the

US (Katzenstein & Fontes, 2017). While individual themes within our findings may well exist within other community experiences, the point of our framework is to consider how *all* of the identified material-discursive forces co-create a specific cultural and material space enabling sexual revictimisation to occur. This includes densely populated communities, community victim-blaming, a propensity to side with the perpetrator, male reputation, *geographical isolation*, threat of social isolation, higher likelihood of being stalked by the perpetrator, a lack of support services, high likelihood of service staff knowing the perpetrator, limited public transport options and likelihood that local service systems will dismiss women and children's disclosures. Our framework is not specifically unique to rural areas; rather, this approach indicates the ways *multiple* material-discursive forces co-constitute experiences. Each of these forces cannot be isolated into 'singular factors', but rather constitutes a complex web that needs to be considered in its entirety.

From a material feminist perspective, geographical isolation is an active agent in shaping violent experiences. Geographical and social isolation has been extensively researched within the context of rurality and family violence, in particular the barriers it can pose for victim/survivors seeking support (Owen & Carrington, 2015). Yet, more than a barrier to support, geographical isolation is a material condition that influences individuals' physical and psychological experiences of place. The geographical isolation of rural communities is an embodied reality of distance—distance from neighbours, from trusted friends, from being seen or heard. This distance is not simply a physical restriction in accessing services; it can contribute to material conditions that support a felt sense of vulnerability. Furthermore, expansive physical space and a lack of proximity to other humans can create the conditions for abuse to occur undetected and uninterrupted. It is not that geographical isolation is the central force in sexual revictimisation experiences. Rather, it exists in a dynamic relationship with other material-discursive forces, including perpetrator agency and behaviour, that set the conditions of possibility for sexual violence.

The Web of Perpetration

In the following section, we will consider the conditions and relations that are evident across regional/rural women's revictimisation experiences as detailed by counsellors and examine the ways men are enabled to commit sexual violence and sexual revictimisation within these spaces. Creating a lens for analysing regional and rural spaces enables consideration of the ways places, history, gossip, community relations and structures, among other things, allow certain community attitudes about violence against women to flourish, and how this entangles with structural disadvantage and 'response' systems. The first step in developing this approach was to examine what counsellors said about the material-discursive forces that flow through revictimisation experiences. What conditions enabled men to perpetrate sexual violence towards girls and women? What were the enduring qualities that held across sexual revictimisation experiences in regional/rural areas? (see Fig. 1).

The point of Fig. 1 is to highlight the material-discursive conditions and forces that enabled men to perpetrate sexual violence across a victim/survivors' life course. From the diagram above, we can quite literally see a multitude of forces that co-constitute sexual re-perpetration, beyond an individual victim/survivor's 'risky' behaviour. From a material feminist perspective, this illuminates the limitations inherent in conceptualisations of sexual revictimisation as temporally bound events of interpersonal violence solely between individuals (see Harris et al., 2020). This is not to suggest

Fig. 1 Co-constituting forces and conditions within sexual re-perpetration

perpetrators should not be held accountable for their harmful behaviour as individuals; however, as noted earlier, there is a propensity within research and policy to view human action as the sole 'cause' of revictimisation, which obscures the material-discursive conditions that scaffold the occurrence of sexual violence. Broadening our scope of who/what is implicated in the perpetration of sexual revictimisation necessitates that accountability for sexual violence is a shared responsibility (OurWatch, 2021; Victorian Law Reform Commission, 2021).

A large proportion of family violence literature has examined the mechanisms underpinning male reputation within rural settings, and the ways systems and structures are complicit in thwarting perpetrator accountability processes within cases of IPV and family violence (George & Harris, 2014; Neilson & Renou, 2015; Wendt et al., 2017). For instance, Wendt (2009) highlighted the ways male reputation is bolstered through generational family property and lineage, which deterred community members from challenging abusive behaviours due to men's power and influence within the community. As reflected in our data, there was a presence of a 'Boys' Club' mentality, where informal social networks between community members work to trivialise abuse towards women in a range of settings (Websdale & Johnson, 1997; Lievore, 2003; Neame & Heenan, 2004; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009; Owen & Carrington, 2015). As detailed by counsellors, the heavily interconnected and geographically/socially close-knit fabric of regional/rural spaces provided a foundation for men to operationalise particular 'power-knowledge relations' (Foucault, 1977, p. 27), which determined how sexual violence would be conceptualised and responded to.

It is important to note the entanglement of material-discursive forces and daily practices that co-constitute sexual revictimisation are not static, and evidently, they do not occur in isolation to structural and systemic forces. From the data collected, we can see the way patriarchal attitudes which support the use of power over and disbelief in women's narratives infiltrated familial, community and system response within regional/rural communities. The reputations of perpetrating men as prestigious community members worked to eliminate from public imagination the capability for them to enact sexual violence. This occurred at an interpersonal and community level, as well as within service provision, police response, education settings and the legal system and reflects prior evidence regarding systemic revictimisation (Maier, 2008; Jakubec et al., 2013). While this phenomenon is not necessarily specific to rural areas, when entangled with geographical isolation and other forces, it creates distinctive conditions of violence within particular regional/rural communities. The following section will examine how material-discursive conditions that co-constitute sexual revictimization emerge within and through each other.

Violence as Lively Motion

The ability for perpetrating men to be held in high regard, the infiltration of this into community systems, and the ability to enact surveillance over victim/survivors' movements is not simply an outcome of 'patriarchy' or residing in a rural community. Neither rurality nor patriarchy occur as pre-existing entities, nor can we say they are bounded phenomenon with particular 'effects'. Instead, rural spaces, systems of violence and social networks that protect perpetrating men are understood as dynamic practices/processes that are in a constant state of 'becoming'. Within rural studies, 'geographies of becoming' seek to recognise the ways space and place are co-constituted through materiality, practice and performance (Heley & Jones, 2012, p. 210), indicating that rather than a static frame, rurality is 'always in process (…) never a closed system' (Massey, 2005, p. 11). In this way, the community rearing of perpetrating men and the subsequent access to stalking and harassing victim/survivors is (re)produced through, but also in turn (re)produces, the rural place, its distances, densities and layout, mundane gossip practices, sexist and misogynistic discourses, systemic colonial violence, use of power over and abject emotions and bodies. This list is not exhaustive; the point is how these forces entangle to enable sexual revictimisation to occur, and the ways these forces, such as rural place, are (re)produced through this violence. For instance, victim/survivors' experiences of sexual violence, subsequent exclusion from friendship groups and limited opportunity for alternative connections due to geographical isolation co-constituted how their rural space could be felt-known. These material-discursive forces are specific and emergent phenomenon in and of themselves, and their exploration is beyond the scope of this article. However, from the data collected, it is evident that geographically and socially isolated spaces, cultures of victim-blaming, structural disadvantage and systemic revictimisation were entangled and co-constituted perpetrators' ability to enact sexual revictimisation in localised and specific ways.

Strengths and Limitations

Strengths of this article include our industry partnership with a sexual violence response organisation, informed by a CBPR approach. Our research partnership has provided a rich opportunity to better understand the situated practices, processes and conditions that co-constitute the phenomenon of sexual revictimisation within regional/rural areas. While this analysis is not generalisable to all regional/rural areas,

capturing counsellors practice experience with victim/survivors has been crucial in understanding the importance of how particular regional/rural spaces, structural disadvantages and systemic revictimisations co-constitute clients' experiences of sexual revictimisation. A limitation of this article is that we only documented practitioners' perspectives. The need for regional/rural revictimised victim/survivors' voices and experiences is crucial in informing the practice-based knowledge we have documented in this article.

Conclusion

This article aimed to enhance understanding of the broader phenomenon of sexual revictimisation through exploring sexual violence counsellors' perspectives on the experiences of their clients. The implicit framing of women's behaviour as causally related to sexual revictimisation continues to dominate broader revictimisation literature, and as outlined in the discussion, has material impacts on victim/survivors. Utilising a conceptual framework informed by material feminism and Bacchi's (2012) WPR approach enabled analysis of the way material-discursive relations co-constitute perpetrators' ability to enact sexual revictimisation. We examined the ways rural place, community norms and victim-blaming discourses coalesce and produce conditions that enable sexual violence to occur. The findings reinforce the limitations of solely focusing on individual victim/survivor behaviour in isolation to the specific and localised co-constituting forces that mark revictimisation experiences. Within this analysis, practitioner contributions demonstrate that spatiality, temporality, community discourses, norms, histories and practices combine with perpetrator agency to enact sexual revictimisation. In this way, sexual revictimisation needs to be studied and researched as an active and emergent process which is co-constituted by a range of material-discursive forces.

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Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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