ABSTRACT

Stigma as a phenomenon has long held the interest of researchers from various fields including sociology, anthropology, literature, political science and psychology and has been studied extensively from various vantage points. While the breadth of available literature has provided insights into the nuances of manifestations and implications of being stigmatized, certain types of stigma and certain stigmatized identities continue to stay at the margins of research interests. Sexual stigma, i.e. the devalued status ascribed to any non-heterosexual identity is a kind of stigma that has caught the attention of researchers relatively recently and has been sparingly studied in the Indian context. The limited research available on sexual stigma is marked with a predominance of quantitative, hypothesis-testing models that have ignored important questions like the role of the body in the experience of sexual stigma and impacts other than the negative and unconstructive ones for the individual concerned. In an attempt to plug these gaps in available literature, the present study explores using qualitative methodology, the experience of sexual stigma, its lived body experience or its embodiment and the possibility of outgrowing its negative impacts in a sample of thirty individuals with different sexual identities including gay men, lesbian and bisexual women and transgender.

The study utilizes two methods of data collection- a semi-structured interview and the body mapping method, which is a visual art method particularly suited to explore experiences of stigma and its embodiment in marginalized groups. The data obtained i.e. narratives and visual representations of participants’ body maps were subjected to analysis using the thematic network analysis method. This method presents the findings in the form of web-like networks that allows for the researcher to understand the process through which basic themes collate to develop an organization theme and how organization themes converge to allow for the extraction of higher order themes that form the global themes of the study. A total of
fifteen global themes (with global theme fourteen sub-divided into three sub-sections) have been obtained from the participants’ narratives of which nine global themes explicate the various manifestations and facets of sexual stigma, three global themes illustrate the manner in which sexual stigma is embodied and the last three discuss the possibility of resisting and outgrowing sexual stigma. The salient findings of the study include the reconsideration of sexual minorities as not passive recipients of discrimination but as active agents who process and hence influence the impacts of sexual stigma meted out to them; stigma based on sexual and gender roles as existing even within the queer community thus resulting in layers of privilege and discrimination in the community; sexual stigma experienced at the intersections of various parallel identities held that is not merely a summative effect of discrimination faced owing to multiple minority status; revisiting the importance of coming out in attaining self-acceptance and outgrowing sexual stigma and understanding it as facilitating but not a necessary condition that is linked to positive self-esteem in sexual minorities.

Analysis of the body maps and the narratives that accompany them reveal that sexual stigma is an embodied phenomenon and is lived by the body in the form of marks on skin, physical sensations of fear and anxiety in the anticipation of stigma and also as absorbed within certain parts or organs of the body. The thematic analysis reveals that the body of a queer person is policed and regimented by the individual herself/himself as a sign of internalizing the heteronormative roles imposed by the larger society and just like the identity of being queer is stigmatized, so is the body of the queer person. As the study explores sexual stigma as having other effects than ones that are only negative and depleting, findings reveal that individuals with alternate sexualities are capable of finding benefits in the otherwise difficult experience of being stigmatised and that psychological growth in the wake of sexual stigma is a valid possibility. The salient themes obtained however also indicate that growth is not a state of immunity to pain and trauma that is attained but a process that is fluid and dynamic.
for a queer person, marked with simultaneous experiences of ridicule and rejection and hence may be better understood as ‘growing’ out of sexual stigma. The implications of these findings for future research and limitations of the study are also discussed.

Keywords:

Sexual stigma, embodiment, body map, psychological growth