



## The 'perfect victim', internalised self-blame and our coping strategies

This post is inspired by a conversation with a friend - initially inspired by thinking about promiscuity and performative sex as related to sexual violence, we realised that much of our own experiences disrupted the 'typical' narratives about 'recovery' and trauma enforced by society. I feel like this is a huge topic, and our experiences while really individual and diverse were quite similar with respect to our initial experience (rape as an adult by someone known) - please comment with more and help us flood out these archetypes with real stories!

As we see it, the socially enforced narrative goes something like this: after rape the survivor will be immediately uncontrollably distressed. Somehow she will still retain the ability to coherently recount her experience in chronological order, and will either use this skill to report to the police or at least to tell a friend and possibly her parents once she feels up to letting them in. She will get a lot of support early on but will struggle to talk to those close to her. On the one hand, she may become really fearful of men and of sex. She will probably have flashbacks during sex and her boyfriend will probably stop and hug her and not know what to do. When she is first able to enjoy sex again she'll feel liberated, like she has achieved a milestone in her recovery. On the other hand, the 'bad' victim may start having lots of casual sex, because she feels worthless and doesn't 'respect herself'. She becomes the archetypal 'damaged goods' and probably needs a stable man to calm her down and 'fix' her, but she should be grateful for one willing to deal with her 'baggage'.

Enough with the stereotypes. These are our experiences, which certainly involve a good sprinkling of the above, but as threads in a much larger and more real narrative.

Both of us felt that our sexual experiences and relationships became part of a narrative which both played into and justified internalised self-blame, and caused us a lot of anxiety with respect to the 'good/bad' victim ideals. Neither of us immediately 'called it rape'. My friend's later sexual experiences were all within relationships - despite this she felt immense pressure to perform in the right way sexually, not appearing to enjoy it 'too much' for fear of being a 'whore', but simultaneously feeling the need to create a fiction of sex always being pleasurable and denying her own personhood and desires to do so. For me, casual sex often in very unsafe situations perfectly reinforced the narrative that I was a 'slut' who enjoyed it and found violence a turn on. These experiences reinforced for me that violence, disregard and contempt for your sexual partners was normal, even expected. I could subsume memories I didn't want to confront into that narrative. Far from being born out of a lack of self-respect or being damaging, this kept me safe, psychologically speaking, until I was able to name and address my experiences. Despite the differences between our early experiences, we both struggled immensely with the idea of being the one who was more experienced or was initiating sex in a relationship. For me the feeling I remember here is overwhelmingly one of exposure, that 'what I had done' and 'who I really was' was raw on the surface for my partner to see.

For both of us, some of our sexual experiences after the rape were some of the most difficult memories to think about. My friend described it as 'memories of my own compliance'. We both



remember struggling to create a narrative which saw us as both enjoying sex and performing that enjoyment perfectly for our partners (as I write this, I don't think that's unique to survivors!). My experiences were sometimes liberating, sometimes bizarre and, looked at from a clear distance, often frightening. My memories include dissociating during sex to the point where I was asked repeatedly why I was bleeding and if I was ok (I managed to get out 'yes fine' and he carried on), then leaving later on to realise when I was getting odd looks on the street that I had mascara smeared over my face and tears in my eyes but had no idea why. I remember encouraging a man to hit me across the face during sex (I knew I could take it) - he then choked me as he ejaculated and reminisced that he enjoyed it because it 'didn't feel too different from rape'. While my friend's experience didn't as clearly fit the 'promiscuity' narrative, we had remarkably similar memories of crying during sex and having it ignored by a partner (and by ourselves until later reinscribing the memories!), and of the performative ideal we felt we had to live up to leading to us not being 'all there'. However not having become self-aware about our own experiences never mind discussed them with partners, sex for us became a minefield where we tried to hide and/or deal with all of this while enforcing the idea on ourselves that we were always enjoying it.

In light of all this, we don't enjoy the socially constructed narratives of reactions to sexual violence. They erase the context of the survivor's life and the other influences on their sexuality and desires, and force our diverse experiences into tiny boxes. We've heard overly simplistic discussions far too many times which imply that some women 'don't respect/value themselves' after assault and therefore incur continuing 'damage' from engaging in casual sex which should be prevented. In combination with the assumption that abstaining from sex or intimate relationships with men is also a 'trauma response' to be cured, this duality implies that 'recovery' from sexual violence, whatever that is, entails learning how to have exactly the right amount of sex (with men). Count us out please.