



UK Research
and Innovation



SH+ME



Call for Papers for Workshop:

Researching and Writing Histories of Sexual Violence: Methodological Challenges and Ethical Complexities

27 October 2021

Research into sexual violence...is not lightly undertaken...The project is necessarily and unavoidably political. An attempt at dispassionate, discrete authorship runs the risk of becoming voyeuristic and exploitative. Research on sexual violence should be empowering, for those involved in its writing(s) and reading(s). It therefore demands methodologies devised as if to be similarly empowering to the women and children disclosed in the written sources.¹

These words, written almost thirty years ago by Shani D’Cruze (who sadly passed away earlier this year), remain an important provocation for historians of sexual and gender-based violence. D’Cruze was a leading figure amongst a generation of historians who, inspired by the women’s liberation movement of the 1970s, turned their attention to histories of rape and sexual violence in the 1980s and 1990s. These feminist scholars demonstrated how the meanings and experiences of rape are historically and culturally specific, and how understandings of what constitutes harmful sex change across time and place. In the wake of the #MeToo movement, and in response to renewed public attention to sexual violence and the failures of judicial systems to adequately address rape, historians are again turning their focus to how sexual violence has been conceptualised, experienced, and responded to in the past. Moving beyond the previous historiography’s reliance on court documents, historians today are increasingly utilising interdisciplinary methods, drawing on work in medicine and psychology, anthropology and the social sciences, art and literature, and looking for sources beyond the traditional archive through oral histories and participatory methodologies.

Such approaches to studying the history of sexual violence come with particular methodological challenges and ethical complexities. This workshop recognises that these concerns and complications are foundational to the research that we do and need to be explicitly interrogated in our research, analysis, and writing. Jointly organised by the [South Africa’s Hidden War](#) project at the University of Exeter and the [Sexual Encounters and Medical Harms](#) (SHaME) project at Birkbeck, University of London, **the workshop is aimed at scholars from any discipline working on histories of sexual violence across any time period or location.** We hope to include a broad geographical and cultural range of perspectives, and particularly encourage papers exploring histories of sexual violence beyond Europe and the global North.

We invite proposals for 15-20 minute papers on topics and questions including but not limited to:

Methodology:

- What is and is not knowable from the archive? How can we approach archival material in new and creative ways to hear marginalised voices?
- What are the benefits and challenges of working with participants for this type of research?
- What particular methodological challenges do historians of sexual violence face, and how can we overcome these challenges?

¹ Shani D’Cruze, ‘Approaching the History of Rape and Sexual Violence: Notes Towards Research,’ *Women’s History Review* 1:3 (1992): 377.

Ethics

- What does it mean to do ethical research on histories of sexual violence?
- How can we incorporate and address ethical concerns into our research, analysis and writing?
- Do all historians of sexual violence, even those not working with living participants, have ethical responsibilities to their subjects? What are the ethical concerns regarding using archival material on sexual violence?

Positionality and Power Dynamics

- How do our own identities, politics, or backgrounds shape the research we do? What does it mean to bring an intersectional perspective to our historical research on sexual violence?
- What are the opportunities and challenges of doing research on sexual violence as either 'insiders' or 'outsiders' to the communities we study?
- How do we ensure our research is not exploitative or extractive?
- How should researchers contend with the legacies of racism and colonialism when conducting research on the global South?

Dissemination and Impact

- What are the challenges around disseminating research on sexual violence, either through traditional academic channels or public engagement? How can historians of sexual violence best practice engaged or impact-facing research?

The workshop will be held online on 27 October 2021.

Proposals, consisting of a **300-word abstract and brief bio** should be sent to Emily Bridger (e.j.bridger@exeter.ac.uk) and Ruth Beecher (r.beecher@bbk.ac.uk) by **2nd August 2021**.