

A critical review of sanctioned knowledge production concerning abortion in Africa: Implications for feminist health psychology

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Abstract

Taking a feminist health psychology approach, we conducted a systematic review of published research on abortion featured in PsycINFO over a 7-year period. We analysed the 39 articles included in the review in terms of countries in which the research was conducted, types of research, issues covered, the way the research was framed and main findings. Despite 97 per cent of abortions performed in Africa being classifiable as unsafe, there has been no engagement in knowledge production about abortion in Africa from psychologists, outside of South Africa. Given this, we outline the implications of the current knowledge base for feminism, psychology and feminist health psychology in Africa.

Keywords

abortion, Africa, feminist health psychology, health psychology, reproduction

Introduction

In this article, we present the results of a systematic review of the published literature on abortion in Africa using the PsycINFO database. The purpose of this review is to unpack the implications of the knowledge produced about abortion in Africa for health psychology research and practice. Given the centrality of gender in abortion and its key place in feminist work (Braam and Hessini, 2004), we home in on the possibilities and gaps in relation to feminist health psychology.

In 2008, an estimated 13 per cent of all pregnancies (including live births, miscarriage and abortions) ended in abortion in Africa, a minor increase from the 12 per cent estimated in 1995 and 2003. Of these, 97 per cent could

be classified as unsafe abortions, with unsafe abortions being defined as a procedure performed by people lacking the necessary skills or in an environment not meeting minimal medical standards, or both. The rates of unsafe abortion are somewhat lower in Southern Africa (58%) owing to the liberal abortion law, and the implementation thereof, in South Africa (Sedgh et al., 2012).

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