Terms, definitions and language used when we research and talk about multiple perpetrator rape.

The first workshop of the day was put aside to discuss definitions and terms used in research on MPR as requested at the last seminar in April 2011. Language was added as a request received on the day.

Mackenzie Lambine and Teresa da Silva had, in advance of the day, reviewed all articles they could find on MPR and sexual violence in general to determine what terms were commonly used and if/how they were defined. Mackenzie and Teresa circulated a document that they had produced summarising their findings which can be requested by emailing the seminar organisers via m.horvath@mdx.ac.uk or j.woodhams@bham.ac.uk.

The first word suggested for discussion was “perpetrator”. It was argued that this is a problematic term since it has a loaded meaning (i.e., it implies intent). It was queried whether we should use “offender” instead? However, offender has a loaded meaning also, particularly in the UK where it implies the person has been convicted of the crime. It was therefore agreed that we are likely to experience difficulties in arriving at a universal definition in this respect because of cultural differences. The issue of labelling a child as an “offender” rather than using terms such as “children who display sexually harmful behaviour” was also raised. There was discussion of the damaging nature of the term “offender” for young people.

The group also discussed terms used to describe verbal behaviours during multiple perpetrator rape. It was suggested that the term “verbal violence” should be avoided since violence by definition implies physical action. Concerns were raised that it takes away from the significance of physical violence. Alternative terms that the group preferred were “Verbal abuse” or “verbal aggression”. However, it was discussed that even within these categories the function of a verbal act can vary and it can be useful to know about the function of the language the individuals are using.

Several group members expressed their frustration with the focus on injury in sexual violence research. It was argued that it is only one aspect of harm and that “coercive control” can be just as damaging as violence due to the loss of power and control experienced by the victim.

It was highlighted that official definitions of sexual violence can be problematic. Responses from other group members were that we can’t get away from official definitions if we are trying to research with police data.

Discussions moved on to the terms used to describe sexual assaults committed by two or more perpetrators. Gang rape was rejected by the group as an inappropriate term since “gang” is associated with the motive for the act and the relationships between the victim and offender(s). The group agreed that a written document would be helpful which explained why multiple perpetrator rape is not gang rape to raise awareness.

Discussions moved on to levels of involvement in a multiple perpetrator rape and under what circumstances someone should be considered a perpetrator/offender. It was debated whether a bystander who is not there under coercion should be considered a perpetrator. Or, whether a bystander in this scenario should be labelled an accomplice with the individuals who have a hands-on role being labelled as perpetrators/offenders. The group highlighted the difference between acts of commission and acts of omission. This led to a discussion of joint enterprise. Such labels assume that everyone in the room is making choices, has an equal level of power and therefore has an equal choice. Group members argued that these assumptions are incorrect. The group agreed that it is vital to focus on early interventions to assist young people in making these sometimes difficult choices. The discussion of how to intervene continued with the group considering the importance of working with school children about perceptions of “snitching” and developing social responsibility.