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Sexual violence in higher education: staff knowledge, understanding and confidence in supporting minoritized students who disclose sexual violence

Clare Gunby [a], Laura Machin [b], Harriet Smailes [c,d], Saima Ansari [a,e], Khatidja Chantler [a], Caroline Bradbury-Jones [f], Kate Butterby [g] and Catherine Donovan [g]

[a]School of Nursing and Public Health, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK; [b]Department of Sociology, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK; [c]Institute of Applied Health Research, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK; [d]School of Criminology and Sociology, The University of Leicester, Leicester, UK; [e]School of Social Sciences, The University of Manchester, Manchester, UK; [f]Institute of Clinical Sciences, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK; [g]Department of Sociology, University of Durham, Durham, UK

ABSTRACT

Sexual violence on UK university campuses has received research and policy attention. However, little is known about the experiences of and responses to student victim-survivors with minoritized identities and how inequalities linked to race, sexuality and disability may impact the disclosure process. To address this gap, we conducted 34 interviews with academic and professional service staff working at three UK universities to understand their knowledge of the intersections between minoritization and sexual violence, awareness of institutional processes and support provision and confidence in receiving disclosures of sexual violence. Our findings outline the layers of complexity that minoritization adds to the experience of sexual violence, and the lack of confidence amongst academic staff in receiving disclosures, compounded by their limited knowledge of institutional provision and process. We call for a whole-institution, intersectional response to enable universities to provide practices and policies that serve the interests of all.

Introduction

Sexual violence (SV) at university – sometimes referred to as sexual misconduct and defined as 'any unwanted or attempted unwanted conduct of a sexual nature' (Office for Students 2023a, 16) – is not uncommon. UK-based studies have reported prevalence rates amongst students of around 60–68% (National Union of Students 2010; Office for Students 2024; Revolt Sexual Assault 2018), with multiple studies having identified the gender of the perpetrator to be 'overwhelmingly male for both female and male victims' (Jones, Farrelly, and Barter 2024, 14). Contrary to the assumption that the

problem of SV is one affecting White, able-bodied, cis women, emerging data suggests that, whilst numbers are lower, minoritized students may be proportionately more likely to report SV (see Donovan and Roberts 2023). Despite this, there is a gap in literature focusing on the experiences and responses to student victim-survivors with a minoritized identity (House of Commons Library 2022). More broadly, there is limited insight into staff confidence in receiving disclosures from students and to our knowledge, no UK-based literature examining the intersections between SV and minoritization and how this may impact the disclosure process. Gangoli and Jones (2023) have pointed to the importance of understanding the intersectional identities of students, with regards to gender, social class, race and ethnicity and international student status, to better make sense of their experiences of gender-based violence. Here, we contribute to addressing this gap, by drawing on interviews with 34 staff working across three English Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to examine staff knowledge of the intersections between minoritization and sexual misconduct, of related institutional support provision/process and their confidence in receiving disclosures of SV.

Institutional and sector context

In 2016, Universities UK released 'Changing the Culture', hailed as a catalyst moment in the sector. Universities, up to this point, had been expected not to involve themselves with student misconduct which could constitute a criminal offence. However, this report made clear the need for HEIs to take a strategic and comprehensive approach to SV, harassment and hate. Subsequently, there was a call from the English universities' regulator, the Office for Students (OfS), to regulate university approaches to sexual misconduct (OfS 2023b). Of course, while sector-wide approaches are necessary to affect positive change on a larger scale, the specific actions of a university in response to SV at a micro-level, also require consideration. That is, how staff are responding to SV on a day-to-day basis and how institutional structures either help or hinder the response, need to be understood. Students themselves perhaps now also have greater expectations for institutions to at least openly discuss how they are doing to handle SV (Bull 2024).

A student's formal university support network may include counsellors/therapists, student services (e.g. residential services), or university security. In a systematic review, it was found that rates of formal disclosure to these services were low, particularly when compared to disclosures to friends and family (Halstead, Williams, and Gonzalez-Guarda 2017). When students do disclose or report to university services they do not necessarily receive the support they require. For example, in 2018, only 2% of student respondents reported that they were satisfied with institutional reporting processes (Revolt Sexual Assault 2018). Bull and Page (2022) identified that students were not able to progress through institutional complaints processes, and generally that inadequacies in formal reporting mechanisms limit the opportunities for justice for students. Not disclosing SV may lead to poorer mental health outcomes, but survivors who receive negative responses are impacted more significantly by depression and post-traumatic stress (Ahrens, Stansell, and Jennings 2010; Halstead, Williams, and Gonzalez-Guarda 2017). Smith and Freyd (2013) have developed this further in their considerations of 'institutional betrayal', whereby the approaches of an institution have been found to negatively impact a victim-survivor's experience of trauma, more so than what was caused by the SV itself.

These approaches constitute not just how universities respond once something has happened, but also how they educate and work to prevent incidents from happening in the first place, an area where students are also increasingly expecting action (Bull 2024).

Staff are central to creating and maintaining campus environments that support disclosure. However, expectations of staff can be disjointed, with the potential to create a culture whereby student SV is not seen as the business of, in particular, academic staff. It could be suggested that 'once the class is over, the room empty, and the door closed, students' lives become the domain of student affairs' (Radina 2017, 134). While not entirely untrue, in the sense that staff across a university will have different levels of involvement with SV compared to others, this division could lead to poor responses to disclosing students. Staff cannot, however, just be expected to respond appropriately – they require time, guidance and support to encourage effective responses (Jones, Chappell, and Alldred 2021). Sales and Krause (2017) found that around a quarter of staff participants reported feeling uncomfortable guiding students through disclosures of sexual misconduct, but that these responses were (positively) affected by receipt of training being rolled-out at the time of the survey. The context of precarious staff contracts must also be addressed when considering the role staff are expected to play in institutional SV approaches, with 'precarious labour relations (re)produc[ing] the material conditions for sexual violence' and therefore necessitating attention (Phipps 2025, 5).

Intersectionality and minoritization

Research indicates that students from minoritized backgrounds encounter distinct and additional obstacles in disclosing SV, linked to their intersectional identities (Crenshaw 1989). Intersectionality aims to dissect the interplay of various power dynamics and intertwining identities, including (but not limited to) 'race', class, gender, sexuality, age and ability. Ideas of mutual constitution suggest that experiences of SV, along with reactions to it, cannot be understood through a singular lens of identity but that the interconnections between identities result in intricately diverse realities. For example, minoritized students may experience different 'types' of SV which intersect with other forms of oppression, such as sexual racism or transphobia. Black and ethnically minoritized students may be fetishized or exoticized, while transgender students may be subjected to SV that is rooted in transphobia and the denial of their gender identity (Brubaker et al. 2017).

Research also suggests that university social support structures do not adequately recognize the impact of race-related trauma, leaving students feeling unable to disclose or report in a way that means they can access appropriate intervention (Wong, Copsey-Blake, and ElMorally 2022). Fear, stigma and failure to see oneself represented within support services also decrease the likelihood of disclosure for minoritized students (Brubaker et al. 2017; Gill and Harrison 2019). University responses, therefore, must be sensitive to trauma experienced by minoritized individuals, aside from – yet compounded with – any experiences of SV they may be subjected to. Adopting an intersectional approach – as this paper does – is key to grasping the complex realities of SV within varied (and sometimes multiple) minoritized contexts.

In this paper, we define minoritized to mean students who identify as LGBTQ+, Black or ethnically minoritized, international, disabled, and relevant to one institution, working-class or first-generation scholars. We pose the following research questions: what is staff knowledge and understanding of how minoritized identities intersect with

experiences of SV; what is staff knowledge and understanding of university processes and support for minoritized students subjected to SV; and third, how confident are staff in managing disclosures of sexual misconduct from minoritized students.

Methods

Interviews with academic and professional service staff working across three English universities took place between April 2022 and April 2023. This allowed for comparison across different types of institution with different profiles, histories, size and experience of implementing responses to sexual misconduct. Institution 1 was a large 'modern' university with 40,000 + students and 5,000 + members of staff. Institution 2 was a mid-sized, Russell Group university with a student population of 20,000 + and 4,300 + staff. Institution 3 was also a long-established Russell Group university, with a student population of 38,000 and 8,000 + staff members.

Staff were invited to participate in an interview via targeted email invites, institutional email lists and dissemination of study information through relevant networks e.g. student support services. All participants were self-selecting and we acknowledge these limits. However, the consistency of themes generated across staff working in different institutions suggests that we can draw rigorous insights from our findings. Semi-structured interviews (and one focus group) were used to strike a balance between flexibility, comparability and depth (Kvale 1996). Vignettes depicting instances of SV within the university setting were used to prompt discussion and facilitate conversation on sexual misconduct 'at a distance' (Pincock et al. 2023; Ross et al. 2021). Vignettes were crafted in liaison with the Students' Union at institution 1 (and input from institutions 2 and 3) and refined in consultation with minoritized staff members. This served to instil lived experience into seemingly fabricated scenarios (Bradbury-Jones, Taylor, and Herber 2012). Three vignettes were developed and used in interviews, incorporating instances of smartphone-based sexual harassment; hate incidents; challenges faced by international, disabled and LGBTQ + students subjected to sexual misconduct; and SV perpetrated by staff against students. This provided a spectrum of situations through which to explore understanding, with follow-up questions focused on the potential actions of victim-survivors, staff and the university. Participants drew on their professional and personal experiences to contextualize their responses.

Prior to interview, measures to ensure anonymity, confidentiality, data storage and the voluntary nature of participation were explained. Participants could retract their data up to two weeks after the interview and all provided verbal and/or signed consent. Ethical permissions were obtained from the relevant faculty of each institution (approval numbers: 41550; ERN_22-1273; SOC-2022-01-24T12_37_50) and no ethical issues arose with respect to the disclosure of information or participants' welfare.

Thirty semi-structured interviews and one focus group with four participants took place. Of these 34 participants, 21 were academic staff (lecturers, senior lecturers/associate professors) who worked across disciplines (nursing; psychology; criminology; sociology; social work; youth justice and linguistics). Thirteen professional service staff (working in sports and/or departmental and centralized student wellbeing roles) also participated (see Table 1). Each institution conducted interviews with their own staff members which lasted (on average) for one hour and ranged from 35 min to one hour 36 min. The focus group lasted for one hour 28 min. All but one interview was conducted

Table 1. Participant demographic information.

Demographic Information[a]		No.
Age Group	18–24	1
	25–34	7
	35–44	15
	45–54	5
	55–64	3
Gender	Female	20
	Male	10
	Trans woman	1
Sexuality	Lesbian	2
	Gay	3
	Pansexual	1
	Bisexual	5
	Heterosexual	19
Disability	Physical	2
	Mental health	3
	Other	1
	Yes – but not specified	2
	No disability	23
Ethnicity	White British	20
	White Irish	1
	Other White background	6
	Indian	1
	Other Asian background	1
	White and Black Caribbean	1
Job Role	Academic	21
	Professional Services	13

[a]Totals do not always equal 34 due to missing data.

online via Microsoft Teams/Zoom and was recorded and transcribed using Teams' transcription or an authorized transcription service. Each team reviewed their transcripts for accuracy, to redact identifying content and to allocate pseudonyms.

The data were thematically analyzed (Braun and Clarke 2006) using a critical thematic approach (Lawless and Chen 2019). This began with an in-depth reading of the transcripts to understand repeated, recurring or forceful patterns within the data, inductively coding without limiting the number of codes. This was followed by closed coding, which involved linking the patterns identified to larger power relations by asking questions about what the emerging themes might be doing and by considering their interrelationships (Lawless and Chen 2019). We had collaborative discussions to support the interpretation/categorization of codes, to merge data and develop broader, critically informed themes. The team met to develop and refine a unified coding framework across institutions and to confirm its relevance and fit across the entire data set. This process indicated that certain issues are unique to minoritsed students whilst others are pertinent to the wider student body. The following themes were developed to explore this: 'structural inequalities and minoritisation'; 'lack of clarity and support for staff'; 'architecture for safeguarding'; 'institutional mandates for tackling SV'; and 'privileging the perpetrator?'

Findings, analysis and discussion

Theme 1 – structural inequalities and minoritization

This theme speaks to the structural inequalities experienced by students who are subjected to SV and who belong to a minoritized group. Participants indicated that a

'public story' of SV exists (Donovan and Hester 2014; Donovan and Roberts 2023), one which produces assumptions about what counts as SV (i.e. rape and what might be termed 'serious' sexual assault) and who counts as a victim (i.e. white, heterosexual, cisgender, British, able-bodied, women). This public story, they argue, is damaging for minoritized students because it does not include the particularities of their experience or how it might be spoken about, making it less identifiable. For example, participants argued that inequalities such as institutional sexual misconduct services being organized in line with the public story (i.e. the perceived needs of white, home, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied students); English not being a first language; cultural tropes; and the broad 'global history of inequalities' (Layla, Professional Services, Institution 3. I3 hereafter) created barriers to recognizing 'what counts' as SV, reporting it and accessing support. These barriers operated both insidiously for minoritized students who, for example, 'just feel like it's [SV support services] not … it's not there for them' (Max, Academic, I2), as well as overtly:

> … in all the disclosures I've had, I've only had one student who was from an Indian heritage background, British Indian as opposed to an international student, who disclosed and the responses that she had from her college were in line with being a – a college that was responding poorly, but for her she also felt like there was a highly racialised element to it. (Abigail, Academic, I2)

Staff across the three institutions argued that a student's international status can create an additional facet of vulnerability in an already unbalanced power dynamic. This related, in part, to UK residence being dependent on academic attendance, especially if on a Tier 4 Visa. As Patrick (Academic, I1) considered, this positioned university staff as akin to 'border guards, because we are required to report their attendance'. Expectations around uninterrupted study may form a structural barrier to reporting, particularly if disclosure is assumed to impact progression. Participants argued that other factors positioned international students as structurally disadvantaged, again reducing their potential for reporting. This included being less likely to have an immediate support network in the UK, potentially having less familiarity with the local community and culture – including understandings of deference, law and university policies – and experiencing potential language barriers. As Layla stated: 'What language course would … [have] taught you the word sexual harassment?' (Professional Services, I3):

> Well, they're an international student, so their traditional support base isn't immediately there for them, it's going to have to be … remote. Plus, they are a stranger in a strange land, so that adds sort of context of not quite understanding … You know, sort of wanting to urm be polite, be respectful of the local community, yet simultaneously standing up for their own rights, urm and feeling pressurised into behaving in ways which they normally wouldn't. (Michael, Academic, I3)

At institution 2, the operation of a college system, the associated 'class expectations' and feelings of exclusion from that system were seen to further disadvantage international students: 'And I think international students, and this is again, based on kind of some real-life conversations, can feel very outside of that kind of clique within colleges' (Tammy, Academic, I2).

Reflecting existent research (Casteel et al. 2008; Plummer and Findley 2012), disabled students were reported to be 'statistically more likely to be victims of abuse' (Gillian, Academic, I1) and that such violence can be targeted. As the following quote indicates, the victim-blaming aspects of SV can extend to encompass the prejudiced assumptions made about a disabled student's particular intersecting identity:

> … it's easier to do/get away with because people are, for example, someone who's in a wheelchair for example they're less mobile, less able to resist. But also, potentially, sexual violence being used as [a] form of … disablist abuse basically, along the lines of like sexual violence being used … it's not about sex, it's about attacking women specifically, and sexual violence potentially being used in a similar way of, of committing essentially, like, disablist hate crime. (Max, Academic, I2)

The intersections between race, ethnicity, SV, reporting and service response were also considered. As part of the 'global history of inequalities' referred to by Layla, minoritized women's experiences of gender-based violence in the UK have been exceptionalized to instances of forced marriage, FGM and 'honour'-based victimisation, perpetuating their invisibility within conversations around SV (Thiara and Roy 2020). Participants argued that racially minoritized women were reluctant to report due to such marginalization, alongside shame and 'cultural' taboos inhibiting disclosure (Gill and Harrison 2019). Racism, ethnocentrism and worries that reductive cultural stereotypes would influence the help-seeking response were also raised: ' … Particularly for young black women … they are openly perceived by staff and other students as being highly sexualized, as being aggressive … ' (Abigail, Academic, I2).

Issues of homophobia, hyper-sexualization, not being 'out' and differences in sexual education/socialization for members of the LGBTQ + community were also positioned as making help-seeking problematic, alongside abuse looking different and being less recognizable:

> … sexual harassment can look different and potentially go a little bit unnoticed for those who identify as homosexual. Shortcuts [in terms of developmental sexual behaviour and practice] that we have in a heterosexual society aren't there because you have to navigate different things and navigate different expectations. (Quinn, Academic, I1)

Experiences of the trans community, in particular, were identified as instances of how harassment itself can differ from the more public story of SV that is recognized in heteronormative culture. For example, intrusive questions about a person's body (and specifically genitalia) are experienced but not necessarily outed as harassment and go unreported. Possible inequities in agendas, or 'tokenism', were raised at institution 3, with Cassie arguing that whilst their university supports and celebrates their LGBTQ + community as part of Pride and LGBTQ + history month, it was debateable whether the same attention was given to issues of protection and safety: ' … it's more of a, dare I say, if we're not celebrating, then it's not mentioned' (Cassie, Professional Services, I3).

Theme 2 – lack of clarity and support for staff

This second theme focuses on the perceived lack of support for staff regarding disclosures and how these needed to be actioned, issues that had implications for all students, but sometimes related uniquely to minoritization. Participant responses grouped around two specific sub-themes: 'training' and 'visibility/accessibility'.

Training

Training on receiving disclosures of SV was variable across the three institutions. At institutions 1 and 3, where work on SV – including training for staff and students – is relatively 'newer' or still being developed/implemented, there was a feeling of unease amongst most academic participants about responding to disclosures from students. At institution 2, training has been rolled out to staff, however, participation is voluntary and there is no expectation to undertake a refresher input. Regardless of whether training existed, similar concerns were raised and confidence in responding was often associated with participants' area of teaching or research expertise (i.e. if it was around SV) or practice experience that predated academia. For example, at institution 1, a subset of social work academics spoke of the application of their practice-based skills and the importance of applying a person-centred approach, which appeared to engender greater confidence. However, staff working across other disciplines often reported either feeling 'unqualified' to respond (see Roberts, Donovan, and Durey 2023; Sales and Krause 2017), or were unsure of the subsequent process and provision offered by the University post-disclosure:

> To go back to your original question, which was am I aware what the support looks like? The answer is no, but what I would do is I would put the students in contact with student services and let student services deal with the student as appropriate, and I'm sure there is specialists sort of sexual violence counsellors available within the university, but that's a guess rather than knowledge. (Michael, Academic, I3)

For other academic participants there was a sense, in their capacity as personal tutor – and bound up in the rhetoric of needing to prioritize student satisfaction – that they should be acting as de-facto counselling and wellbeing officers. Here, as part of the neo-liberal agenda HEIs embody, an agenda that produces pernicious ways of being and doing in the academy (Gill 2018), certain departments were felt to have offset wellbeing responsibilities onto individual academics. However, staff did not always feel equipped to execute these responsibilities: 'I don't feel fully equipped in the sense of dealing with this because as I say, I'm not a counsellor. It's got serious implications … ' (David, Academic, I1). Having the capacity to support those who disclose was also identified as difficult, especially in the context of 'fast academia' (Gill 2010), where the intensification of work is now a hallmark of academic life:

> It's always really tricky that I know that person's made a decision to re … disclose to me for a reason as opposed to anybody else, but it's not in my role and I don't really have the capacity to provide the … the type of support that I would want to. (Abigail, Academic, I2)

Some participants spoke of the difficulty of disengaging emotionally when having received a disclosure and feeling a sense of ongoing responsibility to the student. This was exacerbated when staff were aware that decisions to tell them linked to their SV subject knowledge or shared minoritized identity. Thus, the onus of responsibility for disclosure appeared to be disproportionately placed onto minoritized staff:

> I think that [when considering who students disclose to] we've got to be mindful of kind of racial and sexual division of Labour. And how basically … non-straight male, racially minoritised [people], are double burdened … when it comes to SV and misconduct, women will be the students, kind of, point of contact more than men in most cases. When it comes to racism or being racially [abused] minoritised staff rather than the white staff in most cases [are the one's responding] … (Tim, academic, I2)

Participants described the impact that hearing accounts of SV could have, with Quinn (Academic, I1) being 'devastated' by the disclosure they received whilst feeling that they had 'nowhere to put it'. Louisa highlights that staff may have been subject to SV themselves and that this can complicate receptivity towards training as well as the support provided to students:

> It felt like there, there was no sensitivity towards the fact that [staff] have experienced these things themselves … and that can affect how you support students … so I found that in the training quite difficult, I couldn't do it in one sitting, it took me three attempts to get through it. (Louisa, Academic, I2)

As noted, staff at institution 2 had received training and this may account for them, on average, feeling more comfortable providing support to students. However, most agreed that training needed to be refreshed, updated and made compulsory. The comment was also made, as it was at institution 1, that existing training was 'generic', which we take to mean presenting the public story of SV, and not suitably nuanced to capture the situation of minoritization:

> I think staff would be comfortable in providing a generic response, but would it be nuanced to the, to, sort of, to the fact that Max [vignette character] identifies as a lesbian? Possibly not, no. Because dare I say it, the training that the staff would have received is quite generic; it's not got those nuances to it … (Scott, Professional Services, I2)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the professional service participants interviewed, mostly those in student wellbeing roles, were significantly more confident in receiving disclosures and knowing how to provide support, linked to the provision of additional, specialist training input. They recognized and reflected on the challenges academics often experienced when confronted with disclosures: 'The main response I see from academic staff is panic. Because, and again I think that comes down to not knowing what they can offer and not being experienced in having dealt with it … ' (Cassie, Professional Services, I3). Thus, whilst training is essential to bridge these knowledge gaps, questions as to whether that training should be mandatory, include refresher inputs, the extent to which staff are aware of it and whether it's intersectional, remain salient.

Visibility/accessibility

Almost all participants identified a lack of visibility, clarity and consistency of information related to their university's services, training and processes for sexual misconduct (Hayes-Smith and Hayes-Smith 2009). Issues that apply regardless of whether a student has a minoritized identity or is represented within the public story of SV. The lack of knowledge about available provision, perception that it was 'buried within pages and pages of text and goodness knows … ' (Tammy, Academic, I2) and therefore an inability to seamlessly locate it, served to compound feelings of being ill equipped to respond: ' … I reckon it [the related process and provision] could be a lot easier, a lot more simplified, even like a flow chart of this is what happens' (Oliver, Professional Services, I3).

It was argued that making services/responses more visible and accessible would humanize student care, particularly important when a student's experience requires an empathic approach. For minoritized students, however, being able to see themselves represented within university sexual misconduct processes/responses is also essential.

Theme 3 – architecture for safeguarding

This theme, which appeared primarily in institution 1 data, considers how building design has the potential to create safe environments (or otherwise) for disclosures and communication around SV. Staff across institutions recognized that 'first disclosure is so important' (Layla, Professional Services, I3) and that to support this, an environment that afforded privacy and space, 'where she [the victim-survivor] felt safe to discuss it' (Charlotte, Academic, I3) was paramount. However, a tension in achieving this existed, sometimes due to shared office space – an issue particularly pertinent at institution 1 with its heavy use of open plan office design – but sometimes because of anxieties held around academic staff being in enclosed spaces with (potentially vulnerable) students.

For example, several participants commented on the power imbalance between students and lecturers and recognized that options for meetings tended to include attending staff offices (potentially alone) or requesting an online meeting. There was concern that consideration was not always given to 'how comfortable students might feel being at our offices … ' (Quinn, Academic, I1). Hence, for certain academic staff at institution 1 emphasis hinged on the need to 'make sure that you were in a place which was visible to others' (Steven, Academic, I1), on keeping office doors open or arranging meetings in observable spaces when working pastorally with students. Participants' comments here reflected assumptions around what students *might* find most comfortable, their direct experience of what students wanted, but also a seeming struggle to find the balance, sometimes, between preserving a student's privacy and safety versus enabling the academic to themselves feel safe – both physically and reputationally. Perhaps the difference at this institution relates to the enhanced expectation to take on wellbeing care, the absence of disclosure training and possibly, the stronger seep of neoliberalism. As Shore (2008) argues, the regimes of audit and surveillance that now pervade higher education can have a symbiotic (and corrosive) impact on an academic's sense of professionalism, autonomy and (need for) self-surveillance.

Theme 4 – institutional mandate for tackling SV

This theme highlights arguments around the need to implement or expand existing university approaches for the purpose of more effectively responding to all students' disclosures of SV. However, there was a disparity in opinion as to how this should be achieved. For example, certain participants were keen to highlight the importance of building a university-wide, consistent and balanced approach to supporting students when an SV allegation was made. Central to this was ensuring that all parties be 'represented as part of that process because It's about achieving safeguarding outcomes. It's not about necessarily apportioning blame' (Gillian, Academic, I1). Others spoke of balance in a less administrative sense, suggesting that it should be sought by supporting the victim-survivor, but also by working with the perpetrator towards change: 'I probably wanted to think about [the perpetrator] and what's happening to him and why he thought it was appropriate and around kind of education and awareness raising' (Charlotte, Academic, I3). Such approaches speak to issues of 'recognition' and 'acknowledgement', aligning with the justice aspirations of victim-survivors who want their perpetrator to understand that what they did was harmful, and recognize why (McGlynn and Westmarland 2019),

bringing prevention, education and harm acknowledgement into conversation (Cowan and Munro 2021).

However, most participants tended to focus on the importance of a punitive response, arguing that the University should take a zero-tolerance approach, 'go after' (Ava, Professional services, I3) students who perpetrate abuse and issue contracts upon admission which set out that 'If you do this, you will be thrown out of university … we need to take a much harder line … ' (Anna, Academic, I1).

At institution 2, in addition to staff disclosure training, a suite of established SV policy and procedure was in place (in excess of what existed at institutions 1 and 3). This included a sexual misconduct policy; established investigation and disciplinary processes with specially trained officers; online consent training for students, the completion of which is a requirement for registration at the university, alongside voluntary bystander intervention. On paper, everything was in place, and yet, as outlined, this did not translate to all staff being familiar with the provision or believing it to be suitably capable of accommodating the circumstances of minoritized students. Thus, a more integrated, whole-system response was felt necessary: ' … So as opposed to, you know, one session for incoming Freshers around consent and showing them the video of the tea, drinking tea, it needs to be that kind of whole scale institutional change'. At the heart of which would be recognition and integration of 'intersectional experiences' (Abigail, academic, I2).

Theme 5 – privileging the perpetrator?

A further thread across institutions was that current responses to sexual misconduct served to privilege the perpetrator, resulting in SV experiences being marginalized or inadequately responded to. This theme coalesced around two lower order codes: 'protecting the university's "reputation"' and an 'inequality in the protection of interests'.

Reputation

Community knowledges (Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan 2001), or those stories about the university that percolate throughout the institution about its culture, are important to attend to. These stories may include ideas around the university having more interest in its reputation in the press than in those victimized by SV, that minoritized students will receive less preferential responses and that disciplinary processes are opaque and outcomes never known. Community knowledges flourish in a culture of mistrust and become 'truths' about 'the university', regardless of firsthand (potentially positive) experience. Participants argued that community knowledges influenced perceptions of their university's reputation as a trustworthy place (or otherwise) to report SV to:

> So, you know she has a really horrible experience of disclosing that and it goes, and, and we deal with it badly. Umm … we might put off the next student from disclosing, you know, and the next and the next and the next. (Charlotte, Academic, I3)

Several participants argued that a reluctance to proactively address SV at their institution linked, at best, to a certain amount of naivety whereby, 'we just want to think that this isn't happening. And we just want to assume that it's not … ' (Vicky, Academic, I1). Others argued that concerns with reputation more cynically underpinned inaction, linked to a

fear that, in addressing the issue of SV, it may suggest that there was a particular 'problem' with such at their institution. Examples were given of activities that focused on SV (usually during Welcome/Freshers' Week) being scaled back under the guise that such content 'ruins the mood' (Anna, Academic, I1). In turn, possible risks to the university serve to reconfigure understandings of SV away from the needs of its students (Page 2022).

Inequality in the protection of interests

There also exists the community knowledge that perpetrators will be believed and treated more favourably by the university than victim-survivors, further inhibiting help-seeking. This includes if minoritized students are victimized by majority students. For example, if the perpetrator is white and the victim Black: 'That's incredibly hard to do [officially report], and like an institution, it's already proven to be like fundamentally against taking actions [in favour of] women like you … ' (Layla, Professional Services, I3). Further, if the offender was a member of staff it was felt that the disclosure would not be taken seriously:

> [We see attitudes of the type] 'Just don't bother, it's just how they are, you know … ' But they bring in twenty million a year and, and write all these papers, so it's just them'. And so, people are reticent to disclose negative behaviours … because they think it's not going to go anywhere. (Charlotte, Academic, I3)

Here, it was suggested that a student's minoritized identity could be used to discredit an accusation against a staff member further still: 'My experience is that the University supports the tutor narrative, you know … the student has misunderstood, and I think particularly given Haven's [the vignette character] international, first-year status, again, [the narrative would be] "you have misunderstood something"' (Sebastian, professional services, I2).

Participants also spoke of instances where the educational achievements of the perpetrator (and attainment standards of the institution) had seemingly been prioritized over an accusation of SV, or that accusation minimized: 'Oh this guy, he's a really promising student … and [the university perspective is that] this girl's ruined his life' (Emily, professional services, I2). At institution 1, Andi (Academic) recalled reporting to a senior colleague a female student who felt in fear of her life at the hands of a male peer, only to learn that the matter would not be escalated because 'He's [the perpetrator] expected to get a first'. Here, assumptions that academic excellence could preclude a student from violence were felt to influence the response, alongside broader institutional agendas of it taking 'a lot for anyone to be withdrawn from the university' (Cassie, Professional Services, I3).

Conclusion

This study provides one of the first UK-based examinations of the intersections between SV and minoritization and subsequent impacts on student disclosure. The findings from which have implications for HEIs internationally. The research illustrates the need for universities to be cognisant of these intersections and the additional barriers that existing structural arrangements generate for minoritized students. Minoritization adds layers of complexity, with, as our data suggest, SV being overlaid with aspects of 'hate crime'.

This works to create the gap that Crenshaw (1989) highlighted, as institutions may pursue a 'hate crime' route, thus overlooking the SV, or a SV route that overlooks the 'hate crime' (Donovan and Roberts 2023). Universities must understand the ways in which minoritization intersects with SV if they are to ensure that their policies and practices serve the interests of all.

Staff responses show that, overall, whilst recognizing the barriers that inhibit minoritized students from disclosing and seeking support, academic staff are not clear about their institution's SV processes and provision. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, they did not always know what minoritized students may need in addition to, or that is different from, what their university currently offers. Many academic staff expressed a lack of confidence in their ability to effectively respond to disclosures, because of the gaps in their institution's training and/or communication. However, some staff with SV knowledge/ practice-based experience did report greater confidence. Certain themes generated from the data were generic to 'all' students and considered the architecture of spaces for disclosure, ideas around better ways of responding to victimized students and the lack of training and visibility/accessibility of related information. In terms of the latter, a simple, visible flowchart on a university's webpages, outlining the steps and support available from the point of disclosure through to a formal report, including an institution's sexual misconduct process, would be an immediate and quick intervention.

Given the lack of staff confidence, mandatory disclosure training appears necessary. Further, the emotional labour required to respond to disclosures (even when referring to specialist support) should not be underestimated. Students are still likely to discuss the process with the person they made the original disclosure to, often a staff member who reflects their minoritized identity. This often being the same staff members who find themselves most structurally disadvantaged within the university (Phipps 2025; Universities and College Union 2021). In the neoliberal context of higher education, an academic's emotional labour or potential for vicarious trauma is invisibilized and the lack of time that epitomizes 'fast academia' (Gill 2010) either impedes responses or overburdens staff. Consideration needs to be given to staff workload and wellbeing, to better protect individuals, but also to maximize the support offered to students. The structural inequalities discussed complicate disclosures from (and responses to) minoritized students, so particular attention needs to be paid to publicity, policies, guidance, support provision and training to ensure that the account is given of 'what counts' as SV and 'who counts' as victim speaks to all students in an intersectional way. Training also needs to encompass staff potential for unconscious bias in hearing and responding to all students in an inclusive manner.

Community knowledges (Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan 2001) may be inaccurate and/ or outdated and universities need to take steps to address this. A whole-institution, intersectional approach is required, with a raft of measures aimed at dispelling inaccurate community knowledges. Being open about the existence of SV seems like a crucial first step, alongside the actions the university has taken to address it e.g. through senior management buy-in, bystander interventions, compulsory staff training, increased visibility of easy-to-understand processes and reporting outcomes of (anonymized) sexual misconduct cases. Whilst it is common to talk of whole-institution responses, our emphasis is on taking this a step further to call for intersectional whole-institution responses, thus ensuring that minoritization is mainstreamed throughout the response. Maintaining

ongoing transparency and communicating with the student body is crucial to dispelling inaccuracies and potentially increasing confidence in the university's processes, which may, in time, increase disclosures. The protection of a university's reputation cannot serve to hinder such transparency.

Most participants tended to favour a more punitive, zero-tolerance response to SV. However, we know that victim-survivors receive poor criminal justice outcomes. In the year to December 2021, there were 67,125 rape offences recorded, yet only 2% resulted in conviction (Victims Commissioner 2022). Universities must not replicate in their own disciplinary processes the well-evidenced difficulties within the criminal justice system. Particular attention needs to be paid to how power relations work in the context of SV and the intensification of these for minoritized students. Legal guidance on how universities should respond to allegations of sexual misconduct is laid out in Universities UK (UUK) and Pinsent Masons (2016) guidance and covers civil matters (pertaining to internal disciplinary processes) as well as advice on allegations that are of a criminal nature. None of this guidance, however, covers intersectionality or minoritization. Whilst the general principles in the guidance apply, potentially far greater use could be made of the Equality Act (2010) and the Human Rights Act (1998) to draw out the implications for students who occupy more than one protected characteristic. There might also be a case for universities to consider alternative approaches in responding to perpetrators, away from what Cowan and Munro (2021) call the 'criminal justice drift'.

Lastly, a trauma-informed approach is often advocated for universities to prevent and respond to SV (McCauley and Casler 2015; Sales and Krause 2017). This requires a whole-institution response with active senior management leadership and adequate, long-term resourcing for the work. Student voice should be central to the development of the approach and staff must be provided with the time and skills to be able to respond in trauma informed ways, to become cognisant of referral pathways and to have a sound understanding not only of SV, but of its intersections with minoritization.

Notes on contributors

Clare Gunby is a senior lecturer in gender-based violence. Her research focuses on sexual and domestic abuse, gender and justice. She has over 10 years of experience researching these areas and writing on them. Her work has examined legal, criminal justice, voluntary sector, and public

health responses to gender-based violence and how these can be used to reduce and 'recover' from victimization. She has published in leading journals and her co-authored monograph *Rape and the criminal trial: Reconceptualising the courtroom as an affective assemblage* was published in 2020.

Laura Machin, is a Lecturer in Criminology and Sociology/Doctoral Student in the Department of Sociology at Manchester Metropolitan University. Contributing to both The Justice Project and Gender Based Violence Research Centres, her teaching and research focus centres upon gender-based violence, gendered social phenomena, the criminalization of marginalized groups, critical criminology, zemiology, penology and feminist theories. Her doctoral studies have formed an exploration into the effectiveness of procedural justice for victim-survivors of sexual violence and the wider social harms created by the system that is designed to protect them in their pursuit of justice.

Harriet Smailes is a researcher, previously based at the University of Birmingham now working and completing a PhD at the University of Leicester and working for an independent government-funded Institute. The focus of Harriet's research is sexual violence and domestic abuse. Prior to working as a researcher, Harriet was a front-line sexual violence practitioner in Higher Education and a sexual violence trainer and consultant. The focus of Harriet's PhD reflects this experience of working in Higher Education as it sets out to explore the impact of university support and resolution intervention of student sexual violence victim/survivors.

Saima Ansari was a research associate in the current study. Her doctoral work focused on the interplay between identity and religion among British Muslim women, with reflections on the #Mosque-MeToo movement, anti-Muslim hate, and the term 'modesty'. Currently, at the University of Manchester, she contributes to the TIES project. This work challenges Eurocentric views on environmental behaviour through an intersectional lens, highlighting the experiences of marginalized communities. Saima's scholarly interests include intersectionality, Islamic feminism, and the experiences of marginalized communities. She is dedicated to illuminating the challenges faced by underrepresented groups.

Khatidja Chantler (PhD) is Professor of Gender, Equalities and Communities at Manchester Metropolitan University where she leads the Gender-based violence team. Her key areas of research expertise are gender-based violence, particularly within minoritized communities, self-harm, gender and ethnicity. She is also an internationally known expert on forced marriage research. She has worked on several national and international research projects on gender-based violence including research council-funded studies on domestic homicide and domestic abuse safeguarding during the COVID-19 pandemic. She has published widely in national and international journals and is author of several book chapters and co-editor of three books.

Caroline Bradbury-Jones is a Professor of Gender Based Violence and Health at The University of Birmingham. She has a clinical background as a registered nurse, midwife and health visitor in the UK. Caroline has undertaken extensive research in the field of violence against women and girls. She has published widely about the issue. A particular focus has been on health professionals' understanding of domestic violence. Caroline is the founder and lead of the Risk, Abuse and Violence (RAV) research programme at the University of Birmingham: http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/nursing/research/rav.aspx

Kate Butterby is a post-doctoral researcher at Durham University. Her research interests include gender and sexuality and domestic and sexual abuse (particularly within LGB and/or T + populations). She has also worked on projects within the broad field of violence and abuse, including police recording of 'honour-based' abuse, minoritized students' experiences of sexual violence at university, sexual violence in mainstream pornography and the remit of LGBTQ + specialist domestic violence and abuse services.

Catherine Donovan, Professor of Sociology and Head of Department at Durham University has researched the family and intimate lives of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, trans and non-binary people for nearly 30 years. This has included family and parenting experiences and domestic and sexual abuse; and has also encompassed hate crime and hate relationships in which neighbours

exert coercive control over victims in/around their homes. More recently her focus has been on sexual violence and harassment in higher education with a focus on the experiences of minoritized students in help seeking and perceptions of institutional responses.

ORCID

Clare Gunby 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8428-6621
Laura Machin 🆔 http://orcid.org/0009-0008-2217-9810
Harriet Smailes 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0430-7053
Saima Ansari 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7501-7841
Khatidja Chantler 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9129-2560
Caroline Bradbury-Jones 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5237-6777
Kate Butterby 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6790-8943
Catherine Donovan 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3997-1571

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