

# The Epistemology and Ethics of Analysing Lived Experience Data: A Pragmatic Foucauldian-Informed Approach to Coproducing Student Mental Health Initiatives in the Neoliberal University

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Michael Priestley<sup>1</sup>  and Laura Mazzoli-Smith<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

Analysis of lived experience data is increasingly advocated as an enabling strategy to inform ethical and effective policy and practice, particularly in the university mental health field. However, where Michel Foucault's work is often drawn on to frame subjectivity of lived experience in the neoliberal university, this brings forth epistemological, methodological, and ethical tensions in using student voice to inform changes in mental health policy and practice. In Foucauldian terms, a double bind emerges wherein the power of student voice to destabilise existing forms of mental health knowledge and to reimagine the distress-inducing power structures within the neoliberal university are recuperated to (re)produce the same neoliberal structures and subjectivities. Drawing on data from 10 student focus groups, this study explores the epistemic, methodological, and ethical questions attached to analysis of student lived experience data in the context of a Foucauldian-informed understanding of the neoliberal university. It is argued that in pragmatist terms, whilst student voice must be contextualised within the socio-material and socio-psychological context of the neoliberal system to ensure beneficial consequences for student experience, a Foucauldian approach to interpreting lived experience data can also re-empower the subject with the freedom to resist and disrupt the reproduction of mentally unhealthy structures within the neoliberal system as part of a whole university approach.

## Keywords

lived experience, voice, Foucault, pragmatism, student mental health

## Introduction

Student mental health is a growing public and political concern. Given evidence of increasing prevalence in student psychological distress (Linden et al., 2021), inequality in student mental health outcomes (Stoll et al., 2022), and significant academic (Jones et al., 2021), social (Priestley et al., 2022), and financial (McCloud & Bann, 2019) stressors in the university environment, there has been marked sectoral transition to a whole university approach to mental health in the UK (e.g. Universities UK, 2020). 'A whole university approach means not only providing well-resourced mental health services and interventions, but taking a multi-stranded approach which recognises that all

aspects of university life can support and promote mental health and wellbeing' (Hughes & Spanner, 2019, p. 10), whilst remaining attuned to the diverse needs and experiences of different student demographics. Student voice and participation is advocated as an enabling strategy to operationalise a whole university approach (Hughes & Spanner, 2019). In particular, evocation and mobilisation of student

<sup>1</sup>School of Education, Durham University, UK

<sup>2</sup>Narrative Practices Lab, School of Education, Durham University, UK

### Corresponding Author:

Michael Priestley, School of Education, Durham University, UK.

Email: [michael.j.priestley@durham.ac.uk](mailto:michael.j.priestley@durham.ac.uk)



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voice is positioned as an efficacious and ethical imperative (Horgan et al., 2020), inherently empowering students with the freedom to direct holistic changes to the university environment based on their lived experience, which result in benefits across the whole university for the whole university population (Priestley et al., 2021). Indeed, preliminary evidence has identified individual and institutional benefits of utilising authentic student voices and participation in mental health initiatives, including enhanced social integration and community; mental health literacy and help-seeking; academic and employability skills; and responsiveness, efficiency, and sustainability of services (Needham & Carr, 2019; Clark, 2015; Mockford et al., 2012).

However, the politics of student voice (Couldry, 2010; McLeod, 2010) has methodological and ethical implications and we consider this specifically when using Foucauldian approaches to investigate student subjectivity in the neoliberal context (see e.g. Ball & Olmedo, 2013). We explore how these issues were navigated in analysing qualitative data in an ESRC-funded collaborative partnership doctoral project in which student voice in the context of the neoliberal university was central (Priestley, 2023).<sup>1</sup> Here, a Foucauldian approach to situating data in wider discursive regimes troubles the idea of qualitative data being analysed primarily with an ethical intent to empower and give authentic voice to participants within a realist or constructivist presupposition that this transparently represents reality and/or the meaning-frames of those participants (see e.g. Priestley et al., 2021). In this paper, we explore the methodological implications of accepting a Foucauldian framing of context – here the neoliberal higher education institution – as inseparable from analysis of what students say within this context. Qualitative analysis in this sense cannot be realist and assume that students' voices represent their experience in any correspondent version of truth that takes no account of discursive regimes which, in Foucauldian terms (1982), determine what the participant understands to be true. Whilst this analysis could be seen to raise ethical and also epistemological tensions given the rationale for attending to student voice to inform practice, we explore in this paper how and why these tensions can be navigated productively. We demonstrate how, firstly, especially in Foucault's later writings, there is a clear space in which research should attend to the voices of 'those on the ground' (Foucault, 2001, p. 235), precisely because it is here that we see the creative ways in which discursive regimes and technologies of power are challenged. Secondly, we suggest that American pragmatism, in its emphasis on the utility of narratives and vocabularies, offers a framework that is epistemologically and ethically suited to dissolve these possible tensions and contribute positively to practical research outcomes in the field of student mental health.

## The Epistemology and Ethics of Analysing Lived Experience Data: Discourse, Truth, and Power

For Foucault (1982), lived experience is framed and constrained by normative socio-political and cultural discourses that condition and construct the parameters of subjective possibility and permissibility. 'The constraining historical, political, and economic contextual factors are therefore central to the understanding of the limits of the horizon of possibilities and practices through which the subject actively constitutes him/herself, including the practices of resistance' (Ball & Olmedo, 2013, p. 87). Hence, the Foucauldian subject is inherently constrained in their capacity to identify or articulate changes to socio-political structures within the institution that may impact on mental health experience, as these structures are inherent to the 'domains of validity, normativity, and actuality' (Foucault, 1974, p. 68) of experience itself (Morrissey, 2013). A 'double bind' (Bateson et al., 1962, p. 155), or 'a confusion of message and meta-message in the patient's discourse' (Bateson et al., 1962, p. 155) resulting from 'two orders of message and one of these denies the other' (Bateson et al., 1956, p. 256) emerges, wherein subjective experience in the neoliberal university and the freedom to imagine alternative possibilities and subjectivities are conditioned by the same neoliberal relations of discourse, truth, and power (Ball, 2013). As a result, the subject is compelled to (re)produce a representation of experience which is articulated in isolation of, and inadvertently reproduces, the neoliberal power relations that underpin the politics of lived experience (Couldry, 2010; McLeod, 2010).

A methodological and ethical tension therefore arises for the researcher in drawing on lived experience data, in respect of how far to situate student voice in the parameters of these discursive effects of the neoliberal context, when they are unlikely to be articulated by the participants in these terms. Or, seen as a related epistemic question, how is knowledge about student lived experience produced and in what way should we as researchers then analyse such qualitative data if we are also utilising Foucault's work to interrogate the wider power/knowledge structures of the neoliberal university? We suggest that a Foucauldian approach to research in universities that draws primarily on genealogical work to conceptualise the neoliberal context can indeed be taken to reveal a largely deterministic social sphere in which voice is subsumed into the workings of discursive regimes to reproduce power (Foucault, 1965). However, in this study we explore a less deterministic approach to such data and Foucault's own interest in voice for its creative potential with respect to change and what this enables methodologically, specifically in terms of analysis of this data. Before we come to the study it is important to explore further Foucault's interrogation of power and the subject.

## The Experience of Mental Health in the Neoliberal University: Power and the Subject

‘Subject,’ for Foucault, connotes both a state of subjection ‘to someone else by control or dependence’ (Foucault, 1982, p. 212) and the self-configuration of an identity ‘by a conscience or self-knowledge’ (ibid). As such, subjective experience in the neoliberal university are conditioned both by socio-material power relations that ‘consists in guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome’ (Foucault, 1982, p. 789) ‘by control or dependence’ (Foucault, 1982, p. 212) and ‘governmentality’ (Foucault, 1997, p. 67) ‘by a conscience or self-knowledge’ (Foucault, 1982, p. 212) that appropriates the freedom of the subject through discursive ‘techniques and procedures for directing human behaviour’ (Foucault, 1997, p. 81) by ‘translating the goals of political, social, and economic authorities into the choices and commitments of individuals’ (Rose, 1990 p.165). The discursive production of truth is ‘both an instrument and an effect of power’ (Foucault, 1982, p. 101); it is both formed by, and formative of, power relations. Hence, the power relations inherent to discourse and truth in the neoliberal university reproduce the subject in socio-material and socio-psychological power relations; they perform the parameters in which educational subjects perceive, value, and conduct action in alignment with neoliberal power, framing and constraining student experience, whilst invisibilising these neoliberal power structures as individual choices.

At the same time, ‘power is not merely prohibitive, it is productive .... it “makes us up” rather than “grinds us down” ... and is as much about what can be said and thought as what can be done (Ball, 2013, p. 30). Student experience of the neoliberal university is thus defined both by material power structures that determine students’ actions, and discursive power structures that condition individual choices, interactions, and behaviours (Ball, 2013). Accepting this Foucauldian conceptualisation of discourse, truth, and power relations, the power inherent to students’ experience of the neoliberal university constitutes ‘a mode of action’ (Foucault, 1982, p. 789) that intrinsically defines the subjective experience of distress. Given that ‘the manifest discourse is really no more than the repressive presence of what it does not say’ (Foucault, 1972, p. 25), the absence of alternative socio-political discourses in higher education inherently ‘presuppose and constitute power relations’ (Foucault, 1979, p. 27)).

Foucauldian conceptualisations of discourse, truth, power, and the subject arguably have particular methodological implications for interpreting mental health knowledge and subjectivity. Foucauldian genealogy (1965) traces how traditional scientific discourses of mental health knowledge constitute biopolitical disciplinary technologies that identify and discipline the ‘abnormal’ individual and legitimate a series of corrective normative interventions in (neo)-liberal capitalist society through ‘a system of differentiations which

permit one to act upon the actions of others’ (Foucault, 1982, p. 792). These classifications thus ‘function as power well before it functions as knowledge’ (Foucault, 2008, p.3). In particular, these discourses explain mental health experiences as ‘the psychological effect of a moral fault’ (Foucault, 1965, p. 158) through the socially dominant (neo)-liberal discourses of (ir)rationality and associated discourses of morality and labour governing capitalist society (Foucault, 1954, 1965). For Foucault then, ‘social pathology is medicalised, necessitating social regulation and reclamation of the unfit into labour normality’ (Rose, 1979, p. 34). Indeed, the knowledge permitted in scientific episteme pre-defines mental health in commensurable individualistic terms that exclude individual lived experience ‘as naïve knowledges, located beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity’ (Foucault, 1980, p. 81), pathologizing the ‘abnormal’ subject, and necessitating specialist knowledge and intervention.

We can see, from this exploration of the Foucauldian subject, that it is then far from clear-cut to ascertain how a researcher might approach qualitative student voice data with respect to questions about individual agency for instance or the transparency of that data in terms of lived experience. The complexity of this constituted subject calls on us to interrogate the way in which we analyse lived experience data as a form of knowledge relative to subjectivity. On the one hand, Foucauldian analysis is suspicious of using individual narratives of experience as a source of knowledge because they are inherently constructed through socio-political relations of discourse, truth, and power (Ball, 2013); indeed, for Foucault, the ‘disciplinary techniques’ endowed with epistemological primacy to elicit individual voice and experience will inhibit the production of knowledge by reproducing the dominant socio-political discourses of subjectification (Coudry, 2010; McLeod, 2010). On the other hand, understanding student voice and lived experience are essential to resistance and critique of socio-political power relations that underpin mental health experience and knowledge in the neoliberal university and ‘in order to understand what is or was going on, we still have to try to grasp what each actor or group of actors intend when they did this or that’ (Merquior, 1985, p. 113).

It is helpful here to draw on a wider range of Foucault’s writings, especially the lectures, essays, and interviews (e.g. Foucault, 2001), as such a reading of power/knowledge does suggest the possibility of agency attached to student voice, which affords power to shape and construct the discourses that determine actions (Ball, 2013). Foucault was, at times, also explicit about the necessity of drawing on the lived experience of those at the grass roots level, as he stated ‘The only important problem is what happens on the ground’ (2001: 235). The ethical imperative is not analysis as an end in itself, or theory, but rather experimentation (2001: 240) to effect change and improvement, however hard this may be: ‘Years, decades, of work and political imagination will be necessary, work at the grass roots, with the people directly affected, restoring their right to speak’ (2001: 288). Participant knowledge

provides an understanding of how agency is negotiated in the wider conditions of what it is possible to think and to speak (McLeod, 2010). As the question of agency in voice and experience is bound with questions of knowledge and subjectivity, the question of what it means for a student to speak one's truth is therefore a pressing ethical, as well as political, issue. Calling into question the autonomy of the subject and the legitimacy of personal knowledge as foregrounded through qualitative methods is ethically compromising where there is lack of transparency about precisely the power/knowledge nexus that Foucault invites us to engage with. The research method is thus inherently situated within the reproduction of knowledge and discourse, 'From a Foucauldian perspective the interview is a social practice and the interviewer and interviewee participants in the reproduction of discourse' (Fadyl & Nicholls, 2013, p. 26). The researcher's role here is to work at the intersection of the limits of knowledge in terms of the participants as subjects and the possibilities of knowing in terms of participant subjectivity. As Foucault stated,

'I don't think an intellectual can raise real questions concerning the society in which he lives, based on nothing more than his textual, academic, scholarly research. On the contrary, one of the primary forms of collaboration with non-intellectuals consists in listening to their problems, and in working with them to formulate those problems' (2001: 285).

Notwithstanding the unnecessary binary invocation of intellectual/non-intellectual, we explore what working with student participants means in terms of research that draws on student voice as situated in neoliberal context.

### **The Present Study: A Pragmatic Foucauldian-Informed Approach to Student Lived Experience Data**

In the part of the study under discussion, ten online focus groups were conducted during March and April 2021, ranging in size from 5 to 15 participants, with 99 participants in total. Participants provided written informed consent and ethical approval was granted by Durham School of Education Ethics Committee [EDU-2020-09-12T16:28:16-pjnw34]. Participant demographics are shown in Figure 1. Focus groups were semi-structured and lasted approximately 50 min in duration, providing a total of 472 min, which was audio-recorded and manually transcribed. Modelled on Student Voice Forums (Piper & Emmanuel, 2019) and consistent with pragmatist conceptions of creative imagination (Elkjaer, 2018), the focus group activity employed a creative ideation strategy which asked students to collectively imagine, on the basis of their lived experience, the ideal university for student mental health and wellbeing (Priestley et al., 2022). The activity was designed to simultaneously elucidate narratives of lived experience and co-produce policy recommendations

'unconstrained by current possibilities' (Piper & Emmanuel, 2019, p. 56). The focus group method is predicated on an understanding of 'individuals with unique insights into their 'inner worlds' contingent on shared understandings of a person' (Fadyl & Nicholls, 2013). We see this as both political - providing a platform for marginal or implicated voices - and ethical - hearing these voices and acting on their individual insights, but crucially framed within a Foucauldian understanding of the neoliberal discursive regime as mediating how we approach this epistemically.

Focus group data were analysed using pragmatic Foucauldian informed interpretative narrative inquiry (Tamboukou, 2008). This approach analyses individual experience, subjectivity, and relationality as processed, interpreted, and performed through personal narratives that are taken to reflect, incorporate, and function within social, cultural, and organisational structures of power (Squire et al., 2012). Interpretative narrative inquiry can thus enable critical interpretation of how neoliberal discourses frame experiences and expectations of higher education within relations of truth and power (Tamboukou, 2008) to 'make links between macro-organisation and institutional practices on the one hand and experiences and affective states on the other' (Gill, 2009, p. 4). Crucially however, Foucauldian-informed interpretative narrative inquiry cannot - nor seeks to - elucidate the "true" meaning of what the subject 'really' thinks and feels by what is said or not said' (Cole & Graham, 2012, p. 116). For Foucault rather, individual narratives invariably constitute a matrix of multiple, fragmented, and at times conflicting subject positions which are temporarily inhabited and which reflect contested and unstable discourses of truth and power within specific contexts (Lester et al., 2017). The data presented in this paper is drawn from 17 participants across six focus groups broadly representative of the wider dataset.

Taken together, whilst students were found to actively resist the individualisation of distress by situating personal experience of wellbeing in relation to institutional structures and stressors, the general depoliticization of these structures within student narrative accounts resulted in expressed dissatisfaction with isolated material conditions, dissociated from the wider political conditions inherent to the neoliberal system. As such, student freedom to resist the health-compromising features of the neoliberal university manifested as discrete recommendations for micro-level structural change that ultimately enable the neoliberal culture of higher education - and the identified implications for wellbeing - to persist unchallenged. By extension, where neoliberal discourses constitute student perception and subjectivity, students cite neoliberal consumerist and instrumentalist discourses of higher education to critique the material neoliberal conditions that define their experience of distress within technologies of power, paradoxically reproducing the neoliberal system that they oppose (Lolich, 2011). It is argued, nevertheless, that a pragmatist Foucauldian-informed interpretative narrative inquiry can generate a new language of

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage	National Average	
Year of Study	Undergraduate Y1	17	17%	73%	HESA, 2021
	Undergraduate Y2+	54	54%		
	Postgraduate	28	28%	24%	
Student Status	Home	65	65%	80%	HESA, 2021
	International	34	34%	20%	
Gender	Male	34	34%	43%	HESA, 2021
	Female	65	65%	57%	
	Non-Binary	0	0%	0%	
Ethnicity	Asian or Asian British	28	28%	11%	HESA, 2021
	Black or Black British	34	34%	7%	
	White or Caucasian	35	35%	76%	
	Mixed	2	2%	4%	

**Figure 1.** Participant demographics.

student mental health, which incorporates the material and cultural implications of the neoliberal system, empowering both students and researchers with greater scope to (re) imagine more helpful and context-specific solutions to anxiety conditions in the neoliberal university, as part of a whole university approach. In the following sections we explore in more detail the student voice data, grouped into the role of neoliberal structures in experiences of distress, the invisibilisation of neoliberalism in recommendations for change, the subsequent reproduction of neoliberal structures and the possibilities of resistance before returning to pragmatism to elucidate how such a philosophical frame contributed to this end.

### *The Presence of Neoliberal Power Relations in the Experience of Distress*

Throughout the focus groups, students explicitly and recurrently resisted the individualisation of distress by situating student experience in relation to institutional stressors and structures. Indeed students largely resisted the attribution of stressors to wholly individual choices and characteristics, instead foregrounding how institutional practices such as assessment culture and conditions inherently frame and constrain individual exposure and experience of academic stressors. Students particularly critiqued individualised mental health knowledge and interventions, given the material and cultural imperative of workload in the neoliberal university.

‘They’ll just be throwing stuff on top of everything they’ve already got but then they’ll say okay now if you want to talk to someone we are here for you’; ‘talking won’t help that kind of issue because what can someone say to me if I’ve got too much work’ [Female, Asian, Undergraduate Y1, Home student].

Consistent with Foucauldian relations of discourse, truth, power and the subject, student experience of distress was indirectly attributed to neoliberal power relations ‘that act upon their actions’ (Foucault, 1982, p. 792) through ‘a conscience or self-knowledge’ (Foucault, 1982, p. 212). Indeed, in Foucauldian terms, once educational value is situated within a discursive neoliberal network of instrumentalism, individualism, and meritocratic competition, examination outcomes become socio-symbolically ‘understood to reflect on the value and worth of the individual’ (Gill, 2009, p. 10). ‘*You don’t really matter as much as your grades and if you can’t really do good in academics, then you don’t really have a purpose*’ [Female, Asian, Undergraduate Y2+, Home Student]. Assessment outputs ‘measure in quantitative terms and hierarchicalises in terms of value the abilities, the level, the ‘nature’ of individuals’ (Foucault, 1979, p. 183).

‘Our examinations are really overrated over-hyped and I think that is where the pressure comes from’ [Male, Black, Undergraduate Y2+, Home] and ‘that level of perfectionism comes through for a lot of students’ [Female, White, Postgraduate, Home Student] where performance ‘has to be flawless’ [Female, White, Postgraduate, Home Student].

This supports Ball’s application of Foucault wherein subjects are permanently seen, known, and valued in pan-optical power relations according to assessment outputs within the neoliberal system. They internalise the judgement of the neoliberal ‘gaze’ to monitor, value, and discipline their own performance in relation to these indicators, ‘as part of our sense of personal worth and our estimation of the worth of others’ (Ball, 2013, p. 139). The assessment results, rankings, and categories inherent to performativity consequently underpin a performative ‘change in categories of self-understanding and techniques of self-improvement’

(Rose, 1992, p. 161). Given these existential implications, students define subjective identity and value according to performance outcomes, internalising a competitive pressure to perform against their own personal standards even when assessment conditions are demonstrably low stakes (Brunella, 2019; Paltrinieri, 2017). *'I'm very academic driven, so even when they just tell us "oh this is just a formative assessment it doesn't really matter", I'm still there aiming to get 90 plus percent or 100%'* [Female, White, Undergraduate Y2+, Home Student].

Student narratives further demonstrated how neoliberal discourses of personal responsibility become internalised by the subject to regulate rest and relaxation in the neoliberal university, whereby 'not being idle is central to neoliberal subjects' life' (O'Flynn & Petersen, 2007, p.469). *'There is a bit of a toxic work landscape in academia that you should always be working and shouldn't take time off'* [Female, White, Postgraduate, Home Student]. *'Universities can set the standards way too high and that can lead to people over-working themselves'* [Female, Asian, Undergraduate Y2+, Home Student]; *'There is a culture and expectation that you have to be working all the time'* [Female, White, Postgraduate, Home Student]. Where performance outcomes are discursively inscribed with personal characteristics relating to individual ethico-economic choices, taking a break is disciplined as a personal moral failing (Slater & Seawright, 2018).

Student narratives also signified profound dissatisfaction with the privatisation of higher education and the perceived discrepancy between receipt of tuition and financial expenditure, whilst still expecting that privatisation will deliver particular consumer goods.

*'At the end of the day, you are paying, what, nine grand for it. If you have a question, you deserve it to be answered'; 'there is no reason that you should be paying insane tuition fees and then not getting any type of support'* [Female, White, Postgraduate, Home Student].

Indeed, some students described an exploitative 'exchange relationship with the university,' manifest in the emotional experience of inundation, isolation, and failure (Houlden & Veletsianos, 2021).

*'I might as well have just paid myself six grand, sat in front of the computer, gone on a few videos on YouTube and then printed myself off a certificate saying 'sorry, you've failed.' Because it's been literally like 'do it yourself'* [Female, Asian, Postgraduate, Home Student].

### **The Invisibilisation of Neoliberal Power Relations in Recommendations for Change**

Notwithstanding, student perception of these conditions as experienced were explicitly dissociated from neoliberal power

relations. The depoliticisation of experience tended to result in discrete recommendations to address specific micro-level structures in university practice and procedure, opposed to collective resistance to the neoliberal cultural conditions that underpin and reproduce these material structures (Lolich, 2011). For example, whilst emphasising the stress and anxiety involved in assessment practices, students' recommended isolated and a-political micro-level changes in practice such as *'the option to do coursework instead of exams'* [Female, Asian, Undergraduate Y1, Home Student].

In this way, the object of dissatisfaction in student accounts was frequently individual staff rather than neoliberal structures and cultures. Students tended to project limitations of the neoliberal system onto academic staff, responsabilising academic staff to remedy stress-inducing structural conditions in the neoliberal university. For example, students responsabilised academic staff for the relational disconnect and anonymity in higher education, lamenting that *'lecturers don't try to actively find out if anybody is struggling'* [Female, Mixed, Undergraduate Y2+, International Student]. Hence, when given the freedom to imagine an ideal alternative, student recommendations tended to foreground micro-level material changes to staff behaviour and interactions, such as *'more training for lecturers'* [Female, White, Postgraduate, Home Student]. *'Lecturers could have funding to do first aid courses so they would be a little bit better equipped to recognise the signs, and that early intervention is so important to address these issues'* [Female, White, Postgraduate, Home Student].

### **The Reproduction of Neoliberal Power Relations**

Where neoliberal conditions are invisibilised in student perception, students paradoxically cite neoliberal cultural discourses to frame critique of the material neoliberal conditions they oppose, representing a 'double bind' (Bateson et al., 1956) whereby free choice to imagine an ideal alternative is recuperated through neoliberal discourses to reproduce the existing neoliberal system that is arguably the site of the problematic experiences.' Hence, student dissatisfaction with neoliberal privatisation and individualisation is paradoxically critiqued through the same neoliberal discourses of consumerism and individualism. This was exemplified by citation of a legal right to compensation for 'breach of contract,' evocation of market regulator 'bod[ies] that regulate universities,' and advocacy of disciplinary 'accountability' technologies of surveillance by *'holding personal tutors accountable'* [Female, Mixed, Undergraduate Y2+, International Student].

*'These problems are in significant breach of contract and do make us entitled for thousands of pounds of refunds ... you are entering into a contract which is conditional upon them fulfilling their terms and if they are not then you can get money back'* [Female, White, Undergraduate Y2+, Home Student].

Surely if I'm paying the university that amount of money over three years, it should cover things you have got problems with, you shouldn't have to beg for basic things. That should be covered and if we're not getting it then it should be a refund [Female, Mixed, Undergraduate Y2+, International Student].

This evocation of the private consumer transaction exemplifies the double bind, whereby neoliberal subjects' experience is framed by neoliberal socio-psychology to paradoxically reproduce the neoliberal conditions they oppose. This was exemplified by the recommendation to 'keep the cost [of tuition] because that makes sense' [Female, White, Postgraduate, International Student]. Student recommendations are conditioned by the dominant neoliberal discourse of privatisation wherein alternatives are unthinkable/unsayable.

### *The Possibility of Resistance*

Notwithstanding, a small number of students demonstrate parrhesia (Foucault, 1984, p. 11) 'tak[ing] the risk of telling the whole truth that [s]he thinks' (Foucault, 1984, p. 13) and critique of neoliberal structural pressures and stressors that define mental health experience, which are excluded from individual mental health knowledge. 'It is through people paying greater attention to what is happening to themselves in contextual terms that it is possible to develop a consciousness of personal feelings as public feelings and thus as a possible source of critique' (Brunella, 2019, p. 138). In an act of 'care of the self' (Foucault, 1986, p. 10), students critiqued the individualised explanations, interventions, and responsabilization for mental health in the neoliberal university by,

'reframing the way you think about things so that blame isn't on you, it's on the difficult situation that you are going through and the external pressures of university rather than the fact that you are rubbish and don't deserve to be a student' [Female, White, Postgraduate, Home Student]. 'It's the easy fix. 'Ah yeah we can get a therapy dog come in the library.' I'm like 'what about the structural issues please? you solved them, we might need less therapy dogs' [Female, White, Undergraduate Y1, Home Student].

By demanding '*an acknowledgement from the university that those extra stressors are there*' [Female, White, Postgraduate, Home Student], students at times could also resist the exclusion of structural stressors from mental health knowledge, reasserting the power of the institution for structural and cultural change, and reimagining the possibility of a wellbeing-supportive university. '*Universities, as well as just academic education, it makes an individual grow in all aspects of life. Mental health should be included too. It's a place where you learn from those around you and develop as an individual*' [Female, White, Undergraduate Y1, International Student].

It is in Foucault's later work where we find an ethical disposition that can hold these different levels of analysis and concerns together: the self-formation of subjectivity as an aesthetic pursuit in becoming and enacting practices of freedom in understanding of how we are constituted. In explanation, given power's governmentality through a 'conscience or self-knowledge' (Foucault, 1982, p. 212), 'in order for power relations to come into play, there must be at least a certain degree of freedom on both sides' (Foucault, 1988, p. 194). 'If there were no possibility of resistance, there would be no power relations at all' (Foucault, 1997, p. 292). Student narratives of experience constitute, in Foucault (1988, p.18) terms then, 'a technology of the self' which encapsulate how a subject positions oneself through discourse, both within *and against* the operant structures of truth and power within a specific context (Rose et al., 2009). It must then be a central aspect of any Foucauldian-informed analysis of qualitative data to interpret such differing subject positions.

'Critique,' Foucault writes, 'is the movement through which the subject gives itself the right to question truth concerning its power effects and to question power about its discourses of truth' (Foucault, 1997, p. 386), 'discover[ing] a new way of governing oneself through a different way of dividing up true and false' (Foucault, 1982, p. 233). Critique of traditional knowledge of mental health in the neoliberal university involves 'a refusal of these abstractions, of economic and ideological state violence which ignore who we are individually, and also a refusal of a scientific or administrative inquisition which determines who one is' (Foucault, 1982, p. 212). Lived experience data should therefore, we argue, be viewed in conjunction with Foucault's 'technologies of self,' whereby individuals come to know themselves as well as take care of themselves, through discourse. This 'care of the self' encapsulates 'those intentional and voluntary actions by which [wo]men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves' (Foucault, 1986, p. 10). We see in the focus group excerpts presented here a range of angles and strategies that the students use to interrogate and explicate their positions relative to their own mental health and the wider context of university support for mental health. We see varying spaces for critique in these positions, with critique here being define as '*is the movement through which the subject gives itself the right to question truth concerning its power effects and to question power about its discourses of truth.*' (Foucault, 1997)

### **A Pragmatist Approach to Lived Experience Data**

In the last section of this paper we argue that American Pragmatism in the tradition of Richard Rorty, John Dewey, William James and Charles Pierce (Mounce, 2002) dissolves the tensions discussed in a Foucauldian-informed analysis of student voice in the neoliberal university. A pragmatist

approach situates knowledge as plural, encountered through experience, and elucidated through language (Bacon, 2012). Pragmatist ontology postulates that the criterion for knowledge is not the direct representation of empirical reality, but its practical application and consequences for experience (Rorty, 1999). We suggest that this is both apposite with respect to how we approach student voice data above and also takes account of the imperative to action – to use our research to improve the conditions for student mental health.

Rorty (1981) states that ‘whatever terms are used to describe human beings become ‘evaluative’ terms’ (1981, 195). Yet policy-makers, he suggests, would like ‘hypothetical sentences in whose consequents are phrased in terms which might occur in morally urgent recommendations’ (1981, 196). In research focused on the whole university approach to student mental health this might manifest in the logic ‘If all students have access to a particular form of provision, mental health will be improved.’ However, Rorty argues that in pragmatist terms no method that could be suggested as being better able to provide this sort of predictive evidence is in fact better than any other. The point here is that it is misguided to see a tension, or binary, in either a realist/representational way of analysing student voice data as opposed to an interpretivist analysis, aimed at understanding/interpreting rather than explanation. Rather, Rorty argues, both are predicated on their utility, rather than on any more foundational logic around prediction and understanding. This rests on Rorty’s pragmatist critique of the fact that language – whether used in a realist or interpretivist mode – should be taken to permit us to understand people as they really are. Pragmatism opposes such a correspondence theory of truth. For the pragmatist the focus shifts to which vocabularies and cultures produce new and better ways of thinking and acting, rather than which better represent a truth read as innate reality, even when we think about the student reflecting on their own experience.

Adopting this understanding of language dissolves the tension in either approaching student voice as being discursively determined in the Foucauldian nexus of power/knowledge, which accords little, or no, room for the idea of individual agency read as freedom to self-determination, or as being fully agentic, such that voice is taken in a realist way as providing transparent access to the self-determining truth of the subject. If this is perceived to be a binary choice, there is much at stake ethically and epistemically with respect to how we argue that student data should be incorporated into research and then used to inform policy and practice around student mental health. This binary is also likely to lead to a hierarchical understanding of student mental health data with qualitative findings from research which draws on student voice being situated as central in an uncritical way, or marginal in an arguably unethical way.

However,

‘If, with Dewey, one sees vocabularies as instruments for coping with things rather than representations of their intrinsic natures,

then one will not think that there is an intrinsic connection, not an intrinsic lack of connection, between ‘explanation’ and ‘understanding’ (1982, 198).

So it is for this reason that Rorty can then say that ‘The only general hermeneutical rule is that it’s always wise to ask what the subject *thinks* it’s up to before formulating our own hypotheses. But this is...not a search for the ‘true meaning’ of the behaviour’ (1982, 200). Rorty discusses how it is a mistake to think that a person’s account of themselves is *epistemologically* privileged;

‘He might have a good account of what he’s doing or he might not. But it is not a mistake to think of it as morally privileged. We have a duty to listen to his account, not because he has privileged access to his own motives but because he is a human being like ourselves’ (1982, 202).

On Rorty’s reading, attending to what participants say in our research is *an ethical issue* and the social scientist still maintains a role as interpreter of this on epistemic grounds, whatever their method might claim to be doing. There is a logic here that accords with the Foucauldian understanding of power/knowledge, which relieves us of the methodological tension discussed above, whilst elevating the ethical imperative of talking to people in our research. This pragmatist approach to research dispenses with the binary between positivist/realist or interpretivist, and sees all research as continuous with ‘interpreting other people to us, and thus enlarging and deepening our sense of community’ (1982, 202). A Foucauldian approach is in keeping with this pragmatist mode of inquiry as it dispenses with the need for ‘method,’ since we are abandoning traditional notions of truth and rationality. Rorty discusses how a Foucauldian understanding of social science as itself part of the power-knowledge nexus then brings a quasi-politicization to the debate as we have suggested, since we are all subject to the production of truth through power, so we cannot hold to any naïve representation of student voice as pertaining to an external truth about experience. There is therefore both the ethical imperative to incorporate student voice into our inquiry on student mental health, as well as the ethical issue of how the ‘findings’ of our inquiry are themselves part of the production of truth. Rorty positions Dewey as a more hopeful version of Foucault, in that the ‘will to truth is not the urge to dominate but the urge to create’ (1982, 207).

We suggest that we also see in Foucault the possibility of the will to create, as discussed above. We understand the ethical imperative, from both Foucault’s and Rorty’s perspectives, as being in the ontological and epistemic space of ‘working on the ground,’ to attend to the accounts of the participants directly implicated in our research. Methodologically we are then still interpreting student voice data in its double-bind, through our Foucauldian mode of knowing in the neoliberal university. As Rorty states, we decide to include the

voices of students not because this endows methodological rigour with respect to differently framed arguments about description and evaluation, but rather because they must be necessarily included on ethical grounds from the outset as being directly implicated. The burden of the ethical decision comes at this point, which accords with the ethical imperative for lived experience research. If situated in this pragmatist framing, the approach to analysis is then not about fidelity to this data in a naïve, realist way, but rather the opposite. The ethical imperative is about working towards the best language through which to understand these experiences in their fullest sense and in the most useful way, given our concerns about student mental health.

Care of the self can thus foreground listening to student experience data through the lens of the neoliberal university as an ethical imperative, given this is most likely to take us to the most useful language through which we can understand these experiences. Accepting this, the question then becomes how can researchers productively and pragmatically understand individual voices within a genealogical lens that sees experience as constrained by power within a specific moment, whilst also elucidating experiences and practices to improve a whole university approach in more general terms, which open up spaces for creative critique and contestation of the neoliberal university. A pragmatist philosophical approach can be seen to generate such a reflexive space within which the epistemology of lived experience as accessed through narrative attends both to awareness of neoliberal subjectification and therefore both the limits of what it is possible to think and speak, as well as the creative and imaginary potential to challenge these through voice. This reflexivity necessarily applies equally to both researchers and research participants and supports what McNay refers to as 'the formation of a 'critical ontology of the self' 'an alternative standpoint from which individuals can begin to resist the normalising forces of the 'government of individualisation' (1994; p 133 cited in Ball, 2013; p 17).

## Conclusion - Pragmatist Research to Enact a Whole University Approach to Student Mental Health

Rather than undermine the authenticity or utility of student voice within mental health research and practice, we contend that, within a Foucauldian framework of power-knowledge, pragmatism enables an ethical disposition to the politics of lived experience that offers a pluralist reading of subjectivity attuned to the complexity of the Foucauldian subject, both constituted and self-constituting under conditions not of her/his making.

The evidence presented in this paper suggests that the neoliberal higher education context imposes material and psychological conditions that demonstrably increase student exposure to academic determinants of mental health. Where student recommendations were found to foreground

individual-level explanations and interventions, it is therefore imperative to contextualise these recommendations within the neoliberal system that materially and psychologically frames and constrains student experience. Foucault's work proves pre-eminent in this respect, yet we argue that qualitative researchers must remain cognisant of the complex ethical, epistemic and methodological considerations that follow. Pragmatist ontology presupposes that different sources and uses of language are helpful to connect with experience in different contexts for different purposes (Cornish & Gillespie, 2009). Seen here alongside a Foucauldian-informed understanding of context, we explore how this can destabilise the expertise of the researcher and possibility of a singular science of mental health (Peters, 2003), whilst producing a more helpful interdisciplinary and biopsychosocial conceptualisation of student mental health in the neoliberal university in the context of individual lived experience. 'Linking regimes of truth to power (e.g. psychiatry) in no way cancels out their validity as therapeutic (Peters, 2003, p. 121). A pragmatist informed Foucauldian approach can critically engage with both specialist mental health knowledge and student voice without discounting either, situating different modes of knowing in a context that shapes and is shaped by all concerned.

In pragmatist terms, the production of a new language that 'disturbs what was previously thought immobile ... [and] seeks to re-establish the various systems of subjection' (Foucault, 1991, p. 82) can also re-empower the subject with some freedom and agency to critique and resist neoliberal power relations (Kumar, 2005; Rorty, 1981). Pragmatist philosophy can thus elucidate future action for the conceptualisation and operationalisation of a whole university approach in the context of the neoliberal system in an ethical way, allowing for the researcher to attend to the complexity of lived experience data, neither reducing it to a transparent and neutral representation of reality, nor subjecting it to interpretations which position the researcher but not participant as outside of power relations. This does not lead to straightforward, universal solutions, but rather, seeks a more helpful, responsive, pluralist language to understand student experience of wellbeing that incorporates the socio-material and socio-psychological conditions that mediate exposure to institutional stressors. 'Policies and proposals for social action are to be treated as working hypotheses, not as programs to be rigidly adhered to and executed ... [but] subject to ready and flexible revision in the light of observed consequences' (Dewey, 1927, pp. 202–203). We are inspired by Rorty's analysis of,

'Dewey as having already gone the route Foucault is traveling, and as having arrived at the point Foucault is still trying to reach – the point at which we can make philosophical and historical ('genealogical') reflection useful to those, in Foucault's phrase', 'whose fight is located in the fine meshes of the webs of power' (1982: 207).

We have sought to demonstrate in this paper precisely how it is useful to locate student mental health experience data in these meshes of the webs of power of the neoliberal university in ways which attends to both the complexity of ethical practice when invoking student voice and ethical purpose with respect to developing a better conversation about the whole university approach to student mental health.

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### Ethical Statement

#### Ethical Approval

Participants provided written informed consent and ethical approval was granted by Durham School of Education Ethics Committee [EDU-2020-09-12T16:28:16-pjnw34].

### ORCID iD

Michael Priestley  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7071-7336>

### Note

1. Author 2 supervised Author 1 on this doctoral project.

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