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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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Unwilling trust: Unpacking the assumption of trust between sexual misconduct reporters and their institutions in UK higher education

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Abstract

This article explores trust in organisations by analysing interview data from students and staff who have disclosed or reported gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) to their higher education institution in the UK since 2016. GBVH contributes to gender inequality in higher education (HE), and increased reporting of it may not only help prevent GBVH, but also improve gender equality by helping to retain women and gender minorities within HE. Around half of the interviewees in this study ($n = 12$) expressed distrust in their institution, yet despite this they still reported or disclosed their experiences *to* their institution. Existing literature in this area, particularly the concept of institutional betrayal, assumes that survivors of GBVH trust their institutions—including HE institutions—because they are dependent upon said institutions. Our data challenges this assumption, and in this article, we analyse participants' trust orientations in the context of their reasons for reporting. We argue that dependence on and trust in institutions are separate phenomena, in that members of an organisation may be dependent upon the organisation in various ways, but their trust in the organisation reflects their structural positioning within it. To develop the theorisation of trust in institutional betrayal, we draw on and

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extend Luhmann's concept of 'system trust' as well as other sociological theories of trust. Finally, the article introduces the concept of 'unwilling trust'—a contradiction between an individual acting in trusting ways despite feeling a lack of trust—to explain this disconnect between dispositions and actions.

KEYWORDS
gender-based violence, higher education, institutional betrayal, reporting, sexual harassment, trust

1 | INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH), including sexual harassment and assault, in higher education (HE) is both a cause and a consequence of gender inequality, and as such is under discussion in policy, practice, and scholarship internationally (Ahmed, 2021; Bull & Rye, 2018; Cantor et al., 2015; NUS, 2018; Prior & de Heer, 2021). Common consequences of experiencing GBVH include mental health deterioration, poor academic and/or career performance, and withdrawals from university (Bull & Rye, 2018). As gender minorities—including cisgender women and members of the transgender community—are overwhelmingly the victims of such violence, GBVH in HE further marginalises these groups and thereby contributes to gender inequality (Cantor et al., 2015; NUS, 2018). In order to work towards greater gender equality in education, it is necessary to improve responses to and support following GBVH so that women and gender minorities can safely remain in their careers or studies.

Underreporting of GBVH remains an issue in higher education institutions (HEIs) (Spencer et al., 2017, 2020). While some scholars suggest that increasing reporting rates may prevent potential perpetrators from committing harm (Towl & Walker, 2019), others caution against prioritising increased reporting without first improving response infrastructure (Bull, 2022) as institutional responses to sexual violence can be traumatic (Smith & Freyd, 2013). There is clearly a substantial amount of work to be done to ensure that reporting processes offer survivors what they need, which is often to keep themselves and others safe (Bull, 2022). Our stance is that formal reporting should be one option that is available to survivors. Furthermore, in the current UK policy context, reporting is seen as part of the institution's requirements (see Office for Students, 2021), and therefore it is important to understand reasons for (not) using such structures.

Much discussion has focused on post reporting experiences, such as the concept of institutional betrayal (Smith & Freyd, 2013). Institutional betrayal refers to the harm institutions can cause when responding to sexual harassment reports in ways that violate the trust of their members (Smith & Freyd, 2013). Such responses, including minimising sexual violence or covering it up, exacerbate the initial trauma of sexual harassment (Smith & Freyd, 2013). Institutional betrayal assumes that members of an institution trust their institution prior to reporting GBVH. In interviewing students and staff members who disclosed or reported GBVH to their HEIs, however, we did not find evidence of this universal pre-existing trust: about half of our sample explicitly did not trust their HEI before disclosing/reporting.[1]

In this article, we analyse the role of trust in GBVH reporting behaviour of 12 UK HEI students and staff members. We draw on sociological theories of trust as well as theories of power relations within the university to contextualise how trust intersects with the relationship between the individual and the institution. In doing so, we introduce the concept of 'unwilling trust' to complicate binary understandings of trust/distrust and explain why people reported despite their lack of trust in the university. We first give an overview of literature on trust between

individuals and institutions before analysing the concept of trust in literature on reporting GBVH. We then discuss interviewees' perspectives on initially (dis)trusting their universities and explore reasons why interviewees who did not trust their university reported or disclosed. The article concludes by introducing the concept of 'unwilling trust' and exploring its implications for institutional betrayal theory development.

2 | BRINGING TOGETHER LITERATURE ON INSTITUTIONAL TRUST AND REPORTING

2.1 | Theorising institutional trust

Interpretations of the concept of institutional trust vary based on how scholars understand the relationship to or within the institution in question. Due to the wide scope of this term, Möllering differentiates between 'the influence that institutions have on the trustor-trustee relationship on the one hand and the trust that actors have in the institutions on the other' (2006, p. 71) when discussing trust in institutions. In this article, we examine the latter: the (extent of) trust that actors exhibit in the overarching organisation to which they belong, namely an HEI in the UK.

One of the most significant theories of trust in systems, including institutions, is Luhmann's (1979) system trust. The core function of trust here is reducing social complexity; society accomplishes this by creating systems that filter information and present people with a limited number of options with which to engage (Luhmann, 1979). System trust is the legitimacy people give these constructed systems even though they cannot see how internal processes work (Luhmann, 1979). For most actors, trusting in a system (e.g. the monetary system) is not a conscious decision, but rather largely automatic (Luhmann, 1979). Nevertheless, actors are still aware that they are dependent upon this system, which they cannot change, and are therefore vulnerable *to* the system (Luhmann, 1979). Ultimately, there is little agency (as theorised below) involved in system trust: actors must trust that the system will accomplish what it claims it will.

Although Luhmann's theory presents a useful framework for understanding the dependence inherent in institutional trust, it assumes that all actors have the same relationship with and proximity to a system. Luhmann's theory of trust is not anchored within existing social structures (Morgner, 2018). In other words, system trust does not consider how actors' positioning within social hierarchies impacts their perceptions of the system. Likewise, it is not clear from existing literature how an actor's social positioning impacts their trust in social systems. We turn now to feminist theory in order to move from understandings of trust as automatic to a phenomenon grounded in social structures.

Feminist theory makes explicit how intersections of identity axes—such as race, class, and gender—produce different lived experiences, including different experiences of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991). Drawing on Crenshaw's (1991) concept of intersectionality, Acker (2006) proposes a theory of inequality regimes: these inequality regimes (re)produce existing external gendered, raced, and classed power relations within an organisation. Power relations within organisations mirror power relations in society at large and therefore grant upward mobility to those occupying culturally valuable positions (e.g. white, male, middle-class), and conversely keep those occupying culturally devalued positions at the bottom of organisational hierarchies.

Ahmed's (2021) analysis of complaint processes in HE is pertinent here. In a university setting, marginalised students and staff who make complaints about the university are considered institutional 'strangers' (Ahmed, 2021, p. 158) because, in raising issues (e.g. about inaccessibility, racism, sexual harassment), they are not 'reproducing an institutional legacy,' (Ahmed, 2021, p. 158). In breaking this institutional legacy, complainants mark themselves as other. Their complaints translate to evidence of not belonging within the university (Ahmed, 2021). Such evidence allows the university to treat complainants as though they are at fault—and not the institution, including the enmeshed person(s) who harmed them (Ahmed, 2021). Some complainants are easier to discard than others such as those who are 'different' (Ahmed, 2021), who do not occupy culturally valuable positions (Acker, 2006). When

applying these theories to Luhmann's concept of trust, it becomes clear that the university is a more complex space to navigate for those who occupy socially marginalised positions. System trust in the university, then, looks different based on the intersections of an actor's identity and whether they are considered strangers within the university. From this perspective, the more marginalised an actor is, the less the university treats them as if they belong, and subsequently the less likely the actor would be to trust the university.

Two final elements of trust are applicable to our understanding: agency and temporality. Khodyakov incorporates both elements in his (2007) theory of trust as an agential, temporally informed process. He argues that trust is a type of agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) in that individuals use knowledge, social schemes, and social norms to determine alternative options in a situation and choose the trust option with the perceived fewest negative consequences (Khodyakov, 2007). Agency here is inextricable from dynamics of time:

> By accepting the agentic nature of trust, I claim that the decision to trust another person is made in the present and is affected by the partner's reputation, which represents the past, and by the expectation of possible tangible and/or non-material rewards, which represents the future.
>
> (Khodyakov, 2007, p. 126)

While Khodyakov (2007) focuses on how individuals exercise agency in interpersonal trust decisions, we focus on how institutions constrain actors' agency in our new concept, 'unwilling trust,' introduced at the end of this article.

Lastly, temporality is key to understanding trust. This temporal dimension to trust is crucial to theorising it, as it foregrounds the idea of faith in the institution's future actions. Part of complicating a theory of institutional trust beyond the trust/distrust dichotomy, we argue, is acknowledging how trust may evolve over time. We draw on Khodyakov's (2007) perspective on temporality, specifically how past experiences inform current and future trust, and how trust can change over time. Informed by the literature above, our working definition of institutional trust used throughout this paper is as follows: institutional trust is the future-facing belief—informed by past experiences—that someone has in an organisation of which they are a member, but whose internal workings they cannot see; this level of belief depends on one's social positioning in hierarchies of power and oppression as well as their existing relationship to/within the organisation, and may change over time.

2.2 | Trust and reporting gender-based violence and harassment to institutions

Trust is a key issue with regards to reporting GBVH. Perhaps most notably, dynamics of trust inform Smith and Freyd's (2013) theory of institutional betrayal. Drawing on betrayal trauma theory, they assert that the relationship between an institution—in particular, one on which its members rely for their wellbeing—and its members mirrors interpersonal trust relationships (Smith & Freyd, 2013). As a result, when the institution violates the trust of its members in responding to reports of GBVH by minimising or covering up the experience, this betrayal of trust exacerbates the initial trauma of the violence for the survivor (Smith & Freyd, 2013). Institutional betrayal therefore focuses on the aftermath of reporting sexual violence to an institution, and what role the trust relationship between survivor and institution plays in said aftermath. It is a key theory in sexual violence literature that helps unpack institutional responses that retraumatise survivors.

In analysing the *fallout* of the trust relationship between survivor and institution after a sexual violence report, however, institutional betrayal theory makes several assumptions about that relationship *at the moment of reporting*. We now turn our attention to these assumptions. First, institutional betrayal theory assumes that social dynamics of trust in institutions mirror interpersonal trust relationships. Such an approach omits a consideration of the context in which trust relationships occur (Möllering, 2006). Drawing on interpersonal theories to understand people's relationships with institutions risks reifying institutions as unified, coherent entities, which in turn flattens out their social complexities. Second, institutional betrayal relies upon the implicit understanding that, prior to

reporting, survivors trust the institution. This assumption of trust is inherent in the theorisation: if an institution can betray a member's trust, there must be a degree of pre-existing trust the individual has in the institution that the institution can then betray. There is ultimately an elision of trust and dependence in the definition of institutional betrayal, as Smith and Freyd (2013) state that members of these institutions rely upon the institutions for their wellbeing and safety. We suggest separating this dependence from trust. Furthermore, as previously discussed, not all members of an organisation have the same relationship to the organisation (Acker, 2006; Ahmed, 2021). Social positioning within larger hierarchies of oppression informs the relationship between the individual and institution, and this positioning may inform who finds the institution trustworthy.

Questions of trust and distrust extend to debates about barriers to reporting sexual misconduct. While national policies may influence the context of reporting misconduct to universities—for example, the presence of Title IX as a national legal framework in the US versus the absence of a national legal framework in the UK (Shannon, 2021)—a comprehensive examination of response frameworks in different countries and their impact on reporting rates is outside the scope of this paper. There is extensive literature on why survivors do not report sexual misconduct to universities (Bull & Rye, 2018; NUS, 2010; Spencer et al., 2017, 2020; Stoner & Cramer, 2019). One Canadian study found that distrust in the university was a significant barrier to reporting (Marques et al., 2020). Contrary to Marques et al.' (2020) study, distrust in the university was not a barrier for 12 staff and student reporters in our sample who did not trust their universities prior to reporting, as all of them did ultimately report to their universities.

Since distrust in and of itself was not a barrier, we wanted to explore what motivates people to report, especially when reporting behaviour ultimately contradicts interviewees' attitudes towards institutional trust. We therefore draw on Bull's previous (2022) work to make sense of why interviewees decided to report. In analysing why student interviewees who experienced sexual misconduct from staff members[2] reported to their universities, Bull (2022) proposes a framework that separates catalysts and rationales of reporting to highlight levels of decision-making involved in this process. Catalysts are immediate circumstances that trigger people to report while rationales are the deeper motivations they describe for reporting (Bull, 2022). In the examples explored below, we highlight interviewees' rationales for reporting despite their initial distrust to capture how their relationship to the university evolved over time.

3 | METHODS

The data informing this article come from a larger study that examined UK HEI responses to disclosures or reports of GBVH from the perspectives of reporting parties and HEI staff handling reports. By carrying out qualitative semi-structured interviews with survivors who had disclosed/reported GBVH to their HEI, we worked within a feminist epistemological framing that foregrounds women's and other marginalised people's accounts of their own lived experience (Stanley & Wise, 1993). Interviews were therefore an appropriate approach both ethically and epistemologically. Ethically, interviews allowed participants to recount their experiences in a setting where they were assured of being believed and heard with compassion, and to feel that their experience was contributing to change. Epistemologically, interviews focused on interviewees' experiences and perspectives to understand their unique standpoint in relation to institutional handling of disclosures/reports. In addition, as part of our 'epistemological responsibility' as feminist researchers to contribute to transformative change (Campbell, 2018), we also published an open-access, non-academic report that aimed to inform policy, practice and public debate, and which interviewees had the chance to comment on or amend prior to publication (Bull & Shannon, 2023).

This project received a favourable ethical opinion from University of Portsmouth's Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee. We used a self-selection sampling method and recruited via a call for participants on the 1752 Group's Twitter (now known as X) account. Participants were required to have worked at or attended a UK HEI and disclosed/reported GBVH to their institution since 2016, as this is when Universities UK published

national guidance for institutions to address sexual violence and harassment (Universities UK, 2016). Data collection occurred between June 2020 and November 2021 and involved one-to-two-hour-long semi-structured interviews over Zoom. We utilised a safeguarding framework that Shannon (2022) previously employed. The semi-structured interviews included open questions about the culture of the participant's department and/or HEI and their experience of reporting GBVH to the HEI. We assigned pseudonyms to participants and sent the interview transcript for participants to review if they wished to.

Our sample included 27 staff and student reporting parties. Of these 27, about half—14 interviewees—mentioned (dis)trust. This theme was not in response to a direct question; through the dataset familiarisation and data coding phases of Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis, we noticed that many participants brought up their trust (or lack thereof) in their HEI, and therefore developed it as an inductive theme. We then analysed the data from this theme in dialogue with deductive codes built from our previous respective research (Bull, 2022; Bull & Rye, 2018; Shannon, 2021), which led to the four themes discussed below. Finally, for the 14 interviews included in this article, we reviewed the full transcripts considering the four themes to re-situate interviewees' accounts within the wider narrative of their experience.

Beyond asking for participants' staff or student status and that of the respondent(s), we asked for demographic data where interviewees thought aspects of their identity were relevant to their experience of reporting. With this limitation, the 14 interviewees whose accounts we analyse in this article included 12 women and two men; six are white, one is East Asian, and one is mixed race; and at the time of experiencing GBVH, three were staff members and 11 were students (specifically six PhD students, two MA students, and three undergraduates). Only one of these 11 students was an international student and the remaining 10 were home students.

4 | FINDINGS

In what follows, we describe the different trust orientations that participants had towards their institutions. We use these (dis)trust orientations to draw out and make visible what trust looked like in each case before relating these experiences to our working definition of institutional trust. The section concludes by using these elements to inform our new concept of unwilling trust, and discussing how unwilling trust can contribute to theory development for institutional betrayal.

4.1 | (Dis)trust in the university

4.1.1 | Trust prior to reporting

Fourteen of our interviewees mentioned (dis)trust, with 12 of our 27 interviewees explicitly stating that they did not trust their university to handle their GBVH report well. By contrast, two explicitly stated that they trusted (someone in) the university; this trust facilitated reporting for one, but for the other, it was not enough to give her the confidence to formally report.

The two interviewees who stated that they trusted their universities did so in differing ways: one described how she trusted individual staff members, while the other explained that she trusted her university. Jennifer—a white, queer woman from a low-income background pursuing a Master's degree at a large research-intensive university—disclosed bullying and sexual assault from another student in her cohort to staff in her department. When she disclosed the bullying, she explained, 'I turned around to a faculty member I really trusted, in the end, and I said, "Look, this is happening. What can I do?"' After two of her female classmates had reported the same student for sexual harassment, she then disclosed that he had also sexually assaulted her, as she thought her account would support theirs. Jennifer once again reached out to a staff member to make this disclosure: 'I, initially, contacted a

member of the department I really trusted, and we had a phone call.' She then spoke to a more senior member of staff in her department, but ultimately decided not to make a formal report to the university because she was afraid of how the reporting process might impact her. Instead, her department made informal adjustments to allow her to continue her studies. Although she did not link the trust she had in staff with her decision to disclose her experience, Jennifer had previously explained that she had been an undergraduate student in the department and her department had always supported her, especially with regards to helping her secure funding as she came from a low-income background. It is important to note, however, that in both of her explanations, she highlights trusting individual staff members, not her department as an entity. This indicates a level of interpersonal trust in a few staff members, but not necessarily institutional trust. Such a trust orientation complicates the trust/distrust binary in Jennifer's case, as she did not trust her university enough to formally report, but she found a handful of staff members trustworthy despite their institutional positioning.

On the other hand, Sarah—a white woman who had studied at a large research-intensive university—did trust her university. A lecturer had sexually harassed her during her PhD, and she did not report at the time because she was unsure about whether the experience was serious enough, she was aware that the university mismanaged a previous complaint within her department, and 'there [were] 1000 reasons of not trusting the institution and not trusting that anyone is going to believe you.' Five years after she finished her doctorate, Sarah heard that

> they had completely replaced the entire HR department at my old PhD university because of the big scandal of how badly they handled [a previous complaint], and that the person in charge of the university was very keen on making sure these things were dealt with properly, unlike the previous person... So, I started to have more trust in the institution and so at that point I decided to [report].

It was this apparent institutional commitment to change, cultural shift of values and staff, and recognition of past mismanagement of the complaints process that enabled Sarah to trust her university. Additionally, her position as a white woman—a culturally valued form of womanhood in UK society, including within universities (Acker, 2006; Phipps, 2018)—granted her a relative 'in' to the university that may not have been available to women of colour. Beyond her positionality, temporality is important to understanding this trust. Due to the time elapsed between her experience of GBVH and her report, she was able to see how the university had changed, and watching these changes over time allowed her to trust the university. This newfound trust worked as a catalyst (Bull, 2022) for reporting to her university. Overall, Jennifer and Sarah's experiences reveal both a complication of the trust/distrust binary through Jennifer's interpersonal trust in a small number of staff yet lack of institutional trust, and how distrust can change over time into trust through Sarah's experience, components which we explore in more detail when articulating our concept of 'unwilling trust.'

4.1.2 | Lack of trust prior to reporting

As two people who trusted (part of) the university body, Jennifer and Sarah are the exceptions in our sample; we now examine the experiences of the 12 participants who expressed that they did not trust their university prior to reporting. Within these reasons for distrust, we found four broad themes: interviewees did not trust their universities due to their perception that individual staff would serve as barriers to the university's reporting and/or response process; their perception that they would face personal consequences because of reporting; a previous experience of unsupportive or under-resourced responses; and their awareness of cultures that normalise gender inequality and GBVH. These categories are not mutually exclusive as interviewees often offered multiple explanations for their distrust in the university. Given that these interviewees eventually reported their experiences of GBVH to their institutions, however, we also identify the reasons why they reported despite their initial distrust. Several common themes appeared among these reporting rationales (Bull, 2022), which include seeking

acknowledgement and/or documentation of the misconduct; seeking institutional change as a result of their experiences; wanting to support other survivors and/or wanting to prevent future victimisation of others; and wanting the misconduct to stop as it severely interfered with the interviewee's ability to work/study/function in their university.

Perception of staff barriers in university response process

Four of the 12 interviewees who did not trust their university prior to reporting mentioned that this distrust stemmed from not trusting individual members of staff, or staff offices that would be involved in the reporting process. This distrust was a result of perceived conflicts of interest between staff handling reports and the reported party, or in the very role response staff occupied in relation to the university (e.g. Human Resources [HR]). While this distrust is related to individual staff or specific offices, it cannot be fully explained within an interpersonal lens; even though interviewees discussed individuals, these individuals were not seen as separate from the system in which they worked. Jonny's experience exemplifies how distrust of an institutional office maps onto distrusting an institution. He is a white male staff member who organised a group complaint against his head of department for harassment of various types. He indicated that their group

> didn't have any confidence in HR, so we said, 'We want to have independent HR people deal with this'
> … We don't feel that HR is really on our side. We feel HR is there to make sure that the university
> doesn't get sued or that they are following the rules or whatever it is.

Unusually, they were successful in this demand. Their insistence on using independent HR personnel reveals the specific location of their distrust in the reporting process: although they did not trust their institutional HR staff to carry out the investigation, they did trust the process itself.

Perception that they would face personal consequences because of reporting

In comparison to other reasons interviewees gave for distrusting their universities, fewer people expressed fear of personal consequences as a reason to distrust their university. It is possible to read interviewees mentioning fear of personal consequences in this context as a fear of victimisation (i.e. retaliation from individuals or the institution because of their complaint). Previous research indicates that it is relatively common for HE students who have experienced GBVH to believe that their harasser or the university will retaliate against them for reporting (NUS, 2018; Smith & Freyd, 2013). Our data reflects this trend. The interviewees who raised this concern were either junior within their institution or junior in comparison to the respondent party; this relative status appeared to contribute to their concerns over victimisation (see also Universities and Colleges Union (UCU), 2021).

Amy, a white working-class female PhD student at a research-intensive university, was junior both within her institution and compared to the respondent, a professor in her department. She was acutely aware of the power differential between them: 'I think the big formal [complaint] process would've destroyed me more than him… it was either, I have a future, or I haven't.' She first disclosed her experience because she did not feel able to function at her university; she felt unsafe on campus, and this impacted her ability to work on her PhD. After attempting to seek informal resolution, she decided not to file a formal report because of his status:

> He works with big NGOs as well; a lot of people know him. He's very charismatic and people initially
> will really like him because he's charming and funny and always got a story and I was a 23-year-old
> student. I'm just collateral damage in the grand scheme of the university.

When disclosing to the head of her department, he cemented her view that she would suffer personal consequences. She described how he told her, '"If you want to take this any further it would ruin your PhD… You're our top scholarship-winning PhD student, don't fuck it up." He told me not to fuck it up.' Her head of department was

not only speaking to her as himself, but also as a representative of the university that she perceived could potentially harm her academic career. As someone who worked to support herself and her family and was on a scholarship in the department, in addition to being a young white woman, she quite literally could not afford to challenge this more senior male member of staff. Amy's experience makes visible how the positions people occupy within their institution impact their perception of and relationship to the institution. Between her own knowledge of her junior position relative to the would-be staff respondent and her head of department reinforcing her fear of consequences should she report, Amy, like others in our sample, struggled to trust her university because she did not feel protected by it (Phipps, 2018; Shannon, 2021). In other words, interviewees' perceptions of hierarchical power imbalances within their institutions did not foster trust when participants occupied more precarious positions within such hierarchies.

Previous experience of an unsupportive response to a report

By far, this rationale for distrusting the university was the most prevalent: seven of these 12 participants identified a previous negative response to a disclosure as something that affected their expectations of institutional responses, and made them initially distrust their HEIs. Not all of these previous experiences occurred within their current institutions. These experiences were, however, powerful enough to carry over from another institution (e.g. the police, a school) to the university.

Andrea—a white middle-class female Master's student at a research-intensive university—attempted to report 'grooming' (Bull & Page, 2021) and sexual harassment from her Master's supervisor twice, once during her Master's and then as a PhD student at the same university. In her first attempt, the university's staff GBVH advisor incorrectly claimed that Andrea had to go through an informal mediation before making a formal complaint, which she did not want to do and therefore did not report. Two years later, at a gender equality forum for her department, she disclosed her experience and a male professor in her department, who supported and believed her, encouraged her to report. She was also informed that the earlier response—that she had to go through mediation—was incorrect. Andrea did report this time to gain closure, and so that the university would acknowledge the harassment. Temporality, like in Sarah's case, is important here as it allowed Andrea to see institutional change over time regarding attitudes to and procedures for addressing sexual harassment. This second report implies that her trust in the institution was only partly damaged and was able to be restored. Such a conceptualisation challenges binary understandings of trust and distrust, particularly those that position trust and distrust as immutable states, or distrust as an irrevocable phenomenon.

Awareness of normalising cultures around gender inequality and gender-based violence

Awareness of cultures that normalised gender inequality and GBVH is the last broad rationale interviewees provided for not trusting their institutions. Five of the 12 participants in this sub-group indicated that they did not trust their university prior to reporting because of cultural issues they identified within their department, institution, or subject area more broadly. Both student and staff interviewees spoke of how these cultures—which normalise, tolerate, and/or perpetuate sexism, GBVH, and/or staff/student relationships—impacted them and their view of the institution, specifically with regards to fostering institutional distrust.

Several interviewees spoke of how these cultures extended beyond their department or institution and were present in their discipline at large. Courtney, a white woman, is one such example; she identified how her disciplinary field normalises crossing boundaries that can lead to sexual exploitation (Ahmed, 2021). An instructor groomed her into an abusive relationship (Bull & Page, 2021) at the performing arts institution she attended for her undergraduate and Master's education. Later, supported by a newly formed collective which raised awareness of GBVH in her discipline, she posted on social media about her experience. This led to a formal report to her institution several years after the abuse occurred. In discussing why she chose to first post on social media that she had been groomed—a post in which she named the institution but not the instructor—she explained that,

putting something on social media in that way was what felt like a space that was going to be well-supported and like safety in numbers; on reflection why didn't I approach the school directly, and there's this feeling of, 'that would've been the most silencing way to do that'; like it felt like it needed to be something about bursting a bubble I think, because it is something that's not just about the [performing arts] school, it's about the sector I work in at large.

In addition to processing her experience over time, Courtney's perception of the pervasiveness of boundary-crossing behaviour in her field motivated her to report. Courtney's desire to seek solidarity and recognition through online means is an approach that has become more common since #MeToo, particularly for white women who have experienced sexual harassment (Phipps, 2020). The politics of 'speaking out' online have been intensely debated (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019), for example, in relation to activists speaking out about sexual harassment and violence in Indian universities (Anitha et al., 2020; Dey, 2020). This approach has been argued to be a symptom of distrust in institutional systems amidst a widespread normalisation of gender-based harassment and violence (Dey, 2020). Our findings complicate this debate as for Courtney, posting online led to her reporting to her institution, and the institution taking formal action. 'Speaking out' in this case opened a channel of communication with the institution, and led to a (partial) rebuilding of institutional trust.

Cultures that normalised gender inequality and violence signalled to participants that their HEI would respond to reports in ways that perpetuated such cultures. These cultural issues impacted interviewees' perceptions of their university's response process's legitimacy: if people view their university as compromised because it is part of the culture about which they go on to complain (Ahmed, 2021), then the university becomes a less legitimate option for responding to reports, and in turn people who have experienced GBVH may not fully trust the university.

4.2 | Theories of trust and reporting behaviour

The above examples of distrust prior to reporting demonstrate the importance of understanding institutional trust as distinct from interpersonal trust. Jonny's case illustrates dependence upon the institution through having to use an HR process for their group complaint, while Amy's case speaks to the different positions people occupy in relation to the institution. Temporality was integral to Andrea's case in that she was able to see attitudes and procedures change between her reports, which helped establish partial trust in her university. Courtney, conversely, perceived boundary-crossing behaviour as normalised in her field and extrapolated her hesitance to trust the field to her institution. These elements—dependence, positionality in relation to the institution, time elapsed, and trust in institutions at large—point towards a more complex, sociological analysis of the role of 'trust' at the time of reporting in institutional betrayal.

To begin addressing these gaps and make sense of why interviewees in our sample reported to their universities despite not trusting them prior to reporting, we introduce the concept of 'unwilling trust.' This concept complicates Khodyakov's (2007) theorising of trust as an agential process and expands on Luhmann's (1979) system trust. It helps to explain the experiences of people, like our interviewees, who do not trust an institution but nevertheless engage with it. We purposely stay away from using language that implies choice in this context (i.e. in not claiming that interviewees *chose to* engage with their university) precisely because unwilling trust reflects limitations of agency. This theorisation begins to clarify the difference between someone's dependence on and trust in an institution when mobilising institutional betrayal.

4.2.1 | The contested nature of 'agentic' trust for interviewees of sexual misconduct

A significant part of Khodyakov's (2007) theory of trust as a process relies on understanding 'trust as a form of agency' (p. 125). He draws on Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) definition of agency and its three core components of

iteration (how past behaviour influences present social engagement), projectivity (how people anticipate the future based on affect and calculation), and the practical-evaluative dimension. Our data challenges the practical-evaluative dimension. Khodyakov (2007) states that in the practical-evaluative dimension of agency (Emir-bayer & Mische, 1988), actors examine and judge available options for proceeding based on behavioural and moral norms, as well as the information available. When applied to trust, this evaluation considers the risks and benefits of (dis)trusting the chosen party: 'The decision to enter trust relationships means that the actor anticipates only positive rewards from such relationships and is ready to act "as if" the other person could be trusted (Uslaner, 2002)' (Khodyakov, 2007, p. 126). The language here implies that the trusting relationship in question is between two individual actors ('other person'), not an individual and an organisation, which is what we examine. While such a conceptualisation of trust as a form of agency works well in understanding one individuals' decision to (not) trust another—if both parties have equal power and agency—it does not necessarily map onto the trusting relationship between an individual and an organisation of which they are a member. The dynamics of trust between two actors are different from the dynamics of trust between an actor and an institution, and it is this latter relationship—built on uneven power, (relative) anonymity, and complex, unseen processes (Luhmann, 1979)—that challenges notions of agency in institutional trust.

Beyond differences in power dynamics between the involved parties, Khodyakov's (2007) theorisation of trust as a type of agency, particularly through the practical-evaluative dimension, assumes that there are alternatives that actors can consider when deciding whether to put their trust in someone. For 12 staff and student in-terviewees in our sample, this was not the case. The police or the HEI are the two main options for reporting sexual misconduct, and there are many barriers to reporting to the police, including rape myth acceptance among law enforcement, concerns around confidentiality, and fear of not being believed (Hahn et al., 2020). The HEI may be the only viable option for any kind of recourse in university GBVH cases. Furthermore, given that the most frequent rationale for reporting was wanting the GBVH to stop as it interfered with the interviewee's ability to work/study, the HEI is the organisation with the ability to enforce this. As a result, while participants may not have trusted their university to respond to GBVH reports, they were nevertheless dependent upon their university to find recourse. Though Smith and Freyd (2013) mention members' dependence on and trust in institutions when explaining institutional betrayal, we argue that these are separate phenomena. Members of an organisation may be dependent upon it, but this dependence is distinct from their trust in the organisation.

4.3 | Unwilling trust

Luhmann's theory of system trust mentions a 'compulsion' (1979, p. 50) to trust which is like this dependence. System trust addresses the limitation of individual agency within the relationship between an individual and a system (Luhmann, 1979). Using the example of the monetary system, Luhmann argues that

> [t]he person trusting realizes his dependence on the functioning of a highly complex system which he cannot see through, although it is, in itself, capable of being seen through. The person trusting knows he is unable to make corrections; *he thus feels himself exposed to unforeseeable circumstances, but nevertheless has to continue trusting as though under compulsion to do so.*
>
> (Luhmann, 1979, p. 50, emphasis added)

We suggest this 'compulsion' is important, and have expanded upon and retheorised it as 'unwilling trust' to make sense of the experiences of the 12 interviewees who did not trust their universities prior to reporting GBVH yet reported anyway.

Unwilling trust is a contradictory phenomenon. Here we theorise it both as a result of and occurring within the relationship between an individual and an organisation of which they are a member. It can be understood as a

contradiction between an individual acting in trusting ways due to their reliance on an institution while feeling or expressing to some extent a lack of trust, or uncertainty as to whether they can or should trust. It can also denote the time lag and disconnection between the feeling and action of trusting: the action of trusting may lead to feeling trust; the action and feeling of trust may be entirely (consciously) disconnected (e.g. when a member of an institution decides to act in a trusting way while feeling distrustful); or the actor may suspend the decision whether to trust. We see this time lag and how it worked to garner institutional trust in both Sarah and Andrea's cases, as they both waited several years to report (again) to their respective universities after witnessing institutional change during that time.

We suggest that unwilling trust is more likely to be experienced by those who are positioned as marginal to the institution. This suggestion reflects Acker's (2006) work on inequality regimes of race and gender within organisations, and Ahmed's (2021) work on complainants as institutional strangers. While institutional betrayal (Smith & Freyd, 2013) and many other studies in HE position 'belonging' to the institution as important, perhaps surprisingly, our theorisation of unwilling trust does not include a sense of belonging as a component. In fact, key to this definition is that trust can occur *without* a sense of belonging. Amy's reluctance to formally report the misconduct she experienced from an older male staff member illustrates how people can perceive their own relative outsider status within the university. Most significantly, unwilling trust makes clear the limitations around agency that an individual has when interacting with an organisation. As outlined above, many of our interviewees did not trust their respective universities prior to reporting—yet because they were dependent upon the university, as it offered the only form of recourse that they wanted, they had to act as though they trusted the university in an attempt to resolve their situation. Their 'trust' in the university was unwilling.

5 | CONCLUSION

A crucial step for tackling gender inequalities in HE is addressing GBVH. Understanding how and why survivors disclose/report their experiences to their institutions can help in this work. As we have outlined, a significant yet understudied component of reporting sexual misconduct to universities is trust, which is central to the concept of institutional betrayal, but which we argue needs a deeper sociological framing to fully explain the variety of trust dispositions we encountered in our data. To theorise the role of trust in institutional betrayal (Smith & Freyd, 2013), we have separated it into dependence on and trust in institutions. We have explored how staff and student interviewees of GBVH discussed their (dis)trust of their universities prior to disclosing/reporting. While two participants expressed that they trusted an individual staff member or the university as an entity, about half of our sample explicitly said they did not trust their universities. Nevertheless, these 12 participants still went to their universities to disclose/report GBVH. To make sense of this apparent contradiction between interviewee dispositions and actions with regards to (dis)trusting their universities, we introduced the concept of 'unwilling trust.'

Unwilling trust examines the fraught trust relationship between an individual and a membership institution. It complicates Khodyakov's (2007) theory of trust as an agential process and expands upon Luhmann's (1979) theory of system trust by highlighting both the lack of agency involved in these relationships and the split between apparently trusting actions without corresponding trusting dispositions. Unwilling trust also addresses critiques of institutional betrayal by moving beyond interpersonal theorisations of trust to encompass both the system and the context in which trust occurs. In our sample distrust manifested in various ways, yet because the interviewees wanted some form of resolution and the university was the only body able to allegedly provide it, they reported GBVH despite their distrust. Drawing on feminist theories (Acker, 2006; Ahmed, 2021; Crenshaw, 1991), it also addresses the different ways that individuals experience institutions due to the intersection of their gender, race, and class, whereas mainstream sociological theories of institutional trust tend to flatten everyone's experience of an institution. Ultimately, the concept of unwilling trust pushes forward theorisations of trust in institutional

betrayal by acknowledging disconnection between dispositions and actions regarding trust, and interrogating the role of agency (or lack thereof) within individual-institution trust relationships.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to their sensitive nature and their containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This project received a favourable ethical opinion from University of Portsmouth's Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee (Reference Number: FHSS 2021-57).

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ENDNOTES

[1] Throughout our findings, we use 'report' or 'disclosure' to discuss interviewees' individual experiences with their HEIs. A report is a formal complaint to the university of GBVH that triggers an investigation, while a disclosure is a private conversation about the GBVH with someone in the institution that does not trigger an institutional process (following which they may or may not make a formal report). We default to 'report' when speaking generally.

[2] As we will discuss, the student or staff status in survivor/perpetrator dynamics—for example, a university student assaulting another student, or a university staff member assaulting a student—can also impact survivors' trust in their university due to their awareness of power imbalances (Bull & Rye, 2018; Phipps, 2018).

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