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Joining up well-being and sexual misconduct data and policy in HE: 'To stand in the gap' as a feminist approach

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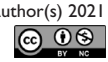
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Abstract

This article joins up evidence and policy relating to two linked concerns in higher education (HE) that are treated as unrelated: postgraduate research student (PGR) well-being, and staff sexual misconduct towards students. Against the standard methodology of systematic reviews, we build on feminist approaches to apply a 're-performance' approach to the review. Re-performance re-enacts established methods, contextualising previous analysis through ethnographic and desk-based research, exposing gaps in evidence, analysis, representation, care and policy. We reveal how aspects of PGR experience, particularly the cultures that engender ill-being and enable sexual misconduct, are silenced in evidence-making. Our 're-performance' uncovers how this occurs in three ways, through: the (mis)construction of the 'typical student' in well-being literatures; the (mis)construction of the phenomenon of 'well-being' exacerbated by generic survey tools focusing on a medicalised model of mental health; the (mis)construction of HE institutions as integrated, agential and ethical, aided by the fragmentation of administrative systems and knowledge production between disciplines. Together, these organising modes conceal lack of care, staff sexual misconduct and poor well-being. From these findings, specific policy issues are identified: the risks to giving more responsibility to supervisors for PGR well-being; a pattern of institutional listening while silencing; and the need to explore feedback loops between patterns of vulnerability to ill-being and staff sexual misconduct. Through our analysis, the article demonstrates how to 'stand in the gaps' – between knowledges; and between evidence and action; between policy and care – in a way that can be generalised across policy domains, epistemologies and policy-making contexts.

Keywords

evidence-based policy-making, higher education, staff sexual misconduct, systematic review, well-being

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To stand in the gap: to assume a position of active, resolute defence (for or against something)[1]

Introduction

Within higher education (HE) policy, two issues that have seen increased research interest in recent years are staff sexual misconduct towards students, and student well-being. Both of these issues have been documented as being particularly acute among postgraduate researchers (PGRs),[2] for whom there is evidence of higher levels of ill-being[3] and staff sexual misconduct[4] than among students in general. Indeed, evidence suggests that 10% of all female postgraduate students will be subject to staff sexual misconduct from academic staff as opposed to around 3–7% of undergraduate students (Australian Human Rights Commission [AHRC], 2017; Cantor et al., 2019). While data on well-being may be inconsistent for reasons we allude to below, international research indicates that 36% of PhD students have sought help (Nature, 2019) and 31% had shown signs of major depression, general anxiety disorder or a panic disorder, in the previous 12 months (Auerbach et al., 2018), while academics' estimates of mental health issues across the student body in the UK ranged from approximately 20 to 70% (Student Minds, 2018), and other survey data record 15% of undergraduates reporting mental health issues (Vitae, 2018, p. 5).

HE well-being literature on students rarely draws on research about HE systems or staff that is not about academic provision (Oman, 2016). This may be because previous studies have primarily focused on isolated determinants of well-being (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018), omitting evidence on PhD candidates' personal experience (Amran & Ibrahim, 2012, p. 528). This approach has obscured *causes* of ill-being, which include being subjected to sexual misconduct from staff (Bull & Page, 2021a; Bull & Rye, 2018).

Despite this fragmented use of evidence, contemporary HE governance is said to be evidence-based and, when empirical and about the student experience, is primarily from surveys (Beerkens, 2018) or synthesised by systematic reviews (e.g. Worsley at al., 2020). Sector-level surveys, such as the UK's Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) and the National Student Survey (NSS) for undergraduates, claim to capture student experience to evaluate performance and inform policy-making. With specific policy interventions, such as improving well-being, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) survey and report on their own interventions, as do advocacy organisations, such as Student Minds (2018) or Vitae (2018). Yet these methods rarely capture students' own interpretations of their well-being or their lived experience, including how this experience is racialised or affected by intersecting inequalities (Oman, 2017, 2021b; Oman et al., 2015). Instead, they reflect a lack of rigorous engagement with the meaning and experience of well-being as subjective and multi-dimensional, and with the politics of framing well-being, and enable contentious issues such as ill-being or sexual misconduct to be evaluated in the terms of the interest group – whether the HEI, the sector, or the advocacy organisation – rather than those of the student.

The limitations of evidence-based policy-making for well-being in HEIs are revealed when institutional failures to address well-being, sexual misconduct, racial harassment, or disability discrimination (to name a few) become part of a public scandal (see for example Batty, 2019; Weale, 2017; Westmarland, 2017). Such reporting opens up individual experiences of systemic issues to wider public engagement which drives demands

for sectoral and institutional change. Yet, similar evidence from lived experience has not previously resulted in change. Clearly, there is a gap in the evidence used to inform policy change – and monitor it. It is not incorporating certain types of data. What counts as evidence in HE, and how that evidence is constituted, is culture-driven, disrupting claims to rationality and creating barriers to understanding and change.

This article addresses the cultural nature of HE data by connecting the two policy objects well-being and staff sexual misconduct – which tend to be addressed separately. It builds on our activism and research in these two areas. The second author is a founder and director of The 1752 Group, a research and campaign organisation addressing staff sexual misconduct in higher education (Bull, 2021; Bull & Page, 2021a, 2021b; Bull & Rye, 2018; Page et al., 2019). It also draws on research from the first author, who addressed the lack of research on PGR well-being (Stubb et al., 2011) by undertaking research for a Student Union whilst enrolled as a PGR in the institution (Oman, 2016, 2017). We identify how these issues of social justice are broken (up) by the Academy, through 'standing in the gaps' that separate them. We see these gaps as ones of experience, evidence, representation, care and policy; we see 'standing in the gap' as a critical mediation on behalf of those who are organised by university administration processes, and in defence of those at risk of staff sexual misconduct and ill-being in HE.

Well-being and staff sexual misconduct are chosen as exemplars that problematise HE's capacity for 'care-as-policy', as outlined below (Freeman, 2017). Ahmed (2018) has identified 'strategic inefficiency' in systems to address sexual misconduct and, we suggest, these can be generalised to systems for well-being and other HE management processes. In this article, therefore, we 'stand in the gap' between these two policy objects, and between them and the worlds to which they refer, to reveal how knowledge production and institutional policy delimits sociological objects, restricting the sorts of evidence that inform practice and policy.

Empirically, this article demonstrates how joining two bodies of evidence together reveals hitherto obscured issues in the recommendations and approaches taken to address these issues separately. Theoretically, it builds on literatures on feminist knowledge production, proposing a methodology to review evidence that is more inclusive of experience than the systematic review. It draws on dialogues across this journal of the conflicting epistemologies of 'care-policy' (Freeman, 2017) and proposals for 'radical care' in the Academy (Silver & Hall, 2020). Its contributions are therefore relevant to policy and knowledge production in higher education internationally.

To understand what these objects are and how they function, together and separately, we stand in another gap: between a problem and what we might know about it, and between the different forms such knowing takes. This is a project rooted in feminist methodology and epistemology, drawing from research on translation between policy and care as ways of knowing (e.g. Freeman, 2017), and in the method of 're-performance' that we introduce below. We ground our project in these ideas before then outlining our application of the 're-performance' methodology to the two case studies: PGR well-being and experiences of staff sexual misconduct. We discuss what the approach can reveal more broadly about HE's systematic structural issues and reveal implications for policy and further research. Finally, we reflect on the method of re-joining knowledges across the gaps as reparative activist-research and argue for how 'standing in the gap' in this way constitutes a critical and crucial feminist praxis of knowledge production.

Evidence versus care in HE: Re-grounding policy in feminist knowledge production

A recent special issue of *The Sociological Review* examined care and policy practices (ed. Gill, Singleton, & Waterton, 2017), drawing from ethnographic engagements to challenge default everyday distinctions between care and policy. A postscript reflects on how these intersect at a point 'of discrepant worlds/knowledges' with some emphasising inconsistencies and others exploring how these 'separate worlds' could be joined up, or are indeed more connected than we imagine (Freeman, 2017, p. 193). In drawing together lived experience (through the focus on care) with wider metrics, practices and knowledge frameworks (through the focus on policy-making) Freeman argues that the space of care is shrinking, challenged by policy in the form of governance, regulation and accounting (2017, p. 193). Freeman's counter-argument is the idea of 'care-policy', arguing that care needs policy and policy needs care, and both need to be examined as practices. However, 'care-policy' in the field (carried out by 'knowing subjects') and in the office (as inscribed in documents) clash because they draw on different epistemologies.

The epistemic norms of evidence-based policy-making are heavily influenced by knowledge production in medicine; its preferred methods, such as randomised control trials (RCTs) and systematic reviews, are increasingly used in other domains. As we describe below, systematic reviews tendentially prioritise medical frameworks which assume evidence quality and have been shown to have implications across policy domains, including international development (Mallett et al., 2012) and social care (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). This is because social science methods which reveal lived experience are marginalised, and consequently, knowledge of the causes of ill-being and staff sexual misconduct are limited, crucially inhibiting their visibility and legibility in policy-making.

By contrast, care-policy argues for joining up epistemic communities through experiential data, such as ethnographic or other deep qualitative accounts. Not only can such data capture evidence of lived experience (Oman, 2017) but can also be used to critically interrogate other forms of data (2021b). Such methods are therefore crucial for framing a feminist epistemology of 'standing in the gaps' between knowledges and between care and policy. This is especially true at this moment of various crises of care in HE and beyond. Yet, as feminism has long pointed out, epistemological others are not recognised in the status quo. So, rather than an opposition of experiential knowledge versus 'evidence for policy' we aim to join together experiential knowledges to inform policy in a way that addresses issues of care for students.

Our approach therefore draws on a long history of feminist work on knowledge production (Stanley & Wise, 1993). In this tradition, Wylie et al. argued that interrogating the institutional mechanisms by which knowledge does or does not gain authority and visibility is integral to feminist knowledge production:

> The projects of reclaiming women's experience as veridical, of theorizing this experience, and of building on it a program of political action – arguably the central concerns of contemporary western feminism – are thus inextricably bound up with that of analysing and challenging the politics of control over knowledge and epistemic authority, politics which are now closely identified with the institution of science. (Wylie et al., 1989, p. 19)

Feminist knowledge production attends to gaps and fissures and has been fundamental to previous critical feminist work on ways of knowing (Potter, 1996) revealing the performativity of systems, including those which disguise crises (Butler, 2010) and the confinement of contestation, inhibiting agency (Ahmed, 2017). For example, when people raise complaints of sexual harassment, racism, or other oppressions within the academy, as Sara Ahmed describes, 'the gap between what should happen and what does happen is densely populated' (2017, 2019). This gap in action is also a silence: 'you can hear the failure to do anything, to say anything; you can hear the turning away, the sounds of distraction; busy; preoccupied . . . by turning away, their actions are as loud as the words they do not say' (2017). We will suggest that this 'gap' does not just exist within institutional responses; it is deeper and wider than that, as it is also institutionalised into our modes of knowledge production and re-entrenches how the 'promise of happiness' (Ahmed, 2010) is structured to assess and assure the well-being of a typical student, while obscuring those outside of the assumed somatic norm.

However, there is little feminist engagement with the systematic review, in comparison to debates on how other methodologies reproduce and revalidate certain experiences over others. This is despite high-profile revelations of hitherto hidden injuries of the lived experience of the academic, which are available on systematic scales (Erickson et al., 2020; Legalisse, 2020) and through individual testimonies and case studies (Eyre, 2000; Gill, 2009). Others evidence the harms experienced as a result of resistance and redress, through following narratives of complaints processes and experiences of policies (Ahmed, 2019). Ahmed's work on complaints builds on previous work that revealed the performativity of diversity policy-making processes in HE, uncovering the gap between symbolic commitments to diversity policy and the experience of those who embody it (2012).

We aim to extend these scholars' use of 'the gap' by standing in gaps we have encountered and attempting to join up policy and experience, bodies and types of knowledge to help facilitate change. If 'feminism is what happens when complaints speak to each other across gaps' (Ahmed, 2019), we are trying to speak across the gaps which pre-exist complaints. Furthermore, we speak across the gaps of knowledge that exist before the prevalence of ill-being and sexual harassment are 'known' as evidence. The methodological approach outlined below reveals the gaps that enable the 'containing of complaint' as it is 'the same work as reproducing culture' (Ahmed, 2019). The challenge that is laid out by Ahmed, Bhopal and Henderson, Gill, Eyre, and the critical tradition of feminist interventions in academic knowledge, is to find methods of knowledge production that enable lived experience to be accounted for within systems of knowledge that not only go beyond the individual to account for institutional and societal structures, but also provide an impetus and evidence for activism to change these structures.

Re-performance: A theoretically-informed methodology to understand systematic reviews and evidence

A standard practice of synthesising evidence is the systematic review, which is gaining popularity as a default in social science. Often used to inform policy or identify gaps in

the evidence base, systematic reviews ordinarily involve searching databases using keywords, generating a long list of relevant research, and then assessing the quality of this research through various criteria, including method and publication. This approach therefore validates certain knowledges, invalidating others, reproducing epistemic difference and omitting some publications (Martín-Martín et al., 2019), thereby further legitimising that which has already been legitimated.

Consequently, systematic reviews tendentially exclude research which includes certain knowledges, and as we explore below, they risk silencing narratives of experiences which contribute to ill-being, such as those of sexual misconduct. In particular, the methodological biases described in the introduction generate an evidence base for HE, in which structural and symbolic violence or physical and sexual violence taking place are unlikely to appear. While there is a critical literature engaging with methods and epistemologies of systematic reviews, feminist critiques have not been as prominent as in critiques of quantitative methods, for example. We argue that feminist approaches to knowledge production are a generative way of examining the systematic review and how it constructs policy problems.

The 're-performance' methodology, as devised by the first author (Oman, 2021a), illuminates ways in which research constitutes common-sense understandings of an issue, as well as evidence for policy. The approach takes a policy issue or widely accepted solution and, re-enacts aspects of an established method to understand the issue. Previous examples include responses to a well-being survey and class inequality metrics (Oman, 2021a). By contrast to the deductive approach taken in systematic reviews, which frames its questions so as to *exclude* evidence, this alternative approach undertakes inductive analysis of others' research, interrogating how evidence practices support policy-making (Oman, 2021a).

Re-performance is conceptualised as not only reproducing, but re-enacting research and extending analyses (Oman, 2021a; Oman & Taylor, 2018), often aided by gathering ethnographic or other contextual data in order to understand the site of knowledge production 'in-the-round'. Regrounding knowledge production as cultural is vital for a feminist approach, enabling a mapping of what counts as 'evidence' onto larger moral, political and scientific domains (Potter, 1996, p. 239). In a context in which existing structures and systems reproduce gaps, re-performing the systematic review highlights the structural production of knowledge as a practice of power.

Method: Joining gaps by applying re-performance to systematic reviews

Joining up staff sexual misconduct and PGR well-being evidence and policy has been informed by observation of others' and our own respective experiences of working within HE systems to address these issues. Our collective, personal experiences and activist sociological research led us to investigate these problems separately. Our dialogue led us to interrogate how HEIs have created bodies of knowledge that systematically foreground evidence that the HEI is policy compliant, but that exclude lack of care.

To reveal the modes of knowledge production that have contributed to the 'gaps' within which this article 'stands', the first author 're-performed' a literature review of

PGR well-being. A previous review (Oman, 2016) indicated the lack of evidence identified in 2011 (Stubb et al., 2011) had not been addressed. Indeed, Schmidt and Hansson's systematic review of doctoral well-being in 2018 resulted in only 17 texts, 10 of which were published before 2015, seven after. In this 're-performance', to understand this apparent paucity of research, we tried to locate PGR well-being in a wider context and broader literature around the ways in which well-being is experienced, measured, defined and evaluated across HE more generally.

We extended this everyday, collaborative approach to snowball-sampling literature to incorporate opinion and comment pieces describing experiences of the academy from national, international, sector and non-sector publications and conference presentations from PGRs. We followed all bibliographic references, rather than excluding those that didn't fit a predetermined paradigm, drawing from discussions on social media platforms to enrich the sample of literature reviewed. This follows Greenhalgh and Peacock, who argue that 'asking around' can be more efficient in its return of evidence than formal protocol-driven search strategies 'which can fail to identify important evidence' (2005, p. 1064). No method is perfect for understanding well-being as a universal phenomenon, and *who* does the searching will always bias the results. However, this snowball approach[5] to literature and evidence includes high-profile research and systematic reviews, whilst also identifying experiential evidence that is marginalised from dominant approaches.

The headline findings from the extended review were shared with the second author, who undertook a deductive review of research literature on staff sexual misconduct, including her own research in this area, to re-view the gaps arising in the first author's findings. The overlaps and tensions across both bodies of knowledge were then discussed. We turn now to 'stand in the gap' between our literatures to show what this method can reveal.

Standing in the gaps

This review revealed major gaps, assumptions and elisions across academic and grey literatures both on staff sexual misconduct and well-being among PGRs. A comprehensive overview of all issues we discovered is beyond the scope of this article, so below we demonstrate what 're-performing' the well-being literature review can reveal of the previously obscured PGR experience, particularly the cultures that engender ill-being and enable sexual misconduct. Our analysis showed three key ways in which the categories of analysis were constructed in misleading ways. In each case, the evidence constructed a research 'object' that was not reflected in experiential data.

The (mis)construction of the typical student

The well-being literature frequently elides 'students' into one population. Consequently, identifying research about the PGR population is challenging (Mackie & Bates, 2019). Literature focusing on student well-being and 'the student experience' prioritises that of undergraduates. Given that much of the literature aims to review interventions, PGR well-being has largely been addressed assuming undergraduate strategies would suffice (Mackie & Bates, 2019, p. 566; Oman, 2016). While the paucity of PGR-specific research

in 2011 has been partially addressed since the first author's initial review in 2015 (see above, Oman, 2016), the literature that clearly includes PGRs remains limited and wider evidence of well-being initiatives in HE settings reinforces ideas of the typical student which affects solutions.

Student experience surveys tendentially ask questions directed at the typical student (Oman, 2017; Oman et al., 2015); their methods are often problematic and their documentation lacking in methodological detail (Bennett & Kane, 2014). Well-being survey design can overlook how people at greatest risk of ill-being, or already marginalised, are least able to communicate their experience (Oman, 2021b). Different demographic groups experience PhDs differently (Oman, 2017) but when differences across PGR populations are studied, analysis of gendered experience tends to obscure racialised experience, as Bhopal and Henderson describe (2021). Therefore a lack of intersectional understanding further excludes those who are most marginalised. Oman's case study found that PGRs wanted the HEI to accommodate the subjective and multi-dimensional nature of well-being in its support, as it was lacking (Oman, 2016). However, as certain experiences and opinions do not translate into evidence on which policy claims to be based, solutions are misdirected and situations in which people become further marginalised through poor well-being continue to be reproduced.

Despite these conclusive (albeit recent) findings, well-being research rarely explores the causes of ill-being, instead exploring the most obvious problems and interventions, using methods which are unlikely to render staff sexual misconduct visible (see Worsely et al., 2020). As sexual violence researchers have repeatedly indicated, specific questions about behaviours are necessary to render sexual harassment or violence visible in surveys, as the impact of such experiences may mean that people do not disclose it unless specifically asked (Bull & Rye, 2018) or may not use these labels (Welsh & Nierobisz, 1997). Furthermore, staff sexual misconduct survey data do not always distinguish between Master's and PhD students (AHRC, 2017; Cantor et al., 2019; National Union of Students, 2018). If data such as these were referred to when generating well-being evidence, other gaps in knowledge and causes of poor well-being might also be revealed.

The (mis)construction of the experiential phenomena of well-being

Re-viewing the well-being literature revealed a lack of a clear definition of 'well-being' and a focus on narrow aspects of the mental health crisis in HE, rather than broader concepts of well-being (as also demonstrated by Schmidt & Hansson, 2018). There is currently no recommended/agreed measure of well-being that is specific to HE, although discussions are emerging on instituting these (Vitae, 2018). Consequently, much academic work on well-being in HE actually foregrounds mental health. While the two are, of course, inextricably linked, such an approach reflects a medicalised representation of well-being, rather than a social or experiential one.

This elision of mental health with broader notions of how well-being is experienced most likely results from the use of long-serving measurement tools that are easily applicable to HE settings. However, this does not mean they have been evaluated for contextual integrity (i.e. whether the questions work for those answering them and whether the measures capture what is required to understand the problem at hand). One of the consequences

of this mental health focus is that research foregrounds barriers to help-seeking from mental health services, using survey questions that predetermine reasons why a student does not attend relying on a deficit model of participation. Consequently, the literature discussing student well-being locates failure in the student not attending services, with the solution assumed to be increased attendance or engagement, rather than considering whether the service is required, apposite or useful. For example, in the case of PGR engagement, PGRs often draw on the university offer less, because it is less suitable for them than undergraduates. This shifts the focus onto evaluating services, rather than looking at well-being or lived experience. Consequently, dangers and impediments to well-being, particularly contentious ones such as staff sexual misconduct, are unlikely to be revealed.

The focus on mental health as narrowly conceived; on barriers to help-seeking; and on evaluation of interventions rather than looking at causes of poor well-being, means that the link between mental ill-health and sexual violence is rarely made. If mental health measures ask about symptoms, rather than causes of mental ill-health, understanding remains limited. In particular, how HE's contexts – its structures and systems and specific disciplinary or departmental cultures (as discussed below) – contribute to creating poor mental health will never be uncovered.

The (mis)construction of the institution as integrated, agential and ethical

The student well-being and staff sexual misconduct evidence is fragmented between disciplines including psychology, law, sociology, education, organisation and management studies, health disciplines, and policy studies. In the well-being literature, the focus on mental health rather than broader understandings of well-being, as noted above, means that the evidence base sits predominantly within psychology and that there is less sociological understanding of well-being in HE, whether quantitative or qualitative; thus poor well-being is conceptualised as individualised rather than as socio-cultural. There is some work which foregrounds the academic experience (Christie, 2018) or from a critical feminist point of view (Gill, 2009), but little that examines HE as institutional culture where students, PhDs, early career researchers, tenured staff and non-academic staff are all experiencing depleted well-being, 'together'.

An example of the methodological basis for this fragmentation is the PRES, the most comprehensive UK-based survey for PGRs run by sector agency Advance HE. The PRES does not include a module that might capture aspects of well-being for analyses, although HEIs can add questions. It focuses on asking about aspects of 'provision' rather than experience. This gap in understanding experience could, to some extent, be filled by policy evaluations within institutions, but where they occur, this is minimal (see Universities UK, 2018, p. 28). Further evidence comes from HEIs' self-reporting initiatives (as seen in Universities UK, 2018) as if these are solutions rather than critical engagement with what works. Such instructional behaviour has received extensive criticism in the area of diversity (e.g. Ahmed, 2012) and the motives are called into further question by the fact that grey literature in this area is very often commissioned by, or written in collaboration with, a particular HEI, or HE-focused organisation. This allows

a policy focus on managing mental health and profiling initiatives, rather than any reflection on the structural problems in HEIs.

Within this disciplinary fragmentation, the institution is presented as the key site for tackling both poor well-being and staff sexual misconduct. However, the lack of joined-up thinking across the methodologies, journals and sites of knowledge production across disciplines is mirrored in – and contributes to – a lack of joined-up thinking within institutions. The idealised response is referred to in UK policy guidance as a 'whole institution approach' to tackling sexual violence, harassment and hate crime (Universities UK, 2016). However, such an integrated, agential and ethical approach from the institution is difficult to build from existing research where there is reliance on either quantitative survey-based studies, or small-scale accounts of survivors' experiences (see for example Ahmed, 2017; Cantor et al., 2019; Eyre, 2000; Whitley & Page, 2015). This is problematic because it is at the level of the institution that changes are currently being made, but existing research does not allow sufficient analysis of the issue at such a level.

Therefore, there are indeed structural gaps, or a 'vacuum' in the institution around staff sexual misconduct (Bull & Rye, 2018, p. 19). There is also evidence that prevalence of staff sexual misconduct varies greatly between institutions (AHRC, 2017; Cantor et al., 2019). This institutional vacuum coexists with the strong departmental and disciplinary cultures within HE (Becher & Trowler, 2001; Lee, 2007), whereby staff and students' identities may be more closely tied to their discipline area or their department than their institution, and so it is likely that a particular department within an institution may have micro-cultures that condone or enable sexual misconduct.

Discussion

We have outlined some ways in which 're-performing' reviews of these literatures has revealed systematic gaps in knowledge production. However, this method is not solely a critical one but can also be generative for policy (Oman, 2021a). What, then, can be learnt from this approach towards substantive approaches to addressing these issues?

There are risks to giving more responsibility to the PGR supervisor

Supervision and the supervisor relationship are the most researched factors in PGR well-being studies (Sverdilk et al., 2018, p. 365). When the systematic and structural care that the institution should be providing to the student is slipping, and external support networks are unavailable, the supervisor is often who they 'reach out to first' (Guccione, 2019). Indeed, the grey and academic literature on PGR student well-being both advocate for greater responsibility to be placed on the supervisory relationship (Mackie & Bates, 2019; Oman, 2016).

The dangers of this approach are made visible in the research literature on staff sexual misconduct. Here, the relationship of the perpetrator to the student is usually only generically described, for example, as 'faculty member' or 'lecturer' (AHRC, 2017; Cantor et al., 2019; although see National Union of Students, 2018, where this relationship is specified in relation to students in general, although not specifically to PGRs). Thus, a well-being solution that is easy for a university to administer, by displacing responsibility onto individual supervisors, actually risks enabling staff sexual

misconduct. It is clear that the gaps in systemic support for the most vulnerable not only fail to address both poor well-being and sexual misconduct, they in fact create realities in which these two phenomena are more likely to exist.

There is a wider pattern of institutional listening while silencing

Some of the ways in which institutions respond to disclosures of staff sexual misconduct are in fact symptomatic of wider well-being/mental health responses. While it proved difficult for many respondents in Bull and Rye's study to find someone to take their disclosure, when they did disclose their experience, they often received an initially sympathetic response (2018, p. 16), but this was followed by a realisation that the institution was unwilling, or lacked any processes, to address the issues they were raising, sometimes alongside more active forms of being blocked from reporting (2018, pp. 15, 19).

Similarly, a report for Student Minds found that UK HE does not currently have the appropriate structures or cultures to assist academics to support students (2018). While there may be some spaces to listen to disclosures of ill-being, and these have been formalised in some sector research (Student Minds, 2017), the other systems around assessment, funding or other support services are not joined up to readily accommodate ill-being when it is disruptive to the standard trajectory (Oman, 2016).

This Janus-faced response confuses students, who may feel initially comforted to have been listened to, only to be confounded and distressed by subsequent institutional silencing, 'brick walls' (Ahmed, 2018), or even institutional harassment (Bull & Page, 2021b; Bull & Rye, 2018). These patterns can be theorised through the care-policy framing that Freeman describes: individual staff members within an institution are attempting to provide care but this care is not connected to the wider policy framework. This is symptomatic of the 'strategic inefficiencies' and 'non-performative' systems that Sara Ahmed describes (2012, 2018), which claim to support diversity and other duties of care, whilst only re-performing the status quo in protection of the institution.

We need to better understand how inequalities and vulnerabilities intersect

Not only does being subjected to sexual misconduct usually lead to poor well-being, but there is some evidence that the poor well-being may lead to students being targeted by staff because they are vulnerable. In the criminal justice context, Nina Burrowes suggests that this is a strategy used by perpetrators, who 'can increase their chances of being able to carry out the offence and reduce their chances of being punished for the offence through the careful selection of a victim' (2013, p. 16). In addition, vulnerabilities created by patterns of inequality may affect students' likelihood of seeking or obtaining support for these issues. For example, students and staff of colour lack confidence that institutions will act effectively if they report racialised harassment (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2019, p. 58). Furthermore, complaints processes may not be able to address such intersections; in the US context, Cantalupo (2018) notes that the same incident might be both sexual harassment and racialised harassment at the same time, but

institutional processes under current Title IX legal frameworks make it impossible to deal with this intersection.

These intersections work together in ways that need to be more clearly understood. While policy-making prefers linear relationships that can be solved by off-the-shelf interventions, a circularity or feedback loop could be at play in these experiences, rather than a clearly causal relationship. Therefore, we need to focus on wider structural patterns of devaluing within institutions, and how institutions reflect or refract such devaluing of certain groups in wider society.

Standing in and closing the gap – re-joining care and policy

Freeman (2017) argues for a re-joining of care and policy across their different epistemological framings, and the discussion in this article has made visible some of the structure and effects of these gaps. Interestingly, despite the shift towards a reliance on policy over care that Freeman notes, the notion of care is frequently cited in UK HE policy and discourse under the guise of HEIs' 'duty of care' towards their students. Universities UK, the industry lobby group for UK HEIs, points out that 'although universities do not have the same statutory duty for safeguarding their students as colleges and schools have, they do have a duty of care to ensure that students have a safe environment in which they can live, work and study' (Universities UK, 2019, p. 26). However, as they further note, 'the extent of a university's duties in respect of safeguarding and mental health has not yet been tested in the courts' (Universities UK, 2019, p. 28) and so the precise responsibilities of institutions under this duty of care remain unclear.

Given the discussions above, it is not surprising that 'care' remains undefined in the UK HE legal and policy contexts, and this is perhaps one of the gaps that most urgently needs to be examined in relation to both staff sexual misconduct and student well-being. Indeed, many of the recommendations that we have made ourselves (Bull & Rye, 2018; Bull et al., 2019; National Union of Students, 2018; Oman, 2016, 2017; Oman et al., 2015) and that we have read elsewhere appear unlikely to be implemented, or be effective if they are implemented, because there is no political imperative or will towards care in HE policy.

Arguably, these conditions emanate from a lack of wider discussion and systemic attention to what a university is for, related to the current HE context of competitive marketisation. Many authors have argued that this results in a lack of care for well-being, beyond addressing the performance indicator. Indeed, as described above, the various arguments of value (such as the symbolic and economic value of research and researchers through innovation and impact discourses) supersedes that of 'care' in many of the literatures found, thus exacerbating the issues abounding in asking the wrong questions, finding the wrong answers and justifying why it is important to do so in the first place. In obscuring the values of 'duty of care', the HE's values skew towards the economic contribution of labour. This default omission of what a university is for facilitates the exclusion of how well-being is experienced in the round, including how the culture of university itself facilitates poor well-being.

Clearly, improved care in policy requires a change in the forms of evidence used to inform policy, as at present the lived experience of staff sexual misconduct lies in locked

filing cabinets (Ahmed, 2019), rather than informing institutional change. Protecting the well-being of staff and students should be paramount to the HE's purpose, and yet well-being evidence is dominated by limited survey methods and systematic reviews. These methods are important, but need to be linked to qualitative and ethnographic approaches, as well as changing the way survey questions are asked and interpreted to prioritise context and accommodate how experienced well-being is communicated by people.

Conclusion

The article has demonstrated how re-performing literature reviews – reviewing the way that knowledge is produced through a literature review, becomes literature, and is reproduced as fact – exposes more than just gaps in the literature. This method is able to reveal gaps in the systems and structures of HE that produce knowledge, and how falsehoods, misrepresentations, inadequate methods and systems are able to reproduce themselves across the existing system to perform and re-perform as if they represent an ethic of care. By re-visiting academic research and grey literatures on PGR student well-being in HE alongside literature on staff sexual misconduct, we found that there exist gaps between claims to evidence in HE policy-making and the claim of care. Sara Ahmed reveals the 'non-performativity' of policies in HE, in that they do not address the thing that they name. This article supports this work, uncovering the systems of knowledge production that support and underpin this non-performativity.

As we have argued, when it comes to understanding well-being and sexual misconduct within PGR populations, there are particular problems with the prevalent method of synthesising an evidence base, the systematic review. These issues are exasperated with sociological objects which are often slippery concepts, such as well-being (see Ahmed, various). Furthermore, identifying the PGR population, and delimiting it from articles analysing empirical material about undergraduates is difficult when the word 'student' is non-specific. Another way in which sexual misconduct is obscured in student well-being literature is through the questions asked and methods used; generic survey tools asking about mental health cannot reveal data on sexual misconduct or the reasons for PGR ill-being, nor will studies that evaluate interventions to address well-being. Finally, we have argued that the fragmentation – of knowledge production between disciplines, and of policy responses within institutions – conceals staff sexual misconduct and poor well-being, and impedes the stated goal of 'whole institution' approaches. From this analysis, we were able to identify specific policy and research issues to be addressed: the problems with giving more responsibility to supervisors for PGR well-being, as this ignores the possibility of staff sexual misconduct; a wider pattern across both issues of institutional listening while silencing, whereby students may initially receive a sympathetic response to later encounter 'brick walls'; the need to explore causal or structural links between patterns of vulnerability and ill-being and staff sexual misconduct.

As well as these contributions, this article makes methodological suggestions for improving how evidence is drawn together to create policy. We have drawn on feminist literatures to argue for thinking critically about the methods behind the ways that we draw on literatures, what the gaps are, and how to speak across the gaps. Specifically, we have shown how drawing on a feminist-inspired approach to literature reviews,

're-performance', can reveal different patterns of evidence within existing literature than the systematic review. In sum, we have argued that in order to produce knowledge that solves problems we have to produce joined-up knowledge.

Revealing gaps in processes and evidence highlighted gaps in representation, care and policy, enabling us to 'stand in the gap' in defence of those who are let down, because they fall between the cracks in care-policy. We aim to mediate between academics and policy-makers, and urge both to start from the margins and speak across gaps – including (and especially) alongside those working on racism in HE, LGBTQ+ lived experience of HE and sexual misconduct. Indeed, we drew together from our own research expertise, but there are other topics that could have done similar work such as examining racialised harassment and hate crime, or even more mundane, low-level emotional abuse and lack of care, alongside the well-being literature. We suggest that re-joining across the gaps is a form of reparative and/or activist action that can work against inequalities within or across population subgroups including by socio-economic status, race, age, gender, disability and sexuality. In order to confront the failures in leadership and political will that are evident in the often-poor institutional responses around the topics discussed in this article, we urgently need these forms of joined-up thinking.

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Notes

1. To stand in the gap has biblical origins (Ezekiel 22:30), it means acting as a mediator, whilst also standing in defence of someone/something.
2. There are national differences in how postgraduate students are described. We used the term PGR, as a feature of the research question of the original research. It references those on PhD, but also Master's of Research programmes in the UK.
3. Ill-being, as the opposite of well-being, despite a lack of agreed definition (Oman, 2021b), is used here to incorporate the social, psychological, emotional and the physical, rather than simply happiness or mental health.
4. Drawing on Page et al. (2019), we use the term 'sexual misconduct' to indicate that we are drawing on all forms of sexual violence, sexual harassment, as well as sexual behaviours that may not fall under these categories but may still constitute professional misconduct. By 'staff' we include both academic staff or faculty (in the US terminology) as well as non-academic staff, although evidence (National Union of Students, 2018) suggests that most sexual misconduct towards students is perpetuated by academic staff.
5. Further description of a similar application of the snowball approach to literature reviews can be found in Kennedy et al. (2020).

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