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Sexual Violence in UK Higher Education: A Psychologist's Perspective

Sam Hales is conducting his PhD at the Centre of Research & Education in Forensic Psychology (CORE-FP) at the University of Kent. His research assesses the treatment needs of sexually aggressive male students and the effectiveness of clinical interventions in reducing their propensity towards offending. For regular updates on his work, please follow Sam on Twitter, @hales_samuel.

Where are we now and what's left to do?

University-based sexual violence is a devastating public health issue rampant within higher education institutions (HEIs). Figures from the US Department of Justice (2014) show that over 31,000 female American students are victims of rape or sexual assault each year. There is a similar story emerging in the UK, with 56-70% of female university students reporting that they are victims of sexual assault or abuse during their studies (National Union of Students, 2010; The Student Room, 2018; Brook & DigIn, 2019). These statistics are significantly higher than rates of sexual violence perpetrated within the general population, suggesting that universities are breeding grounds for dangerous sexual behaviours.

The consequences of sexually violent offences extend beyond the serious mental and physical health implications for survivors. There is a substantial economic cost associated with sexual violence owing to the sick days that survivors often need to take as a result of the event. There are also issues for university admissions and retention – personal safety is often a high priority for prospective students, especially females, and their parents when selecting

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universities (Agrey & Lampadan, 2014). This blog post is the first in a series that discusses university-based sexual violence research in the UK. We start with an overview of the information available about sexual violence within UK universities, and the scope for future directions which can be taken to address this issue.

As psychologists, we are well placed to incite change which reduces rates of violence towards, and improves outcomes for, students. Now is the time to talk about sexual violence in higher education (HE).

National Responses to Sexual Violence in HE

In 2016, in the wake of on-the-ground activism, increased media, and political scrutiny of safeguarding practices in HE, Universities UK (UUK) commissioned its *Changing the Culture* report. This report summarised evidence available from individual universities, charities, and NGOs, to provide an overview of the rates and types of violence (including sexual violence) female university students experience during their studies. The report's findings were stark: there were systematic problems in universities' approaches to harassment and violence against its female students, with only a handful laying the necessary foundations for effective sexual violence prevention and response.

Although there have been improvements in this area since the initial report, the standardisation of sexual violence interventions remains poor across the sector. Many HEIs develop initiatives to combat the issue only at a local level, and using methods that are not always evidence-based (UUK, 2018). Given that the majority of female students self-report being victims of university-based sexual violence, this seems negligent on the part of institutional policymakers. A collaborative approach wherein institutions work together to share ideas – including the successes and failings of any developed initiatives – would undoubtedly lead to a reduction in campus-based sexual violence, as well as an increase in reporting figures by survivors. To date, though, this has not been the norm, with many

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universities reticent to share their sexual violence rates under fear of reputational damage. This is despite evidence to the contrary (Lindo, Marcotte, Palmer, & Swensen, 2018).

Academic Developments in the UK

In recent years, the number of sexual violence climate surveys conducted with HE students has steadily increased. This has been brought about, in part, by the growth of feminist campaigns such as the #MeToo movement and Time's Up. Whilst these surveys have been good at highlighting the issue of university-based sexual violence and quantifying its prevalence, they lack scope. Owing to these surveys, for example, we now possess a concrete understanding of who the survivors of sexual violence are. We know little, though, about the perpetrators and the reasons why they choose to offend.

These deficits in academic understanding surrounding the psychology behind university-based sexual violence has stunted developments in policy and the design of interventions to tackle such behaviours. Given psychologists' well-developed understanding of incarcerated sexual offenders (see Gannon & Ward, 2017) and the effectiveness of clinical-forensic treatment programmes to reduce their propensity towards offending (e.g., Olver & Wong, 2013), this is very surprising.

Future Directions

Despite recent increased social, academic, and political interest in university-based sexual violence, there are still fundamental gaps in our knowledge surrounding the issue. This is evident within the published psychological literature in the UK, which appears to have stagnated in comparison to other social science subjects. This is especially true of empirical work, of which there is virtually none. Psychologists are uniquely well placed to contribute to sector-level changes in various ways (Towl, 2018): we understand the psychology of sexual offending, we know how to enact behavioural change at institutional levels, and we

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appreciate the need for – and can help to develop and evaluate – evidence-based interventions to reduce sexual violence.

Despite the many skills abundant within psychology to tackle sexual violence in HE, there remains a lack of cross-collaborative work targeting this issue within the UK. This has contributed to a ‘silo effect’ across the sector, in which academics have become isolated from one another and the wider academic community. This reduces our ability to share information and tackle the systematic problem of sexual violence in our universities. To break down the silo that plagues modern-day HE, researchers and university policymakers should collaborate more and adopt interdisciplinary working practices when researching this area. The successes of such an approach are evident when reviewing cross-collaborative projects such as USVreact, which brought together academic and non-academic partners across seven countries to review best practices in institutional responses to sexual violence.

Lastly, more intersectional research should be conducted with under-represented groups (e.g., the LGBTQ+ community, ethnic minorities) to assess their lived experiences of university-based sexual violence. This is made obvious when reviewing The Student Room’s climate survey, which signals to worryingly high levels of sexual violence against non-binary students and students with a disability (61% and 73% respectively). Emancipatory work such as this would not only make an obvious contribution to academic knowledge, but it would also encourage the design of inclusive policies and interventions that are of benefit to all students, not just the majority.

Only by acknowledging problems with their current practices and through making a conscious effort to alter these, can academics and policymakers ensure that they are contributing most effectively to sector-level change.

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