UNIVERSITY of York

The politics of in/visibility: how institutional conceptualisations of sexual violence enable or prevent effective challenge and change in higher education.

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Key arguments

- Sexual violence remains largely invisiblised in and by institutions
- Research-informed training about sexual violence *can* be an effective mechanism for prevention and culture change but ….
- Myths and misperceptions around sexual violence are fairly prevalent and some persist post-training among staff and students:
- Has implications for understanding about how universities respond, institutionally and on at the level of individuals, to disclosures of sexual violence

Invisibilisation

We don't notice it, so I think it's quite accepted. Because when I was first thinking about lad culture at this university I thought 'oh well there isn't really' and then I realised actually there is and there's quite a lot of it. It's something that even I sometimes don't even notice.

All I can say is I've been here 21 years and I've not handled more than 5 or 10 cases. In the grand scheme of things, students are more affected by depression, anxiety, anorexia – they are more prevalent.

Invisibilisation, normalisation

On the spectrum of kind of things it's I think there's obviously the more serious side of it is an issue but there's like the kind of … there's literally no good way of saying it, like kind of the less kind of drastic sexual assault is really, really, really rare.

From my personal experience, I haven't heard much of it, from people I know. I have never really heard of anyone who has been raped or anything like that.

Sure, maybe some creepy local in town would try to kiss someone or whatever, but nothing too severe, nothing where the person was left feeling really distraught afterwards or whatever.

Normalisation and trivialisation

I would never think to report it to be honest. It's never, maybe it's because it's never really scared me enough for me to think it's a problem, but I mean it could be. Yes I've definitely been touched when I've said don't touch me, I've definitely had my skirt pulled up, I've definitely had people like kiss me when I've said get away from me, and they'll just take your face and they'll just kiss you. There's not a lot you can do about it but I'd never ever think to report it. [….] I wouldn't know how. Taken seriously? I don't know because I've obviously not taken it seriously enough to report it, so maybe not. Like I say, I don't know what it would take to take it seriously. It's like what would you say to report, 'cos I could give you 20 reports from one night out. (SU officer)

*That's so true because if it happens to me, I don't even think about it; I wouldn't even think twice, I'd just literally swap places with one of my friends just to move out of the way because obviously I don't want it but it's just – yes, it is such a common thing to happen now that yes, people do just accept that it happens. You just shrug your shoulders and go, "Well that's what happens in a club on a night out". (*Student leader)

Conclusions

- Not an uncritical reading of universities as 'danger zones'
- As Lewis, Marine & Kenney (2018) have argued, universities can be sites for transformative feminist activism and resistance

'The limited focus on danger and safety belies the potential of universities to enhance human freedoms through intellectual endeavour' (Lewis, Marine & Kenney, 2018, 2)

- Depiction of universities as unsafe spaces for young women in particular can increase neo-conservative focus on protecting women from excessive, hypermasculinity
- Risks us overlooking the ways in which women are inhabiting universities spaces more agentically – including resistance to lad culture and sexism through e.g. feminist groups, feminist publications/zines and advocacy

Conclusions

- Research-informed training about sexual violence *can* be an effective mechanism for prevention and culture change but ….
- Myths and misperceptions around sexual violence are fairly prevalent and some persist post-training among staff and students
- Findings suggest that staff and student education around these issues is still needed and that an empathy-centred approach is more effective than a skills-centred one
- Institution-wide approach necessitates top down support and action, clear disclosure and reporting pathways and policies, and a survivor-centred, trauma-informed approach
- Culture and norms change around gender – and other – forms of inequality is also necessary – necessitates shake-up of make-up?