Student Sex Work: Governmentality in Higher Education and Silence as a Technology of Power

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Abstract

This article draws on interviews with student support service providers in the United Kingdom and United States of America to illustrate conflict between university values such as equality, diversity and inclusivity and the lack of protections and support afforded to students engaged in sex work. Utilising Foucauldian concepts of power and governmentality to inform our analysis, we contend that the silence surrounding students engaging in sex work in higher education is a technology of power and part of a governmentality in higher education which is damaging and oppressive to students engaged in the sex industry. We also consider a range of harms that student service providers believe students engaged in sex work are experiencing through a zemiological lens, which usefully renders less visible harms visible. In doing so, we aim to accelerate an understanding of the grim challenges students engaged in sex work in higher education environments are facing.

Keywords: student sex work; higher education; governmentality; silence; zemiology

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Introduction

The student cohort is changing with evidence suggesting between 5 per cent (Sagar et al., 2015) and 7 per cent (Ernst et al., 2021) of students engage in the sex industry and that these students are facing high levels of prejudice and discrimination within higher education (Stewart, 2021; Simpson & Smith, 2021). After reviewing previously published student sex work research the authors found that Sagar et al (2015a) carried out the first research study with student support service providers in 2013-14 on the topic of students engaging in sex work in the United Kingdom (UK). The findings suggested that participants had misconceptions about sex work as well as a lack of awareness about students engaging in sex work. With indisputable evidence that students were engaging in sex work across higher education (see, Sagar et al., 2015b), the researchers argued the findings illustrated a need for higher education to recognise that students were involved in sex work, to refrain from taking part in any discriminatory action against these students who were engaging in work that was highly stigmatised, to accept the institution has a duty of care to all students who live, work, and study under the umbrella of higher education, and to respond 'pragmatically and facilitate and provide health, safety and welfare support for students actively considering or actively engaged in work in the sex economy' (Sagar et al 2015a, p. 401).

In the USA, in states where forms of direct sex work are criminalised, any student charged with a criminal offence may also be in violation of the student code of conduct and likely to face a second layer of disciplinary measures including expulsion from the university. This is also true for UK students, although less likely given that the act of selling sex, if consensual and if carried out in private, is legal. The USA has made some changes with Maine adopting a partial criminalization model (Heal, 2023), and other states repealing prostitution laws that prohibit loitering in a public place for the purpose of sex work (Vielkind, 2021). However, a decade on from Sagar et al's research, few universities have established policies to protect student sex workers from discrimination and harassment. For example, at the time of this writing, while Leicester University in the United Kingdom (UK) is known to have an equality, diversity and inclusivity policy specifically to safeguard student sex workers, the vast majority of UK universities have not followed suit, although similar policies have been developed by student unions which have started to multiply (see for example: Newcastle University Student Union, 2023; Northrumbia University Student Union, 2023).

We use the term sex work, and its definition offered to us by Weitzer (2010, p. 1) 'the exchange of sexual services, performances, or products for material compensation'. Where students enter the sex industry voluntarily and without coercion or force (while still recognising structural coercions that place a burden on students such as rising tuition fees in both the UK and USA) This umbrella term is used for a wide range of occupations with varying levels of intimacy, including indirect forms of sex work which are less intimate might include for example, stripping, erotic dancing, web cam sex and phone chat, and direct forms of sex work which might include more intimate escort work for example.

This article is concerned with the views and opinions of those who provide services to higher education students. It reports on a cross-national study carried out with 16 student support service providers, nine in the United Kingdom (UK) and seven in the United States of America (USA). Given that student sex work is a global phenomenon (Benoit et al., 2018; Campbell et al., 2019; Jones & Sagar, 2022) and that all who work in the sex industry face high levels of stigma that is known to be damaging to sex workers (Goffman, 1963; Hammond & Kingston, 2014; Simpson & Beer, 2022), we hypothesised that both groups of

student support service providers may experience barriers when helping student sex workers access university services. Our main aim was to understand, from a student service provider's perspective, what may stop student sex workers getting the support they need and what might help to improve access to student support services.

Background

Despite the evolving political and legal landscapes, students in both the USA and UK face a second layer of governance targeting behaviour that is perceived to be immoral with students who engage in sex work in both the USA and UK open to accusations of breaching academic standards and codes of conduct. Social stigma is one of the most destructive forces for all who engage in the sex industry and students who are "outed" can find themselves facing charges of conduct violations enforced by academic programs' fitness to practice and morality codes. Assumptions about immorality and deviancy associated with sex work can give way to questions about proper conduct (UK) and technical ability (USA) in fields of study.

There is, however, a double bind for universities when it comes to the issue of disciplining students for engaging in the sex industry. Disciplinary action at a university confirms that students are engaged in sex work at that higher education, thus, the university may fear a potential impact on a university's reputation and recruitment. Disciplinary action also leaves the university open to accusations that it is far too concerned with outdated concepts of immorality as well as the hypocrisy of students taking up sex work to keep their heads above water due to exorbitant tuition fee increases (see for example, Roberts, 2022). While alternatively, those institutions which accept the existence of students engaging in sex work while at higher education and which seek to extend support services to these students face the very real problem of stigma by association – something we are beginning to understand more about as researchers who are concerned with student sex workers report their own negative experiences (Hammond & Kingston, 2014; Jones & Sagar, 2022; Roberts, 2022).

The public outcry following the creation of support Toolkits for staff and students by Trueman and colleagues at Leicester University (Trueman et al., 2022) stands as testimony to the gauntlet some brave universities have been prepared to run. Instead, most universities have opted to keep silent on the issue (Roberts, 2018; Lancaster et al., forthcoming). Within this silence, stigma against students who are engaged in sex work in higher education in both the USA and UK is increasingly reported (see for example, Jones, 2022; Stewart, 2021; Simpson, 2022; Trueman et al., 2022), with some even suggesting that stigma against student sex workers in higher education is institutionalised (Lancaster et al., forthcoming).

Research Gap

Our cross-national sample of student service providers and our theoretical framework offers an original contribution to the student sex work literature. An earlier cross-national study explored student sex workers' stigma management in the UK and Australia addressing the importance of stigma and stigma management from a student perspective (Simpson & Beers, 2022). However, our study is one of only two in the literature to provide student support service providers perspectives on their knowledge of student sex workers, opinions about the possible harms they may face, and barriers to providing support to student sex workers. Our study is also the first to do so cross nationally. We sought to measure student support providers responses because this discrepancy in research participants allows an opportunity for misunderstandings and assumptions to go unexplored. Indeed, current research shows that student sex workers do not believe student support can understand them or assist them (Hammond, 2019; Jones, 2022; Stewart, 2021). We wanted to know if this is true, and if so, why.

Drawing on findings from interviews with student support service providers in the UK and USA, we examine their concerns about the silence surrounding student sex work in higher education and the harms they believe sex workers are experiencing. We start with a Foucauldian perspective; recognising there is a block of power supporting the university, manifested through rules/regulations and policies. We then move beyond the more visible harms resulting from outdated notions of deviance that can give way to dubious regulations and punishments (for example such as deeming a student who is engaged in the sex industry unfit for professional nursing practice) to zemiology.

Zemiology (a discipline which grew out of social harm theory within criminology, see Hillyard et al., 2004), has been employed by academics studying a range of social phenomenon to challenge dominant notions of harm – notions of social deviance for example (Canning & Tombs, 2021). The discipline seeks to 'unpack powerful structures and institutions to consider who they serve and who they disproportionately harm' (Canning & Tombs, 2021, p. 4). Through a zemiology lens we seek to explain harmful practices and identify forms of harm that are less visible/unseen (Canning & Tombs, 2021; Hillyard &Tombs, 2004). Drawing on both, we illustrate the invisible harms student sex workers experience and set out to challenge discrimination against student sex workers.

A discussion follows which is bolstered by a Foucauldian analysis. We argue that subjectification of staff and students is achieved, with both students engaged in sex work and student support providers understanding the need to keep silent. In this way the existence of students engaging in sex work is hidden, but likewise, so are their needs and concerns. And, as our findings suggest, deterred from accessing support, the harms experienced by student sex workers are rendered invisible. This article offers new theoretical understandings of why student sex workers are outside of university protections.

The Neoliberal 'Problem' and the Art of Government

Relationships of power, how constructions of discipline are created and influence behaviour, and how people adjust their behaviour in response to power, is central to the work of Foucault (see, Foucault, 1980, 1982) and it can explain governance within universities. Academics have drawn on Foucault to explain an array of political, social, and economic contexts and his ideas have proven particularly helpful to those seeking to understand how neoliberal societies function (see for example, Gordon, 1987). Foucault's conceptual thinking on the art of government, 'shaping the conduct of individuals by calculated means' (Murray, Li, 2007, p. 275), helps to explain how in a neoliberal society, political power is exercised to influence the behaviour of people to adhere to the principles of market economy (Gordon, 1987). In the pursuit of maximum profit, neoliberal agendas push against excessive regulation and state interference. People are urged to put their talents to good use and adapt where necessary so they can compete in the global marketplace, and personal problems are a private responsibility, not the states (McKee, 2009; Metcalf, 2017). Following what Foucault refers to as a process subjectification – 'having power exercised over oneself' (Lawlor & Nale, 2014, p. 496), people govern themselves in a way that benefits the market. In this way Neoliberalism regulates whole lives, with market principles organising all aspects of activity (Metcalf, 2017). To the extent that 'economics thus becomes an 'approach' capable in principle of addressing the totality of human behaviour' (Gordon, 1991, p. 43), and what Foucault describes as a regime of truth is created (see, Lorenzini, 2015).

When this process is transposed to the neoliberal university environment, education is a valuable commodity, something worth paying for and worth having. A university degree is marketed as a stepping stone to profitable employment in the capitalist economy, although admittedly this has evolved in recent years to include impressions of getting value for money (Tomlinson, 2017). Applications to university are incentivised with images of students attaining higher paid/professional jobs. On admission, students are informed of their

responsibilities (in a range of documents and charters) to uphold the inspirational values of the university which include the need for students to be self-governing, hardworking, and successful. Subjectified students understand the need to adhere to student behavioural codes which enable both students and the university to prosper. Unfortunately for the university, the same neoliberal values can also result in students being quick to recognise 'sexual consumerism, autonomy, choice, individual freedom and entrepreneurship' and to take up profitable opportunities in the sex work markets (Jones, 2022, p. 123), an irony that is not lost on academics (see for example, Roberts, 2018, 2022).

Evidence of students engaging in sex work is undeniable and universities are likely to be aware of the convincing data suggesting that students who engage in sex work do so most often to pay their tuition fees/avoid debt (Sagar et al., 2015) and/or be part of the consumer economy while studying (Ernst et al., 2021; Sagar et al., 2015). However, while on the one hand it could be argued that such activity bears the hallmarks of a conscientious neoliberal citizen, on the other acknowledging students working in the sex markets brings forth risks of reputational damage with a potential negative impact on the University's profit margins (Roberts, 2022). To overcome this quandary, the university stays silent.

Our previous research drew on mass communication theory to offer a better understanding on how silence spirals in higher education to keep those with opposing opinions at bay (see, Lancaster et al., forthcoming). Here however, we are concerned with governmentality – how the conductor (the university) shapes the behaviour of staff and students (the conducted) within HE environments. We are particularly interested in how silence as a technology of power, influences and shapes the behaviour of staff and students.

Technologies of Power

When we understand how power functions, we can begin to appreciate how disciplinary structures are formed and maintained (why people behave in the ways they do). Contemporary neoliberal higher education is underpinned by what Foucault refers to as a block of power (Foucault, 1982), a disciplinary structure comprising a wide range of policies and rules which influence and shape student behaviour from a distance. This may include for example, expectations that students will act professionally, within the law, that they will behave in a manner consistent with the functioning of the university, that they will not bring the university into disrepute, that students enrolled on degrees leading to professional qualifications and/or the right to practice that profession, will not engage in conduct rendering them unfit to enter/practice that profession.

Yet, these rules are vague in the extreme with terms like appropriate conduct being left to the discretion of the university and/or the profession the student aspires to be part of (see, Roberts, 2018; Sagar et al., 2015a). Drawing again on Foucault, how a student makes sense of their status as a student is down to the art of government (see, Burchel et al., 1991) – the tactics of power deployed by the university to protect its economic security, and the technologies of power – the methods/forms of power which activate and shape (see, Rose et al., 2006) student behaviour. One example of discrimination in higher education involved a nursing student who received extra assignments, grade changes, and severe harassment after her instructors learned about her previous employment in the sex industry, leading to the student's attempted suicide (Weissman, 2022).

Foucault's understanding of technical power or techniques of power (Foucault used the terms interchangeably, see Behrent, 2013) is particularly helpful to us because technologies or techniques of power can take many different forms, involving action as well as inaction. Technologies of power are purposeful, calculated, and deployed with the aim of achieving a desired result – the control of another's behaviour (Murray Li, 2007). In the context of students engaging in sex work, we argue that keeping silent is a very powerful tool deployed by the university to control staff and student behaviour. This gives rise to questions

of decision making and the conscious intentions of higher education within broader political, social, and economic contexts. Furthermore, while understanding different forms of power and the consequences of actions and inactions is important, we contend that such explorations are particularly valuable where damaging unintended consequences are exposed, as emphasised in this article.

Methodology

Prior to starting this research study, the first author (USA) contacted the second author (UK) noting an interest in collaborating on a future study. After two years of contact and evaluating the existing research, we decided to examine student support service providers perspectives on student sex workers. We believed this to be particularly important given that Sagar et al's research (2015) had been carried out a decade earlier (2013/14) and given the lack of progress in terms of policy development within higher education as recommended by that research team. We hypothesised that both groups of student support service providers may experience barriers when helping student sex workers access university services, but we also wondered if responses may show a noticeable difference between the UK providers where more research and training is available versus the USA providers who likely would not have received training on student sex workers given the absence of research-based training. Subsequently, two universities took part in the study with which the researchers had professional contacts. Ethical approval was granted by both universities and following ethical research practices, initial contact was made via email introductions and informed consent attachments with support team leaders. Participants were invited to take part in the study by email. Interviews with self-selecting participants were held via Zoom and Microsoft Teams – nine in the UK and seven in the USA. Participant data was then anonymised, separated by country, and the identities of both the institutions and participants undisclosed (Colosi et al., 2019). Participants came from a range of student support teams including financial hardship, welfare, faith, disability and information.

The interviews were semi structured with questions centring on two key areas:

1. Participant perceptions about students engaged in sex work.
2. Participant experiences of supporting students engaged in sex work.

Prior to meeting participants, we formalized a semi-structured protocol consisting of eight main questions and five sub questions. We asked participants what they thought might be the main concerns of students engaged in sex work; their opinions on the level of awareness of student sex work within the student support service provision; why they thought students engaged in sex work might opt not to disclose their involvement to support services; as well as being asked to offer their opinions on how students engaged in sex work might be viewed within higher education environments and by wider society. Ruslin et al., highlights the relevance of this qualitative data approach by stating:

> When researchers view knowledge and evidence as contextual, situational, and interactional, they should ensure that the interview is contextual as well; researchers should view interviews as something to draw upon and conjure up relevant social experiences or processes in the best possible manner (2022, p. 4).

For those participants that had experience supporting student sex workers, they were asked to share that experience. Follow up questions involved the usefulness of higher education policies such as 'Dignity at Work' and 'Equality, Diversity and Inclusion' in assisting service providers to support students engaged in sex work, as well as whether participants had received any training on student sex work and if they thought policy development and training would be helpful. This article draws from key descriptive findings from across the data set to discuss the pervading silence on student sex work in higher education and participant beliefs that student sex workers are being harmed because of this silence.

With 16 participants we wanted an in-depth approach to collecting participant

opinions based on their specialised knowledge as student support providers. Once the interviews were complete, we started with a broad data analysis searching for similarities and differences among the two data sets (UK and USA) and then went about organizing descriptive findings in an attempt to understand where the silence around students' sex work roots and the perceived zemiology resulting from the silence and differences between those providers who have and have not received student sex work training or previous experience in supporting students in the sex industry.

Findings

In this section we draw on the data set of 16 semi-structured interviews utilizing student support service providers' opinions, perspectives, and interview excerpts, versus themes, to discuss the range of harms and challenges students involved in the sex industry are facing in higher education.

Shaping and Influencing Behaviour Through Silence

It's Just Not Talked About

Eleven out of 16 participants believed student support service providers *did not* have a good understanding about students engaged in sex work. Three participants believed they were *unlikely* to have a good understanding. The remaining two were either unsure or believed student services might have a good understanding. Participants were asked how they had arrived at their opinions. Ten out of 16 participants noted the silence surrounding sex work in higher education for example: Participant 12 (USA) explained that the issue '*goes under the radar*' and how '*the topic really hasn't arisen…it's not really spotlighted or acknowledged*' with Participant 6 (UK) responding in kind '*We need some way to even just talk about it because at the minute I feel like it's hidden, it's not there. Because it's not talked about*.' Five participants also referred to a pretence in higher education that sex work does not take place. Participant 11 (USA) was one of five to refer to a pretence in higher education that sex work doesn't take place: '[staff] *don't really talk about it because we pretend that it doesn't happen*'. Pondering the situation further, some participants expressed their concerns, suggesting that the silence surrounding student sex work permeated every level in the university, for example: '*we've never personally talked about it, or talked about it at a professional level here*' Participant 10 (USA). Participant 14 (USA) went even further, saying that the institution did not actually '*put itself in a position to know such things*.'

It is certainly not uncommon to hear about institutional failure to understand the issues sex workers face. Over decades academics have challenged government, policy makers and state services about the need to be better informed about the lived realities of sex workers and the negative impacts of policies and practice (see for example, Sanders et al., 2006). Where there are misunderstandings about sex work, even well-intentioned interventions can result in discriminatory practices that harm sex workers with stigma and harassment going under the radar (see, Hanks, 2022). However, our findings suggest that higher education is failing to even acknowledge the *existence* of student sex work. This institutional denial directly impacts on the level of support available to student sex workers because it shapes the conduct of those who work in higher education, leaving support staff either ignorant of need, or unsure of how to assist. This point is perhaps best summarised by Participant 13 (USA): '*given if I don't hear anything about it, I don't know that there is an understanding of the need for support*.'

Students Just Wouldn't Do It

The lack of discussion and information about student sex work in higher education means that staff are left to draw on the negative social constructions associated with sex work that prevail in society. One participant who had received previous training understood this and pointed out that ignorance leads to wrongful assumptions being made about the character and backgrounds of sex workers which according to Participant 1 (UK) included originating from socially deprived backgrounds, with drug and or alcohol problems, as well as perceptions of

sex workers being lazy and stupid, with chaotic lifestyles (stereotypes that are well reported in the sex work literature, see, Jones, 2022; Waring, 2022). However, such misconceptions in higher education has two impacts. First, because these social constructions do not sit harmoniously alongside the traditional image of a scholar (the engaged learner and future professional) (Cusick, 2009; Roberts, 2022), this leads to another wrongful assumption, that higher education '*[doesn't] think that's something our students engage in….'* Participant 4 (UK). The reality of course, as already noted, is that contemporary social, political and economic challenges can make engaging in sex work a 'rational economic choice' (Jones, 2022, p. 123). This point was also picked up on by a participant who has experience working with students in the sex industry. Participant 9 (UK) with reference to the UK specifically:

> [There is still] … a perception that if you get to university level then you are from a relatively stable but middle-class, upper-class background, and therefore these things shouldn't be happening in that space which is absolute nonsense…People are in difficult positions. We are all human. When we are put in a position where we face a challenge we try and work out what is the best solution to fix the problem. For some people that is engaging in sex work. Participant 9 (UK).

A second point is because the sex worker's immoral identity does not sit well alongside the socially desirable *student status* (a status shaped by university expectations), our participants were unanimous in their belief that students engaged in sex work faced discrimination and prejudice within the higher education environment. Some even spoke about their own biases, for example:

> …you think of university students…as people who are going somewhere and I've always sort of associated it with people who don't have other choices…I can't quite get my head around why someone would choose to supplement their income like that…I would not expect somebody with an education or involved in education was involved in sex work. Participant 5 (UK).

Importantly, Participant 5 (UK) acknowledged these personal notions were biased, and explained that they came about because sex work was not part of their own experience, they had no experience of supporting students engaged in sex work, nor had they received any information or training in their support role at university. As Participant 14 (USA) noted: *'I think there's a whole host of different things and I think from the [university] side it's probably due to the fact that we just don't get to know our students as well as we probably should.'* In fact, thirteen of the sixteen participants did not have any experience supporting students engaged in sex work, despite several participants being employed in higher education institutions for over 10 and even 20 years. Several shared with us the realisation that until the point of interview they had not really questioned why that might be the case. However, eleven participants believed that it was highly likely student sex workers were not seeking any support from the university due to a range of fears including being stigmatised and judged, because of fears of discrimination and prejudice, because of feelings of embarrassment/internal shame, and fears they would get into trouble with the university.

The participants were unanimous that stigma and prejudice against student sex workers existed in higher education and justifiably, several were visibly perplexed at interview about why student sex work did not feature in any training, for example: 'This is happening. This stuff happens. But what we need to do is to understand why it happens, how it happens, where it happens…the whole institution needs to understand. [Students need to know] they are listening….' Participant 9 (UK).

It's Not Part of the Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity Mission

All 16 participants believed training was required to address the lack of understanding in higher education. However, although the university has responded to a changing student cohort with attempts to protect the rights of students under the umbrella of equality, diversity, and inclusivity in matters of race, faith, sexuality, disability, gender and so on, student sex workers remain outside of this support structure. Several participants recollected how the topic had not

even been mentioned in *any kind* of training and thoughtfully offered their opinions on why this might be, for example:

> So, you can have a policy in black and white, but you can have a leader at an organisation whose going to go against it even though there is a policy, right? You know, like there is an organisation who, or if a CEO, or leadership wanted to make a statement, a public statement, most of the reason why they are making that statement is to safeguard their organisation right? Participant 12 (USA).

Roberts (2022, pp. 53-54) describes vice chancellors fears of reputational damage from students' sexual behaviour as 'obsessional'. Some of our participants understood this and shared their concerns about how even information for students on safe sex during covid had not been encouraged '…because that is saying there is an issue' Participant 8 (UK). Similarly, Participant 1 reflected on the length of time it had taken to get a 'Report and Support' scheme for sexual violence off the ground because 'you are suggesting there is an issue to be reported.' According to Participant 1, it logically followed that the provision of any kind of support for student sex workers would imply that lots of students were engaged in sex work and then 'What are the public going to think?'

Harms Masked by Silence

All the participants believed that student sex workers are likely to suffer harms as a direct consequence of prejudice in higher education. Some spoke about the potential for harassment and online bullying with one of the three participants who had some experience supporting student sex workers describing their involvement in "really sad cases where students have been threatened with…photos and videos being released to family members and accounts being hacked…students handing over hundreds and thousands of pounds in some cases." Participant 9 (UK). Such harms are not specific to students engaged in sex work, harassment and blackmail are known harms experienced by sex workers (Sanders et al., 2018). However, because sex work is invisible in higher education, so are many of the harms they experience.

Participants had strong opinions on how prejudice in higher education might impact, for example: 'I think students are really worried they'll be discriminated against on all levels…academically, financially, students might worry that they lose a loan or a space in student accommodation….' Participant 4 (UK). In this discriminatory environment, Participants believed student sex workers were likely to withdraw from services for a range of reasons including being anxious worried and stressed, having low levels of self-esteem and self-worth, and due to experiencing negative impacts on their mental health and general wellbeing. With Participant 13 (USA) stating: '*Everything put together would just weigh down a student who's trying to better themselves, some to the point where they might not make it through the program.'* And, because sex work is stigmatised and the harms student sex workers experience go unreported, the liability of the institution as the creator of a range of potential harms is obscured.

One possible alternative approach offered by a student service provider with prior experience noted:

> 'If they want support for something because of the sex with they're involved with, that's the focus, not the fact that they're involved in sex work, they can get involved for all I care, yeah it's like, this is your choice but if something bad has happened then that's what we need to support with, whether that's you know, whatever it is, whether it is something like substance use, risk of sexual violence, risk of sexual assault, accommodation issues, risk of exploitation of any kind, whether that's like monetary exploitation or blackmail, you know the list is endless really. That's the focus of the support; the negativity isn't the sex work itself.' Participant 7 (UK).

Identifying Harm Through Zemiology

Our participants believed that the discrimination and prejudice in higher education had significant negative impacts on student sex worker's health and wellbeing – the reality of which has been evidenced in research across the globe (Ernest, 2021; Hammond & Kingston, 2014). However, because student sex workers do not report the harms they experience (Stewart, 2021; Trueman et al., 2022), it makes it very difficult to locate accountability. This is where zemiology helps us. Canning and Tombs (2021, p 113) offer their observations on what it is to 'do zemiology' which intrinsically involves 'understanding a wide gamut of harmful policies, practices and processes, with explicit commitments to recognising and confronting inequality, poverty, injustice or social control and thus furthering social justice.'

This involves understanding harm as it is experienced and how that harm is produced. Similarly, Pemberton's (2015) understanding of zemiology is a discipline that focuses on harm that is created by states and corporations, harms caused through the omission to act, and indifference to suffering which is preventable. This provides a helpful conceptual framework when analysing our findings that suggest that identifiable harms are being created through silence which fosters discrimination in higher education, and the *inaction* of the institution to rectify this. This leads us to argue that the failure to recognise student sex work and arm staff with knowledge/training aiming to destigmatise sex work, is an omission to act – indicating an indifference to suffering, which is preventable. Thus, we contend that the university, as a bystander to harm, is accountable.

Discussion

Critiquing higher education for its failure to acknowledge and protect students engaged in the sex industry, Roberts (2022) suggested that we need to now focus on the mechanisms used to steer behaviours in higher education, behaviours rooted in economic agendas. We agree. In this article we have focused on silence as a mechanism of control, with the aim of revealing how it works and exposing its impact. Applying a Foucauldian analysis to our findings we can see how power is much more than a command to say, 'don't do this', instead it is wielded through the 'production and circulation of elements of meaning' (Foucault, 1982 p.786). Our findings suggest that simply not talking about student sex work is very powerful tool. As this silence becomes normalised, students and staff adjust their behaviour and observe the silence. This process of subjectification gives rise to a *regime of truth* that students do not engage in sex work. In this way the deployment of silence as a technology of power to control the behaviour of staff and students comes into fruition, and the intention of the university to protect its reputation is apparently achieved.

Of course, the regime of truth is contested by more than a decade of evidence on students engaging in sex work and calls for universities to ensure these students have access to the same anti-discriminatory protections afforded to all students (Cusick et al., 2009; Sagar et al., 2015; Stewart, 2021). Academics are right to raise such concerns and through our analysis we can pinpoint how silence enables stigma, prejudice, and harassment to flourish. The university might purport to protect the health, welfare, and rights of all students but we have illustrated how silence as a technology of power is able to attack the 'deviant' (Sanders, 2007) sex worker identity and detach it from the 'respectable' (Haeger & Deil-Amen, 2010) student identity. On breaking this link, students who are also sex workers can find themselves isolated from the higher education community and its services. All of this is done subtly, without discussion or communication.

Implications

Applying a Foucauldian perspective can also help us pinpoint how silence as a mechanism of power can be *de*constructed in higher education. Foucault (1982) explains that government without force, is dependent on freedom and acceptance, and it is because of this that technologies of power are particularly useful to steer the behaviour of the conducted to the benefit of the conductor. Furthermore, because this silence operates subtly and from a distance,

people (like our participants) 'are not necessarily aware of how their conduct is being conducted' (Murray Li, 2007: 275). Still, silence is only powerful so long as it remains – it can be challenged and resisted (Foucault, 1982).

Disclosing one's engagement in sex work is risky. We are not encouraging student sex workers take the first step. However, an example of challenge and resistance can be illustrated by the steps taken by the National Union of Students in the UK which declared its support for student sex workers in 2018 and 2021 and reintroduced policy to support students engaged in sex work in 2023 (Students Union UCL, 2023). The Union pledges a service for student sex workers that is non-judgemental, supportive and confidential. It also supports the right of students to work in the sex industry and challenging stigma is a key priority. This support has taken hold, with Union resources and support being offered across the UK (benefiting students for example in universities at St Andrews, Cambridge, Surry, Manchester, Leeds, Durham, Leicester). In this way and in many other matters, the Union is carrying forward the student voice. And as the student voice grows louder, it might even spearhead changes on policies and practices in higher education in the UK.

Despite the USA lacking the same kind of student unionisation, we nevertheless assert that new knowledge is a powerful tool. Having identified silence as a technology power, and having pinpointed how it works, as well as its impact (both intended and unintended), we have suggested that accountability lies firmly with the institution, and this opens a new avenue for critical challenge to communities of academics, researchers, and activists. Furthermore, in isolating silence as a cause of harm we have drawn attention to the possibility that harms against student sex workers can be confronted in higher education and a new reality for these students can be reconstructed through dialogue, trainings, and protective policies. Indeed, in this study we found participants with training or prior experience offered empathic and nuanced responses.

Conclusion

The findings and analysis presented in this article have the potential to expand the debate on student sex work. The argument that silence is a powerful tool purposefully deployed to control the behaviour of staff and students with the potential to create harm for student sex workers offers a new perspective and creates opportunities to ask different questions. Such as, how can the regime of truth that students do not engage in sex work be reshaped? How can the power relationship between the institution and its staff and students be adjusted?

Arguably, exposing how power works is a good start to 'unsettling truths' (Murray Li, 2007 p 25). Furthermore, although power can be complex and damaging, it is also reversable. To this end, we contend the provision of student equality, access to inclusive anti-discriminatory policies and practices for all students, is dependent on the dismantling of silence on student sex work in higher education.

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