



Comparing Narratives of Harm: Popular Media, Policy Directives and Safeguarding Practices Regarding Sexual and Intimate Partner Abuse Between Students in UK Schools

Jonathan Paul Woollgar

University of Sussex, United Kingdom

Abstract

This paper looks at policy developments in English school safeguarding regarding sexual abuse between students and how this complex issue is reflected in popular media. Sexual violence and harassment between secondary school age students is a global concern. In the UK this issue gained public prominence after the website *Everyone's Invited* allowed victims/survivors to post their personal accounts of abuse in schools in 2021. Historically, academia has long identified two broad categories of causal explanations for abuse, building on different constructions of childhood – the individual, and the cultural. UK policy, however, remained largely focussed on individual explanations and incidents until 2021 when the focus shifted for a time to include cultural explanations. Drawing on my research of news and popular media, and policy, and with school safeguarding leads, I discuss how the individualist focus of UK policy was reflected in UK entertainment media's portrayals of abuse. I contrast this with the more multi-factorial approach in US policy and media. I consider how since *Everyone's Invited* increased the public understanding of peer abuse, popular entertainment shows in the UK have echoed policy developments in considering cultural and institutional issues alongside individualist narratives using examples from TV dramas *Consent* (Channel 4) and *Adolescence* (Netflix). I contend that the struggles with intersectionality, the desire to avoid judgemental attitudes, and the narrowing of cultural explanations to factors like pornography and radicalisation reflect many of the developments seen in approaches to safeguarding but not always the wider academic research.

Keywords: child protection; education; peer abuse; technology enabled harms; youth culture