Organisational Evil, Total Institutions, and Epistemic Injustice: Understanding the Savile Sexual Abuse Scandal

Abstract
Cases of widespread sexual abuse spanning decades, often involving young women and children as victims, have been a tragic and horrifying revelation for our times. These crimes have been perpetrated by powerful organisational figures, typically men, working across various significant institutions, such as churches, sports clubs, media and healthcare. While some figures appear to be thriving at work, it is vital to ask whether such thriving has a dark side, and comes at a devastating cost to the well-being of other, more vulnerable groups. To explore these issues further, the current paper presents an in-depth case study of the sexual abuse scandal that broke around the British television and radio personality, Jimmy Savile, from 2012, about a year after his death. We draw on public inquiry reports and investigative journalism to establish three main themes: (1) the psychology of evil in the perpetrator; (2) the ‘total’ institutional environments of abuse; and (3) the ‘epistemic injustice’ when victims are unfairly ignored or not believed. Our findings have crucial implications for misconduct, power and well-being in the workplace.

Introduction and Background
The ‘Time’s Up’ and ‘Me Too’ movements have aimed at empowering women in needing to be taken far more seriously about the prevalence of sexual assault in many workplaces and industries. Sexual abuse scandals surrounding figures such as Harvey Weinstein, the movie mogul, have emerged as part of a series of horrifying and tragic revelations involving powerful abusers (typically men), and their relatively powerless victims (typically women and children), spanning decades. Such events defy easy explanation and leave a legacy of confusion over how such deviant and harmful acts could have gone undetected and/or unpunished for so long (Heffernan, 2011). Furthermore, these scandals invariably take place in relation to large public, private and governmental organisations and institutions (Greer & McLaughlin, 2017).
Given that powerful figures often thrive at work at great cost and harm to others around them, how can these scandals be understood psychologically in relation to workplaces? Addressing them clearly has implications for organisational misconduct, injustice and well-being. It also offers deeper insights into power, institutional settings and the dark side of organisational life (Linstead et al., 2014). In the current paper, we therefore undertake an in-depth case study analysis of one of the most widely investigated and far-reaching of these sexual abuse scandals, the one surrounding Jimmy Savile that emerged in 2012, following the celebrity media personality’s death, and involving over 500 charges of abuse (Greer & McLaughlin, 2013).

There are many obvious research gaps here for organisational psychology, particularly around the status of women and children as workplace victims, the cultures of large closed-off institutions like hospitals and the BBC and the ways in which power can be abused. Here we try and go further than simply looking at the ‘dark triad’ of personality traits (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) – narcissism, psychopathy and Machiavellianism – to develop a fuller, more social, political and ethical understanding of sexual abuse scandals. We focus on a different ‘triad’ to achieve this – a more criminological and psychiatric one regarding the perpetrators, the victims and the organisational environment (Kamavarapu et al., 2017).

**Methodology**

Our case study analysis of the Savile scandal draws on a sample of eleven major UK public inquiry reports for qualitative documentary analysis. These included inquiries into the BBC, the NHS, Metropolitan Police Service, and other UK organisations and institutions too, such as councils, charities, government departments and children’s homes. These inquiry reports were the main data sources for the study, although we did rely on some additional secondary materials from outside the category of official reports where appropriate. The latter included resources such as Dan Davies’ (2015) book of investigative journalism on Savile, and the various television documentaries made in the wake of the scandal emerging.
Our analysis was thematic, and as mentioned above, focused on three main areas for developing organisational and psychological explanations – perpetrators, victims and environment (Kamavarapu et al., 2017). We were particularly interested in understanding psychological and organisational conceptions of evil; how the cultures and structures of organisations involved enabled the abuse; and how and why victims were ignored for so long.

**Findings**

In brief, our findings develop further understandings of the perpetrator, victim and environment triad as follows:

1) The organisational environments showed aspects of *total institutions* (Clegg, 2006) and *institutional sexism* (Korn, 1995). They were highly regimented organisations where stakeholders were closed off from the outside world in 'strong' situations. Powerful male figures were free to exploit these aspects of total institutions while not being themselves subject to them. Sexism was also entrenched and overlapping – it was implicitly understood that powerful men could break rules, while others had to follow them and remain silent about transgressions.

2) The perpetrator represented a particular kind of deviant patriarchal *institutional agent* engaged in *institutional work* (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010) – an evil organisational predator exercising unchecked power to indulge harmful fantasies and whims. As a male celebrity and eccentric figure, Savile was able to uniquely broker powerful network ties between worlds of television, policing/crime, the press and even religion and government, leaving organisational actors ‘star-struck’ in offering special treatment to him.

3) Finally, the victims were repeatedly subjected to *epistemic injustice* (Fricker, 2007) – their stories and experiences of harm were generally not taken seriously or seen as credible knowledge to be acted upon in organisations while Savile was alive. This was due to a mixture of them feeling isolated and of low status, as well as being women and children.
Implications and Conclusions

In conclusion, sexual abuse scandals appear to have certain interlocking features that organisational psychologists can try to understand and address to prevent future threats to the well-being of vulnerable workplace minorities. Helping workplaces to thrive is not just about promoting positive worldviews, but also about addressing the genuine harms and violence that can occur within and across organisational boundaries (Calvard & Sang, 2017). Implications for organisations involve the careful deconstruction of unnecessarily powerful roles and strong rules and structures that can be exploited, as well as enabling organisational change agents who can help support victims in speaking up and being taken seriously.

Selected References


