The #MeToo Legacy and ‘the Collective Us’:

Conceptualising Accountability for Sexual Misconduct at Work

ABSTRACT

**Purpose** - This study aims to analyse how the collective processing of the #MeToo legacy in the form of community discourses and activism advances the conceptualisation of organisational accountability for sexual misconduct and enhances the development of new accountability instruments.

**Design/methodology/approach** - The study draws on social movement theory and the intellectual problematics of accountability, together with the empirical insights from two research engagement projects established and facilitated by the author.

**Findings** - The study reveals multiple dimensions of how post-#MeToo community activism advanced the emerging boundary concept of organisational accountability for sexual misconduct at work. Firstly, the movement enhanced discourses prompting a new societal sense of accountability at work. Secondly, this in turn facilitated public demands for organisational accountability for workplace misconduct and organisational responses to it. Thirdly, the accountability crisis and the lack of accountability instruments that it revealed created the momentum for community activists to shape the emerging boundary concept by suggesting organisational pathways and solutions, such as new digital tools with which to report harassment and an emphasis on the behavioural consciousness of individuals at work, self-accountability and self-assessment.

**Originality/value** – The study addresses a topic of social importance in analysing how a social movement and corresponding community activism have transformed public demands for accountability into an emerging boundary concept by establishing pathways towards the
socially desirable, institutionalised practices of organisational accountability. The study contributes to theory by revealing the emancipatory potential of community activists to advance organisational accountability practices and propose new instruments at a moment of organisational hesitation and a crisis of accountability.

**Keywords:** sexual misconduct at work; community activism; #MeToo legacy; accountability instruments; (auto)ethnography.
1. Introduction

*Any place I go to, there are people like you. They’re all interested in significant, important problems – problems of ... empowerment, of understanding the world, of working with others, of just finding out what your values are ... and helping each other to do it.*

Noam Chomsky on community activists (Chomsky, 2002, p. 177)

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Social movements are powerful indicators of the matters that require public attention (Catchpowle & Smyth, 2016; Della Porta & Diani, 2020). Back in 2006, activist Tarana Burke started the #MeToo movement to raise awareness of the experience of sexual abuse (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2019; Xiong, Cho, & Boatwright, 2019). The movement received a new impetus in 2017 when the accusations of sexual assault against the Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein created a massive reaction on social media in the form of individuals using hashtag #MeToo to share their experiences of sexual harassment at work. The movement then synergised its efforts with the newly emerged Time’s Up initiative to raise funds to assist survivors with legal counsel (Kantor & Twohey, 2019; Regulska, 2018).

The protest rapidly went beyond Hollywood and the film industry and expanded into politics, fashion, academia, health and sports industries, the aid sector, and many others. The domino effect of this expansion revealed the need for new regulatory initiatives and the transformation of workplace norms and societal perceptions of organisational accountability for sexual misconduct (Clair et al., 2019; Goncharenko, 2021; Veissière, 2018; Zarkov & Davis, 2018). The concept of accountability for abuses of power and misconduct, primarily localised within academic discourses and political debates (Clinik, 1990; Grant & Keohane,
2005), has been placed in the centre of the #MeToo public agenda, turning both individual and organisational accountability into a widespread aspiration.

From being an event significant only in the margins, the #MeToo movement spread into a wider societal domain. The new public discourse brought cases of workplace harassment out into the open, but simultaneously highlighted the fundamental lack of adequate instruments available to discharge organisational accountability for sexual wrongdoings taking place at work (Gillespie, Mirabella, & Eikenberry, 2019; Regulska, 2018). As the main wave of the social protest has now passed, there is a need to analyse what impact the views expressed had on the conceptual understanding of organisational accountability for sexual misconduct at work and the instruments to exercise such accountability. The present study aims to examine how the collective processing of the #MeToo legacy enhanced the conceptualisation of organisational accountability for sexual misconduct and stimulated the development of new accountability instruments.

The study is grounded in the interdisciplinary perspectives of social accountability and occupational management and ethics. It engages with the theory of social movements (Della Porta & Diani, 2020; Ishkanian, 2021; Morris, 2000), with a particular emphasis on the role of community activism in mobilising collective awareness, persuasion and solidarity; and in processing matters of public importance by turning the legacies of protest into new organisational practices (Chomsky, 2017; Gallhofer, Haslam, & van der Walt, 2011; O’Leary, 2017; Vachhani & Pullen, 2019). The study also engages with research on the intellectual problematics of accountability (Blader & Rothman, 2014; Messner, 2009; Roberts, 2009) to understand how the accountability practice of actors is shaped by their engagement with ‘the Other’ (Butler, 2005; Yates, Belal, Gebreiter, & Lowe, 2020). The study uses the term ‘accountable actors’ to refer both to individuals at work and to organisations, considering the latter to be ‘collectives of individuals’ who determine the direction of organisational
accountability (Boomsma & O’Dwyer, 2019). Finally, the study builds its analytical framework on relevant insights from prior research on the situational aspects of abuse, harassment and victimisation (Garcia, 2021; Glomb & Cortina, 2006; Pilch & Turska, 2015) to fully understand the phenomenological complexity of the matter for which organisational accountability is required.

The study deploys ethnographic methodology with elements of participatory action (in the form of facilitation) and builds on the empirical insights of two research engagement projects undertaken by the author in the United Kingdom in 2019–2021. It contributes to research on social and dialogic accounting (Bebbington, Brown, Frame, & Thomson, 2007; Brown, 2009; Catchpowle & Smyth, 2016) by revealing the emancipatory potential of community activists to advance the emerging boundary concept of accountability for sexual misconduct at work. It demonstrates how in the midst of organisational hesitancy about how to approach such a sensitive matter and address calls for accountability, community activists mobilised to offer relevant expertise and construct socially orientated pathways for organisational accountability for sexual misconduct in the workplace. The study also shows how a crisis of accountability led to technological innovations designed to improve accountability at work – instruments to collect and assess the evidence of misconduct, and improve the accessibility of reporting channels and support for survivors. Finally, examination of the discourses reveals that community experts suggest that organisations support the implementation of such technological innovations with greater behavioural consciousness at work, individual self-accountability and self-assessment. This dual focus on the technological advancement of reporting and improvements in workplace environment is likely to shape organisational approaches to communicating accounts of sexual misconduct and corresponding disclosures as the emerging concept becomes embedded within organisational settings and regulatory frameworks.
The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section discusses the role of social movements and activism in framing and facilitating demands for accountability. The third section engages with research on the situational contexts of workplace abuse and harassment to understand the matter for which organisational accountability is required. The fourth section outlines research methodology and the ethnographic settings of the study. The fifth section presents the empirical findings revealing how collective processing and community discourses shaped a new boundary concept of organisational accountability and its corresponding accountability instruments, i.e. the technological innovations in harassment reporting and the assessment of workplace environment. The final section reflects upon the findings’ implications and concludes the paper.

2. Social movement theory: When ‘the Other’ becomes ‘the Collective Us’

The ability of actors to acknowledge and process the impact of their conduct is reported to be limited due to the biases of self-consciousness (Hernandez, Almeida, & Dolan-Del Vecchio, 2005; Passyn & Sujan, 2006). To facilitate accountability for (mis)conduct, a physical or virtual presence of a counter-party is needed to impose scrutiny and pass judgement if the justification for the conduct is unsatisfactory. This counter-party is known by many names, including ‘public gaze’, ‘accountability forum’ or ‘the Other’ (Butler, 2005; Roberts, 2009; Yates et al., 2020). The presence of ‘the Other’ and the demands they impose are essential for the actor’s capacity to discharge accountability (Islam & McPhail, 2011; Neu, Saxton, Rahaman, & Everett, 2019). The actor approaches self-assessment in line with the (potential) expectations of ‘the Other’ and holds themselves accountable only for the conduct significant and visible to ‘the Other’ (Cooper & Lapsley, 2019; Messner, 2009).
‘The Other’ is also complex. Understood as a wide assembly of stakeholders gathered in accountability forums (Dellaportas, 2019; Goncharenko, 2021; Yates et al., 2020), ‘the Other’ is contra-lateral to an accountable actor. One may wonder what is happening on the side of ‘the Other’. However, once one steps to the Other’s side, there is no longer ‘the Other’, but ‘the Collective us’. This notion of an assembly holds valuable insights into how and why certain public discourses, collective actions and demands for accountability emerge, progress, peak and collapse (George, Brown, & Dillard, 2021; Vachhani, 2020).

One way to explore such insights is through social movement theory (Ishkanian, 2021; La Torre, Di Tullio, Tamburro, Massaro, & Rea, 2021). ‘The collective us’ could disintegrate one day, and then ‘suddenly’ be empowered and mobilised around a shared idea or target. Social movement theory illuminates the transformation of individual voices into collective concerns and aspirations, and then into a widespread movement (Morris, 2000; Tsutsui & Wotipka, 2004). A movement is, then, a form of organising ‘the Collective us’ to strengthen the vocalisation of a certain idea or a demand for accountability, justice or change from responsible actors (usually governments and organisations).

Individuals join social movements in response to “a question of scale and dedication” (Chomsky, 2002, p. 179) once their individual identities resonate with the movement’s ideology and agenda (Della Porta & Diani, 2015; Gahan & Pekarek, 2013). Unlike professional campaigners, community activists usually have another professional occupation but join a movement in response to their internal sense of injustice and calls for the greater good, or as part of the “responsibility of intellectuals” (Chomsky, 2017). A movement’s absence of a clear centre or formal hierarchy allows anyone to join at any stage in order to process emotions collectively, form a task force or develop collective actions in the name of a shared idea. The lack of ownership permits parallel developments and advancement of a movement’s ideas in various locations, even with very limited coordination.
Social movements place significant emphasis on facilitating the agenda for accountability by constructing and imposing demands for it, intensifying the presence and manifestation of ‘the Other’, and by effectively overcoming the blocks associated with more traditional and established pathways to hold individuals or organisations to account (Chomsky, 2002; Kavada, 2015). Spontaneously and rapidly increased demands for accountability are often rooted in outbreaks of collectively experienced emotions of blame, resentment, anger and disbelief, especially in situations of crisis (Cooper & Johnston, 2012; Goncharenko & Khadaroo, 2019; Guénin-Paracini & Gendron, 2010; Skærbæk & Christensen, 2015). The snowball effect of synchronised and intensified calls for accountability persuades accountable actors to respond. The next section discusses theoretical aspects of organisational accountability for sexual misconduct at work and its situational contexts in order to better understand how accountability can be exercised.

3. **Theoretical stands on organisational accountability for sexual misconduct at work**

As open systems, workplaces are “vulnerable to all of the dimensions of domination and subjugation that operate in the larger society” (Hernandez et al., 2005, p. 112). However, within the workplace domain, individuals do not always recognise their roles in the social patterns (Greve, Palmer, & Pozner, 2010). This resonates with what Garcia (2021), elaborating on the philosophical insights of Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler, suggests calling a “situated individual”, i.e. an individual determined by their situation (Garcia, 2021). She explains that “one … hold[s] together two levels, the one of the individual, who makes choices and behaves in certain ways, and the one of … [situation], which prescribes certain behaviours” (Garcia, 2021, p. 55).
Those who hold power tend to maintain the privilege of defining normality for others (Vachhani & Pullen, 2019), either excluding themselves from being held accountable for their conduct (Persson, Roland, & Tabellini, 1997) or being “held to a lower standard of accountability” (Jory, Anderson, & Greer, 1997, p. 407). In contrast, those vulnerable to victimisation are not usually equipped with instruments to hold others to account or facilitate change (Glomb & Cortina, 2006; Pilch & Turska, 2015). Routinised professional activities, gendered work places and gender-based (mostly, female) victimisation in various professional settings aggravate gender (mostly, male) domination and amplify the social patterns of power (Carmona & Ezzamel, 2016; De Coster, Estes, & Mueller, 1999; Haynes, 2013).

The broad amplitude of sexual misconduct goes from offensive remarks about someone’s body and appearance, sexual jokes, discussions about sexual matters, and gestures of a sexual nature to the brutal acts of rape and assault (Sen, Borges, Guallar, & Cochran, 2018). The conceptualisation of abuse of power at work for sexual wrongdoing remains widely debatable, as sexual misconduct cannot be reduced to a single definition, but is rather determined through context and the specifics of a particular situation, and the (potential) impact on victims and witnesses of abuse (Bimrose, 2004; Hunt, Davidson, Fielden, & Hoel, 2010). At the same time, even the mildest misconduct can cause severe and largely unpredictable psychological damage: the experience of a traumatic event is unique to each individual (Eissa, Lester, & Gupta, 2019; Pilch & Turska, 2015; Tepper, 2000). Trauma also arises from the experiences associated with misconduct, such as shame, humiliation and emotional distress (Perry, Pollard, Blakley, Baker, & Vigilante, 1995).

The complexity involved in understanding the traumatic experience of harassment poses a challenge to the practice of accountability. However, such complexity simultaneously motivates the establishment of boundaries in workplace settings and a corresponding boundary concept of accountability “as [when] boundary maintenance increase, so too does accounting”
The importance of accountability is increased by the psychological aspects of trauma recovery as “the victimised … may be further psychologically damaged if … the accountability of the [abuser]” has not been properly acknowledged and discharged (Jory et al., 1997, p. 400; Passyn & Sujan, 2006).

In situations of conceptual ambiguity, organisations are considered responsible for identifying the behaviours that they will not tolerate (Cheng et al., 2020; Pilch & Turska, 2015). To achieve liberation from unhealthy power dynamics and toxic behavioural patterns, behavioural consciousness, accountability and empowerment need to be emphasised as “structural differentiation controls sexually harassing behaviours [but] … decentralisation and formalisation reduce sexual harassment” (Mueller, De Coster, & Estes, 2001, p. 436). The notion of collective justice within organisations would facilitate the development of shared patterns, cognitive perceptions and commitments to moral values and prescribe certain behaviours while discouraging inappropriateness (Glomb & Cortina, 2006; Ott & Dicke, 2001; Siehl & Martin, 1984). However, as organisational polices on misconduct prevention tend to lack enforcement (Bruce & Nowlin, 2011; Greve et al., 2010; Mueller et al., 2001), the external emphasis on continuous public scrutiny and an accountability gaze imposed by organisational stakeholders or ‘the Collective us’ is essential to persuade organisations to commit to transform themselves and exercise accountability.

Prior research emphasises societal expectations from reporting techniques and practices to resolve complexity, generate documented evidence, provide visibility and ensure accountability conduct (Mouritsen & Kreiner, 2016; Walker, 2016) allowing governance of complex phenomena, such as crime, violence and abuse of power (Islam & McPhail, 2011; Lehman, Hammond, & Agyemang, 2018). However, while organisational reporting on measures of risk assessment, physical safety and injuries has been standardised (Schormair & Gerlach, 2019; Sinkovics, Hoque, & Sinkovics, 2016), psychological damage and vulnerability
are yet to find their place in systematic reporting practices and disclosure requirements (Glomb & Cortina, 2006; Kelley & Mullen, 2006; Tepper, 2000). Moreover, when it comes to matters of sexual misconduct, there are extensive social, cultural and practical barriers to reporting (Deegan & Islam, 2014; Hunt et al., 2010) due to the associated feelings of shame and distress, uncertainty about how a complaint will be received, power disparity between the parties involved and the possible complicity of the employer (Crawshaw, 2009; Lopez, Hodson, & Roscigno, 2009).

This study is set to reveal the insights from community discourses about the role of activists in developing a concept of organisational accountability for sexual misconduct and facilitating the development of new instruments to report harassment and enforce accountability. Prior to that, the next section discusses the empirical settings and methodology.

4. Ethnographic settings and methodology

The #MeToo movement stimulated new social discourses on the topics of accountability for workplace misconduct (Jain & Lee, 2020; Regulska, 2018; Veissière, 2018) and physical and psychological safety at work (McBride, Mitra, Kondo, Elmi, & Kamal, 2018; O'Neil, Sojo, Fileborn, Scovelle, & Milner, 2018). Millions of survivors shared their personal testimonies to raise awareness of a collective issue and to take part in a “[public] dialogue about the brokenness, silence and trauma” (Clair et al., 2019, p. 118; Xiong et al., 2019; Zarkov & Davis, 2018).

To analyse the collective processing of the #MeToo legacy, the author designed and delivered two research engagement projects focusing on accountability for sexual misconduct at work: a research-facilitated public debate (2019) and an impact acceleration project (2020). Within the first project, the author organised a public panel of law enforcement, psychology,
technology and public policy experts, NGO activists and campaigners to discuss the challenges of addressing workplace harassment and misconduct. The second (follow-up) project facilitated collaborative learning and new connections between providers and users in the emerging area of harassment reporting technology and the psychologically safe workplace environment. All data collected by the author in these projects was then publicly shared as part of an engagement, facilitation and knowledge exchange. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, it is treated as publicly available secondary data.

The author adopted the interventionist approach of engagement as a research method to view the issue from multiple perspectives (Cameron & Gibson, 2020). Research engagement is defined as “a research activity that seeks to develop comprehensive understanding” of studied phenomena (Correa & Larrinaga, 2015, p. 17). Engagement methodology has been previously used in the field of dialectic, social and environmental accountability (Ball, Soare, & Brewis, 2012; Bebbington et al., 2007; Correa & Larrinaga, 2015). As a method, research engagement with wide stakeholder groups and the general public has contributed to the conceptualisation and theorisation of contemporary socio-economic phenomena, such as the institutionalisation of corporate social responsibility discourse (Archel, Husillos, & Spence, 2011; Clune & O’Dwyer, 2020), stakeholder dialogue (Unerman & Bennett, 2004) and managerial responsibility for environmental reporting (Bouten & Hoozée, 2013; Rodrigue, Magnan, & Boulianne, 2013). Research engagement has also proved to be an effective instrument of “creating a context in which audiences themselves” (Steinem, 2015, p. 47) would cultivate ideas and knowledge co-production revealing “assumptions … about the world … generated through socially shared beliefs … and conventions” (Atkinson, 2017, p. 20; Bebbington et al., 2007).

The study identified the actors from whom knowledge appropriate for the analysis of the collective processing of the #MeToo legacy could be accumulated (Table 1). As the topic
of sexual harassment is ethically sensitive and psychologically complex (Blader & Rothman, 2014; Hernandez et al., 2005), the author acknowledged the research duty of care (Hillier, Mitchell, & Mallett, 2007; Richards & Schwartz, 2002) and deliberately chose not to interview the survivors of abuse to avoid the risk of re-traumatisation (Bimrose, 2004; Mueller et al., 2001). Fourteen managers from eight organisations were interviewed either individually or as part of engagement meetings and the debate. The representatives of partner organisations (Table 1) have also launched an effective practice guide (by providing an individual essay-type written contribution, outlining their advice for addressing sexual misconduct) and participated in the public debate. As Table 1 demonstrates, the debate, written records, interviews, and engagement meetings were the key sources of empirical data for this study [Table 1 near here].

### Table 1 – Research engagement partners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Position of the interviewee</th>
<th>Type of engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Technology company developing digital tools</td>
<td>CEO, Co-founder</td>
<td>Interview; Written record</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Senior Executive</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Global Marketing Lead</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Head of Partnerships</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Regional police force</td>
<td>Chief Constable</td>
<td>Interview</td>
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<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Chief Inspector</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programme Manager</td>
<td>Written record</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>An NGO specialising in workplace abuse training and psychological support for abuse survivors</td>
<td>Communications, Engagement and Fundraising Officer</td>
<td>Interview; Engagement meeting; Written record; Knowledge-exchange webinar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>A regulator and a large public sector employer</td>
<td>Executive Director Strategy &amp; Risk</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>A legal firm specialising in cases of discrimination and sexual harassment</td>
<td>Director, Head of Employment Law</td>
<td>Engagement meeting; Interview; Written record</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>City council, the largest public sector employer in the region</td>
<td>Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Manager</td>
<td>Group engagement meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>A digital innovation consultancy</td>
<td>Founder</td>
<td>Interview; Written record</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>A women’s rights NGO</td>
<td>Senior Policy and Research Officer</td>
<td>Written record</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The debate brought together the panel of experts and an audience made up of members of the general public to discuss how the #MeToo movement facilitated public discussion of changes in workplace practices, reporting mechanisms and regulation. The debate created a forum in which participants were able to share experiences, learn, and generate new insights and knowledge. It revealed the assemblage of contrasting opinions and enriched the research understanding of the complex phenomenon under study. The debate was attended by 40 professionals who contributed to the discussion.

The interviews were conducted and video-recorded individually prior to the debate on the same date. Six participants were asked about the expertise and positions they were aiming to bring to the debate, the reasons for their participation and relevant activities they undertake. The interviewees were also invited to share their views on the effects of the #MeToo movement on organisational practices and accountability. Further engagement meetings were organised within the second (follow-up) project and enabled discussion in groups of three to four participants from each organisation. The participants discussed the disruptive effects of harassment on organisational effectiveness, relevant organisational challenges (including problematic power dynamics), and shifts in organisational perceptions and practices in the #MeToo era. In addition, the participants were encouraged to reflect on the steps their organisations were taking (or planning to take) to improve internal communication about cases of sexual misconduct and sustainable accountability practices. These engagement meetings were on average 1.5 hours long.

When it comes to the experts in harassment reporting technology, they were asked to provide an in-depth explanation of how technology could be introduced in organisations and synergised with other organisational tactics to tackle misconduct. The interviewees also took the researcher through the use of their company’s software: how an employee could record an account of abuse and submit a claim, and how their organisation could then assess the claim.
and documented evidence and undertake appropriate disciplinary action; and how the organisation could subsequently base relevant strategic decisions on analysis of the data accumulated. Finally, the interviewees were requested to reflect on the short-term and long-term implications of technological innovations in harassment reporting and relevant workplace practices.

All interviews and engagement meetings were conducted in English, digitally recorded and transcribed. The data transcripts and notes from interviews and engagement meetings cover 120 pages. The documentary analysis of supporting data (such as media coverage related to the activities of engaged organisations and coverage of harassment reporting regulation and regulatory incentives) consists of approximately 150 pages. The data analysis contained three stages of data reduction, display and verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The empirical findings were interpreted through the identification of patterns and the attribution of distinct meanings and outcomes to these patterns (Creswell, 2013; Lukka & Modell, 2010), assuring the plausibility of interpretations by revealing multiple and contrasting explanations (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). The analysis enabled the study to obtain empirical insights into the multidimensional complexity of the phenomena under study and the plethora of expert opinions on organisational accountability for the workplace environment and on approaches to reporting and processing accounts of abuse and tackling negative behavioural patterns at work.

5. Collective insights

This section presents empirical insights from collective reflections on the outcomes of the #MeToo movement and how these collective reflections frame the conceptualisation of accountability for workplace sexual misconduct and the development of new accountability instruments. The insights emerged from an analysis of the multiple perspectives vocalised by
experts and community activists in the projects outlined above. The section discusses four themes revealed in the analysis: a shift towards the new societal understanding of accountability for workplace misconduct in the #MeToo era, escalated demands for organisational accountability and various responses, new accountability instruments in the form of harassment reporting technology, and the cultivation of self-accountability and self-assessment in the workplace.

5.1. Debating organisational accountability for workplace misconduct in the midst of a new societal understanding

The breadth and intensity of citizen involvement in the #MeToo movement revealed the extensive societal demands for new understanding of individual and organisational accountability for sexual misconduct in occupational settings. Several of the participants in the engagement projects reflected on the importance of the movement for revealing and recording accounts of abuse and facilitating structural change:

Imagine if the Weinstein scandal never blew up in 2017, imagine if MeToo did not become a global movement. Imagine how much more harassment there would still be going on behind the scenes. Imagine if those 400-plus executives were not being held accountable and people weren’t taking notice. (A)

As open systems, all organisations have been directly or indirectly affected by the revelations of workplace abuse and concomitant calls for accountability and change. The viewpoints expressed by the interviewees revealed ‘the Collective Us’ as a community of activists and organisational stakeholders aimed in persuasion of organisations to listen, examine workplace conditions and exercise accountability. This spectrum of expertise includes legal advisers, psychologists, survivors’ and advocacy NGOs, human resources and workplace training
consultants, regulators, and technology developers. The wide range of expertise called upon highlights the complexity of issues of sexual harassment and misconduct, and underlines the need for multiple actions to be taken to tackle them. The legal adviser asserted:

The thing is, with sexual harassment, it comes in many forms. It can be quite subtle. It can be a low level, but it … could be anything from sexual assault to rape. So … [legal advisers] act for anyone involved in that in the workplace. (J)

The engagement discussions identified measures that organisations tend to undertake in response to increased calls for accountability, including the recognition of inappropriate behaviour, the declaration of zero-tolerance on abuse of power, and, frequently, (public) acknowledgement that male domination together with a lack of workforce diversity may create conditions conducive to a predatory culture. In addition, organisations tend to utilise social and media spaces to communicate their values through hashtag campaigns. Such campaigns include the UN #HeForShe campaign for women solidarity and gender equality, the #OverToYou kitemark for organisational response to workplace sexual misconduct, the #TimesUp for fundraising for justice and the #BelieveWomen for the importance of each story of abuse being heard. The NGO officer emphasised:

We created the #OverToYou kitemark, which involves training and a variety of promises that businesses and organisations make … We are saying survivors have said: ‘me too’. And now it is over to you, to businesses [and] to business owners to change that culture. (H)

The broad variety of approaches revealed above of “how companies listen [to the survivors of workplace abuse]” (A1) determines the differences in organisational responses to the accountability challenges posed by the #MeToo movement. The founder of the technology company which develops digital tools for harassment reporting shared her views on the
characteristics of organisations that mobilise the #MeToo impetus to drive organisational changes:

It is really those visionaries … that want to be on the right side of the revolution … Those employers who … send a … progressive message to their workforce … that they can always speak up and there will always be someone who will listen.

(A)

In addition to the moral drivers of organisational accountability, efforts to take the necessary steps to balance power dynamics in the workplace could also be rationalised through the effects of employees’ psychological safety on their productivity. Several interviewees, including the psychological expert and the executive manager of a large public sector employer, claimed:

Psychological safety … binds you to a group of people … The team is the only valid construct … that we … relate to on an emotional level … We have an intuitive sense of our team … If we do not feel safe … we are always going to be … defensive … looking to minimise risk rather than to maximise return. (M1)

It is important … to have a really diverse workforce … to offer the best possible surroundings for people to thrive in that work … It … matters … because it is about people feeling comfortable to bring the whole of themselves to work. (I1)

Therefore, the findings show that the community of experts and activists persuade organisations to acknowledge their responsibility to clarify their position vis à vis the #MeToo movement and the obligation to establish workplace norms and to draw the line of normality in workplace behavioural patterns. The broad assembly of ‘the Collective Us’ with legal, psychological, technological, educational and regulatory expertise promotes the supply of a variety of approaches to exercise organisational accountability for the workplace environment in order to tackle harassment, offensiveness and abuse of power.
5.2. The new instruments of accountability and harassment reporting

In addition to publicly vocalised commitments to accountability, the expert/activist community encouraged organisations to undertake actions required for dealing with actual cases of misconduct seriously and rapidly. The legal adviser emphasised the importance of taking immediate action to record full accounts of abuse:

Initiate an immediate investigation … suspend the alleged perpetrator on full pay in order to ensure the investigation is thorough. Take a full account from the complainant and make sure that all specific details such as dates and the detail of what happened are recorded. (J)

The #MeToo movement facilitated the disclosure of many cases of sexual misconduct, simultaneously revealing the scarcity of instruments for survivors to report inappropriate behaviour at work and for organisations to collect evidence and investigate misconduct. The technology developer explained:

When you think about those anonymous reporting hotlines or … web forums, we know that … 75 per cent of all misconduct … is not reported … The old solutions, protocols, [and] policies are not appropriate and not adequate for our day and age … Companies should be opening up to innovation in this space. (A)

Recognising the demands for new instruments in the midst of a crisis of accountability, markets responded quickly by offering new technological solutions to make the complaint-raising process both easy and robust and to empower the vulnerable to speak up when they encounter misconduct (Elsesser, 2020). Such technologies attempt to link psychological and behavioural research and technological expertise. As an outcome they supply instruments to record the incidents of misconduct and accumulate corresponding evidence and analytics:
There is a problem that people … do not trust their workplace to … report harassment internally … [This] deficit of trust … inspired … thinking [about] how technologies can bring … trust and empower humans. (A)

There … [are] some really exciting tools that we can use to start … helping people create a more psychologically safe … environment. (M)

The demand for new solutions led to the emergence of technological start-ups providing services for harassment reporting and monitoring (BasuMallick, 2020; Woodford, 2020). The technology developer who participated in the author’s engagement projects designed a platform containing “an employee-facing app and a resolution hub for the enterprises where people can create safe digital records [in the form of] time-stamped wrap codes of events that happened to them and disclose them at a time [when] they feel comfortable” (A). Each event then results in a new accounting record held on the disclosure and reporting platform. There, all accounts of abuse can be documented, described, analysed and classified.

Based on psychological and behavioural research insights, the app is designed to gather high-quality evidence of the account of abuse while supporting an emotionally vulnerable survivor or witness by generating nuanced follow-up questions within each report and opening a line of communication:

[The platform] … prompts you through many questions and … vividly describes the experience: Where were you? When did it happen? How did it make you feel? More … quality evidence is actually shown here … [and] it puts more accountability on both parties … The employer is fully empowered to decide the course of action … Those who are not … comfortable signing their name to their report … can go anonymous but … it [still] opens up a chat feature so that employers … can continue to speak with you even though they do not know your
name … Whereas [with] typical legacy solutions … there is no way to … reach out to the [anonymous] person. (D)

The use of harassment reporting technology thus enables employees to raise their concerns about inappropriate behaviour and misconduct and to prompt the organisation’s management to investigate them and apply disciplinary measures. Upon receiving a record of abuse, the assigned case workers and management are able to access information and examine the matter based on the evidence submitted. Held within the organisation, an overall digital register accumulates an extensive and continuous record of any accounts of abuse, including detailed evidence of the reported events.

The register could then be used not only as a repository of documented evidence, but also as an instrument to analyse patterns within the organisation’s work culture and, if necessary, to initiate/facilitate changes. The technology thus aims to demystify reports of abuse, to make patterns of abuse and unhealthy power dynamics visible and to facilitate mechanisms to hold to account:

Our clients … should be measuring success as a benchmark against what … [their] current situation is. … Often it is not just [the] platform, but also … [their] policies in place … We provide a dashboard of data insights … to support the organisational response … [by the] information in the various categories … [to] see the trends in the organisation … which … [they] would then be able to map against something that might have taken place [in the organisation]. (D)

While the reporting of sexual harassment is the main focus of this digital platform, it can also be modified to assist in tackling relevant non-sexual abuses of power, such as fraud and corruption. The reporting platform is adaptable not only to the needs of different organisations, but also to larger sectoral and socio-economic challenges. For instance, financial sector
organisations which emphasise the prevention of fraud could add further appropriate features to their platforms. In addition, in 2020 the technology developers added a feature to make it possible to report discrimination, rights violation and abuse which might take place in organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic. This adaptability resonates with the idea that a ‘situational individual’ may face various interrelated challenges in the workplace. Therefore, a holistic approach to recording reports of abuse and actions undertaken in response is proposed to organisations in order to establish workplace boundaries and institutionalise the concept of organisational accountability.

Therefore, all sorts of technological innovations in the area of harassment reporting stimulated by the #MeToo movement aim to equip organisations with new accountability tools. Technological solutions to harassment reporting allow an organisation to acquire time-stamped evidence of the records of abuse and misconduct, to analyse relevant trends in their organisational practices and to identify their most vulnerable areas and divisions polluted by the patterns of domination and victimisation. Technological solutions thus facilitate the practice of organisational accountability and enable organisations to meet a commitment to create a safe working environment and remove barriers to reporting misconduct.

5.3. The discourse on self-accountability and behavioural consciousness in the workplace

Nevertheless, the discussions revealed that measures of organisational accountability could be constrained by the limits of human consciousness. Employees might not always be able to recognise the roles they play in situations of workplace conflict and tension. For attempts to tackle workplace harassment to be effective, organisational accountability needs to be supported by continuous self-accountability and self-assessment by individual members of staff. While the instruments of reporting need to be available and accessible, they are more
effective when complemented by action to improve tacit organisational culture and the workplace environment. The psychological expert who was a member of the engagement project panel explained:

Typically, men have quite a lot of power and that is the root of a lot of problems that result in harassment. But we can also use that power to create a better environment. (M)

The providers of harassment reporting technology emphasised the relationship between cultural preconditions, the self-awareness of employees and the implementation of harassment reporting technology:

We … support [the clients’] … communication strategy … Many of these things depend on the current culture. … Are they trying [to] fix a broken culture [or] preserve a positive culture? … Our best-case scenario is clients who already have a positive culture and … a tendency [of] demonstrable commitment to … inclusion in the workplace. Many employees [would show] … less resistance and … scepticism, because they believe that this is another … signal of commitment from their employer. (D)

[In contrast], if employers will not create an [internal] speaking platform, the employees will find a platform outside to raise accountability concerns. (A)

Most importantly, long-lasting sustainable shifts in an organisation’s environment around conscious non-tolerance of sexual misconduct, supported by accessible, standardised reporting, can empower those who experience harassment:

It is a quite radical approach to eliminating the stigma around reporting misconduct at work. … Signing your name to a claim or to something that you witness or experience … can be empowering … [and] contagious. (D)
Such empowerment is rooted in employees’ confidence that their employer is committed to protecting employees’ right to feel safe at work, and to setting up the adequate accountability instruments to report misconduct, thus guaranteeing that previously silenced voices will be heard. At the structural level, the synergy of technological innovations and new behavioural expectations contributes to harmonising an organisation’s approach to organisational accountability, not only for the physical safety of their employees while at work, but also for their psychological safety and wellbeing.

Concluding this section, the empirical insights revealed in the two engagement projects allowed the identification and analysis of four sequential directions in which the collective processing of the #MeToo legacy and targeted community activism has constructed and advanced the concept of organisational accountability for sexual misconduct at work. These directions include the emergence of a new notion of accountability in society, which escalated demands for organisational accountability in cases of workplace misconduct. However, organisational and regulatory responses demonstrated the lack of adequate modern instruments to encourage employees to report sexual misconduct in order to accumulate documented evidence and make possible appropriate disciplinary measures. Consequently, a new market of digital innovations has emerged to demonstrate how the synergy of psychological and technological expertise can provide new instruments of accountability. Finally, the engagement projects revealed that both (potential) users and providers of expertise emphasise that technological innovations need to be accompanied by the continuous deliberate cultivation of individual self-accountability and self-assessment to boost behavioural consciousness at work and so encourage members of staff to recognise and report toxic behavioural patterns and abuses of power.
6. Discussion and conclusion

Social movements make significant impacts on societal reality and perceptions, determining the need to re-conceptualise particular phenomena and re-assess the metrics of execution (Catchpowle & Smyth, 2016; Martinez & Cooper, 2017; Tsutsui & Wotipka, 2004). The #MeToo movement turned social attention towards the chronic and complex issue of sexual misconduct in the workplace and enhanced collective understanding of the relationship between the abuse of power and accountability. The movement took place in a wider social context in which the mobilisation of traditional media channels of communication together with social media and technology platforms (Kantor & Twohey, 2019; Regulska, 2018; Xiong et al., 2019) facilitated discussion and empowered collective voices demanding accountability.

The study contributes to research on the intellectual problematics of accountability (Cooper & Johnston, 2012; Messner, 2009; Roberts, 2009) and social and dialogic accountability (George et al., 2021; Gray, Brennan, & Malpas, 2014; Parker, 2011). Even though the phenomenon of accountability has been extensively assessed in prior research (Bovens, 2007; Mulgan, 2000, 2003; Sinclair, 1995), its instrumental and procedural aspects have often been privileged over its moral (ethical) core (Butler, 2005; Messner, 2009). This study has examined how collective processing assists in constructing a new boundary concept of organisational accountability for sexual misconduct, which, once developed, needs to be sustained by creating corresponding instruments. In order to achieve this purpose, the study has linked the theoretical understanding of sexual misconduct through situations and contexts that individuals find themselves within (Garcia, 2021; Kelley & Mullen, 2006; Pilch & Turska, 2015) to interactions between accountable actors and ‘the Other’ (Butler, 2005; Goncharenko, 2021; Jory et al., 1997; Yates et al., 2020).

In addition to its interdisciplinary theoretical basis, this study provides multiple empirical insights gleaned from research engagements with a community of ‘the collective us’,
including managers, civil servants, NGO activists, psychologists, legal advisers and providers of harassment reporting technology, revealing that the complex phenomenon under study demands a synergy of approaches for its understanding and discussion. Drawing on these diverse strands, the study enriches our knowledge of the varied origins of demands for accountability by revealing the different perspectives to be acknowledged.

The study presents four directions in which the concept of organisational accountability for sexual misconduct has been developed in the #MeToo era. It started with the emergence of a new societal sense of accountability, followed by an acknowledgement of organisational accountability for the workplace environment. This notion of accountability then resulted in various organisational responses and digital innovations in harassment reporting. Finally, accountability revealed itself in the understanding of the role of self-accountability and self-assessment in cultivating any organisational shifts required in the workplace.

The study thus illustrates how the #MeToo movement has mobilised and routinised the continuous virtual and physical presence of ‘the Other’ in the lives of organisational and individual actors (Butler, 2005; Dellaportas, 2019; Roberts, 2009). The intensity of citizens’ demands for accountability highlighted the unhealthy behavioural patterns and imbalances for which organisations and individuals in power would be called to account. Followed by wider socio-political discussion in many national and international settings, the #MeToo movement shaped an understanding that those demands for accountability must be formally recognised and addressed. Once society acknowledged the new calls for accountability, ‘the Collective Us’ placed increasing pressure on organisations to respond. The findings of this study show that the conceptual complexity of sexual misconduct (Bruce & Nowlin, 2011; Mueller et al., 2001) to a large extent resulted in it being left up to organisations to define workplace norms and appropriate behavioural patterns, and to choose the mechanisms by which to exercise accountability.
The demands for sustainable change in the workplace environment stimulated, in particular, innovations in harassment reporting to enable and encourage employees to report and share accounts of abuse. A new market niche has emerged as the high-tech industry has developed new digital solutions by linking psychological and behavioural research to technological expertise. The new instruments help organisations to accumulate evidence about abuse in their workplace by highlighting the areas where employees might be exposed to harassment. Putting such technologies in place also allows organisations to signal that policies and declarations of principle are supported by practical actions to remove barriers to reporting, facilitate intra-organisational communication, and build trust and accountability channels in the workplace. The findings of the study extend our knowledge of emerging digital mechanisms of accountability (Cooper, Coulson, & Taylor, 2011; Ilgit & Prakash, 2019; Islam, Deegan, & Haque, 2020; McPhail, Ferguson, & Macdonald, 2016) by showing how accountability for the right to psychological safety in the workplace could be exercised by recording and accumulating accounts of abuse and how the analytical insights of (internal) reporting could support organisational decisions regarding workplace environment, culture and norms.

However, the study stresses the collective understanding that technical innovations alone will not eradicate sexual misconduct from workplaces. Community activists persuade organisations to accompany technological innovations with conscious improvements within the organisational environment and an emphasis on the personal accountability of individuals to put humanity and psychological safety at the centre of organisational accountability. The study articulates the possibility of addressing the loss of trust and legitimacy faced at sectoral and organisational levels by seeking solutions also on an individual level in the form of self-reflection on the accountability and responsibility of individuals within an organisation.
Any challenge to be resolved first needs to be acknowledged, identified and named. In 2017, the societal response to the #MeToo movement revealed the widespread issue of sexual harassment, violence and misconduct at work and made strong and persistent demands that the offending individuals be held to account and also the organisations for which they worked, rendered complicit by their passivity. That response determined the objective of this study, to reflect upon how the collective processing of the #MeToo legacy made possible by community activists has impacted the conceptualisation of organisational accountability for workplace misconduct. The concept of organisational accountability understood as a constructed social setting in which actors are aware of the need to use accumulated workplace power responsibly, of the consequences of power misuse and of the continuous societal gaze on their actions is important for multiple reasons. First, it provides survivors with closure and the ability to heal. Secondly, by demanding accountability through the power of ‘the Collective Us’, societies signal that sexually offensive behaviour is no longer tolerated. Finally, the notion of accountability equips organisations with an essential perspective on and understanding of their role in eradicating sexual misconduct from the workplace.

The theoretical and empirical insights accumulated in this study provide a rich background and aim to facilitate in-depth case studies on organisational and managerial accountability for sexual misconduct at work and the use of emerging harassment reporting technology. For further research, the author also suggests exploring the diversity of organisational responses to the calls for accountability, looking in particular at how various organisational characteristics and the combination of instruments adopted might determine different outcomes impacting workplace environment and organisational performance. Finally, the long-lasting effects and implications of the #MeToo movement on/for organisational accountability and shifts in culture will also need to be thoughtfully observed and analysed in due course based on the longitudinal data that time will provide.
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