**Harassment and Slurs or Epistemic Injustice? Interrogating Discriminatory Abuse through Safeguarding Adult Review analysis**

**Abstract**

**Purpose –** The purpose of this article is to interrogate and develop the conceptualisation of discriminatory abuse in safeguarding adults policy and practice beyond the current interpersonal definition. The article draws on Safeguarding Adults Reviews that refer to discriminatory abuse or safeguarding practice with adults who have care and support needs and protected characteristics.

**Design / Method / Approach –** A search of the national network repository of Safeguarding Adults Reviews identified 27 published reviews for inclusion. The contents were thematically analysed to understand how discrimination was experienced in these cases. Fricker’s ‘Epistemic Injustice’ theory was adopted as a conceptual framework, informing the analysis of findings.

**Findings –** Evidence from Safeguarding Adults Reviews provides a challenge to the interpersonal emphasis on language and behaviour in national policy. Whilst the reviews acknowledge that interpersonal abuse occurs, a close reading spotlights practitioner and institutional bias, inattention to social, structural and contextual factors. The silence on these matters in policy provides a narrow frame for interpreting such abuse. This suggests significant potential for epistemic injustice and signals a need to acknowledge these social, structural and contextual factors in safeguarding practice.

**Originality –** Discriminatory abuse is an under-researched and under-utilised category of abuse in safeguarding adults practice. The article adopts Fricker’s theory of ‘Epistemic Injustice’ to highlight the silencing potential of current policy approaches to discriminatory abuse in order to suggest a more inclusive and structural framing for safeguarding practice with those targeted due to their protected characteristics.

**Keywords** – Discriminatory Abuse; Safeguarding Adults; Epistemic Injustice; Safeguarding Adults Reviews; Hate Crime

**Introduction**

Discriminatory abuse is a safeguarding category defined in England’s Care and Support Statutory Guidance as “forms of harassment, slurs or similar treatment, because of race, gender and gender identity, age, disability, sexual orientation, religion” (DHSC, 2022, s.14.17). The listed protected characteristics from the Equality Act, 2010 offer safeguarding practitioners an opportunity to challenge any abuse of adults with care and support needs that is motivated by diverse forms of discrimination. On this basis, the category was heralded as a ‘rights-based’ intervention (Manthorpe, 2001) when it first appeared in the now-defunct ‘No Secrets’ guidance (DH, 2000). However, current concerns about very low reporting rates and definitional obscurity have raised questions about the category’s rights-affirming potential (Mason et al, 2022). Whilst the definition above focuses on interpersonal behaviour and language (harassment and slurs), academic literature suggests that structural factors, such as persistent othering of marginalised groups (Parker, 2021), poverty, deprivation and austerity (Balderston et al, 2019; Healy, 2020) provide a more useful frame for discriminatory abuse. This article extends this argument through an analysis of Safeguarding Adults Reviews (SARs) to interrogate the way in which discriminatory abuse is understood and develop a more pragmatic explanation that reflects how it is experienced.

The term ‘discriminatory abuse’ is sometimes used synonymously with ‘hate crime’ (Mason et al, 2022), but this masks the distinctive contribution of discriminatory abuse. Significantly, hate crime relates to a criminal justice approach (including sentence uplifts) for five protected characteristics (disability, race, sexual orientation, transgender identity and religion), whereas discriminatory abuse focuses on protection and support and includes a broader view of discrimination (age is notably omitted from the purview of hate crime). Care and support needs are required in safeguarding work, but a person with no care and support needs may experience hate crimes if their protected characteristics are targeted. These differences are important because conflating these terms might facilitate inter-professional misunderstanding and failure to refer across criminal justice and safeguarding agencies (Healy and Dray, 2021). However, examining hate crime reporting trends can be instructive in developing an understanding of discriminatory abuse. This is because the two phenomena overlap around disability hate crime, where some level of care and support needs are engaged around the person’s disability and the presence of abuse, or prejudice indicates both criminal and safeguarding routes may apply. Reported hate crime has almost doubled in the last four years from 7,221 reported disability hate crimes in 2017/18 to 14,242 in 2021/22 (Home Office, 2022). Against this backdrop, reporting on discriminatory abuse could also be expected to have surged, but official statistics show extremely low reporting rates and only 1.5% of safeguarding activity in 2021-22 was recorded as discriminatory abuse (NHS Digital, 2022). The gap in the reporting rates for these allied phenomena is unexplained and warrants further enquiry.

The Care Act, 2014 requires Safeguarding Adults Boards (SABs) to commission a SAR when a person with care and support needs has died or been seriously harmed and there is a concern that the multi-agency network could have protected the person more effectively (though SABs can commission discretionary SARs beyond this requirement) (DHSC, 2022). O’Reardon (2022) traces SARs back to inquiry reports about failings in health settings during the 1960s and notes that the orientation of SARs has pivoted to learning lessons rather than locating blame. However, it is arguable that their focus on ‘worst-case’ pictures provide a poor frame for improving safeguarding responses (O’Reardon, 2022). SARs present important narratives of safeguarding practice and it is increasingly common to find analyses of SARs in the academic press (e.g. Preston-Shoot, 2021; Holloway and Norman, 2022). This article uses data from 27 SARs relating to discriminatory abuse or people whose experience of abuse linked with their protected characteristics and argues that the current interpersonal definition of discriminatory abuse prevents the articulation of structural factors that underpin discrimination, in effect illustrating Fricker’s (2007) concept of epistemic injustice.

‘Epistemic injustice’ is a theory developed by Miranda Fricker (2007) reflecting a form of social injustice that relates to knowledge and knowing. Epistemic injustice occurs when a person is deemed incapable of possessing legitimate or reliable knowledge, even about their own lived circumstances and it usually occurs in the context of the person’s marginalised characteristics. Fricker notes two main forms of epistemic injustice: testimonial and hermeneutic injustice. Testimonial injustice describes the ways in which people with marginalised identities may receive a deflated level of credibility when it comes to explaining their situation. In safeguarding adults practice, this may happen when certain characteristics such as cognitive impairments or mental ill-health are conflated with stereotypical assumptions that the person automatically lacks capacity or is an ‘unreliable historian’ (Carr et al, 2019). Testimonial injustice may also be manifested in SARs which omit certain views or voices. This frequently occurs by necessity, because SARs are usually commissioned following a death, so the author will not have an opportunity to hear directly from the person at the heart of the review. Information contained in SARs may also be based on incomplete agency records or sometimes estranged family members providing an incomplete narrative of the person’s actual life experience. Meanwhile, hermeneutic injustice occurs when dominant and hegemonic explanations are afforded privilege to the extent that no other ways of thinking about or describing a situation are possible (Fricker, 2007). In safeguarding adults work, this might happen when dominant ways of understanding abuse as interpersonal may limit the potential to articulate structural forms of discriminatory abuse. Preston-Shoot et al (2020) identify that SARs frequently lack analysis of the meaning of protected characteristics in the dynamics of abuse and this shallow level of understanding may prevent us from understanding the ways that such characteristics were important in the abuse that occurred. Furthermore, SARs might actually contribute to epistemic injustice if calls for meaningful change are silenced with lip-service about learning which is not followed through, as per Holloway and Norman’s (2022) review of traumatic brain injury SARs as ‘history repeating’ or Preston-Shoot’s (2021) analysis of ‘not learning’ from self-neglect SARs. Epistemic injustice involves politico-moral concerns about the ways that power is used to deflate the credibility of marginalised people and prohibit them from making sense of their experiences and therefore provides a useful theoretical driver to underpin this study.

Although this article draws on English safeguarding policy and practice, clearly there is broader relevance. For example, Donnelly and O’Brien’s (2022) analysis of Ireland’s absence of primary legislation on safeguarding adults notes recent institutional abuse that targeted people with disabilities. They argue that legislation might provide for effective responses but note that even in countries which have legislated in this area, practice remains constrained by structural factors underpinning abuse, a point that will be returned to.

**Method**

In 2021, a national repository of SARs was established and includes keyword search functionality. To learn more about discriminatory abuse and safeguarding practice with people who have protected characteristics, the following search terms were deployed:

“Discriminatory”, “Discrimination”, “Protected Characteristic\*”, “Equality”, “Stigma”

“Target\*”, “Hate Crime”

These search terms were coupled with terms that describe protected characteristics listed in the definition of discriminatory abuse in order to find the most relevant SARs. Given under-reporting in this area, the review included SARs that related to any adult with protected characteristics in order to observe any potential for discrimination that was implicit in the text. SARs with no analysis of how protected characteristics may have impacted were subsequently excluded. The search method uncovered 27 SARs and Table 1 below outlines these in summary form.

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| **Name / pseudonym used in SAR; SAB details and author** | **Details of Safeguarding Adults Review and Protected Characteristic** |
| Mrs H (Berkshire West SAB, 2017) | Older woman who lived in son’s home and died of malnourishment. Professional assumptions are noted about apparently benign nature of private care arrangements and dementia conflated with mental incapacity. |
| Katherine (Dorset SAB, 2021) | 85-year old woman admitted to hospital following an assault by her husband. Relationship characterised by domestic abuse. |
| Nick; Gloucestershire SAB (Foster, 2020) | 58-year old man with complex health and social care needs due to his learning disabilities. His death was attributed to malnutrition, but the SAR places this in the context of poor care. |
| Mr D (Tower Hamlets SAB, 2019) | 30-year old man with learning disabilities and complex health conditions. He died in A&E whilst awaiting care. |
| Carol (Teeswide SAB, 2017) | 58-year old woman living with schizophrenia. Ongoing anti-social behaviour reports raised. Attacked and murdered in her home by two teenage girls. |
| Claire; Northamptonshire SAB (Manson, 2016) | 57-year old woman with history of self-harm was an inpatient on a mental health ward and fractured her spine. Poor communication between general hospital and mental health ward. |
| Mr V (1); Camden SAB (Warburton, 2020) | 57-year old man of Jewish heritage with learning disabilities. Received 24-hour care. Issues include poor use of the Mental Capacity Act. |
| Mr V (2); Tower Hamlets SAB (Bishop, 2019a) | 84-year old Black Caribbean man with chronic health issues and sensory disability, targeted by a student social worker who financial abused him. |
| Adult A; Southwark SAB (Kingston, 2016) | 45-year old man of Nigerian heritage found dead at home one month after discharge from a mental health hospital. |
| Adult Olia and baby W; Manchester SAB (Wiffin, 2021) | 35-year old woman and her baby found dead following concerns for her mental health and poor ante-natal engagement. |
| Lee Irving; Newcastle SAB (Wood, 2017) | 24-year old man with learning disabilities. Exploited and targeted over several years and murdered at home by a man he lived with. |
| Vicky; Hampshire SAB (Ridley and Appleton, 2021) | 34-year old woman in B&B accommodation with acquired brain injury and personality disorder. Concerns included sexual assault, cuckooing, disengagement with services. Discharged from hospital without assessment and later found dead at home. |
| John; Richmond and Wandsworth SAB (Hopkinson, 2021) | 50-year old Black British man with severe eczema affecting his mental health, who died whilst awaiting a Care Act assessment. |
| Damien; Somerset SAB (Benbow, 2021) | 33-year old White British man with Asperger’s, ADHD and learning disabilities who died by suicide 14 days after discharge from mental health ward. History of exploitation. |
| Kamil Ahmad and Mr X; Bristol SAB (Ohdedar and Dalton, 2018) | Both men lived in supported accommodation, where multiple incidents of racist targeting led to the murder of one man who was Kurdish. |
| Daniel (Berkshire West SAB, 2019) | 76-year old man with cognitive and physical impairments financially exploited by a woman falsely claiming to be his niece. |
| Christopher; Brighton and Hove SAB (Johnson, 2020) | 39-year old man with history of anxiety, learning disability and substance misuse. Died following heroin overdose. |
| Mr Z; Tower Hamlets SAB (Bishop, 2019b) | 59-year old man with learning disabilities and complex physical and mental health issues. Died in the context of poor medical care, but also reported regular targeting by local youths. |
| N; Bexley SAB (Stuart-Angus, 2020) | 19-year old mixed race and bisexual woman with housing difficulties and known to mental health services died by suicide. |
| Amanda; Hampshire SAB (Spreadbury, 2022) | 33-year old woman experienced harassment from a neighbour due to her sexuality in the context of mental ill-health and substance misuse, context of self-neglect |
| Ms C; Tower Hamlets SAB (Pearson, 2019) | White British woman in mid-20s with multiple mental health diagnoses. Placed in hostel and separated from dog upon eviction. Died by suicide in hostel. |
| X; Brighton and Hove SAB (Rogers, 2017) | 59-year old targeted on account of transgender identity and homelessness, found dead in circumstances attributed to self-neglect. |
| Martin; Lambeth SAB (Spreadbury, 2019) | 51-year old White British gay man with history of alcohol misuse and self-neglect. |
| Homelessness Thematic Review; Oxfordshire SAB (Preston-Shoot and Cooper, 2020) | A Polish citizen with no recourse to public funds, estranged from his family and experiencing homelessness is included in this thematic review. He died due to sepsis. |
| Ms F; City and Hackney SAB (Gomes, 2019) | 44-year old Black British woman with multiple sclerosis. Developed a pressure ulcer when there was a delay replacing her specialist mattress. |
| Michael Thompson; Lewisham SAB (Winter and Chamberlain, 2021) | 60-year old Black British man of Jamaican origin who died in a house fire and had frequent contact with mental health services. |
| Miss G; Lewisham SAB (Haggar, 2020) | 73-year old Black Caribbean woman who had two falls closely after discharge from hospital following inadequate risk assessment. |

*Table 1. Overview of SARs included for analysis*

Relevant text from each of the SARs was extracted and analysed. Other SAR reviews have adopted framework approaches to analyse the documents. For example, Preston-Shoot’s (2021) four-domain framework – direct practice, inter-professional work, organisational features and SAB leadership. Whilst framework analysis offers a bounded approach to large data sets and offers a pragmatic review of practice and agency responses, this article adopts thematic analysis instead. The advantage of thematic analysis in developing a clearer conceptualisation of discriminatory abuse is its emphasis on identifying patterns of meaning, working these into themes over several iterations of coding (Attride-Sterling, 1991). This analytic approach was underpinned by a constructionist epistemological perspective. A constructionist approach is helpful, because SARs are written to fulfil practical organisational requirements and are based on accumulated fragments from multiple sources – in other words, they are the product of negotiated understandings and multiple perspectives, rather than a unified truth about the person’s situation or ‘what happened’ (Witkin, 2012). The conceptual framework of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) interlinks with this constructionist stance because such injustice is a social practice that is given meaning in the ways marginalised people are treated by those in positions of power. The findings which follow confirm that inter-personal forms of abuse occur but are only one mode of discrimination. Social, structural and contextual factors are neglected when only inter-personal abuse is considered, leaving us with an incomplete definition which excludes important aspects of how discriminatory abuse is actually experienced.

**Findings**

***Harassment, Slurs and Similar Treatment***

“Sometimes when I do not have anything to do, I'll wander around other service user's flats, or walk the street, where I get targeted by local youths who call me names” (Bishop, 2019b, p.10)

Given the emphasis in policy on harassment, slurs and other similar treatment (DHSC, 2022), it is unsurprising that SARs such as Mr. Z’s review (whose entry to his support plan is quoted above), provide illustrations of interpersonal abuse. Slurs involve using offensive language, underpinned by prejudice, with the intention of making someone feel less about themselves. Several SARs refer to such verbal abuse and offensive name-calling by neighbours, including homo/bi-phobic abuse (Spreadbury, 2022) or disability-related abuse (Bishop, 2019b) and it also feature in a review involving ‘X’ who identified as transgender and was also homeless (Rogers, 2017), resulting in social isolation, mental distress and loss of sleep.

Meanwhile, harassment moves beyond name-calling to behaviours that include intimidation or other types of torment. This is illustrated in the case of ‘Carol’, whose experience of harassment also illustrates its prolonged or cyclical patterns:

“Carol was distressed stating she was afraid to go home... She had a black eye from a physical assault… She was… reluctant to give details for fear of reprisals. Carol told professionals certain people would “do her in”… (I)t became apparent that Carol was sleeping on a beach at times to avoid being at home and having contact with others… Carol said there were adults who were harassing her, and also young people whom she called the “schoolies” (Teeswide SAB, 2017, p15).

Following 219 police reports and multiple reports to her mental health team, she was later murdered by two children aged 13 and 14. Other SARs paint similarly insidious pictures and elsewhere terms such as ‘targeted exploitation’ are used to capture experiences of significant harassment including bullying (Wood, 2017).

One ill-defined consideration is the matter of how far ‘similar treatment’ from the policy definition might extend – for example could it cover abuse where a person is unaware that they are being exploited, such as through ‘gaslighting’ (Berkshire West SAB, 2019). This is interesting to consider because several SARs report on the targeting and financial abuse of people with learning disabilities by people who position themselves as friends (also known as ‘mate crime’), which might prevent an understanding that the experience constitutes abuse (Benbow, 2021, Johnson, 2020). More substantial critiques about the reach of the statutory definition will be picked up through subsequent themes, because in contrast with the dominant interpersonal perspective, most SARs did not mention ‘slurs, harassment or other similar treatment’ at all.

***Practitioner and Institutional Bias***

“There appears to be some stereotyping of people with a learning disability by a lack of… communication, (poor) understanding of mental capacity, and hidden attitudes affecting the way that professionals dealt with Mr D” (Tower Hamlets Safeguarding Adults Partnership Board, 2019, p.27)

The SAR relating to Mr D, a man with learning disabilities, quoted above, and another similar SAR (Foster, 2020), point to failures to make reasonable adjustments in hospital settings in the context of professional stereotyping rather than direct slurs or harassment. Stereotypical assumptions were also evident in SARs on older adults, revealing practitioner discrimination and a lack of commitment to empowerment or participation, for example assuming a lack of mental capacity due to dementia or assuming family caring relationships to be benign (Berkshire West SAB, 2017).

Pushing beyond practitioner to institutional bias, another SAR reports on Claire, who was an inpatient on a mental health ward and died following respiratory arrest because her physical health issues were conflated with her mental health issues. This SAR contextualises individual biases and uncritical assumptions to national and institutionalised patterns of inequality:

“Poor physical health for people with severe mental illness is a nationally recognised area of health inequality...” (Manson, 2016, p.8)

Institutional racism is also called out in the reviews, with one report recommending that agencies develop action plans that address the ways that biases in the workforce and the institution impact on the way that services are delivered to Black and other minoritised ethnic communities (Hopkinson, 2021). Similarly, a thematic review undertaken in relation to multiple exclusion homelessness notes that people with ‘No Recourse to Public Funds’ were experiencing treatment that reflected racist biases:

“EU nationals and other people who have no recourse to public funds were ‘falling through the net’…. there should be a clearer policy towards EU clients as the interpretation of ‘local connection’ was described as ‘discriminatory.’” (Preston-Shoot and Cooper, 2020, p.42).

Practitioner bias can also play out in the related theme of inattention to social identities, which is presented next.

***Inattention to social identities***

Insufficient attention to race and racism is a common theme through most SARs that relate to people from Black or other minoritised communities. This is illustrated clearly in a SAR involving a Black woman with mental ill-health and her new baby:

“(i)nsufficient attention was paid to Olia’s cultural heritage, understanding whether she had any support networks such as the church or community or what culturally sensitive support could be provided” (Wiffin, 2021, p.24)

Her non-engagement with services was not considered in the context of cultural barriers and taboos around mental health. This SAR asks challenging questions about race and racism in adult safeguarding and the review calls for reflections considering the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement (Wiffin, 2021, p.32). Whilst this review provides the clearest focus on race and racism, it is not alone, with several SARs pointing to poor practitioner awareness in this area that might have allowed abuse to go unnoticed (Bishop, 2019a; Hopkinson, 2019; Kingston, 2016). One of these SARs reports on the circumstances of an older man with Nigerian heritage identifying “no reference in the records… to indicate that his culture and ethnicity were considered as part of the assessment” (Kingston, 2016, p.22)

Inattention to sexual or gender identity is also noted. In a SAR relating to a lesbian woman with autism, the review concludes that professionals had not always grasped their responsibilities under the Equality Act, 2010 and there is limited analysis concerning any interaction between her sexuality, disability and experiences of abuse (Pearson, 2019). Another SAR concerning a gay man who died following alcohol use and self-neglect acknowledges that he previously volunteered with the London Gay and Lesbian Switchboard, but there was very little known about the disjunct between his earlier activism and how his sexuality may have structured his subsequent deterioration (Spreadbury, 2019). Two reviews consider deaths that occurred against the backdrop of LGBTQ+ homelessness and mental ill-health, with a lack of clarity about how housing and mental health teams took account of their specific needs (Rogers, 2017; Stuart-Angus, 2020). The second of these SARs refers to a bisexual woman with unstable living arrangements and significant mental ill-health. Professionals considered her female partner as a protective factor in risk assessments but missed opportunities to consider strained dynamics in their relationship. For example, the intimate nature of their relationship was not clear to her partner’s father while they were living in his home and although the partner also experienced mental ill-health, neither woman was offered a carer’s assessment. Intersectional identities were also important and the woman at the heart of the SAR had noted to professionals “it was sometimes difficult to be mixed race”, which was not explored further (Stuart-Angus, 2020).

Often, very little personalisation was evident, with one SAR noting frequent care staff turnover meant nobody involved in her care knew who she was (Gomes, 2019). In another SAR, insufficient curiosity about people’s circumstances at the point of hospital discharge is noted, stating “people’s lives appear to effectively end at the moment they are discharged as far as hospital professionals are concerned” (Haggar, 2020, p.17). It is impossible to say how further curiosity about identity might have changed the outcomes, but it is reasonable to assume that understanding a person’s social characteristics would add depth to professional analysis.

***Context and Place-Based Factors***

“He was desperate to fit in and make friends and this led him to keep the company of “street drinkers” where he would drink or take whatever substance given to him. He became a target for the unscrupulous, shoplifting to order and frequently losing his clothes, shoes and money to his street “mates” (Wood, 2017, p.13)

Interpersonal accounts of discriminatory abuse lack attention to the dimension of context and place, but analysis of SARs shows how these factors were closely connected with the experiences of abuse, whether this be institutional contexts, community factors or dynamic factors such as movement across locations or transient places of residence. For example, the above quote from the Lee Irving SAR illustrates the ways in which street life was woven into the ways in which Lee was exploited. In the context of child safeguarding practices, Firmin (2018) has highlighted the insufficiency of inter-personal or micro-level attention to parenting when addressing abuse that occurs in and is bound up with community contexts. The attention to context is important because the places where abuse occurs are not simply venues for interpersonal forms of abuse, they add context that contributes to and facilitates abuse.

Some SARs also illustrated abuse within institutional settings. In hospitals, two SARs referenced poor care for people who had learning disabilities, with a clear sense that the hospital setting and its pressured environment mitigated against good care or the provision of reasonable adjustments for this group (Foster, 2020; Tower Hamlets SAB, 2019). Another SAR considered poor care in a mental health hospital setting, highlighting the ward’s rigid and oppressive atmosphere, offering an insight into the ways in which closed systems, such as hospital wards, may result in a corruption of care (Wardhaugh and Wilding, 1993) and facilitate discriminatory abuse. Temporary or hostel accommodation was mentioned in two SARs involving targeting by other residents who had their own needs and in the first case, substance misuse within the hostel was part and parcel of the way in which this targeting occurred (Johnson, 2020; Ohdedar and Dalton, 2018). In other SARs, socially deprived or depleted community environments contributed towards discriminatory abuse and corresponded with anti-social behaviour or neighbourhood hostility (Spreadbury, 2022; Warburton, 2020, Rogers, 2017). This arose due to inadequate prevention or coordination by poorly resourced services, which facilitated targeting to go under the radar, thereby locating abuse in contextual context rather than simply constituting interpersonal abuse by a single perpetrator (Wood, 2017; Teeswide SAB, 2017).

Another contextual theme from the SARs is transience and movement across places. Insecure accommodation or multiple placements were featured in the several reviews, including reviews where adults were relocated to areas that were known to have substantial anti-social behaviour problems (Benbow, 2021, Ridley and Appleton, 2021, Stuart-Angus, 2020; Rogers, 2017). Of course, such moves cause immense disruption, uprooting the person from friends, family and services and the protection these networks provide. In another review, ‘itinerant circumstances’ across several UK cities and another country amplified the difficulties of professional services reaching a woman and her baby (Wiffin, 2021), whilst frequent movements across towns along the south coast had a similar impact in a SAR concerning multiple exclusion homelessness and transgender identity (Rogers, 2017).

**Discussion:**

Given the foregoing findings, the conceptual framework of epistemic injustice is prescient. A hallmark of Fricker’s testimonial form of epistemic injustice is when a person feels they are not being listened to, which is unfortunately a common thread through the SARs, such as when professionals listened selectively or jumped to conclusions based on stereotypical assumptions (Teeswide, 2017; Manson, 2016). The case of Kamil Ahmed is particularly informative, where his reports of experiencing racist discriminatory abuse were interpreted as a care and support need for the person perpetrating this abuse, who went on to murder Kamil, his fellow hostel-resident (Ohdedar and Dalton, 2018). The SARs provide accounts of other modes of ‘not being listened to’, sometimes through failures to offer assessments (Ridley and Appleton, 2021; Hopkinson, 2021). Fricker (2007) identifies that stereotypes are the basic mechanism through which a person’s credibility can be deflated and this is evident in a number of these SARs (Berkshire West, 2017, Foster, 2020). In these ways, a review of SARs relating to discriminatory abuse or people with protected characteristics spotlights significant potential for testimonial forms of epistemic injustice.

Fricker’s (2007) hermeneutic form of epistemic injustice offers even further insight into the article’s findings. Hermeneutic injustice occurs when socio-cultural factors prevent people from making sense of their experiences because there is no available framework within which to understand or describe one’s situation. Whilst interpersonal harassment and slurs do appear in the SARs, they are only one outcome of discrimination. Themes of practitioner and institutional bias, inattention to social identities and the importance of context and place offer a more realistic reflection of the ways in which discriminatory abuse plays out. Not only does this help to explain the persistent low reporting of this category, but it also suggests that other social and structural outcomes of discrimination do not have a legitimate home in safeguarding adults practice.

Epistemic injustice is therefore engaged through interventions that do not listen or do not enable a person to make sense of their situation outside of dominant interpretive modes. The interpersonal definition in the statutory definition is just one illustration of discourses that individualise people’s experiences of risk (see also Clarke et al, 2007; Stevens et al, 2018). Safeguarding practice aspires to provide support and protection to those who are impacted by abuse and unable to protect themselves (DHSC, 2022), but safeguarding practice is constituted socially within these dominant discourses. As a result, social workers and those involved in safeguarding activities (including SAR authors) are subject to tacit assumptions, stereotypes and biases that constrain meaningful conversations about the impact of discrimination and divert practice to the resolution of tasks or problems. There was limited evidence of person-centred or strengths-based approaches to safeguarding in the SARs that were reviewed because of the very limited information about who the person was or about their social characteristics. The prevalence of these interpersonal ways of thinking about risk effectively disables conversations that allow practitioners and those affected by abuse to make sense of discrimination outside of this worldview and therefore reproduces these hermeneutic injustices. This is reinforced further by the fragmented and resource-poor organisational or inter-agency environments in which safeguarding practice occurs (Glasby et al, 2021). From this perspective, social work (and safeguarding) is very likely to reproduce epistemic injustices.

Safeguarding principles (and social work values) already point to the importance of participatory practice, facilitating people to feel heard and have a meaningful role in any safeguarding activity that concerns them (Lawson, 2017). Reinforcing values and skills of empathic listening, meaningful conversation and advocacy practices are oriented in this direction but may still be constrained if practitioners are not sufficiently familiar with the wider impacts of experiencing discriminatory abuse. Sensitising practitioners to the impacts of interpersonal discourses through workforce training and development can therefore offer a vantage point towards a more socially and epistemically just approach. However, an awareness of structural problems does not mean that practitioners will feel empowered by their managers or organisations to engage in this way and scaffolding is therefore required to support these practices. Parker’s (2021) suggestion that structural safeguarding echoes the hints at ‘radical safeguarding’ approaches that are being mooted in the children’s safeguarding sector (Maslaha, 2022) and these have been gaining some traction in the intersections of homelessness and adult social care practice (Taylor, 2022). Collective and community-oriented approaches are emphasised here, and Taylor’s (2022) specific reference to widening definitions is particularly heartening in the context of this discussion on discriminatory abuse. Elsewhere, these community-oriented approaches are supported by Firmin (2018) whose emphasis on contextual safeguarding has been influential in child safeguarding practice. More work is required to understand how these approaches could play out in safeguarding adults work, but the link with hate crime suggests that there is space to explore restorative practice approaches further (Gavrielides, 2012), an approach that is scaffolded well by existing strengths-based ideas in adult social care (DHSC, 2017).

**Conclusion**

This article presents evidence that confirms the earlier findings that SARs frequently lack attention to the identity and social context of the person at the centre of the SAR, including how protected characteristics are often not accounted for (Preston-Shoot et al, 2020). The use of Fricker’s epistemic injustice provides a framework to better understand the politico-moral consequences of under-reporting or limited practice engagement with the category of discriminatory abuse. Ultimately, Manthorpe’s (2001) heralding of the rights-based inclusion of discriminatory abuse in ‘No Secrets’ needs revisiting and underscoring based on a more inclusive approach to dynamics of discrimination beyond interpersonal abuse and intervention strategies that orient practice in this direction that emphasises social, structural and contextual practices. In this way, safeguarding work can aspire to enable people to make sense of any experiences of being targeted based on their protected characteristics.

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