

A continuum of acceptability: understanding young people's views on gender based violence

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Introduction

There is an increasing focus on sexual violence in higher education in the UK. A growing body of research suggests that experiences of sexual harassment and violence are widespread in university communities (Phipps and Young, 2013). Recent research also suggests that institutional knowledge and action to tackle sexual harassment and violence (often described as 'lad culture') is sparse, with most university-led initiatives adopting a reactive and, often, punitive approach (Jackson and Sundaram, 2015). Violence *prevention* initiatives in higher education are not yet well-developed. However, increasing attention is being given to how to 'tackle' or 'challenge' sexual harassment and violence in universities.

In 2016, the UK Women's and Equalities Committee launched an enquiry into sexual harassment in schools. The final enquiry report noted the prevalence of various forms of sexual violence in schools, including unwanted sexual touching, sexual name-calling and sexual violence in teenage partner relationships (WEC, 2016). A major recommendation of the report, which was based on quantitative and qualitative research from a range of expert organisations and individuals, was that in order to tackle 'lad culture' in universities more work must be done to understand and prevent gender based violence (GBV) earlier in the educational life course.

This chapter therefore discusses research on secondary school pupils' views and experiences of gender based harassment and violence, in order to improve our understanding of how such practices arise and become entrenched. In particular, the research focuses on the ways in which young people talk about the acceptability of violence in different situations. A number of studies have noted that young people have high

levels of tolerance in relation to various forms of GBV (Burton et al, 1998; Prospero, 2006; Barter et al, 2009, 2015; McCarry, 2010) but few have analysed why these views are held. I will argue that, in terms of developing violence prevention in schools and in universities, it is crucial to understand the nuances, contradictions and complexities in young people's views on violence. My work on this (Sundaram, 2013, 2014a, 2014b) suggests that young people's views exist on a *continuum of acceptability* and that binary positions on violence are rarely adopted. The positions young people take up along this continuum are fundamentally shaped by their understandings of normal and appropriate gender behaviour. The discourse used about violence as 'acceptable' or not is shaped by context and setting, perceived relationship dynamics, and gender – such that similar forms of violence may be justified in one instance but viewed as unacceptable in another. Teaching about GBV in particular, then, is unlikely to be effective if simplistic messages about violence being 'wrong' are dominant, especially if these are not accompanied by critical consciousness-raising about the gender norms and expectations underlying perspectives on violence. Recent violence prevention initiatives in higher education (for example, *The Intervention Initiative*, discussed in Chapter Eight in this volume) have similarly focused on culture and norm change, rather than on behavioural improvement.

Compulsory heterosexuality, young people and violence

In the following section, I review the recent UK research on young people and GBV. The focus will primarily be on young people's views and attitudes towards violence in order to situate this chapter in relation to questions about why GBV might exist in university communities and what actions might be necessary to engendering cultural change at higher education institutions. It is key to understand how values and attitudes around GBV manifest among younger people and the key factors influencing these views.

A growing body of research in the UK and elsewhere suggests that GBV, including sexual harassment, coercion and assault, are prevalent experiences for young people. Findings from a recent EU study showed that 48% of young women aged 14–17 years report having experienced sexual violence from an intimate partner (Barter et al, 2015) and a recent UK parliamentary enquiry into sexual harassment in schools found that sexual violence (in a range of forms) is a common experience for young school-aged girls in particular. Over 5,000 separate cases of sexual harassment or assault were recorded in UK schools between

2012 and 2015 and a Girlguiding poll in 2015 found that 75% of girls experience anxiety related to sexual harassment. The parliamentary enquiry found that sexual harassment covered a range of experiences, including unwanted sexual touching, groping, sexual jokes, name-calling that focuses on appearance, homophobic bullying, spreading of sexual rumours on- and offline, sharing of nude photos, coercion to participate in sexual activity, and sexual assault by intimate partners.

While the negative emotional, physical, social and psychological impacts of sexual harassment and violence have been well-documented, there appears to be a high degree of toleration of these practices too. Research with young women, in particular, suggests that their enjoyment of school is negatively impacted in a range of ways by coercive sexualised practices (for example, Ringrose and Renold, 2011; Keddie, 2009). Existing literature notes that practices such as phone-checking, monitoring friendships and contact with peers, and restrictions on dress are commonly perpetrated forms of harassment and abuse. Yet, young women normalise and accept these behaviours, narrating them as caring, loving or to be expected (even if not desirable). The normalisation of sexual violence by young people is key to their reproduction. Sexual violence becomes recast as 'relationship practices' that signify seriousness, possession, love and are accepted, even if not uniformly seen as 'good'. Young men adopt these practices as signifiers of 'proper' masculine behaviour (for example McCarry, 2010), demonstrating control, dominance and manliness to their peers and partners in doing so.

The pervasive normalisation and acceptance of GBV by young people is well-documented in UK and US research literature. Studies by the Zero Tolerance Trust (Burton et al, 1998), Prospero (2006), Barter et al (2009, 2015), McCarry (2010) and Coy et al (2016) have shown that young people justify and rationalise violence against women and girls in a range of situations. Violence against women is viewed as sometimes justified and women are varyingly viewed as having provoked violence towards them. Coy et al (2016) found that consent is a poorly understood concept among teenagers and numerous instances of sexual harassment or coercion were seen either as a 'normal' part of relationships or as something that the woman in the scenario had brought upon herself. The perpetration of relationship violence/s by young men is narrated as 'normal', if not desirable, and is therefore widely tolerated by young men and women. This produces a 'truth' about gendered interactions in which violence does not need to be automatically challenged or rejected. Following Foucault, it is imperative that we acknowledge the ways

in which social arrangements produce discourses about gender and other hierarchies, such that particular knowledges become common-sensical and alternative interpretations are marginalised, denigrated or silenced (Waite, 2010). This has significance for our understanding of how and why young people – and adults – come to normalise toxic heteronormative practices and to rationalise them through essentialist understandings of gender.

A wide-ranging body of research suggests that sexual harassment and violence are common experiences in educational settings (see, for example, Sundaram and Sauntson, 2015). There is also increasing evidence to suggest that young people tolerate, justify and even normalise a range of forms of violence, and that women themselves are sometimes blamed for having provoked violence towards them (see, for example, Barter et al, 2009). Less theorisation has been done around the reasons why young people (and adults) might perpetrate, accept and excuse violence in a range of contexts.

Heteronormativity as a framework for justifying violence

Gendered social norms are a key influence on young people viewing violence as ‘violence’ and understanding it as ‘wrong’ or as acceptable. Young people’s expectations of appropriate and expected gender behaviour within the context of relationships are a fundamental influence on their definition of specific practices as violence and on their acceptance of violent practices. The centrality of heteronormative gender expectations to young people’s justifications of violence is such that I would argue that heterosexual hegemony (Butler et al, 1994) can, itself, be understood as violent, in its policing of young people’s views and practices to ‘misrecognise’ violence (in Bourdieu’s sense of the term). Violence is not always recognised for what it is (Bourdieu, 2000) because of the salience of heteronormative gender expectations in shaping young people’s understandings of ‘normal’ gender behaviour.

It is clear that young people hold strong expectations about ‘appropriately feminine’ behaviour. This has been shown in work with primary aged children (Davies, 1989; Reay, 2001; Renold, 2005), as well as older children and young adults. These discursive constructions of ‘normal’ gender behaviour also play out in the ways young people view violence, what constitutes violence and the acceptability of violence (Sundaram, 2013, 2014a).

The findings from my own research (Sundaram, 2014a) suggest that young people employ varying and contradictory discourses around the acceptability of violence, alternately labelling it as ‘wrong’

and ‘unacceptable’ to use violence against women, or calling it ‘understandable’ or even ‘deserved’. The narratives young people draw on in relation to the acceptability of violence are heavily influenced by the context of the violence, the relationship dynamic between the social actors involved, and their imposition of gender expectations onto these two aspects of a given scenario. Expectations of women were a particular hinge-point around which narratives of violence as acceptable or not were centred. The expectations were not explicitly used to justify violence *a priori* but emerged through discussions about violence, in which young people revealed that their position towards violence was influenced by their understandings of how women should behave in different situations. They thus positioned themselves on a continuum of acceptability, where their understandings of violence were shown to be complex, nuanced and not-binary. Crucially, their positions on the continuum were influenced by their gendered expectations of behaviour within a given situation.

Young people appear to be well acquainted with formal school and governmental discourses about violence against women. A number of young people I interviewed were familiar with the governmental *This is Abuse* campaign which was launched in 2010 as a public information campaign about relationship violence among young people. The campaign had a dedicated website with sources of support, examples and stories illustrating the range of violences in relationships, and a discussion board for young people. It also included short films that depicted different scenarios of violence between young people and that presented viewers with a moral choice about whether to challenge and reject violence or whether to be a perpetrator. The campaign was discussed as a positive form of awareness-raising by many participants, although views challenging the gender-relatedness of violence was strong in almost all of the focus groups. There was a fairly widely-held view that girls can be, and are, violent within intimate relationships and within same-sex friendships too. Challenges were also presented to the notion that all violence was necessarily undeserved and there were some views expressed that were disparaging of people feeling like ‘victims’ over relatively ‘mild’ forms of violence, such as pushing, a slap or putting sexual pressure on someone.

The value of asking young people about ‘real world’ scenarios, rather than solely presenting them with abstract moral dilemmas to discuss, became apparent in the use of mixed methods for this study (see Sundaram, 2014a). When relatively generalised discussions about ‘violence’ were initiated, the vast majority of participants were quick to reject violence against women and to label perpetrators negatively.

Some of the judgements expressed about perpetrators were heavily classed and close links were made between substance use, certain forms of attire or socialising, and the use of violence. No young person in this study expressed a positive view on 'violence' per se. Violence against women was described as 'wrong', 'unacceptable' and as something that young people know, almost intuitively, not to do.

Yasin: 'It's a thing we know, but we can't put into words.'

The use of 'real world' vignettes generated a different, more nuanced response from young people in relation to violence. Details about the (presumed) context, relationship dynamics and setting were invoked to sustain a narrative of violence as unacceptable or, in many cases, of violence as understandable, excusable or even as deserved. Acts of violence were re-classified, as 'self-defence', 'caring too much' (being too emotionally invested in a situation), or as 'natural [male] reaction'. So, young people's views on what violence actually is began to shift as they imagined and imposed more details onto the different scenarios being discussed. Participants hypothesised about the sequence of events leading up to a particular scenario of violence, collectively generating stories about, and in defence of, harassment, coercion and acts of physical violence (Sundaram, 2014a).

Mark: 'If he cheated, like if he cheated on his wife or something, then you would probably expect it [one man to hit another]'. (in response to being shown a photograph of one man hitting another)

Laura: 'If she wasn't used to it, she'd probably fight back, but she's probably in the past hit him back and then it's got worse so she probably thinks 'oh just sit there and do nothing''. (in response to being shown a photograph of a man acting in a threatening manner towards a woman)

Across different school settings, young people expressed consistent views on what they thought might be 'normal' emotions, practices and reactions for men. These included jealousy, pride, needing to show dominance or control, not being seen as weak, feeling anger or embarrassment if they are turned down, and doing what other men or boys would expect you to do. The naturalisation of these emotions as gendered, as specifically expected of 'men', was used as a means to rationalise or explain men's use of violence. An essentialist discourse

about (heterosexual) 'men' was used to normalise their use of violence and, in some ways, to undermine its significance or noteworthiness.

Josh: 'I think do you know like how the Romans before they used to have gladiators and everything and they just, they had like a lust for violence, it's the same with all of us. Like, say if Elliott and John, they had been arguing a lot and then we think they might have a fight, everyone is going to try and make them have a fight. Because like, school days, to be honest they are pretty boring and there's not much to do.'

In some cases, expectations of 'male' behaviour were used to defend their use of violence, indirectly and explicitly. Assumptions around the 'nature' of men in relation to sexual appetite and pride were invoked to rationalise violence, in a range of forms, including harassment and coercion. For example, violence was seen as excusable or justifiable if a man had been sexually rejected or if their dominance within the relationship or family dynamic had been challenged (by a female partner or relative or by another man). This reification of socially constructed expectations for male behaviour as 'natural' was thus used to excuse the use of violence by men.

Tallyia: 'Some guy whistled at my sister and my [male] cousin realised and he gave him a black eye.'

Isobel: 'It depends on how she goes about it because if she turns him away and [...] he feels rejected and embarrassed, then it could turn into a violent situation.'

Expectations of appropriate behaviour for girls or women were also clearly articulated and provided the complement to narratives about 'normal' male behaviours. While on the one hand, men's use of violence was narrated as justifiable depending on the scenario being discussed, girls' or women's perceived transgressive behaviour (especially within the context of intimate partner relationships) was used to excuse harassment, coercion or violence. Young people's expectations of appropriate behaviour for women and girls became apparent through their narratives about when violence might be used. Their justifications for violence were illustrative of these normative expectations of women. Normative 'feminine' behaviour included sexual compliance and acquiescence, honesty, listening and doing

what you are asked to do. The scenarios that young people discussed and constructed together revealed that infidelity, sexual rejection and ‘not listening’ were situations in which violence might be justified to varying extents.

Marta: ‘If she slept with someone else, then there could be a little bit of violence but he shouldn’t take it to the extreme.’

Farah: ‘[...] Some guys do not mind you talking to [another] guy, it’s just that they are like, if you cheat on them the guy is obviously going to get ‘messy’.

Gender norms are powerful in shaping their views on what constitutes violent behaviour and where the boundaries of acceptability lie (the use of euphemisms for violence – as above – also signals the parameters for naming a practice as ‘violent’). Young people’s views are fluid and often contradictory, shifting between imagined scenarios. Gender norms may be varyingly invoked to label violence as unacceptable (Richard: “a man should know better than that”), or as understandable (Emma: “she shouldn’t have lied to him like that”). As discussed earlier, assumptions about the temporal and spatial contexts and relationship dynamics are imposed onto scenarios of violence to render them acceptable or not. The fluidity and tensions inherent in the varying accounts young people have of violence are important to acknowledge and to draw upon in thinking about how best to educate them about violence and gender. In the following section, I argue that a continuum of violence emerges in relation to the acceptability of violence in young people’s narratives.

Re-theorising young people’s views on violence: towards a ‘continuum of acceptability’

Liz Kelly’s (1988) work has been fundamental to our understanding of violence – and of sexual violence in particular – as comprising multiple and overlapping forms. Existing work shows the range of forms of violence young people perpetrate and experience, including sexist name-calling, groping and sexual touching, coercion and physical assault. Kelly (1988) argued that sexual violence should be conceptualised as a continuum of aggressions that might be visual, verbal, physical or sexual (and all of these might co-occur) and that are experienced as degrading or invasive by the victim and take away their ability to control intimate contact (Kelly, 1988: 41). This conceptualisation of violence has been pivotal to a survivor-led

understanding of the experience and impact of violence. In the current political and cultural climate in which women's experiences of sexual harassment and assault are routinely trivialised, mocked and dismissed (as exemplified by US President Donald Trump, for example) (WEC, 2016; Bates, 2015), a theorisation of sexual violence which positions the survivor's experience at the centre is necessary.

Building on this concept of a continuum of violence, I propose that in terms of understanding why young people accept and excuse violence, it is helpful to think of their views as existing on a *continuum of acceptability*. Young people do not straightforwardly conceptualise violence in binary terms of 'right' and 'wrong'; rather they sometimes label violence as 'wrong' and at other times construct narratives to excuse or justify violence. Sometimes, violence is narrated as a negative practice but its use in a particular situation is still accepted. Their positions on this continuum are heavily influenced by their views on what is appropriate or 'normal' gender behaviour. So, violence against women may generally be viewed as a bad thing, but if a woman has transgressed expectations for appropriate 'feminine' behaviour within a given situation, expressions of understanding or empathy for the perpetrator were made. Similarly, if a 'male' reaction to a situation was understood as 'natural' then violence, which had previously been rejected, might be justified.

Conceptualising young people's views on violence as existing on a continuum is significant to thinking about prevention work aimed at this group. Previous national action on violence against women and girls prevention has tended to take as its starting point and primary focus the need to teach young people that violence against women is 'wrong'. While it is clearly imperative that young people are taught, unequivocally, that violence against women and girls is wrong, existing research suggests that this might not be an effective way to challenge social and cultural norms that inform young people's thinking about violence. My own, and other, research (for example, Prospero, 2006; Sundaram, 2014b; Barter et al, 2015) shows that young people 'know' that violence is wrong, morally and legally speaking. They are aware of school, social, cultural and legal 'rules' that reject violence – and violence against women in particular. They repeat these formal, learned discourses fluently and express this knowledge with conviction in its value. This tension between formal knowledge and more implicit values and attitudes towards violence needs to be acknowledged in our development of educational programmes aimed at young people.

Using a feminist research base (as additional to a feminist political approach) to inform school- and university-based prevention

programmes would be a novel approach in the UK context. Over the past decade, feminist research has shown that young people are, by and large, accepting of violence against women and that cultural norms and expectations for gender are key to their acceptance and justification of violence. A fundamental aspect of prevention work therefore must be to challenge these entrenched gender expectations. Given that gender norms are embedded more widely in culture, including in local cultures (for example, school or university cultures), one element of violence prevention work should be to influence and change these local cultures. Connell (2006) has described public sector organisations, including universities, as ‘gender regimes’ that uphold – and even protect – the gendered distribution of power, labour and emotion, thereby producing conducive contexts for gender inequality, including abuses of gendered power. Making changes to institutional cultures therefore necessitates an approach to violence prevention which goes beyond identifying problematic individuals or having effective policies in place for responding to individual acts of harassment or violence. It necessitates an understanding of violence in its range of manifestations (so as to avoid an unhelpful focus on one-off, ‘severe’ incidents), an understanding of values and practices within the educational setting as closely linked to those reflected in wider society (and therefore a need to engage with critical consciousness-raising about these wider cultural norms), and an understanding that teachers, parents and pupils are all responsible for creating cultural norms and expectations within the school. Interventions that seek to alter prevailing social norms are therefore key to bringing about change. However, in increasingly marketised higher education contexts, where the generation of revenue and the protection of institutional reputations is paramount, challenging gendered, racialised and classed power relations may be difficult.

Critical consciousness-raising, which is rarely done in work to empower young people (Allen and Carmody, 2012), implies, in this case, that gender norms and the socially and culturally constructed nature of these, should be made explicit and visible to young people. The impact on the lived experiences of young women and men should be made visible and pedagogical strategies to help young people reflect on the positive and negative ways in which gender norms impact on their lives should be used. As Donaldson, McCarry and McCullough also argue in this collection, there is a need to move away from the gender-neutral focus on ‘healthy relationships’ that is currently employed. Some young people do find a criminal justice or legalistic approach to violence prevention attractive. The ability to categorically identify certain practices as ‘criminal’ and to have clear consequences

for engaging with these behaviours is appealing (Sundaram, 2014b). It is straightforward to see the appeal of boundaried, consistent messages that link action to consequence and in these teenagers' narratives, the threat of punishment was cast as a primary incentive to avoid using violence.

Connor: 'If there are police about to issue, like, proper verbal warnings and then a few times afterwards, they could like, get fined or something, something to really make them stop.'

Farah: 'Information could be given about how, like, say if you don't realise how violent you've been, then how far it could go [in terms of severity of punishment].'

One limitation of this approach is in its lack of challenge to contexts in which it is seen as acceptable to use violence. Young people do not consistently see all acts of violence as negative or, indeed, as 'violent', and their views on violence are fluid across different situations. So, taking an exclusively legalistic approach that might assume a consistent understanding of violence, straightforward categorisations of violent practices, and linearity between action and consequence would overlook the challenges in young people's conceptualisations of violence. Second, and related, an approach focused heavily on individual acts of violence and legal recourse overlooks the cultural norms that produce violence, and young people's values around violence. Phipps (2016) has noted the ways in which punitive approaches are adopted in university contexts too, serving to reinforce cultural myths about 'a few naughty boys' being responsible for violent behaviour. The punitive approach also stands at odds with what survivors of violence say they would like prevention programmes to include. In research by Coy et al (2016), survivors said that young people should be taught to respect each other, to practice consent in a range of ways, and not to be controlling or dominating within a relationship. Sex and relationships education provides an obvious educational space in which to challenge gendered social norms with young people, exploring ways in which they restrict and confine their practices and identities.

I therefore argue in favour of making explicit the ways in which heteronormativity shapes and limits young people's lives and experiences in violence prevention work, and giving young people the skills to begin to recognise and differentiate gender norms from biological realities and then to challenge sexist expectations and

practices. Such an approach also gives young people the knowledge and tools to recognise gender normative expectations and practices around them, for example, in the media, in the behaviour of celebrities or role models they look up to, and to be critical of these in a wider sense, as well as in relation to violence. Bystander intervention is an approach to responding to violence, which has been used widely in the US higher education context (Katz, 2001). The bystander approach has been relatively widely seen as an effective approach to tackle attitudes around GBV in the US context (for example, the Mentors in Violence Prevention programme) and is now being introduced in the UK context (for example, *The Intervention Initiative*, University of the West of England), as discussed by Fenton and Mott (in Chapter Eight of this volume). The bystander approach is based on the premise that social actors can be given a positive and active role in challenging violence towards women (Fenton et al, 2015) and, thereby, in changing social norms and institutional cultures. Bystander interventions comprise knowledge development as well as skills acquisition; so, for example, knowledge about causes and forms of GBV, and skills to challenge harassing or violent behaviour.

One potential limitation of bystander approaches may be that while they strive to ‘reinforce shared social identit(ies)’ (Fenton et al, 2015: 2) that can outweigh perceived differences between social actors (for example ethnicity, disability, and so on), one’s ability to understand a given situation as potentially harassing or violent, and one’s ability to feel empowered and safe to act to challenge this, are intimately linked to characteristics such as ethnicity, gender, disability and class. However, used in the context of a ‘closed community’ such as a school and reinforced by institutional commitment to challenging sexual harassment and violence, giving young people the knowledge and skills to recognise sexual violence and to intervene (when safe to do so) might be an effective way to tackle sexual harassment.

Making links to ‘lad culture’, sexual harassment and sexual violence in universities

In 2016, the UK government’s Women’s and Equalities Committee made the recommendation that in order to tackle ‘lad culture’ in further and higher education, we need to look at origins of aspects of ‘lad culture’, such as sexual harassment and abuse, earlier on in school.

‘Lad culture’ has not been precisely defined by the few existing studies that have been conducted on sexual harassment in higher education (for example NUS, 2010, 2014; Phipps and Young, 2013; Jackson

and Sundaram, 2015). It has been characterised as a set of values and practices that frequently revolve around heavy alcohol consumption, competitive games or activities, and the public abuse of gendered and cultural 'others'. Phipps and Young (2013) noted that 'lad culture' often involved a discourse of sexist stereotyping, the sexual objectification of women, and the trivialisation of violence against women and rape. The National Union of Students found that 'lad culture' included sexual harassment, unwanted touching, sexual name-calling and rape jokes (NUS, 2010, 2014). Jackson and Sundaram (2015) found that 'lad culture' was associated with the humiliation and degradation of women students and staff in social contexts, as well as teaching and learning spaces. Examples of 'lad culture' in classroom spaces included homophobic graffiti, sexist contributions in seminars, systematic refusal to engage with teaching and attempts to undermine women lecturers.

Many of the values and practices that are associated with 'lad culture' closely resemble behaviours that are reported as occurring in schools. The inscription of gendered norms for appropriate sexual behaviour and identity onto women's bodies, in particular, is also clear in work we have done on 'lad culture' in university settings (Jackson and Sundaram, 2015). Women participants in our study on institutional perspectives on 'lad culture' narrated personal experiences of being sexually shamed in online and offline spaces, as a means to undermine their authority and credibility by discursively positioning them as 'whore' or 'slut' – as not appropriately 'feminine'. In one instance, a senior officer at the university students' union disclosed that she had been targeted and bullied online over a matter of months, with sexualised texts and images of her being posted in public social media accounts. Public posts were made about her sexual life, as well as that of her female family members, accompanied by nude photographs of women that were doctored to look like this particular participant. The catalyst for the harassment and visual violence (Kelly, 1988) was that our participant had challenged the behaviour of a men's sports team at her university (which included misogynistic chanting in public spaces and verbal harassment of the equivalent women's team), eventually preventing them from participating in future events for a period of time.

Other participants (men and women) in our study narrated instances of gendered sexual shaming and harassment that they had witnessed in university settings. These included the harassment of university staff in teaching interactions, in professional evaluations and in teaching spaces more generally.

‘For Sports programmes in particular, this can be problematic for staff. Male students can be disruptive in lectures and male staff don’t help because they tolerate those behaviours or don’t challenge these behaviours.’ (HEI 3, interview 3, female provost/dean of school)

‘We’ve seen instances of sexualised feedback regarding lecturers, for example, MILF’ (HEI 1, interview 2, female dean of school)

A few women staff in our study suggested that this ‘laddism’ or reinforcement of male privilege prevailed in senior levels of the academy, making it difficult to challenge or to report. Some women said that they had attempted to raise instances of sexualised harassment or sexist behaviour and had not felt supported by senior management at their institutions. Other staff (men and women) trivialised sexual jokes, name-calling and harassment as ‘banter’, suggesting that sexism was not the underlying driver for such practices. Practices that could be described as forms of sexual harassment, such as sexualised chanting or cat-calling, were narrated as young men taking a bit of fun ‘too far’ and alcohol was seen as the major contributing factor to such abusive behaviour.

Thus, the normalisation of sexual harassment was evident among some university staff as well. It was narrated as inevitable, natural and even desirable for big groups of young men to behave in this way. Essentialist and pseudo-evolutionary perspectives were used to excuse boys having “*a bit of fun*”. (HEI1, interview 4, female head of subject). Narratives about this being ‘the’ way young men behave when they get together in groups carried an implication that this is the *normal* way for young men to behave, nothing to be overly alarmed or concerned about. There was a degree of defensiveness about the naturalised discourse being used; indeed, when pushed to explore why young men might behave in these ways, a number of participants countered this with assertions about the high numbers of young women who behaved in similar ways (although this tended to be narrated as more ‘concerning’ behaviour among young women).

There are overlaps and recurring similarities in terms of the forms in which sexual harassment occurs and the spaces in which young people feel targeted. We can enhance our understanding of the links between these behaviours across the educational stages and settings by drawing on existing research about young people’s views on and acceptance of sexual harassment and violence. The knowledge we have can improve

our understanding of the development of these behaviours over the educational life course, as well as the normalisation of these practices by young people. It can also inform prevention at the university level, offering us important insights into the myths, assumptions and values that need to be challenged among university students and staff engaging in similar practices.

Finally, existing research on young people's acceptance of sexual harassment, coercion and violence potentially offers us an understanding of why some women engage in, or normalise and accept, 'lad culture'. Expectations for appropriate gender behaviour are deeply embedded in the cultural fabric and are reinforced by wider societal and cultural discourses, representations and structural factors. However, I argue that a simplistic argument around internalised misogyny is not sufficient; it does not acknowledge the racialised and classed elements of 'lad culture' and sexual harassment and violence more generally. This is clearly a gap in existing work, including that discussed here, and one that future work should seek to address. In 'Brexit' UK and Trump-era North America, it is imperative to think about the ways in which gender identities intersect with race, religion, disability and class and how these hierarchies are maintained and reinforced through the deployment of sexual and physical harassment and abuse.

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