



Article

Queer Positionality and Researching University Lad Culture

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Abstract: This paper reflects on my experiences as a queer researcher investigating the relationship between university lad culture and gender-related violence. Gender-related violence is analysed as a useful conceptual tool for considering lad culture, owing to the relationship between lad culture and sexual violence, LGBT-phobia and the privileging of white, young, heterosexual men within lad culture. Using reflections from my doctoral case study research, in which I collected data from self-identified 'lads' (5 in-depth interviews), I will consider the challenges and benefits of my researcher position in relation to the research methodology. Then, using a re-analysis of interviews, I will argue that my researcher position led to certain presentations of lad culture from my participants. Self-Identified Lad (SIL) participants presented themselves as distant from lad culture, showed queerness/hid homophobia within lad culture and were willing to discuss sexual violence. While the case study yielded only a small sample of SILs, a benefit of my researcher position is that this project was the first to conduct interviews with LGB lads and one female lad. My queer feminist position has therefore produced a unique insight into lads who identify with lad culture but discursively position themselves as fringe members. This contributes to theorisations of a laddish continuum, and allows us to consider why some self-identified lads are on the fringes, and what this tells us about lad culture.

Keywords: lad culture; positionality; ethical considerations; sexual violence research; masculinity



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1. Introduction

Laddism is a pervasive form of masculinity in UK universities associated with binge drinking (Dempster 2011), casual sex with women (Jeffries 2019) and playing sports (Dempster 2009). Lads are commonly identified as white, heterosexual, young men who hold privilege in university communities (Phipps 2016), in particular over women and non-hegemonic masculinities (Connell 2000). This paper adds to the growing field of research on lad culture by discussing the methodological challenges of conducting research in this context as a queer researcher. I use reflections on my position in relation to recruitment and data collection processes, and re-analysis of participants' responses in interviews which indicate how SIL participants related to my position.

In their recent monograph based on interviews with university staff Jackson and Sundaram (2020) confirmed the importance of binge drinking, playing sport and sexist, homophobic and racist banter to lad culture. They discovered that while laddish practices are recognised, these are often seen as harmless or invisible to staff because of their predominance in university social contexts (Jackson and Sundaram 2018). Moreover, they emphasise that these practices are "underpinned by gender-based harassment and abuse" through which lads oppress and subordinate non-lads (Jackson and Sundaram 2020, p. 33). Misogynist banter is a frequent signifier of lad culture (Jeffries 2019; Nichols 2018a; Phipps and Young 2015a), and laddism is frequently linked with endemic sexual violence in student communities (Goldhill and Bingham 2015; Phipps and Young 2013; Smith 2010). The association of lad culture with sexual violence against women (Lewis et al. 2018; Sundaram and Jackson 2018; Phipps and Young 2015a; Stanton 2014) positions lad culture within a broader context of gender-based violence (see Kelmendi 2013 for a review of research on violence against women since 1970s). While the concept of gender-based violence was utilised in this research, lad culture could also be understood as a form of *gender-related violence*, because

although much of the focus of prior research has been violence against women, there is evidence that discriminatory and potentially aggressive attitudes towards the LGBTQ community (Jackson and Sundaram 2020; Diaz-Fernandez and Evans 2019; Doughty 2014; Gough and Edwards 1998) are common to lad culture. In this way, laddish violence is used to reinforce heteropatriarchal norms, and is related to gender order (Alldred and Biglia 2015), rather than only directed at women.

Nevertheless, the concept of lad culture has been problematized for its opacity (Stead 2017) and lack of nuance (Phipps et al. 2018) which has led to its use in referring to camaraderie between sports team members (Nichols 2018a) on the one hand, and violence harassment on the other. Warin and Dempster (2007) found that laddish subjectivities were adopted by some male students, temporarily, as a way of navigating the transition from school to university—in this context, following prevalent gender scripts provided comfort and norms to follow. Their interviewees presented laddism as a transient and inauthentic self, used as a way of having harmless fun. Research drawing on ‘lived experience’ of lad culture, addressing both the positives of lad culture and the association with sexual violence is needed.

Although there are some exceptions, prior research has predominantly taken two approaches: feminist research looking at the impact of lad culture and using non-lad participants (Diaz-Fernandez and Evans 2020; Jackson and Sundaram 2020; Stenson 2020; Stentiford 2018; Phipps and Young 2013, 2015a, 2015b) and research conducted with lads themselves which focuses on understanding laddish norms of masculinity (Jeffries 2019; Nichols 2018a, 2018b; Thurnell-Read 2012; Dempster 2009, 2011). My doctoral research project intended to draw on both aspects of this field, by combining data collection from self-identified lads (SILs) and non-lads, of all genders, to investigate: laddish masculinity, laddish practices and the relationship between sexual violence and lad culture. This paper first considers the challenges faced in collecting data for this project as a queer researcher.

Approaching Research on Lad Culture

Given the theorization of lad culture as a hegemonic masculinity within universities (Dempster 2011; Phipps and Young 2015a) and predominantly engaged in by male undergraduates (Jackson and Sundaram 2020), though not exclusively, literature on critical masculinities research is relevant. Men conducting gender-sensitive social research with male participants recognize that different gender positions may impact the co-constructed interview responses, for example, homosocial storytelling about sex will be influenced by the sex of researcher and may depend on positioning oneself as heterosexual (Flood 2013). When reflecting on participant observations of laddish behaviour in pre-marital ‘stag trips’ Thurnell-Read (2011a, 2011b) acknowledged that his access to such a research context was dependent on his ability to fit in with the homosocial group. For many men (and women) conducting research on masculinities, especially on men’s dominance or violence against women, the inability to fit in, or desire to avoid colluding in heterosexism, can make the research context difficult to access (Hearn 2013). All researchers, regardless of gender, must be conscious of the way in which their presentation may (re)produce gender hierarchies within the research context. Because of the frequent association between sexual violence and lad culture in aforementioned research with non-lad students as participants, this project needed to be considered as one which may include interviews with perpetrators of sexual violence, especially as a research who was likely perceived as a woman. The majority of research in this field focuses on research with known perpetrators, in clinical or carceral populations (e.g., Moolman 2015). On research with known perpetrators, Hearn argues that this challenges “naïve possibilities of power symmetry in interviewing” (Hearn 1998, p. 55) both in the sense that researchers may sometimes possess more power than participants and vice versa. Recent research based on interviews with social researchers of marginalised participants has challenged the idea that the relationship between researcher and researched is necessarily one in which researchers hold the power (Bashir 2019), as researcher safety is not guaranteed by having power in relation vulnerable participants. Further, conducting

research on sensitive topics can disrupt expectations of researcher power (Fenge et al. 2019). Nevertheless, there is little literature on the challenges of occupying a marginalised position in relation to one's participants.

As a non-lad, I approached this researcher from an outsider perspective (Bridges 2001). In Hayfield and Huxley's (2015) paper on conducting research with bisexual women, they compared the strengths and challenges of both insider and outsider research with these participants, concluding that there are pros and cons to each position. They further argued that insider/outsider positions are less clear cut than they first appear, as Caroline Huxley's heterosexuality made her an outsider to her queer women participants, but her womanhood and relationship to societal beauty norms made her an insider. Instead, they argue, researchers must reflect on their multiple positions in relation to their participants. As a queer person, and someone likely perceived as a woman, I drew on relevant literature relating to these positions in research.

Literature on queer positionality in research has thus far focused on the complexities of being a queer researcher while conducting research with queer participants (Browne and Nash 2010) but little work looks at queer positionality in tandem with outsider status. Rosie Nelson's (2020) work identified five key ways in which being as queer researcher, researching queerness, had an impact, including the benefits (feeling kinship and recognition with participants) and the challenges (being retraumatised by participants' interview responses). I will add to this field by considering the impact of my positionality on SILs' presentation of lad culture in interviews.

Although I do not identify as a woman, it is likely that participants perceived me as such, and it is almost certain that I was not perceived as a male researcher. Moolman (2015) does consider the challenge of being a woman researcher with male in relation to her male 'sex offender' participants, who would present a certain side of themselves because of their perception of gender dynamics in interviews. However, within her ethnographic research, she recognized that researcher position is not necessarily fixed, and acknowledged the intersecting power she held as a researcher with incarcerated research participants, as compared with the power held by male participants over her as a female researcher. This was mirrored in Oddone's (2020) research with men taking part in domestic violence perpetrator programmes, wherein participants navigated the tension between having power over women in heteronormative gender order and being seen as deviant because of their relationship to the criminal justice system. Throughout the term of her research project, there was a transition in the way male participants presented themselves—from presentations of normalcy and abiding the law, to later justifying their domestic violence as a natural response to women's behaviour and an extension of masculine gender role.

Within the wealth of literature on women conducting research with men, there is a call to move beyond simplistic analysis only looking at the gender of the researcher and participants. Reflecting on her years of interviews with fathers' rights activists, Wojnicka (2020) argued that it was not only her gender, but also her perceived sexuality, nationality and social class which impacted on the research process. These intersecting positions had varying impacts on the interview dynamics, depending on the research context—for example, when interviewing in Sweden, her marginalized Polish nationality was used by an interview participant as justification for openly sexualising her. Pini (2005) also argued that analysis of women's interviews with men, such as her interviews with men in the CANEGROWERS agricultural organisation, needed to be considered in relation to the research context. Further, the presentations of masculinity which she observed in her data collection, such as men emphasizing their knowledge, power and heterosexuality, are valuable insights even if they were not directly answering her research questions.

Although prior research has often used sex/gender of researcher as a focal point of considering positionality in research on men and masculinities (Flood 2013; Hearn 2013) I adopt an intersectional approach to my researcher position (as in Wojnicka 2020). In her analysis of the experience of sexual violence by black women, Crenshaw (1991) addressed the ways in which women of colour may be disadvantaged by intersecting

systemic inequalities, and conflicting subject positions, in what Collins refers to as the ‘matrix of domination’ (Collins 2015). The analytic tool of intersectionality can be employed to understand the marginalisation of women of colour, and working-class men of colour, and can also be applied to understanding the power and privilege held by middle-class white heterosexual men in universities—they are privileged by multiple intersecting social systems. This paper draws on these arguments to present a nuanced analysis of the ways in which my multiple researcher positions affected the dynamic of interviews with SILs and their presentations of lad culture.

2. Materials and Methods

This section will look at how my approaches to conducting research with SIL participants was impacted by my position as a researcher, considering the challenges faced in recruiting participants and ethical considerations for conducting interviews referring to sexual violence. This paper does not consider the results of my study in relation to my research questions (about laddish subjectivity, laddish practices and sexual violence), but will instead focus on reflections on the methodology of my research. This paper also draws on re-analysis of interviews with SILs, for the purpose of interrogating the ways in which presentation of lad culture by my participants may have been influenced by my researcher position (as in Pini 2005).

2.1. Researcher Position

My position in relation to the research context of lad culture in higher education is as follows, I am: queer, perceived as female but butch presenting, working class, white, was in my mid 20s, worked as a Graduate Teaching Assistant and was involved in student welfare/political roles in The University. On the one hand being female, queer and working class are not positions privileged within higher education (and would make me an outsider to assumedly male, heterosexual and middle class lads) yet my race and professional status did afford me some privileges in the context. However, my position as a doctoral student was difficult to parse as either insider or outsider—as being a student meant being an insider with participants (having shared knowledge of the current university milieu) but being a postgraduate research student may be seen as distant from undergraduate lads. Further this position may be used to assume I was middle class (as the majority of PhD students are (Dubeau and Mehta-Neugebauer 2020)), which would make me an insider with some lads, but an outsider to others.

Many factors may not have been evident when recruiting participants and collecting data, but I believe that my queerness and gender were visible to participants as I have a butch gender presentation.¹ As someone who has adopted various gender presentations during my life, and have experienced the responses and assumptions I am met with in this butch presentation, I am aware that I am frequently assumed to be queer based on my presentation—so although I did not explicitly state my gender or sexuality to all participants, I am fairly certain that they were all aware of my sexuality because of my gender expression. Additionally, my positions in university activism might seem to “give away” my political leanings, which might be construed as having an impact on my research. In particular, I was the convenor for the Postgraduate LGBTQ Network for almost two academic years, a position which might seem untenable with an objective project on lad culture - which has some reputation as involving homo/transphobia. I am a feminist and originally intended for my doctoral research to be an investigation of the efficacy of anti-lad culture campaigns. This was in part motivated by my political opposition to queerphobia, and sexual violence. Additionally, I felt that the anti-lad culture campaigns I had seen in my university were not acknowledging the ‘lived experience’ of SILs, or the ways in which university and societal structures privilege white, heterosexual and middle class men (features commonly associated with lad culture). My motivations for my actual doctoral research were to understand laddish subjectivities and practices, such that anti-lad culture campaigns could more effectively challenge lad culture.

2.2. Recruitment and Design

My doctoral research was initially intended to utilize a questionnaire to gather data on perceptions, practices and identities of lad culture—comparing between the perspectives of SILs and non-lads. This questionnaire was originally titled the ‘UK University Culture Survey’, as it was thought that naming ‘lad culture’ in the project title (given the contentious nature of the definition (Stead 2017; Phipps and Young 2015a)) might increase response bias in the sample, as students give answers that they assume are desired by the researcher. In the questionnaire, a 0–100 thermometer scale was used for participants to indicate the extent to which they considered themselves laddish. Those who rated themselves as 50% or higher on this scale were then taken to be SILs. The benefit of capturing such data in a scale is that this may account for participants who identify somewhat with laddism but may not identify as a lad when asked a categorical question. The questionnaire was shared on my personal social media accounts, and on specific project-named social media accounts and shared by friends and followers. After several months of data collection with limited participation from SILs, the name of the survey was changed to the ‘Lad Culture Survey, and I opted to adapt my methodology, adding semi-structured interviews with additional SILs. This approach was chosen to allow me to gather further data with a focus on ‘lived experience’ of laddism (Oakley 1981), as the number of SIL questionnaire participants was too low to draw conclusions from. My approach to interviews was not that data collected would provide a ‘true’ picture of lad culture, researchers and participants can be seen as co-constructors of the data collected through interviews, and each interview may take a different path, rather than researchers being positioned as the extractors of factual information from participants.

Owing to the small number of SIL participants initially recruited, and the association between laddism and sport (Dempster 2009), I also decided to specifically target university sports teams for recruitment. I printed fliers which I distributed to each sports society at in-person Freshers’ Fair events at 3 higher education institutions close in location with different student demographics. Further, I specifically addressed sports teams using social media and emails at the 3 institutions. In spite of multiple messages to tens of sports teams over a period of months, I never received a reply from any sports team addressing my call for participants. I also displayed posters with a call for participants across the campus of one institution in public areas, which advertised an incentive of a £5.00 Amazon voucher for SIL interview participants. In total, the number of SIL participants recruited through both methods remained very low ($n = 8$ out of a total of 144 questionnaire respondents, $n = 5$ SIL interviewees). Of the 5 interview participants, 2 were recruited from in-person events, 1 from social media and 2 through physical posters. Participants were offered to choose the location of their interview, or have a private room at The University booked for the interview (4 chose this option, 1 conducted the interview via email). Interviews lasted from 18 min to 45 min and were varied in depth of response. Ultimately, the vast majority of participants across all data collection methods (67% of questionnaire participants, 80% of interviewees) were actually related to a single institution—The University. I therefore had to alter the methodology to conduct a case study of this institution utilizing data collected from university activists collected in a feasibility study. This paper will focus on research design and ethical considerations for interviews with SILs only, for expediency.

2.3. Interview Design

Interview questions for SILs were split into two sections: firstly, those pertaining to the interviewees’ own understanding of their identity and impact on university communities, and secondly questions relating to how they felt lad culture was perceived by others. There were 6 questions scheduled for each of these sections, but additional prompts were prepared for the event that participants were not forthcoming with their responses. Attempts were made to allow reflexivity in the interview questions, following up on interviewees’ comments in the moment. Questions were predominantly open, with the intention of eliciting detailed answers and a similar framing to language in the questionnaire. Inter-

viewees were asked about their perception of and witnessing of sexual violence in lad culture. All participants were in their 20s, were predominantly male (4), undergraduate student (3), heterosexual (3) and students at The University (4), but with a small sample these demographic data are hard to generalise. Prior to and following interviews, I had brief discussions with participants about the aims of the project, which I laid out as being: to more completely understand lad culture, and to represent the fullness of lad culture. Discussion of the data in relation to research questions is beyond the scope of this paper, but the impact of my position when conducting research on lad culture is considered using samples from interview responses.

2.4. Ethical Considerations for Interviews

My research project was devised based on guidelines for ethical educational research from the British Educational Research Association (BERA 2018). Approval for the project was granted by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Education, University of York. Participants were provided with an information sheet detailing the purpose and scope of the interviews, informed of their right to withdraw and the way their data would be used and stored. All participants signed a consent form agreeing to the terms of the project.

In addition, participants might have disclosed *experiencing* or *witnessing* sexual violence, so recommendations for conducting interviews with victim-survivors of violence (Kelmendi 2013; Ellsberg and Heise 2002) were observed. Specifically, I ensured that clear informed consent was gained (and continually sought) to avoid retraumatisation or triggering caused by unexpected questions about violence. During the interview, participants were forewarned of the questions relating to sexual violence, using the following statement:

The next question is about sexual violence, I want to remind you that you are able to skip these questions.

Participants must be protected from harm and supported if distressed; therefore all interviews were conducted by me, as I have had extensive training in supporting students in distress (from previous voluntary and student support roles) and have completed a 2-day course in Mental Health First Aid. This meant that should a participant experience distress as a result of their involvement, I could respond effectively and direct them to appropriate long-term support if necessary. Prior to consenting to participate, respondents were provided with an information sheet containing contact details for local and national support services (those specialising in listening to people in distress and in supporting survivors of sexual violence). A more comprehensive list of support services was provided following participation, which was automatic for questionnaire participants, and made available to interview participants.

Further, participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the project at any time and were reminded of this prior to discussing sexual violence. Following interviews, transcripts of interviews were sent to participants for comment—which they were informed of in the information sheet—so that they could withdraw any statements they had given. Participants were given 2 weeks to return the transcript with any comments, though no participants asked to have comments removed. Data below are presented with filler words removed for clarity where this would not affect the meaning. Pseudonyms are given to anonymise participants.

Additionally, based on prior research linking lad culture with sexual violence, I prepared for the eventuality that interviewees might disclose *perpetration* of sexual violence. Recommendations on this topic agree on a few key ethical considerations for conducting research with this population: the safety of participants and researchers is paramount, ongoing consent must be given, and distress must be minimized (Jewkes et al. 2012; Hearn et al. 2007). There is a balance to be struck, though, when conducting research with potential perpetrators of sexual violence. Although one should avoid causing distress to participants, some perpetrators may find it distressing to be asked about their sexually violent acts. Hearn et al. (2007) consider that this should not be used as a reason to not

ask about these acts, but is something that researchers should be cognisant of to avoid colluding with perpetrators.

Receiving disclosures of violence is one of the reasons that conducting research on sexual violence can be traumatising for researchers, a problem which has been addressed in Sexual Violence Research Institute (SVRI) guidelines (Jewkes et al. 2012) which recommend that researchers equip themselves with knowledge of support services. I also made use of some PhD supervision sessions to speak with my supervisor (Vanita Sundarm) about the difficulty of analysing data on sexual violence, as use of research teams for emotional support was also recommended (Ellsberg and Heise 2002).

3. Results

This section will address the ways in which SIL interview participants' presentation of lad culture seemed to reflect my researcher position. What follows is a closer inspection of the interview dynamics present in my data collection with SILs, as it responds to my positionality, using data from interviews. These do not represent findings from the research, as such, but demonstrate the ways in which my research position impacted on the co-production of interview data.

3.1. Distance from Lad Culture

One way in which SIL participants could be seen to be reacting to my researcher position, is by discursively distancing themselves from other lads. For John this was related to not feeling a stable personal identification with the term 'lad', when discussing the call for participants posters he said:

I kind of saw it the first time and wasn't really sure if I qualified, so I passed it by. But the second time I saw it, I thought actually maybe I do, I would call myself a lad in certain circumstances. (John, Heterosexual Male, The University)

For some, this was based on the way they were perceived by others within or outside lad culture. For example, Matthew's (Heterosexual Male, Other University) acknowledgement that "Throughout my time at university people actually made fun of me for being a 'shit lad.'" Additionally, Lawrence's suggestion that his proximity to being a lad would depend on who of his friends was asked:

Some people would say, he's the furthest thing from it, like my friends from home probably, the rugby playing beefheads would say no because I like the theatre or something. But at uni I think they would, probably more. (Lawrence, Heterosexual Male, The University)

These examples could indicate the problem with the term 'lad culture'—that it can be used to refer to so many different subjectivities that its meaning becomes difficult to pin down (even for those who volunteer themselves to partake in interviews with self-identified lads). Or could reflect that my participants in particular differ from the norms within lad culture—perhaps of the recruitment strategies or my researcher position within interviews. This reading is supported by Matthew's elaboration on his moniker of 'shit lad':

'Shit lad' was usually meant as a half-insult, as I was generally not a particularly successful lad (in that I wasn't the wittiest, or the heaviest drinker, or partier, etc. etc.). (Matthew, Heterosexual Male, Other University)

However, I would argue that this distancing is also used by participants to acknowledge the negative perceptions of lad culture in national media and academic research, and actively refute these or their involvement in such practices. For example:

It's got quite negative connotations with it, and most of it does come with negative connotations and I try and not be part of that side of it. But yeah, I wouldn't say I typically go round and go to clubs and like grope women and stuff like that . . . I think a lot of lads, or like "Lads" kind of do stuff like that, whereas me and my friends kind of don't. (Georgina, Homosexual Female, The University)

I think for a lot of my friends, less so than me, it does come down to sexual prowess.
(Richard, Bisexual Male, The University)

These two responses were not given to questions about sexual violence, but were given at the beginning of the interviews when participants were asked to explain what being a lad meant to them. This suggests that SILs were pre-emptively acknowledging the most problematic stereotypes of lad culture and seeking to position themselves as different from these norms.

Though any research project may encourage socially desirable responses, I felt that because of the contentiousness of the topic, any presumption of my stance would influence participants. Yet, at the same time, I was concerned that attempting to ingratiate myself with SIL participants could lead to missed detail in interview responses, if participants assumed that I had prior knowledge of lad culture. Tinker and Armstrong (2008) acknowledged that although there are challenges to being an outsider to researched communities, this position can elicit data with rich detail from participants. I therefore sought to develop connection through a pre-amble before each interview explaining to each participant that my aim was to understand lad culture from their perspective. I positioned them as experts in their own experience, and myself as a novice so that participants could introduce me to key elements of lad culture with detailed discussion. Nevertheless, I acknowledged my position as a student at The University, having had some experience in the inter-mural sport and the college system.

Knowing that participants would be less likely to give rich detailed responses if they felt that I was intending to paint lad culture in a negative light, I reflected after data collection that I may have agreed too readily with them, not allowing thoughts to flow, or asking for enough clarification. For example, when SIL Georgina referred to lad culture as a “push and push and push environment” but that “there’s always someone to make sure you’re OK” my summary was perhaps too leading. I responded that “Yeah, the competition can be negative in that, but there’s lots of ways it can be positive.” I will counteract this in future publications, where interview data is analysed, by providing a thick description of findings to foreground the data themselves (Bryman 2008; Mays and Pope 1995).

3.2. Queerness

Interview participants also presented lad culture in response to my queer positionality. I did not hide my queerness, though for most interviews I did not explicitly mention it. 2 of the interviewees had interacted with me in social situations prior to the interview, in which I had mentioned being queer (Richard and Matthew). For interviews I presented in professional menswear of long-sleeved button up shirts and chino trousers, and my hair was kept in the short-back and sides style as usual. Unlike prior research on university lad culture (Warin and Dempster 2007; Jeffries 2019), the SILs interviewed in this project were not all heterosexual, 2 out of 5 interviews identified as LGB. I was surprised by participation of LGB participants, having read of the homophobia present in lad culture, and knowing myself the heterosexist norms in laddish practices. Partially I was surprised that there were any queer identifying SILs, recognising that I myself have not often felt safe around university lads and finding it hard to understand why queer people would choose to be in what appeared to be an unsafe community. Additionally, partly I was surprised that LGB lads would participate in my research, as few prior studies have recruited LGB lads for research of this nature.

Georgina, the only female SIL, indicated that not only that she was gay but that many of her female lad friends were too. She explained:

I think with females maybe it helps more because from my research anyway I’ve found out that females tend to be more masculine if they’re gay. Or it’s a stereotype anyway. And that then helps go into the typical masculine male lad culture. (Georgina, Homosexual Female, The University)

This drawing on the stereotype of gay masculine women contradicts her later statements about her girlfriend—another queer woman—as “she’s complete opposite of me, she’s like a really like feminine.” It seemed to me that Georgina was leaning on the stereotype of queer women’s masculinity as a form of recognising that we were both queer butch people sharing space. I felt that her discussion of her gender and sexuality was based on a sense of shared familiarity with queer female masculinity.

Additionally, Richard (Bisexual Male, The University) not only indicated his sexuality, but also used specific language to describe his influence on his laddish community: “I’m bi myself, and when I was president of the football club, I made deliberate effort to queer myself.” The use of ‘queer’ as an adjective and noun has become popularised in common usage, but its use as a verb has roots in Queer Theory and may have been used in interview because he assumed that I would understand this history and meaning because of my position as both a queer person and an academic. He drew on a shared understanding of anti-feminist rhetoric when describing how his perception of feminists differed from other lads:

Say you are a feminist around most of my friends, they immediately assume you’re a 6’5” lesbian with incredibly short hair who gets offended by everything—and those people don’t exist. (Richard, Bisexual Male, The University)

Even though he exaggerated the proportions and sentiments of this stereotypical feminist, his description of a “lesbian with incredibly short hair” was not too far from how I thought I would be perceived by SIL participants. When saying this, Richard seemed to be avoiding eye-contact with me, perhaps aware that as a feminist he might be offending me with this stereotypical description. Richard’s disavowal of this stereotype, “those people don’t exist” seemed to indicate that unlike other lads he did not consider feminists (or indeed lesbians) with this negative lens—a framing perhaps unlikely to appear in research conducted by non-feminist researchers.

Not only queer-identified SILs seemed to respond to my queerness in interviews. Lawrence (Heterosexual Male, The University) noticeably trailed off when discussing the way in which “gay” might be used in a derogatory way in lad culture.

You might say that something’s gay, but you wouldn’t just if someone was gay—if someone was acting in a, if someone was gay you wouldn’t wind them up about that. Like if someone did something kind of embarrassing you might call them [trailed off]. (Lawrence, Heterosexual Male, The University)

Although stating that lad culture was not homophobic, with the explicit example that someone would not be harassed for their sexuality, he began to talk about how someone might be referred to if they did something embarrassing, but stopped short of saying that they’d be called “gay”. He perhaps stopped because he realized the implications of saying this to a person who he probably perceived as gay.

3.3. Discussion of Sexual Violence

As a queer person, I was particularly concerned that the questions about sexual violence and LGBT-phobia might be met with hostility or violence. To avoid this potential, I designed the phrasing of the questions about sexual violence to introduce the topic of discussion, without appearing to accuse participants of having perpetrated sexual violence. This indirect approach aimed to reduce the likelihood of causing psychological harm to my participants, and elicit rich detailed information from SILs on laddish practices without alienating them from the research. In addition, once participants had considered the initial question below, I could probe with questions about their witnessing/experience/perpetration of violence.

Question: ‘Lad culture’ is often referred to in debates about sexual harassment at university, how does that make you feel?

Probe: Is this something that you’ve witnessed in your laddish group?

Although no SILs directly disclosed that they had acted in sexually violent ways, there were many references to having witnessed or known about sexual aggression and groping—analysing these is beyond the scope of this paper. I found it difficult to hear these disclosures in interviews; as lads described knowing friends who had been sexually aggressive or knowing peers who had spiked women’s drinks, I found it hard to understand why the participants I had rapport with were maintaining friendships with people who acted in this way. The disclosures could be because my participants had not been violent but could instead have been related to the methodology of the project: my researcher position, the information sheet indicating that disclosures might be reported to authorities, and the design of the interview questions. Nevertheless, my indirect questioning and researcher position did allow SILs to reveal sexual violence or aggression of their peers, which presents a novel contribution to the field. For example, Georgina (Homosexual Female, The University) described lads spiking the drinks of women students.

Unexpectedly, Georgina also described having had her own drink spiked by another woman in her rugby team:

I was a fresher and, the only time I’ve like properly seen it in my environment, one of the girls that was in our group, she was an older girl, she spiked one of our girls’ drinks, but they give it to me unknowingly and I ended up in hospital. (Georgina, Homosexual Female, The University)

In determining why the older girl had behaved in this way, Georgina answered “It was either to like take the p- out of her, or to do something dirty to her, but I’m not too sure.” She seems to be aware that drink spiking may be used to commit acts of sexual violence (“do something dirty”) within lad culture. My being read as a woman may have contributed to Georgina feeling able to disclose an experience of sexual violence within lad culture.

4. Discussion

This paper has demonstrated the challenges in conducting research in lad culture as a queer researcher and the ways in which SILs responded to my researcher position in interviews. The main challenge was that I was only able to recruit a small number of SIL participants. Although the aim of this feminist mixed methods project was not to be representative of all UK lad culture, it is acknowledged that the findings presented are based on a small number of SIL participants. This could’ve been due to the perceived stance of the researcher, or because participation in academic research is seen as antithetical to the laddish norm of being seen to not care about schoolwork. This apathy has been found to be deployed as a self-worth protection strategy by lads afraid of failing, in the school (Jackson 2002) and university context (Jackson et al. 2014). This may be because of the eventual name of the project, ‘The Lad Culture Survey’, which may have deterred many SILs who feel that the term ‘lad culture’ is used by those who consider laddism problematic. As Lawrence (Heterosexual Male, The University) suggested, “When I first heard it like people slagging off lad culture, I took that as a personal insult.” Significant effort was made to recruit as many participants as possible, including targeted communication with university and collegiate sports teams and in-person recruitment at Freshers’ Fairs at 3 institutions. While in-person recruitment of participants has been found to improve sample size in other fields of study (e.g., Haring et al. 2018 in healthcare research), it is possible that my presentation at these events positioned the research as a feminist queer project on lad culture, which may have deterred potential SIL participants. On the other hand, the 2 out of 5 interview participants who were recruited via in-person interactions were those who identified as non-heterosexual, suggesting that my visible queerness encouraged them to participate in the research project. This population of SILs has not yet been represented in research on lad culture, in spite of significant effort (Warin and Dempster 2007), meaning that findings presented here are an original contribution to the field.

Participants presented themselves as distant from the core of lad culture, in response to my researcher position. This may have simply been an example of providing socially desirable responses—given the perception of lad culture in feminist research as violent and

related to privilege. Prior research has also found a focus from university students on the line between acceptable laddism and unacceptable laddism (Jeffries 2019; Stentiford 2018). Owen (2020) found that male students' responses to anti-lad culture feminist activism used rhetoric of a 'dark side' and 'light side' of lad culture. My participants too positioned themselves as particularly against sexual violence or aggression, in contrast to the camaraderie and belonging they got out of lad culture. These data could also be read as evidence of Warin and Dempster's (2007) proposal that lad culture exists on a continuum. Similarly to those findings, my participants did not articulate alternative masculinities which they felt more closely aligned to—they only distanced themselves from laddish masculinity—with a 'lad' as one pole and 'non-lad' as the other.

Additionally, LGB participants sought to relate to my queer position - while I was not aware of the sexual orientation of these participants prior to their interview, it is probable that these lads felt able to speak to me about their experience as a result of my own visible queer presentation. Georgina's suggestion that gay women were more masculine, and therefore found lad culture more accepting, reflects common perceptions that female athletes are masculine (Tredway 2014). Further, her assertion that this made sense in spite of her own experience of having a feminine girlfriend, can be analysed as an example of Butler's (1990) concept the 'heterosexual matrix' in action. They argue that gender is made intelligible through its relation to sexuality and sex—that a female homosexual would be masculine in order to conform to heteronormative understandings of sexuality. While Anderson's (2009) concept of 'inclusive masculinities' may be supported by the inclusion of LGB lads within lad culture, Richard witnessed and was harmed by homophobia in these spaces. Lawrence's avoidance of discussing lads use of 'gay' as a derogatory term in interview implies that homophobia remains an issue in lad culture. Prior research demonstrates that this is a commonly experienced form of harassment by LGBT young people (Bradlow et al. 2017) and that its use is related to exclusion of gay men (Fasoli et al. 2016).

While interviews did reveal the ways in which laddish practice may be conducive to sexual violence, no participants admitted that they had been sexually violent themselves. Participants were forewarned in the information sheet that any details of proposed or completed illegal activity would be referred to relevant authorities in line with SVRI ethical guidelines (Jewkes et al. 2012), which may have deterred participants from disclosing having witnessed or perpetrated acts of sexual violence. Even so, this discussion of perceptions and witnessing of sexual violence from SIL participants is unique in the field. Prior research has not uncovered experience of sexual violence within lad culture, though studies of sexual violence have found that women are more likely to disclose their experiences to female researchers (Ellsberg and Heise 2002; Walby and Myhill 2001). This novel finding is partly because my doctoral research was the first to interview a female SIL in a higher education context, so there was no precedent for their experience/involvement in violence. Although there is evidence of feminised laddism in secondary schools (Jackson and Tinkler 2007; Jackson 2002, 2006), there is little discussion of female lads in higher education.

Future research could employ observations to collect data with high validity, as has been done successfully in similar contexts, such as Thurnell-Read's (2011a, 2011b, 2012) participant observations of 'stag tours' in Eastern Europe. While this would have presented challenges for a visibly queer researcher such as myself to complete, this approach could be used to witness laddish practices first-hand, which may improve understandings of laddish practices and the relationship between lad culture and sexual violence.

5. Conclusions

Conducting research on lad culture from a queer researcher position has an impact on the dynamics of research interviews, and the presentations of lad culture given by participants. Participants sought to distance themselves from proper laddism, implying a broader range of masculine subjectivities available within lad culture. Much recent research, and university activism, has focused on prevention of sexual violence and building empathy

for survivors of sexual violence. In the future, such activism may holistically challenge lad culture by accounting for the array of students who identify with laddism to an extent but who see themselves as only ‘a bit of lad’. LGB participants demonstrated recognition of my position through assumptions about female masculinity, shared language and disavowal of queer stereotypes. On the one hand my queer presentation may have deterred some potential participants from engaging with the project, because of an assumed anti-lad culture stance, but on the other my presentation may also have encouraged otherwise under-researched SILs to participate.

When conducting research on issues of gender-related violence, the influence of researcher position must be acknowledged. By better understanding the construction of laddish identity and the practices that are used to perform laddism, we can better create interventions which effectively challenge lad culture. Doing research with participants who hold privilege and power can be challenging, but queer researchers doing this work are instrumental in learning about the range of lived experience within a powerful group. These data show that laddish violence is related to norms of heteropatriarchy which are not limited to misogyny.

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Note

- ¹ While ‘butch’ cannot be simplified into single signifiers, and there are many different presentations of butch, I believe that my participants may have recognised my presentation as such. For reference, I have my hair styled in a ‘short-back-and-sides’ typical of men’s haircuts, wear clothing from the ‘men’s section’ of clothing stores and wear multiple visible facial piercings. I typically wear leather boots threaded with Stonewall’s ‘Rainbow Laces’.

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