Chapter 8

Problematising “Lad Culture”: Defining and Tackling “Laddism” in UK Universities

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ABSTRACT

The term “lad culture,” referring to dominant attitudes and behaviours in UK University contexts, will be examined with a view to rejecting the term. While the links between excessive alcohol consumption, sexual violence and bullying/intimidation can be understood with relation to gender norms, the term will be troubled. It is argued that the term “lad culture” implies similarity between disparate identities/experiences/behaviours, which ignores the continuum of behaviours and attitudes subsumed under the definition. As a result, extremely harmful behaviours are trivialised both by actors and those facing such behaviours. Qualitative findings from 8 semi-structured interviews with University campaign stakeholders are presented, recommending that support for anti-“lad culture” campaigns should be improved, insinuating that the ambiguous nature of the term “lad culture” has repercussions not only for self-defined “lads” but for those attempting to tackle associated behaviours.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, increasing national media and academic attention has been paid to the phenomenon described as ‘lad culture’ in UK universities, particularly in male sports teams. For instance, LSE rugby club was forcibly disbanded for the dissemination of flyers referring to women as “slags” and “mingers” and containing homophobic language (Doughty, 2014) and the University of York hockey club faced discipline following social media posts of their Social Secretary stating “I love stabbing black people” and “I may just rape her!” (Benson & Gevertz, 2014, p.1). These incidents, considered to be jokes by the perpetrators, are extremely problematic- making racist, violent and misogynist comments, to engage in

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‘banter’ - yet have been branded as ‘lad culture’. Therein lies the conundrum of using ‘lad culture’ as a moniker: it holds connotations of both harmless and offensive - and potentially violent - behaviours and beliefs. Although female students outnumber males, with 2014/15 Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) figures showing almost 6000 more females enrolled to read for their first degree, female students report that ‘laddism’ is “dominating student life and alienating women” (Wiseman, 2013, p.1). It’s dominance may be felt through the prevalence of sexual violence, which over 14% of female students are victims of, with male students the most common perpetrators (Hidden Marks, 2010). These findings suggest that a prominence of ‘laddism’ and the associated tolerance for misogynist jokes may be in some way related to male students’ treatment of women. The National Union of Students (NUS) has recognised the potential issues faced by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as a result of ‘lad culture’s presence, holding a ‘Tackling Lad Culture Conference’ in May 2016 as well as launching an online hub of resources for those aiming to tackle ‘laddism’ (www.nusconnect.org.uk/ladculture).

In spite of the media and Student Union interest, academic understandings of the term ‘lad culture’ fail to account for the range of behaviours, attitudes and attributes which may be considered central to the experience. This chapter will present and critique existing definitions of the term, outlining the need for greater empirical research in this field. For example, Nichols (2016, p.3) identifies ‘laddish’ behaviours and attitudes as those which “often centre upon the idea of men having fun and behaving in ways deemed to align with historical and hegemonic notions of masculinity”. The term is also recognised outside the academy, it is described in a 2001 Draft addition to the Oxford English Dictionary (www.OED.com), as follows:

A young man characterized by his enjoyment of social drinking, sport, and other activities considered to be male-oriented, his engagement in casual sexual relationships, and often by attitudes or behaviour regarded as irresponsible, sexist, or boorish; (usually) one belonging to a close-knit social group.

As described above, identifying as a ‘lad’ may entitle a man to a social group and the title may be conferred upon him for enjoying male-oriented activities, therefore suggesting that engaging in ‘laddism’ can reinforce one’s social status and personal masculinity. While the above definition does not mark the site of such men (and their homosocial groups) as specifically UK Universities, the number of Students’ Unions publicly campaigning against ‘lad culture’ is evidence that a profound negative impact is felt in HEIs. Yet, this chapter will argue that the use of a term which claims to represent both innocent camaraderie and violent acts must be called into question. The author aims to confirm that ‘lad culture’ is “a potentially problematic term, implying a homogeneity and cohesiveness which may not necessarily be found across communities or over time, and suggesting deterministic links to masculinity..” by Phipps and Young (2015, p.460) recommending, instead, explicit reference to negative behaviours in future anti-laddism work. Finally, the author will present initial findings of a project which aims to investigate (and assess) the attempts made in student-facing campaigns to tackle ‘laddish’ behaviours, attributes and attitudes, with a view to recommending best practice. It will be argued that improvements in anti-‘laddism’ campaigns are required, drawing on findings from a recent pilot study interviewing campaign stakeholders at a UK institution. A greater understanding of the ways in which this culture is already being challenged, can be used to recommend future direction for the prevention of harassment in Universities.