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**(Hetero)sex, 'Fun' and University Life: The discursive construction of women
students' experiences of sexual violence at university**

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Abstract

There is growing recognition of the issue of sexual violence experienced by women university students in the UK. Despite increased attention, problems with prevalence, reporting, support and institutional responses persist. There is, therefore, a need to better understand students' experiences and perceptions of sexual violence and the context in which these incidents occur in order to develop effective, theoretically informed responses which follow from students' experiences. This article presents findings from research which explored the nature and extent of women students' experiences of sexual violence at one university in England. Reporting on semi-structured interviews with students, the article addresses a gap in evidence by using a poststructuralist framework to understand the dominant gendered and heterosexed discourses which shape the nature, extent and understanding of sexual violence and construct a 'truth' about expectations of university life. It applies and extends Gavey's (2005) concept of the cultural scaffolding of rape to consider students' experiences in the university context in which they took place. It is argued that these discourses produce contextually contingent gendered subjectivities which are at times resisted but are also amplified in the space of the university, further limiting the ways in which students can make sense of their experiences.

Key words

Gender-based violence; Sexual violence; Feminist Poststructuralism; Universities;

Students

Key messages

- Discourses of masculinity, femininity and (hetero)sex shape students' understandings of their experiences of sexual violence.
- Dominant discourses in the university relating to the 'fun' university experience reproduced, enabled and amplified the already limiting discourses in which sexual violence can be understood.
- These discourses can be contested, alongside the production of new discourses, to construct a truth which reflects the reality of victims and survivors' experiences and to develop theoretically informed institutional responses.

Introduction

A growing body of research has been developing over recent years which outlines the nature, extent and prevalence of sexual violence experienced by university students in the UK. Since the publication of *Hidden Marks* (National Union of Students [NUS], 2010) the issue has received increased media, political, academic, activist and institutional attention. The report highlighted the extent and impact of various forms of sexual violence experienced by women university students. Whilst research and activism focused on sexual violence in UK universities predates its publication, the report can be viewed as a catalyst due to the increased attention the issue received following its publication. In the years following, several key issues have been identified through research, media reporting and online testimonies. Firstly, several studies have highlighted the extent of sexual violence experienced by women students (see, for example: NUS, 2010; Stenning et al., 2013; Office for National Statistics, 2017; NUS, 2018; Brook, 2019; Atkinson, 2020). Research has also highlighted that students have a limited awareness of institutional support and reporting mechanisms (see, for example: NUS, 2010; Atkinson, 2020) and low levels of reporting to the institution (NUS,

2010, 2018; Atkinson, 2020). Research has now also begun to explore the reasons why students do make the decision to report to universities (Bull, 2022). Although scholarship, activism and institutional acknowledgement of the problem has increased, issues persist. Media reporting has highlighted a number of issues, such as prevalence (Batty, Weale and Bannock, 2017; Reynolds, 2018; Batty, 2019), a lack of adequate support and reporting procedures (Jokic, 2020), silencing students (Lawthorn, 2020; Pittam, 2020) and the use of non-disclosure agreements (Weale and Batty, 2016; Croxford, 2020).

The legal and policy context within which universities now operate in terms of responding to sexual violence has been developing in recent years¹. Universities UK (UUK) (2016a) have clearly stated that universities have a responsibility to respond appropriately to reports of sexual violence and there is growing evidence to suggest that universities are developing reporting mechanisms, support services and prevention initiatives (UUK, 2016a, 2016b, 2018, 2019, 2022), legal guidelines for universities to follow have been developed (Pinsent Masons, 2016) and there is increased attention from the UK government (Lewis, 2022). The Office for Students (OfS) (2024a) has produced a statement of expectations on how universities should implement effective systems, policies and processes to address harassment and sexual misconduct. They have also introduced a condition of registration on harassment and sexual misconduct (OfS, 2024b) and will launch a pilot prevalence survey in 2025 (OfS, 2024c).

Despite these changes and the wealth of initiatives that have developed, progress in addressing the issue is variable (Chantler et al., 2019). Whilst it is evident that some institutions have undertaken significant work to address the issue, sexual violence remains prevalent at university and the range of initiatives introduced have not succeeded in ensuring students are provided with an adequate level of support, reporting procedures or prevention which will potentially be further impacted due to the financial challenges facing the sector in the UK (Foster et al, 2023).

This article suggests that the reason for the persistence of the issue is, in part, due to a lack of theoretical basis in the development of responses. Understanding the diverse and varied experiences of sexual violence is key to developing victim and survivor led responses which provide adequate support to students to ensure they feel confident and able to engage with these services. The article therefore addresses this gap by using a feminist poststructuralist lens to understand the discourses which shape students' experiences and perceptions of sexual violence. This article begins with an overview of the theoretical framework of feminist poststructuralism, focusing on the concepts of discourse, 'truth', subjectivity and resistance. The article goes on to outline the methods utilised in the research. The findings are next considered which demonstrated that gendered and heterosexed discourses which define 'normal' heterosexual sex operated to produce particular 'truths' about sexual violence. Building on Gavey's (2005: 2) concept of the 'cultural scaffolding of rape', it is argued that these dominant discourses were amplified in the environment where university 'fun' was viewed within the limited parameters of alcohol, sex and the night-time economy. The ways in which students resisted these dominant discourses, but ultimately relied on them to make sense of their experiences, is next considered. The article concludes by discussing the implications of these findings, highlighting the need to challenge the limited frameworks through which sexual violence is currently understood and the production of new discourses to create the conditions in which a broader range of experiences can be prevented and responded to through institutional mechanisms.

Discourse, sexuality and the 'cultural scaffolding'² of sexual violence

The concept of discourse is central to understanding the context in which sexual violence occurs through analysing how power is exercised via discourses (Foucault, 1975, cited in Gordon, 1994: xv-xvi), the effects of this on the constitution of subjectivity (Foucault, 1980) and how 'truth' is defined and constructed (Foucault, 1980; 1994) in relation to gender, sexuality and sexual violence. Of particular relevance is the discursive construction of sexuality, built around dominant, but socially, historically and contextually contingent,

discourses of male and female sexuality. It is the operation of these discourses in the context of universities, and the ways in which dominant discourses of student life compound these which are of concern here.

Writing on the development of particular discourses on sexuality, Gavey (2005: 80, emphasis in the original) states that 'sex is *produced* through the deployment of sexuality'. Sex is understood not as natural or fixed, rather tied to relations of power and deployed as a means of social control which produces normative modes of sexuality. These normative modes of female sexuality are shifting and historically contingent (Bacchi, 1988), contradictory (Lees, 1997) and intersect with further social divisions beyond gender such as class (Bacchi, 1988) and 'race' (Hill-Collins, 1990), amongst others. Moreover, as argued by Collier (1998), there are normative modes of masculinity through which populations are regulated, which are again historically, socially and culturally contingent, but which also take culturally exalted forms (Connell, 1995).

Hollway (1984: 228) outlined 'coexisting and potentially contradictory discourses concerning sexuality' which are relevant to explanations, understandings, and constructions of sexual violence. Particularly relevant is the discourse around male sexual drive and the belief that men's sexuality is produced by a biological drive which is deemed understandably difficult to control, with the consequent positioning of women as objects of these 'natural' sexual urges. The deployment of such discourses 'produce a material practice of heterosexuality in which women are produced as subjects who are encouraged to regulate our own behaviour in ways which comply with androcentric versions of sexuality' (Gavey, 1993: 329). Compliance with these dominant subject positions means the ways in which women can move about in the world, behave and understand their experiences is limited.

The conceptualisation of sexuality as discursively produced uncovers what Gavey (2005: 2) termed 'the cultural scaffolding of rape', the everyday, taken for granted, normative forms of heterosexuality. These discourses on sex and gender are argued to produce 'forms of heterosex that set up the preconditions of rape – women's passive acquiescing (a)sexuality

and men's forthright, urgent pursuit of sexual "release" (Gavey, 2005: 3). For Gavey (2005), there are normalising dimensions of contemporary heterosex which might not be thought of as coercive or victimising, but are social scripts, codes and norms which legitimate particular forms of sex as normal and delegitimise others as deviant and dysfunctional. A central argument is that these discursive constructions produce a relational dynamic 'that arguably authorise sexual encounters that are not always clearly distinguishable from rape' (Gavey, 2005: 3). The binary dynamic of heterosexual sex, 'masculine-feminine, active-passive, dominant-submissive, desiring-desired', provides the discursive scaffolding that enables rape (Gavey, 2005: 231-232). This discursive scaffolding blurs the lines between that which is 'normal' heterosex and that which is rape, 'providing the perfect alibi for many rapes – it was just sex' (Gavey, 2005: 232).

In relation to sexual violence, Alcott (2018: 3) states that rape cultures produce a discursive formation in which:

the intelligibility of claims is not by logical argument or evidence, but by frames that set out who can be victimised, who can be accused, which are plausible narratives, and in what contexts rape may be spoken about, even in private spaces.

The criteria through which statements of experiences of sexual violence are interpreted is, therefore, determined by dominant discourses. As this research was concerned with the particular context of universities, it is the discourses which operate through universities on gender, sexuality and sexual violence, and the social scripts, codes and norms which Gavey (2005) highlighted as relevant that are the focus of this article.

Methods

The research was undertaken at one post 1992 university in England. Mixed methods were employed in the form of an online survey of 144 women students enrolled at the university, five interviews with students who had experienced sexual violence and five stakeholders who were responsible, in different ways, for managing and/or responding to incidents at the university. This article focuses on findings from the student interviews which were conducted

in 2018. Although there are limitations inherent in a smaller sample size, in particular generalisability, the smaller sample size reflects a focus on student narratives and the aim of generating insights into how students conceptualised their experiences. In relation to participant recruitment, it was originally intended that students would be recruited via the survey. The final page of the survey included information on the interview stage of the research and participants were asked if they would be willing to take part. It was hoped that approximately 10 participants would be recruited for interviews via this method. However, just one survey participant responded to this request, so the interviews were then advertised to various Students' Union groups which resulted in two further interviewees. One further interviewee was recruited via snowball sampling (Given, 2008) under the recommendation of a previous participant. The final student interviewee contacted me after her academic tutor, who was aware of the research, passed on information.

In the interviews, participants' responses to, and experiences of sexual violence, and the meanings attached to these were explored through in-depth semi-structured interviews. All interviews were conducted in person and the data presented below is anonymised, with pseudonyms used. Interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes with an average of 69 minutes. Qualitative interviewing allowed for the nuances and complexities of participants' views of the issue to be captured (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Undertaking the research within a feminist methodological framework firstly meant that, in practice, the respondents' subjective experiences were valued and validated (Oakley, 1981). Moreover, the interviews were approached, as outlined by Lees (2002: 208), on the understanding that 'the results would be used to bring about improvements in the present situation'. This reflects Stanley's (1990) arguments on feminist praxis, which ensures questioning not only the knowledge that is produced, but also the value of the knowledge in terms of who it is produced for and why. In practice, this meant sharing the research findings with relevant stakeholders in the institution and lobbying for changes in policy and practice. Involvement in relevant committees and sharing the research findings led to some developments in university practice. Following the

commitment of some people in senior positions in the university, and input from a range of interested parties, a reporting mechanism was introduced, prevention and awareness campaigns were developed, and external specialist services had a presence at relevant student events.

The feminist methodological approach ensured that particular attention was paid to issues of power, reflexivity, ethics and wellbeing (Skinner et al., 2005)³. The research process required consideration of a number of ethical issues, in particular the power imbalances between the 'researcher' and 'researched'. This was particularly relevant to my position at the time as an insider and outsider (Hesse-Biber and Piatelli, 2014), a researcher, a postgraduate student and sessional lecturer. Whilst I shared some characteristics and experiences with the student participants, my role as a researcher who would interpret and draw conclusions from the research highlights the complex nature of the research relationship. As power relations can never fully be neutralised, but exist at times to a greater or lesser extent, the aim was to address this as much as possible through the active involvement of participants and concern with the accurate representation of their views (Letherby, 2003). The active involvement of participants was encouraged through the open ended semi-structured interview and a flexible interview schedule so that participants could discuss their perspectives and experiences and raise issues not identified in the schedule whilst having their knowledge valued. To ensure participants views were accurately represented, contact details were provided and interviewees were offered a copy of the final transcript to review although no student participants took this opportunity. At the end of each section of the interview, as well as at the end of the interview, participants were asked if there was anything they would like to add or discuss which had not been raised which led to several further discussions of the effects of their experiences. Throughout the interviews, some discussions were summarised and repeated back to the interviewees to ensure interpretation was accurate.

The interviews were held with five students, both postgraduate and undergraduate, with the aim of producing in-depth insights into how students conceptualised their own experiences in order to challenge the dominant discourses which shape understanding of, and responses to sexual violence. The demographics of the student participants highlight some limitations of the research. All five interviewees were white, British, cisgender women. Four interviewees were studying within the broad area of the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences and one studied in Law and Business. They were all from England or Wales and three had been involved in the university Feminist Society. The fact that these five women felt comfortable volunteering to take part in an interview, and others who took part in the survey or saw the recruitment information and chose not to participate is relevant. The experiences of those whose narratives were not explored will likely differ perhaps for example in terms of their experiences and how they align with dominant discourses on sexual violence. The student participants had experienced a range of physical, verbal, sexual and emotional abuse some of which was not easily definable within pre-existing legal categories. Experiences ranged from being deceived into going back to a hotel room, being pressured to have sex, being locked in a bedroom and verbally harassed for not sexually complying with the perpetrator's assumptions, to sexual abuse perpetrated by a friend and rape perpetrated by a stranger.

All interviews were transcribed and analysis was undertaken in NVivo. Guided by the research questions and the poststructuralist framing, analysis focused on how students conceptualised their own experiences. Themes were developed through a reflexive, iterative process which involved regular revisiting of the data as further questions emerged throughout the process (Berkowitz, 1997). Thematic analysis was undertaken in line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases; familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report. The themes generated which are the focus of this article are: reproducing discourses of masculinity, femininity and (hetero)sex, the 'fun' university experience and contesting and maintaining dominant discourses.

Findings and Discussion

This section begins by outlining the ways in which discourses of masculinity, femininity and (hetero)sex, shaped participants understanding of their experiences. It goes on to highlight the ways in which the university context specifically, and the dominant discourses deployed in relation to the 'fun' university experience, reproduce, enable and amplify the already limiting subject positions available to women students. Finally, it highlights the inescapability of existing within discourse as students are required to rely on the dominant discourses in order to challenge them.

Reproducing discourses of masculinity, femininity and (hetero)sex

The student participants, at times, problematised heteronormative constructions of masculinity, femininity and (hetero)sex. However, at times they also used this language when referring to their, and others', experiences of sexual violence. Firstly, discursive constructions of men's sexuality, and a supposedly innate biological need for sex, were drawn upon to explain and excuse men's behaviour. One of the participants, Sara, and her friend, suggested that her abuser's 'high sex drive' provided an explanation as to why he abused her. Although Sara described her experience as abuse, she also, at times, discussed this as her perpetrator cheating on his girlfriend as seen in the following quote:

Well he's not the kind of person you'd expect to cheat on a girlfriend, but I can understand him doing that because he's got a very high sex drive and he's very flirtatious. (Sara)

Therefore, they utilised the dominant male sexual drive discourse, outlined and critiqued by Hollway (1984), to make sense of the experience through portraying his behaviour as, at least in part, understandable within heteronormative constructions of masculinity.

Several participants also highlighted their perception that what is, and is not, understood as sexual violence is not something that is always agreed upon:

One thing I can really remember is being in a club and a guy grabbed my bum and I turned around to him and I said, what you've just done there, you've just sexually

assaulted me and he was like no I haven't, I've just grabbed your bum and I told him no, like that's sexual assault. (Nicola)

Dominant discourses of men's sexuality and consent affected what was considered appropriate behaviour:

[T]hey do it without realising because of sex cultures, I think. They think it's cool to just like shag birds and then send them off on their way and it's not. It's really taking apart from like love making and having sex and boys don't realise that having sex is both parts consenting to it, rather than I've got you in my room and I'm going to fuck you kind of thing. (Sara)

It shouldn't be, but it is a word that a lot of people are confused about. A lot of people don't really understand, they know what the word means but they don't understand what falls into it, what consent is and what is not consent. (Meredith)

This limited understanding was at times attributed to a lack of education and awareness, with several participants highlighting the importance of their university education in the social sciences in developing their own awareness and being able to challenge dominant discourses. Referring to an incident where she was orally raped, and the effect her sociological education had on her, Heidi stated:

I had to have a degree to know that I had been raped. That's absurd, like for me to know that's what that is, for me to even say that was rape, I had to have a degree to even know that. (Heidi)

A further issue that was highlighted by participants was the sexual expectations they felt due to being women. One participant, Meredith, described situations in which she felt pressured into sex or that there was an implied assumption that she would be having sex, such as being in someone's bedroom or bed. After being deceived into going back to a fellow students' house, she felt pressure to have sex with him:

It was just like surreal, like a surreal experience and I was like no, not really, I'd just like to go home. He was like 'why, why, you knew you were coming back to mine, you wanted to come back to mine' and I was like 'no, like I thought I was getting a taxi home'. (Meredith)

Following this interaction, as she continued to insist that she wanted to go home, she was called a 'fat bitch', told to 'fuck off' and had money thrown at her because she did not comply

with this person's expectations that she would have sex with him. His expectation was based simply on the fact that she was in his bedroom, even when it was not her choice to be there.

Burgin and Flynn (2019: 5) highlight the issue of implied consent, in which 'women's ordinary behaviour is systematically (re)constructed as implying consent to sex'. They discuss these narratives in the context of the rape trial, whereby the implication is that, had the victim/survivor behaved differently, the perpetrator would not have misread the situation and assumed consent. This is also relevant in the broader context, outside of the trial, as demonstrated through Meredith's experience. Responsibility is deflected away from the perpetrator because, as Burgin and Flynn (2019: 3) note, the notion of implied consent, 'absolves the perpetrator from culpability'. This, therefore, reinforces dominant discourses of who can and cannot be a victim or perpetrator and further reproduces victim blaming narratives.

Overall, participants narratives highlighted the importance of normative discourses in demarcating what is and is not sexual violence, what is considered 'normal' sex and sexuality, and the effects of this in terms of defining out incidents which, within for example a legal framework, could be understood as sexual violence. Specifically, participants depiction of the issues highlighted the ways in which discourses of masculinity, femininity and (hetero)sex operated to make sense of their experiences of sexual violence. The effect of these discourses is that the students were, firstly, positioned as passive subjects, expected to comply with men's sexual desires, which ultimately provides the 'cultural scaffolding' (Gavey 2005: 3) in which sexual violence occurs. Responsibility for sexual violence was therefore at times deflected away from the perpetrator through focusing on the assumed naturality of men's uncontrollable sexual drive and women's ordinary behaviour as a signifier of consent in addition to broader misunderstandings of what the terms sexual violence and consent entail. Consequently, through the deployment of limiting discourses on gender and (hetero)sexuality, notions of who could or could not be a perpetrator or victim of sexual

violence were reinforced through limiting the behaviour deemed appropriate for women and extending the behaviour deemed appropriate for men.

The participants also showed that demarcating the boundaries between sex and sexual violence was connected to education and awareness of the issue and that for some participants, their understanding of their experiences reflected the changing discourses available to make sense of them. Ultimately, following feminist poststructuralist arguments, the subject positions available for the students, within these dominant discourses of heterosexuality, were limited and provided the context in which sexual violence occurred and the students made decisions about sex. Such discourses also provide the context in which judgements on the credibility of victims and the culpability of perpetrators are made.

The 'fun' university experience

Discourses operate, and are reproduced, through social institutions and the particular context of the university is key to understanding how these discourses operate. The findings in this research demonstrated that dominant discourses on university life, 'fun' and 'normal' student behaviours further limited the subject positions available to the students, as sexual imperatives were woven into their understanding of what 'normal' student behaviour is, thus contributing, in a very specific way, to the 'cultural scaffolding of rape' (Gavey, 2005).

Grant (1997) argued, in Foucauldian terms, that the university is saturated with relations of power, in which the 'good', docile and useful student subject is produced. She pointed out that students are disciplined 'both by the institution and by themselves to become more like the norm of the "good" student' (Grant, 1997: 101). Whilst she argued this in terms of the 'good' student, academically, her analysis has relevance to this research in terms of the discourses and production of the 'good' social student and the effects of this on experiences of sex and sexual violence.

Dominant discourses about university life, and its social aspects, produce a range of subject positions, constituting students as within or outside of these discourses. Media

representations often portray the social aspect of student life solely as 'wild parties and sex' (Griffiths, 2020: 1) with organisations such as *Student Beans*, a discount, advice and entertainment website for students, undertaking a National Student Sex Survey (Student Beans, 2020). The NUS (2012) survey into students' experiences of 'lad culture' also found that participants expressed feeling pressure to engage in a high frequency of sexual activity and to consume alcohol. Participants connected these messages about university life to the range of non-consensual behaviours which students experience:

I think [sexual violence] happens quite a lot in freshers' though. I'd say more so because everyone is trying to get to know one another and no one wants to seem like antisocial. No one wants to seem boring, so everyone is like having drinks and drinking lots and like wanting to like go out with new people. (Meredith)

[Sexual violence] is like a massive problem I think among students, especially with the way people are with going out and getting drunk and things like that. There's so many, what's the word, vulnerable people around on nights out. (Audrey)

It was also perceived that advertising for student nights reproduced the discourse that normal student life is mostly built around heavy alcohol consumption and sex. Heidi alluded to this, she said, in coming to university:

You are put in this like vacuum of just alcohol and nights out that they are advertising to us. (Heidi)

In addition to this, there are various examples of advertising which includes evidently sexist language and directly refers to sexual assault, as documented by Gunby et al. (2017) and it has been argued that night-time economy venues are using 'lad culture' as a business model (Sherriff, 2014). Such advertising is part of a broader discursive field in which 'the gender-specific deployment of sexuality enables, if not actually encourages, heterosexual practice which contains much invisible coercion' (Gavey, 1993: 329).

As discussed above, Burgin and Flynn (2019) outlined the way in which women's ordinary behaviour is reconstructed to imply consent, a point evidenced by Meredith. In the context of universities and in particular student accommodation, for some, this implied consent is heightened. Nicola discussed this:

I think it's also like an expectation when you're in halls, when you're on campus or not on campus that like a lot of sexual activity is going to go on and that... so like if you were to invite someone home with you after a party at your house, that you, like it's an instant kind of idea that you're going to sleep with them, so then the man expects that... and then like pushes for it. (Nicola)

So, whilst the issue of implied consent is relevant to the broader context, the accounts from student participants in this research showed that the university was a space in which these assumptions were amplified. This had the result of further restricting the circumstances and behaviours in which they could be understood as not consenting and further deflects responsibility away from perpetrators.

There are, therefore, competing discourses which operate around student life, with a clear emphasis for these participants on the 'good' social student taking part in alcohol consumption, sex and the night-time economy. Whilst this is certainly a part of student life for many, and is not problematic for all, there are issues with the dominance of these discourses. Firstly, as noted above, Gunby et al (2017) argue that advertising around alcohol and the night-time economy for students, at times, links alcohol with sexual offending. Secondly, the dominance of the discourse that 'normal', social student life involves intoxication which often, or at least should, result in sex with multiple people severely limited the acceptable subject positions for these students to take up. The students who took part in this research felt the need to 'fit in' with other students, to display the same behaviours, and to demonstrate that they were the same as their peers. Heidi discussed the impact of these discourses:

You'll do anything to fit in somewhere you've never been before. So you brush aside things that happened that you wouldn't usually, because you think you don't really want to draw attention to yourself. (Heidi)

Heidi's case highlights the point that students may minimise incidents to ensure that they are not viewed as antisocial or different to other students.

The findings above demonstrate that, for some, the perceived dominance of alcohol and sex in discourses of student life meant the norm was a student experience built around the night

time economy, alcohol consumption and, as also noted by Phipps and Young (2015), accepting 'lad culture' as a normal part of university life. The normalisation of behaviours attributed to 'lad culture', with its 'group or "pack" mentality residing in activities such as sport or heavy alcohol consumption and "banter"' (Phipps and Young, 2014: 28) was raised by participants, with particular focus on how this relates to student experiences of sex and sexual violence. This had the effect of limiting the perceived acceptable subject positions available to women students as there was a fear of being ostracised for not taking part in the activities deemed normal within dominant discourses on student life. Those who felt pressured to present themselves as the 'good' social student found themselves in positions in which they did not always feel comfortable. The pressure to fit in also had an effect after an incident of sexual violence had taken place, as Heidi noted, the pressure to fit in meant that she 'brushed aside' her experiences of rape because she did not want to 'draw attention to herself'.

Overall, when the institutional context and discursive constructions of the 'fun' university are considered, students' narratives highlighted that gendered, heterosexed discourses around men's need for sexual release and women's passivity were amplified in order to promote and sustain dominant notions of 'fun', a process which limited further the subject positions available to the students. Moreover, discourses on 'normal' masculinity, femininity and (hetero)sex were amplified in the environment where 'fun' was viewed within the limited parameters of alcohol, sex and the night-time economy. Therefore, whilst following the argument that dominant discourses of (hetero)sexuality reinforce gender relations of power, this was compounded by dominant discourses of 'normal', 'fun' university life.

Contesting and maintaining dominant discourses on sexual violence

In Grant's (1997) analysis of the discursive production of the 'good' academic student, she draws upon Foucault's analysis of the exercise of power to demonstrate the ways in which students resist the dominant discourses of the competitive student. Foucault (1986 cited in Grant, 1997: 111) states 'it would not be possible for power relations to exist without points

of insubordination which, by definition, are means of escape'. Some participants pointed to the importance of their education in the social sciences in resisting dominant notions of 'fun' student life and challenging the limitations of dominant discursive constructions of their experiences:

It just happens so much but I think what [social science course] helped to do was like help to understand it ... I was sat thinking, really, is that sexual violence? Because even though I was in my second year I didn't comprehend that. (Meredith)

Lewis and Marine (2018: 129) explored the role of university feminist societies in helping students 'find a voice'. In this research also, two participants specifically mentioned their involvement in the Feminist Society, and their developing awareness of feminism in relation to their experiences. They felt that being involved helped them to find likeminded people and also that feminism helped them work through their own experiences:

I wasn't really feminist at the time, I didn't really know anything about kind of feminism at all to be honest and at the time I wouldn't have thought I've just been raped [...] I'd spent the year kind of like obsessively learning about what had happened just to try and understand it and that's what brought me to feminism. (Heidi)

At this point in my life, because of my like feminist consciousness, I know that I'm not an object for consumption by men. So that makes me then say, why does he feel that I'm available to touch when I'm just in the same space as him? But when I was younger, I would have been like, oh well that's just what happens but now, but now I see this as a problem. (Nicola)

Again, in relation to feminist poststructuralism, the temporary and shifting nature of subjectivity is highlighted in that it is dependent upon available discourses which are open to challenge. An awareness of feminism, whether through their degree or the Feminist Society, therefore, created a space in which participants were able to take up a subject position which was subversive and countered the dominant discourses on what a good social student should be like, but which was also acceptable within that particular space.

Student accounts of their experiences and the discourses used to make sense of them, whether in line with dominant understandings or not, highlight a paradox. As Hollway (1981: 33) argues, 'the power of discourse resides in its hegemony' and, whilst several participants

were engaged in counterdiscursive spaces and practices, challenging the cultural scaffolding of rape, they still at times relied on dominant discourses to render intelligible their experiences. Moreover, counterdiscourses can only be used to challenge constructions of sexual violence because the dominant discourses already exist. This paradox, where students both contest and maintain dominant ideas, means that to comprehend how students work out the subject positions available to them, requires an understanding of the inescapability of discourse and the fact that we all still exist within dominant discourses, regardless of how much they are challenged.

Implications and conclusion

In the discursive space of the university, gendered and (hetero)sexed discourses of student life operated to produce particular 'truths' about sexual violence. The effect of these dominant discourses was the social construction, constitution and limitation of how incidents were understood. This 'truth' limited the parameters in which the broad and varied range of experiences of sexual violence could be rendered intelligible. Participants experiences of sexual violence did not always conform to more popularly understood narratives of stranger danger, physical violence and the type of incidents reported in the media. Experiences of sexual violence were much broader than the construction permitted within current, dominant discourses. Instead, whilst some experiences did fit stereotypical depictions of sexual violence, many were also verbal, made participants uncomfortable, were perpetrated by friends and were normalised by some research participants due to the limited and limiting discourses available to make sense of those experiences. As a result of these discourses outlined, participants also had to navigate a world in which their normal behaviour implied consent and men's behaviour was accepted as normal within the university environment even when this was expressed through sexual violence.

These normative discourses on sexuality have the potential to absolve blame and deflect responsibility away from perpetrators and limit the normatively accepted subject positions available for students. The findings from this research support this work and extend it further

through placing these normative discourses in the context of the university in order to further understand and, therefore, challenge their operation. Not only did dominant discourses of (hetero)sex operate in the university context, but dominant discourses on 'normal', 'fun' university life for students, depicted as relating to heavy alcohol consumption, wild parties and sex, further limited the available subject positions, constructed students as within or outside these norms and reinforced the cultural scaffolding of rape.

The effects of this cultural scaffolding, firstly, could lead to a small proportion of incidents being reported as the incidents are filtered through hegemonic discourses which render these experiences unintelligible. This could also lead to a lower number of students accessing support as they might not view what they have experienced as something which is worthy of accessing support as it does not fit within the constructed 'truth' about sexual violence. Furthermore, there is the potential that institutional responsibility for responding to incidents is deflected as these discourses limit the intelligible incidents in which they are required to respond. Finally, these discourses do not challenge the current context in which sexual violence, at university and more broadly, is prevalent and judgements of victim credibility and perpetrator culpability are made.

Challenging normative discourses on gender, heterosex and university life paradoxically requires a dependence on dominant discourses and therefore whilst there is a need to challenge them, there is a simultaneous need to 'work on the creative task of generating new oppositional and otherwise inventive discourses' (Gavey, 2005: 94) which go beyond tokenistic institutional responses. In practice, this means contesting and resisting dominant discourses which construct a limiting 'truth' about sexual violence and the broader reality of victims' and survivors' experiences and creating the cultural conditions in which more diverse and varied experiences of sexual violence can be understood as sexual violence. Universities should create reporting and support systems which recognise and are able to respond to a broad range of harms and effects of sexual violence beyond the narrow limitations imposed by dominant discourses. Broadening the scope of incidents to which

universities are able to respond could lead to more students accessing required support. Furthermore, challenging the dominance of these discourses and the normalisation of gendered and heterosexed behaviours through, for example, prevention and awareness campaigns, could challenge the cultural scaffolding which limits acceptable subject positions and legitimates harmful sexual encounters.

Contesting these dominant discourses and opening up new ways of understanding and speaking about sexual violence will allow for the development of institutional responses which are theoretically informed and directly address the needs and harms experienced by those who have been subject to sexual violence. Alongside wider policy and structural changes, the reality of victims and survivors' experiences can be fundamentally changed thereby ensuring the physical and psychological safety of women students.

¹ For an overview of this legal and policy context, see Atkinson (2023).

² Gavey, (2005: 2)

³ For a detailed discussion of how power, reflexivity, ethics and wellbeing were considered in the research, see Atkinson (2020: 85-92).

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