

Students' accounts of grooming and boundary-blurring behaviours by academic staff in UK higher education

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Abstract

Drawing on data from qualitative interviews with students who had attempted to report staff sexual misconduct to their higher education institutions in the UK, the article analyses interviewees' experiences of 'grooming' and boundary-blurring behaviours from academic staff where the possibility for consent was affected by the power imbalances between staff and students. The term 'boundary-blurring' is used to describe behaviours that transgress (often tacit) professional boundaries, and 'grooming' refers to a pattern of these behaviours over time between people in positions of unequal power. This article analyses the power imbalances interviewees described that created the context for these behaviours. These were constituted by social inequalities including gender, class, and age, as well as stemming from students' position within their institutions. The article also explores how heterosexualised normativity allows such behaviours to be minimised and invisibilised.

Introduction

From an outsider[*'s perspective*], I was saying 'yes' to doing certain things with him, which, for all intents and purposes, would have counted as consent, but what you don't see is the internal conflict and the invisible power structure where he could make me say 'yes'. [...] He knew the right thing to ask and how to ask it in the right way in which it was pretty much impossible... I felt it was impossible for me to say 'no'.

These are the words of Andrea, a white, middle-class British student in her early 20s studying at a UK university. Her quote, describing boundary-blurring behaviours from a lecturer on her Master's course, reveals the power relations that exist between academic staff and students which complicate the notion of equal, mutually consenting adult relationships within higher education. Discussion of such relationships has intensified in recent years. The MeToo movement, started by Tarana Burke in 2006, as well as the viral hashtag #MeToo that emerged online in 2017, has enabled and sustained more public conversations as to where boundaries lie between sexual harassment or exploitation and consent. Such conversations have a deeper history in feminist theory which has long been engaged in questioning how power is experienced and articulated, and the ways in which social inequalities make it difficult for some to make sense of their experiences and for these experiences to be seen as credible (for example, Frye, 1983; Fricker, 2007; Hill Collins, 2000).

This article contributes to these conversations by exploring the 'invisible power structure' that Andrea describes above. It examines how grooming and boundary-blurring behaviours from academic staff were experienced by students. It analyses how the social positioning of students in relation to structural inequalities within wider society and also in relation to their positioning within teaching and learning relationships in higher education institutions enables sexual and non-sexual forms of harassment and exploitation. It builds on literatures from domestic abuse, heterosexuality, teaching and learning relationships, and inequalities in higher education to describe how power imbalances enabled these behaviours to occur. While the data is drawn from the UK higher education context, the findings are relevant to ongoing debates in the US, Australia, Nigeria, Canada, India, and other sites where staff sexual

misconduct and professional boundaries within higher education are under discussion (see The 1752 Group and McAllister Olivarius, 2020: 32) for a definition of staff sexual misconduct).

The article firstly contextualises this discussion within literature on grooming and boundary-blurring behaviours and recent research into UK higher education institutions' policies. It then outlines the methods used for this study. The substantive sections of the article introduce two case studies of students who did not feel they had fully consented to sexual or romantic activity with staff and explore the structural conditions and forms of inequality that were at play in these.

Grooming and boundary-blurring behaviours

This article draws on data initially published in Bull and Rye (2018), which gave a typology of sexual misconduct behaviours described by interviewees, outlined the impacts of these behaviours, and described institutional responses. The typology included grooming and boundary-blurring behaviours; sexualised communication; sexual assault; stalking and surveillance; and bullying and revenge behaviours. The terms 'grooming' and 'boundary-blurring behaviours' were used to describe behaviours that enabled relationships between staff and students to move beyond the professional and into more intimate or personal realms without necessarily including any behaviours that constituted sexual harassment. Building on this initial reporting of the data, this article focuses in detail on these 'grooming' and 'boundary-blurring' behaviours.

Research within sport education and social work has explored grooming processes between people in positions of unequal power, i.e. between coach and athlete or

between social worker and client (Brackenridge, 2001; Melville-Wiseman, 2015). Celia Brackenridge, writing about abuse within sport education, draws on social work literature to define grooming as 'the systematic preparation, enticement and entrapment of the individual targeted for abuse' (1997, 117). She argues that grooming behaviours 'can be at one and the same time both innocent and also the start of the grooming process' so that perpetrators may test out the suitability of a potential victim, while '[i]ncremental shifts in the boundary between coach and athlete go unnoticed, unrecognised or unreported by the athlete until the point where she has become completely entrapped' (Brackenridge 2001, 36). The focus in this work on grooming as initially unnoticed by the person targeted is important, as is highlighting behaviours that can be both innocent or unintended, and the start of a pattern. However, as we will discuss, it is not clear whether it is appropriate to theorise grooming behaviours as always intentional.

A further point of contestation is whether adults can be groomed. Both Melville-Wiseman and Brackenridge use 'grooming' to understand abuse of adults as well as children. This differs from the legal definition of grooming in the UK, which pertains only to the intention by an adult to commit sexual offences towards someone under 16 (The National Archives, 2018). We have chosen to follow Brackenridge and to use the term grooming to apply to adults because this is how some interviewees in the study described their experiences. We draw on a broader definition provided by Survivors UK that defines grooming between adults:

Grooming can be defined as the process that an abuser uses to desensitise you – to make you less likely to reject or report abusive behaviour. Grooming can

happen when there is a power differential within a relationship, which the abuser exploits for their own gratification. This is most commonly recognised as a tactic used by perpetrators of child sexual abuse, both on children and parents. However, adults can also be groomed (Survivors UK, 2020)

Grooming is typified by a power differential between two or more individuals, and Survivors UK specify that this can be ‘by a professional who has a measure of control over you, such as a doctor or a teacher’ (Survivors UK, 2020). In addition, as we explore below, another characteristic is that it is a pattern of behaviour over time, whether weeks, months or longer.

By contrast, what we are calling ‘boundary-blurring behaviours’ are not necessarily part of a longer-term pattern but simply constitute behaviours that transgress professional boundaries. As Cooper outlines in his work on professional boundaries in social work, some boundaries are very clear, such as sexual contact with a client, but others are less clear and rely on the ethical sensitivity of the social worker to recognise when they are being approached; it is not possible to have ‘a rule book that covers every possible situation’ (2012, 13). There has been much less discussion of professional boundaries within higher education (although see Schwartz, 2012) other than in medical education (see for example Dekker et al., 2013). There is evidence that students and staff do not have shared understandings of where boundaries lie, particularly online (Malesky and Peters, 2011). Boundary-blurring behaviours do not necessarily involve grooming, therefore – they may simply be one-off incidents, or indicate that boundaries have not been clearly set by institutions – but grooming will almost certainly involve boundary-blurring behaviours.

Similarly to social work or sport education where grooming has also been documented, higher education relies upon relationships of trust and dependency. Postgraduate students, in particular, depend on academic staff for teaching but also for mentorship on how to become a scholar, for access to networks, and advice on how to enter what is an increasingly difficult and precarious job market (Whitley and Page, 2015). As Hagenauer and Volet (2014) note, these relationships are under-theorised, despite the potential for exploitation of their power dynamics (although increasing attention is now being paid to supervisory relationships for postgraduate students). Whitley and Page explain how, despite sexual harassment from faculty towards students often occurring in plain sight, such abuses of power are accepted as part of the normative culture of higher education and rarely labelled as sexism or sexual harassment.

Indeed, there is evidence that teaching and learning relationships within higher education often take place within sexualised environments. For example, a national survey of 1839 current and former students in the UK on staff sexual misconduct found that 41% of respondents had experienced sexualised comments or behaviours from faculty or staff (2018, 8). The survey also explored professional boundaries by asking what behaviours students were comfortable with from staff and found that 80% of respondents were uncomfortable or very uncomfortable with faculty or staff having romantic or sexual relationships with students. Women were more uncomfortable than men with such relationships. Furthermore, teaching and learning spaces can also be sexist environments. As Jackson and Sundaram found in research with higher education staff in the UK, sexist attitudes and behaviours were present among staff in some instances in ways that supported and minimised the sexism and misogyny of male

students (2020, 52). This normalised sexism and made it invisible in ways that could help create environments where sexual harassment was carried out by academic staff (Whitley and Page, 2015).

These findings would appear to provide a clear steer from students to professionalise these relationships and clarify the boundaries that exist in educational settings.

However, in the UK, investigative journalism from The Guardian found that a third of UK HE institutions did not have a staff-student relationships policy (Batty et al., 2017). Subsequent analysis of 61 policies across 25 UK HE institutions found a wide variety of policies in this area, with only two including definitions of consent (Bull and Rye, 2018). Despite a lack of definition of what a consensual relationship is, 12 out of 25 institutions within this study discouraged such relationships, which means that half of the institutions analysed had no wording or mention of consent within their relationships policies. As of 2020, only six universities in the UK prohibit sexual and romantic relationships between staff and students where there is a teaching or learning relationship (Tutchell and Edmonds, 2020). It can be seen, therefore, that greater understanding of how power imbalances affect students' experiences of sexualised or romantic behaviour from faculty is needed.

Heterosexuality and gendered and racialised inequalities

Literature on heterosexuality can help in understanding the ways in which the gendered power dynamics of male staff-female student relations can obscure sexual misconduct.

The relationship between heterosexuality and sexual violence is outlined by Nicola Gavey, who argues that 'everyday taken-for-granted normative forms of heterosexuality

work as a cultural scaffolding for rape' (2018, 2). She argues that 'dominant discourses of heterosexuality operate to reinforce gendered relations of power through which women's (and men's) choices and control in heterosexual are potentially compromised' (2018, 8). Gavey raises questions about 'how subtle forms of sexual pressure and sexual coercion may be fostered through the invisible networks of power that operate in heterosexual sex' and applies this analysis to a 'gray area between rape or sexual coercion and mutually consenting sex' (2018, 9). However, this framing of heterosexuality needs to be contextualised within findings that LGBTQ+ people are subject to higher levels of sexual violence and harassment than heterosexuals. The framing of heterosexuality is not necessarily at odds with this finding; as Epstein notes, understanding sexual harassment within a context of the 'heterosexual matrix' makes visible the ways in which heterosexual gender dynamics create conditions where LGBT women are disproportionately targeted (1997).

Gavey's work has been extended in recent discussions of 'grey areas' or 'unwanted' sexual attention (Vera-Gray 2016; Gunarsson, 2018). Fiona Vera-Gray, discussing street harassment, critiques the notion of 'unwanted' behaviour that is used in definitions of sexual harassment as failing to account for 'the possibility of negative impact for the women who may experience such intrusions as wanted or desired' (2016, 7). Indeed, as this article describes, staff sexual misconduct behaviours may not constitute sexual harassment despite involving blurred boundaries facilitated by relationships of unequal power. This article therefore extends this discussion of the 'grey' areas of heterosexuality by examining how they are experienced within relationships of unequal power.

Indeed, this heterosexualised normativity, and the gendered power dynamics it camouflages, is also apparent in the gendered patterns of staff sexual misconduct; it is predominantly perpetrated by male academics towards female students (National Union of Students, 2018; Cantor et al., 2019). However, these gendered patterns are compounded by other inequalities, including race, religion and immigration status. The racialised dimensions to sexual harassment are evident in the National Union of Students study, which found that 30 out of 437 students of colour who responded (6.7%) said they had experienced sexualised comments referencing their race (2018, 24). These racialised dimensions are also visible in the power differences between students of colour, both UK and international, and academic staff in UK institutions, the majority of whom are white. Cantalupo argues that sexual harassment must involve a consideration of race, because women of colour “are harassed in ways in which gender and race discrimination are so intertwined that they cannot be separated” (2020, 236). In the accounts discussed in this article the grooming and boundary-blurring relationships were occurring between white students and lecturers, and although this was not discussed by interviewees their whiteness forms part of the context for the discussion below.

Methods

This article draws on semi-structured interviews carried out with 15 students who had experienced sexual misconduct from academic staff and who had attempted to report this to their institution or to the police. A feminist approach was taken (Stanley and Wise, 1993; Campbell 2009) in that the study design, execution, analysis and dissemination aimed to make positive change in women’s lives. Participants were

recruited from respondents to the National Union of Students' survey (2018) who indicated they were willing to participate in a follow-up interview, as well as students who had contacted The 1752 Group after experiencing sexual misconduct from academic staff. The sample all presented as cis women. Five were international students and 11 were UK students. The international students comprised two White students, two south Asian students and one mixed race EU student. Reflecting the higher prevalence of faculty sexual misconduct among postgraduate students (Cantor et al., 2019), the sample comprised four undergraduates, three Master's students, eight PhD students, and one early career researcher. The data was collected and analysed by author A who is a white, middle-class, cis heterosexual woman. This social positioning may mean that those who were most likely to experience sexual misconduct, particularly LGBTQ+ students, were less likely to volunteer to be interviewed. The data reported in this study therefore gives a partial account of students' experiences, and the accounts that are missing - those of queer/trans students and UK students of colour - might give a different picture to the one outlined below. The sample therefore reflects those who wanted to, and felt able to speak up about experiences of boundary-blurring behaviours.

Ethics approval was gained from the University of Portsmouth Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences research ethics committee. There were significant ethical issues to be considered in carrying out this research, including participants' wellbeing, and confidentiality and anonymity. Interviews were carried out predominantly in person, with a few carried out via phone or Skype. Interviewees were asked to describe in detail the experience of attempting to report sexual misconduct, with the option of describing the sexual misconduct experience itself if they wished to. Most did, but in varying levels of detail. This approach was taken so that interviewees could retain as much

control and choice over the interview as possible (Campbell, 2009). Interviewees were sent the transcript to check over after the interview. Anonymisation is incorporated into the data below, including the use of pseudonyms.

The initial findings from the study were published as a report to feed into ongoing public discussions. It became clear from these discussions that further analysis and exposition of the concept of ‘grooming’ was needed, and so for this article only the eight interviews that discuss grooming or boundary-blurring behaviours were drawn on. While a thematic analysis would have allowed a broader overview of the phenomena under discussion, it would have lost the narrative detail of interviewees’ accounts. As Miles et al. note sampling is investigative (2013, 33), and a generalized or thematic approach can ‘destroy the local web of causality and result only in a smoothed-down set of generalizations that may not apply to any specific case in the set’ (2013, 101).

Therefore, within this sub-sample, the decision was made to structure the article around a detailed analysis of two individual interviews. The two interviews were chosen for two reasons: firstly, interviewees both used the term ‘grooming’ to describe their experiences without it being mentioned by the interviewer; and secondly, their accounts of grooming and boundary-blurring behaviours were the most detailed out of the sample. To analyse these two interviews, a first step was a close reading of the data with the aim of getting a close description of the how the interviewees experienced this process. Their accounts were then compared to existing literature (as outlined above) in order to understand where their experiences did or did not fit existing explanations of ‘grey areas’ or ‘grooming’. In the analysis below, interviewees’ own interpretations of their experience is foregrounded, and all the points mentioned as formative of their experience (such as disability, institutional processes, or gender inequality within their

departments) are discussed. Where possible, these individual accounts are situated within the context of the wider study.

Grooming and boundary-blurring behaviours within the teaching and learning relationship

To introduce the ways in which grooming occurred within the interview data we begin with Andrea's experience. Andrea is white, middle-class British woman who was a Master's student in her early 20s.. She explained how during her Master's degree, she started working as a research assistant for a male lecturer in her department. She worked with him closely for about three months. He also helped her with her PhD proposal and so she asked him to be her PhD supervisor. They had swapped mobile numbers while working together because this was necessary for the research, and after it finished he continued to send her texts and ask her to meet for coffee, in a continuation of their friendly relationship. She went on to describe:

Then, he would start pushing it a little bit every time. So, it would be, 'Oh, do you want to go and meet up for coffee on the other campus?' where none of the lecturers or the department would be, but it was also the campus which we'd run experiments on together. I was on my way home, so I thought, 'I guess this is fine.'

Then, one day, I turned up for a coffee and he was like, 'Oh, I know this really nice place where we can go for a walk. It's only a 15-minute drive away.' I was like, 'Hmm, this feels like a moment where a line is about to be crossed, me

getting into his car.’ I was very uncomfortable and I said, ‘No,’ really quietly. He pretended like he didn’t hear me and was like, ‘Oh, sorry, what was that?’ He said, ‘Go on, it’s only 15 minutes. It’s really nice,’ da-da-da-da-da. I was like, ‘Okay,’ feeling as though I didn’t really want to, but, also, I had this relationship with my supervisor so I didn’t want to do anything to make him uncomfortable.’

She went on to explain that ‘After all of these little things [... I was feeling that] I’ve already said ‘yes’ once and, I guess, nothing actually happened, so is this the new norm? I don’t know.’ These behaviours continued over a period of months; he gave her books as presents and sent her messages and photos while he was on holiday. As Andrea’s discomfort mounted, she tried to report some of these behaviours to her university but she was unable to do so because he had not contravened any university policies; none of his behaviours constituted sexual harassment. She found this experience, which took place over several months, extremely distressing and she became depressed as a result of it. Even after she managed to extricate herself from the situation, these impacts still continued, and at the time of interview, some months later, she recounted ‘I’m doing my very best to remove any illusion of control that I’m still convinced that he has over me’.

She reflected that she assumes he was intending a kind of ‘courtship’ and that these behaviours were intended as romantic. Instead, she experienced them as what she called ‘grooming’. The term grooming was used not only by Andrea, but also by two other interviewees in this study. More widely, eight interviewees described boundary-blurring behaviours that could fall into this category. Such behaviours included singling out the

student for attention; using social media to send private (initially non-sexualised) messages; and asking a student personal questions or telling the student personal information about their marriage or sex life.

One advantage of using the concept of grooming to explain Andrea's experience is that it has spatial and temporal dimensions that illuminate and connect singular behaviours. It draws attention to patterns of behaviour, as above, that may not be visible if single incidents are examined in isolation; boundary-blurring behaviours can become grooming when a pattern of such behaviours becomes apparent. However, a limitation with the term is that it foregrounds perpetrator intent, as in the Survivors UK definition used above, rather than focusing on behaviours. This makes it difficult to apply unproblematically to Andrea's account, as it is unclear to what extent the behaviours she describes were intentional. Indeed, as she herself noted:

I'm very highly aware that, in my head, he is this demon and master manipulator, but, in reality, he's just a person. He doesn't feel as though he's done anything wrong, massively. I'm very aware that, from his perspective, he might be upset about it because he can see that he's upset me, but he doesn't think of himself as a bad person.

As Andrea's comment shows, there is a risk that the term 'grooming' implies scheming, manipulative, well-planned strategies of abuse, rather than encompassing a range of interactions that are an accepted part of the normative culture of higher education, and indeed, opposite gender relationships. Indeed, the acceptance of these behaviours by

other staff members in Andrea's department indicates that they were seen as normal rather than aberrant.

Nevertheless, this is the term that, for some interviewees, made sense of their experiences. While, as noted above, this usage does not fit easily into existing legal categories, a reliance on legal definitions is not necessary nor helpful when discussing behaviours that are acceptable within a professional environment; what is important is how students experience such behaviours. Furthermore, there is now a wider currency of this term being used beyond its meaning as referring to behaviours between adults and children only, for example the prosecution in the trial of Harvey Weinstein described him as 'grooming' adult women (Pilkington, 2020).

It is necessary, therefore, to use the term 'grooming' in order to respect the ways interviewees described their experiences, and to suggest that some of these behaviours are normalised within higher education. This means defining 'grooming' as behaviours by staff that interviewees experienced, in retrospect, as part of a pattern, and 'boundary-blurring' as behaviours that blur or disrupt the lines between professional conduct and personal and/or intimate behaviours and practices. Such a clarification of terms is important, in order to, as Lena Gunarsson describes, label and make sense of experiences that take place within the 'grey area' between consent and violence (2018). Overall, however, the intention of perpetrators is difficult to ascertain, and is of less concern in this context than the impact that sexualised or boundary-blurring behaviours have on not only victims/survivors but also other students and staff. Therefore, we suggest that while responsibility for harm must lie with the professional who is in a paid position of power, grooming needs to be defined by what is experienced by the student.

Social positionality and unequal power

One attribute of the term ‘grooming’ that is not foregrounded by describing behaviours exclusively as ‘boundary-blurring’ is that it enables a focus on the power imbalance in the staff-student relationship. In the quote from Andrea with which this article began, she describes this as an ‘invisible power structure where he could make me say ‘yes’’. This power structure partly occurred on the interpersonal level, whereby ‘he knew the right thing to ask and how to ask it in the right way in which it was pretty much impossible... I felt it was impossible for me to say no’. But it was also created through the structures of inequalities within higher education. These consist of how wider inequalities such as race, class and gender are reflected or reinforced within higher education’s institutional structures, including the teaching and learning relationship.

In research on class and gender inequalities among young classical musicians – similarly to higher education, a quintessential site for exploring gendered power among the middle-classes – these axes of inequality have been explored through analysing the authority of (male) conductors (Bull, 2019). In a youth choir in this study, the young men described wanting to *be* or become their conductor, while the young women either reported feeling scared of him, or described pleasure in the submission of being conducted by him. One young woman even described this relationship of submission by explaining that ‘I feel like I’m his dog – but in a good way’ (Bull, 2019: 126). Gender – both that of the conductor and of the young people – was crucial in explaining how young people experienced this authority, but there were two further inequalities that

structured this relationship between conductor and young musicians. The first was age; his authority was gained in part due to being much older than them. The second was expertise; young people's deep respect for some of their conductors stemmed, in part, from his expert knowledge and musical ability (all conductors in the study were male). These three axes of gender, age, and expertise constructed the power imbalance that shaped the interactions between conductor and young musicians. This contributed to the young women in the youth choir sometimes accepting behaviours from their conductor that they were uncomfortable with.

Such an analysis can also be used to examine the impacts of inequalities between staff and students. Andrea identified two ways in which gender was a factor that affected her ability to consent. The first is in relation to the gender inequality in her department, where academic staff were almost all men. Not only that, but Andrea described how one of the few female academics in her department, who took over her PhD supervision, minimised what had happen, describing it as 'silly' behaviour on the part of the lecturer and telling Andrea she was glad Andrea hadn't been able to report it (see Jackson and Sundaram, 2020). The second way in which gender was a factor relates to her comment that 'Everything that he got away with was because I put his comfort over my own every time. It's something you're sort of taught to do'. This suggests that her socialisation as female made her more likely to go along with behaviours that she didn't feel comfortable with. As we suggest below, this dynamic was invisibilised by the ways that teacher-student relations map onto heterosexual norms.

However, gendered and heterosexualised power structures are insufficient to account for the ways in which power imbalances shape the context for grooming in higher

education. For example, two interviewees recounted sexual harassment or assault from female academic staff. Indeed, in the National Union of Students' study, for 17% of those students who had experienced sexualised behaviours from staff, it was from women (2018, 29). As Gerdson and Walker argue, in reference to Avital Ronell at New York University harassing a male graduate student, the 'corrupting role of institutionalization... has an uncanny ability to make any individual capable of abuses of power, which we typically expect only from the most privileged in our society' (2019, 164). Therefore, analysis needs to start with power imbalances and theorise gender as one of the forms of power at play in such interactions, albeit a critical one.

The intersection between gendered power and other forms of power can be explored through examining research on domestic violence and abuse within same sex relationships. In a mixed methods study of domestic violence in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships in the UK, Hester and Donovan found that gender was *not* the main structure of power that enabled domestic abuse to take place. The three most important forms of social positionality that were associated with a higher risk of domestic abuse were younger age, lower income, and lower educational status (Donovan and Hester, 2015, 101). Indeed, there is a consensus in existing research that people under 25 are more likely to find themselves in abusive relationships, regardless of sexuality (Donovan and Hester, 2008, 282). Similarly, within sexual abuse by professionals in mental health services, the axes of inequality that tend to feature are professional power, gender and age (Melville-Wiseman, 2015, 142).

In a higher education context, the three axes of inequality identified by Donovan and Hester – income, age, and educational status – are also likely to be important, as

students are usually younger and have a lower income than staff members, and by definition have fewer educational qualifications. Income and educational status can be theorised as markers of class, and class inequalities were also present in the interview data for this study. Two interviewees talked about being the first in their family to go to university, which affected their interactions with academic staff. Alice, a PhD student, named two of these inequalities explicitly when explaining how the power imbalance affect her intimate relationship with her supervisor, stating simply ‘He was 17 years older than me and he is so much wealthier than me.’ Class could also be a factor more widely than just income as Gemma, a first year undergraduate, described:

I was the first of my immediate and then also wider family to have ever gone to uni. No one has ever been. So I had no idea what to expect. [...] They don’t tell you what normal interaction with the lecturers is like. This is the problem. I had no idea what was normal. I thought his behaviour was like, ‘Oh, he’s just being really friendly, it’s fine.’ It was only when I sat down at the end and added up everything that I thought, ‘No, that’s not right,’ but it took me a long time to realise.

Indeed, the experiences of working-class students in higher education – particularly in more elite institutions – shows that this lack of familiarity with the culture of higher education is experienced by many working-class students (Reay and David, 2005), and in Gemma’s case, this was one factor that enabled boundary-blurring behaviours to take place.

Students’ status within higher education institutions

As well as wider structural positions of gender, age, class, and racialisation creating power imbalances that enabled grooming and boundary-blurring behaviours, students' structural position within higher education institutions also affected their ability to consent to such behaviours. To explore this, we turn to the account of a PhD student, Alice. Alice was a white, UK student who was the first in her family to go to university and is disabled. Alice described how:

In my MA which is when I first met [my supervisor], we only had two required modules that we had to do, and he took one of them. He was also my personal tutor and he was also the head of the MA. The rest of the assessment was two required modules and then six essays. You were meant to do those six essays under a variety of people throughout the department [...]. He was like, 'Just do them all with me.' I was like, 'Oh it says in the handbook you're not supposed to do that.' He was like, 'Oh it's fine'.

As Brackenridge (2001, 35) describes, isolating someone is part of the grooming process; this is distinct from boundary-blurring as this particular behaviour made Alice feel dependent on her supervisor. However, these isolation tactics occurred alongside boundary-blurring behaviours such as spending time with her in his office late at night. Indeed, Alice described how although 'my supervisor had known me for four years before anything actually happened', she felt 'groomed' from early on. Alice began her doctoral studies with this lecturer as her supervisor. During her PhD, he further isolated her by refusing to sign off her permission to go to conferences and made sure she was solely reliant on him. She described how:

Alarm bells were already ringing, but I didn't know who to talk to, or even what complaint I would have made, because at that point he hadn't exactly come on to me. He would buy me presents and invite me back to his office at two in the morning. Texting every day. It wasn't ever, 'Have sex with me and I will pass your grade.' It wasn't ever as kind of blatant as that, but there was a weird atmosphere.

Alice opened up a discussion with her supervisor of the 'weird vibe' between them, and during this discussion she admitted she was attracted to him. Eventually, they became involved in a sexual and romantic relationship. Alice thought that this relationship was in part her fault for starting this conversation and so felt complicit in the problems that arose later.

Her department had a policy that supervisors could not be in relationships with their students. To get around this, the head of department (HoD) nominally transferred Alice's supervision for her final year of her PhD to another faculty member who worked in a different research area. He explained that this was on paper only, and she would still be supervised by her old supervisor, now her boyfriend. The result was that she got no supervision at all. She tried to tentatively raise concerns with two other lecturers in the department, but both followed the 'romantic' narrative of seeing the relationship as a great love story, despite the fact that her supervisor was married.

During the interview, a few years after these events, Alice reflected that 'at the time I might have said [the relationship] was consensual but looking back I don't really think that it was'. Her account demonstrates that what is deemed to be consensual can

change over time as people reflect back on past experience. Indeed, Glaser and Thorpe found in a study of 464 female psychologists that 17% stated they had sexual contact with supervisor or professor during studies and reported feeling 'neutral' about this at the time it occurred but most felt in retrospect it had been damaging in some way (1986). Glaser and Thorpe's finding, and Alice's reflection, draw attention to the ways in which misconduct may not be recognised until some time afterwards. Indeed, the very subtlety of grooming or boundary-blurring behaviours meant that interviewees spent much time and emotional labour questioning whether what they were experiencing was normal, unable to trust their own perceptions.

Alice's account shows some of the ways that her positioning as a student within an HE institution created conditions that made it difficult or impossible for her to freely consent to a sexual and romantic relationship. Her supervisor had power over her professionally, in assessing and evaluating her work, and gatekeeping her involvement with the wider academic community. His collegial relationship with other academics protected him, and in their departmental culture relationships between staff and students were normalised. For example, when he told his HoD about the relationship, the HoD congratulated him and made arrangements that were convenient for him and the department, but Alice was never asked what she wanted or needed in order to complete her studies.

Similar to Andrea's experience, Alice's supervisor had helped her to get PhD funding, which created a dependence and a relationship of gratitude. Whitley and Page explain how the hierarchical teaching and learning relationships in higher education enable sexual harassment:

Students are structurally positioned within the university to trust those who teach them and those they learn from. In fact, the pedagogical relationship relies upon students being open to accepting the feedback their teachers provide. This creates a possibility for institutionally-enabled manipulation of students by those upon whom they are intellectually dependent (2015: 39).

These hierarchies are compounded when they exist within a heterosexualised dynamic between male lecturer and female student (how this dynamic is experienced by LGBTQ+ students was not revealed by the data from this study). Andrea's and Alice's accounts raise questions about how higher education institutions reproduce and rely on heterosexualised norms of interaction as part of teaching and learning cultures. In the encounters Andrea describes with her supervisor, this gendered socialisation reveals how heterosexualised norms, practices and identities structure everyday interactions as well as being institutionalised into formal structures of power. These behaviours are concealed within the ways in which heterosexual norms of behaviour (Holland et al., 2004) map onto teaching and learning relationships in HE, whereby the (male) lecturer is in a dominant position, the expert who is in control, and the (female) student is required as part of her role to respect his expertise.

Conclusion

This article has discussed students' experiences of grooming and boundary-blurring behaviours from academic staff. We have described boundary-blurring behaviours as those that transgress (often tacit) professional boundaries, and grooming as a pattern of these behaviours over time between people in positions of unequal power that may lead

to an abuse of power. Various axes of inequality shaped students' experiences of sexual or romantic approaches or engagement with academic staff. Gender is one of these inequalities, but there were other inequalities that created the 'invisible structure of power' where students' ability to consent to sexual or romantic behaviours was compromised. Within this group of interviewees these included disability, age and class. However, it was not only wider social inequalities that shaped the context for grooming and boundary-blurring behaviours, but also the relative status of academic staff and students within higher education institutions, such as the material and academic rewards for which students rely on staff. In this way, when unequal power structures of HE (lecturer-student) map onto unequal power structures of gender (male-female) and other inequalities, vulnerability is multiplied.

Unlike much of the literature on 'grey areas', and indeed on abusive relationships, most of the behaviours we have described in this article took place *before* any sexual contact or relationship was entered into. Students, in these situations, tended to think they were primarily in a teaching/learning relationship but the lecturers appeared to be following heteronormative scripts to treat the relationship as a potentially sexualised or romantic one in which they had the right to sexual/romantic access to students. Against previous theorisations of adult grooming that have foregrounded the intentions of the groomer (Brackenridge, 2001), we suggest that intentionality should not be a defining feature of grooming but instead the experience of the person targeted should be foregrounded. This allows a focus on the pattern of behaviours over time and their impact on the person targeted; it is important to note that while the behaviours described above might seem less serious than more explicit forms of sexual violence, this particular measure of the severity of behaviours does not map onto the impacts described by interviewees.

Indeed, the patterns of behaviour over time, in a context where interviewees could not exit the situation, could have very serious, long-term impacts (see Bull and Rye, 2018).

This article has focused on two interviewees' accounts while pointing towards wider patterns. Further research needs to explore how sexuality, disability and racialized inequalities can affect consent within relationships of unequal power, as this sample could not speak to the full range of experiences that students in different subject positions might experience. Attention is also needed towards 'grooming' relationships between staff members as these may be even more difficult to recognise and label.

The boundary-blurring and grooming behaviours described in this article have scarcely, if at all, been recognised by higher education institutions. While prohibiting staff-student sexual and romantic relationships does clarify and professionalise this boundary, this is not a catch-all solution to addressing the issues, not least the gender inequalities, arising from the current state of affairs. Alice's department, as noted above, had a policy that supervisors could not be in a relationship with students. However, this policy failed to take into account the power imbalance in such relationships, lacked any process for dealing with this issue (see Westmarland, 2018), or any concern for student welfare, so the actions of the department only served to isolate and disadvantage her further.

Policies therefore need to define consent in ways that consider the experiences described in this article. This not only signals to staff and students what is acceptable, but such definitions can also be drawn on in investigations if complaints are made.

While having a good policy is no guarantee of a good process, it is at least a starting point for a more sophisticated conversation around consent within relationships of unequal power and professional boundaries.

This article also points to implications for thinking about structural inequalities in higher education. While gender inequalities have been the focus of critical attention for some time, the analysis presented above suggests that working towards gender equality without attention to racial equality and other forms of discrimination, and the hierarchical power structures of academia, will be insufficient to address sexual misconduct (see also National Academies, 2018, 135). Given the ways in which, as this article has described, academia is saturated with power, greater recognition is needed of how this power creates vulnerability and risk within teaching and learning relationships.

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