

## Degrees of Laddishness: Laddism in Higher Education

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Over the last 2-3 years we've witnessed in the UK a sharp increase in the number of concerns voiced about 'laddism', 'laddish' or 'lad' cultures in H.E. These have been evident in media reports such as these:

Student 'lad culture' has become a national issue. The phenomenon, often associated with the website [Unilad](#), has become a catch-all term for anything from boozy boisterousness to casual misogyny and even sexual abuse. But despite numerous media reports on laddism, universities still have little idea of how widespread its effects are. (Guardian.co.uk, 05/04/13)

Lad culture's beery, shouty voice is dominating student life and alienating women  
(*The Observer*, 28/4/13)

Interestingly, while concerns about laddism *in HE* are now fairly common in the UK press, a decade ago it was concerns about laddism in *secondary schools* that were common, where worries such as this were voiced:

We have to crack the lad culture that stops too many young boys doing well at school. . . . The culture tells boys that it is fine to play around and not work hard. But this harms their chances of doing well, getting their exams and fulfilling their potential. (David Miliband, cited by Clare, 2003: 5)

The girls' lead over boys at GCSE has been put down to the growth of a 'laddish anti-learning culture' among teenage boys. . . . Educationalists pinpointed a possible cause several years ago in an attitude among teenage boys that it is uncool to be bookish, a swot, or good in class, coining the term 'laddish anti-learning culture'. Liz Heron (2002: 2).

Although both express concerns about laddism in education, the emphases of the concerns differ somewhat. In relation to *H.E.* the concerns are largely about drinking, sexism, misogyny, and in some cases rape-supportive cultures. They are not about teaching and learning *per se*, although there are clearly likely to be impacts on T+L. The concerns in relation to *secondary schooling* on the other hand were largely about laddism affecting boys' learning and results (and to some degree girls' learning, although the major emphasis was on boys).

This raises questions about the nature of the term 'laddism' – how it is used, and variations over time and context. We won't get into this in depth in our presentation, although we might return to it in the discussion time. But we will explore how HE students perceive and understand laddism. And, relating to the differences in emphasis flagged above, we'll do

this in relation to what might broadly be referred to as the social life of university and T/L contexts. So, we'll pick up on the both sets of concerns – social and academic.

So our overall aim is to provide insights into how laddism is understood, perpetuated, legitimated and challenged among undergraduates in two British universities. We'll explore the perceived benefits of subscribing to laddish masculinities, and also the costs of laddishness for male and female students in both student social life and teaching/learning environments.

We discuss the ways that laddism can be problematic for men and women, and explore the degree to which laddism might be regarded as existing in a continuum of potential masculine subject positionings.

### Overview

We'll briefly outline the 2 research projects

Then outline how laddism is perceived

Give key findings from the two projects before providing a summary and points for consideration.

### The research

We draw on findings from two research studies into 'laddism' or 'lad' cultures in higher education.

The first, undertaken as a PhD by [Steve] Dempster between 2002 and 2004 (awarded 2007), involved undergraduates studying a range of subjects in a pre-1992 university. In November 2002, 1380 questionnaires were sent to all full-time male undergraduates in 10 subject departments – those within each of the university's five faculties which had either the highest or lowest percentage registered for full-time first degrees. Of these questionnaires 180 were returned and nineteen students also took part in a semi-structured interview. These were joined by three students who had undertaken pilot interviews and two who were recommended to Dempster as they could give a perspective on laddishness in male sports teams. The sample was exclusively male, white and predominantly middle-class. Though participants were asked to comment on their academic studies, the primary focus of this research was how laddishness shaped male students' gender identifications and impacted on behaviours in student social groupings.

The second study by [Carolyn] Jackson, Dempster and [Lucie] Pollard and funded by SES took place between 2011-2013. It focused on the impact of laddism on students' approaches to study and on the teaching and learning contexts of a Sports Science programme in a post-1992 institution.

We observed six, 2 hour lectures, and interviewed 33 students (11 women, 22 men) and five members of staff (two women and three men).

Almost all of our interviewees self-identified as working class, 83% of Sports Science students are male, and 44% of all students on the programme are mature.

### How is laddism perceived?

Despite differences in the two studies in terms of research foci, institutions where the fieldwork was undertaken, sample demographics, and despite a decade passing between the empirical phases of each study, there were similarities and continuities in how laddishness/laddism is conceptualised in undergraduate cultures:

I mean like, I wouldn't say violent but you know sort of stand up for yourself sort of thing; you don't want to be some little weedy thing because then that's not going to be one of the lads, if you're like a little weed. I don't know, handling your drink ... and you know sort of a hit with the ladies, obviously if you're sort of well gay, if you're gay, you're not going to be linked to one of the lads (Luke, 2002-04 study).

There is this laddish culture with drinking and stuff and I think it goes with every university. ... I'd say to include sleeping around as well sometimes, I think, and yeah, just, you know, looking to be popular as well. So ... in a team, like in a sports team or whatever, like say the rugby team or something, you know, and quite a big figure in the team. (2011-13 study).

In both studies, undergraduate laddishness was characterised by drinking, interest in sport, being part of a crowd, heterosexual posturing, 'scoring' with women, and espousing cavalier attitudes to academic study.

Furthermore, such characteristics share parallels with the recent media concerns mentioned earlier, and with the definition of laddism that emerged from Phipps and Young's (2013) research and the follow up consultation by the NUS published in November last year called 'Confronting 'lad culture' in higher education'.

Interestingly, the continuities in UK undergraduate laddishness can be traced as far back as, at least, studies of male PE teacher trainees in the 1990s (Flintoff 1993, Skelton 1993) and, anecdotally, to 1989 when Dempster first entered university.

We'll turn now to look briefly at a few of the key findings from both projects.

### SD's Research

A key finding of the 2002-04 study was that laddishness has cultural authoritativeness in providing a way in which interviewees could describe the norms of masculinity for men in their social location. However, contrary to Steve's expectations, only 34% ( $N = 60$ ) of questionnaire respondents self-identified as "lads". Furthermore, interviews revealed a gamut of complex, nuanced and sometimes contradictory relationships with the laddish template and with the way they had self-identified as "lads" or otherwise in the questionnaire. Six out of eight questionnaire identified "lads" indicated that they were unwilling to be seen wholly as "one of the lads", while three interviewees who had rejected laddish subject positions in questionnaires engaged in 'buying back into' laddishness in interviews (Wetherell and Edley, 1999, p 346). A further key finding from this research was how both "lads" and "non-lads" identified men's rugby and football players as 'real' or 'proper lads', they refused to validate these students' behaviours as 'exemplars' of manhood.

Laddishness acted as a 'culturally authoritative' discourse (Connell, 1995, p 30) through which respondents could verbalise, compare, and evaluate their approaches to masculine self-presentation, and construct a taxonomy of masculine subject positions available in their particular social context. They also recognised that laddishness was influential in shaping behaviours within situations where male undergraduates either chose (or felt compelled) to act in a "masculine" manner in order to gain peer-group inclusion. This was particularly the case on nights out where laddishness and heavy drinking were mutually reinforcing (cf. Gough and Edwards, 1998; Rutherford, 1998), and during the transition to university where these young men used laddishness as a means of 'fitting into' a perceived masculine hierarchy and be positioned by their peers as "normal" males.

Though most interviewees claimed they drew upon aspects of laddishness, firstly they tended to describe their engagements with this template of masculinity as a temporary 'front' (George), or 'persona' (John).

I don't believe in laddishness... I believe I can shift my identity to that. But I'm not doing it to show, I'm not doing it to show people, I'm doing it because I enjoy a bit of laddishness you know, just the boys sort of thing (Alex: 2002-04 study (Dempster, 2007)).

Secondly, they attempted to negotiate a subject-position that sat well with the laddish template but was more moderated than the "full" version of laddishness practised by members of the men's rugby and football teams. These sportsmen were *othered* as 'superficial', 'thugs' and 'dickheads', and their performances of laddishness were considered, counter-intuitively, as evidence of a dearth of masculinity:

I think ... [lads' masculinity] is probably more superficial, perhaps... I think that anything that people think has to be portrayed overtly is possibly in question. It's almost like a reaction to an anxiety about it; it's kind of, they're questioning it themselves, and the easiest way to dispel any interrogation of their masculinity is to overtly show it. And I think I'm more happy in myself perhaps than I don't feel the need to, you, know be part of that (John, 2002-04 study (Dempster, 2007)).

This also resonates with discourses about effortless achievement – those who have to work hard to demonstrate their masculinity are not authentically masculine.

In all, the data suggested that interviewees were engaged in reconciling the potential benefits of laddishness while attempting to avoid being tarred with the same beer-swilling, loutish and sexist brushes as the university's men rugby and football teams. This suggested that laddishness could be seen as a *continuum* of potential gendered subject positionings that existed between two poles: the extreme "proper" laddishness of rugby and football players, and its less well-defined opposite ('boring', 'lightweight' 'geeky'). Rather than committing to subject positions at either pole and, furthermore, conceptualising these poles as mutually exclusive, fixed, either/or subject positions, the young men in this study moved between the two poles, temporarily practising laddishness *by degree*. This allowed them to

dissociate both with the extremities of laddishness and with the undesirable 'lightweight' (Alex) or 'geek' (Nick) subject position. Indeed, the majority of interviewees rejected subject positions at either end of the laddish continuum attempted to find a balanced or "ordinary" subject position, usually through balancing their academic behaviours with an active social life (cf. Frosh, et al., 2002; Jackson, 2006)

### The 2011-13 research

As suggested earlier, there were substantial overlaps between this project and Steve's earlier one in terms of how laddism generally was conceptualised and understood. The same was true of the ways in which students spoke about degrees of laddism, with more extreme forms being associated with particular male sports clubs, especially football and even more so, rugby players (this was also the case in the NUS projects). Here though, we'll focus on how laddism was conceptualised in T-L contexts.

### **So who is laddish in T+L contexts and how is it manifest?**

What did the students say?

There's a big group of them [lads]; they turn up about twenty minutes late ... and I've complained about them a few times ... I sit like right at the front [of the lecture theatre], so for me to be able to hear them like it's affecting my learning ... I've had to ask for extra help when I shouldn't have [had to] because I would have understood it if they weren't talking, so that's annoying. But that's just boys isn't it! ... but they just don't seem to really care, they just think it's cool to sit there and talk. Like the worst is a Monday morning because they'll talk about football and you don't really want to hear about football when you're in an anatomy class. (Paris, Y1 Sports Science)

Students suggested that laddism in teaching-learning contexts included: talking and generally being loud (which disrupted classes); being a joker; throwing stuff; arriving late; and being rude and disrespectful to lecturers.

Interestingly, these behaviours overlap considerably with those reported by secondary schools pupils as constituting laddism in class. Mia, a mature student (Y2, sports science) described how it disrupted T+L:

Interviewer: And does it actually disrupt the teaching sometimes, do you think?

Mia: Yeah, it does, yeah, big time ... I can hear them laughing and joking behind me, and that alone, that just stops whoever's teaching to tell them to be quiet. Or if they catch them throwing something at one of their friends then that stops the class as well, and it's just little things like that that they do. Or even, some of them will make stupid noises, just silly noises that their friends will find funny - nobody else does - and that, again, would stop the class. ...

Interviewer: Does that tend to be blokes, are women involved?

Mia: It's the guys. No, the women, there's only some girls that will be there and you'll hear them laugh, but they're not, there's no girls on our course that act like the boys where they'll start throwing things and being really destructive.

In our H.E. teaching-learning contexts there was general consensus that, as suggested by Mia, where there were disruptions in class these were caused by men, and mostly young men.

And while many of the women (esp the mature women and the mature men) found such disruptions a problem and were the ones who challenged it, some of the 'lads' themselves presented it as 'just a bit of fun' that never goes too far:

Oh yeah, well we always banter between ourselves. I mean yeah definitely, like everyone banter I think, especially when there's a lot of lads together. And then, I don't know, a little bit with the lecturers. But it never oversteps or anything, I wouldn't say, it's just a bit of fun, you know, without it like lectures would be boring. (laughs) (Lewis, Y2, Sports Science).

Interestingly, Patrick thought laddism wasn't a problem because the majority of the students are male:

So, do you consider yourself to be a bit of a lad?

Yeah. I take part in a lot of sports and enjoy it, see a lot of games, go to the gym.

... So would you think that there's a lot of laddish behaviour in class at your university?

Yeah, sometimes.

What sort of things happen?

Erm, usually the main one's when one of the lecturers come in, he's quite funny, and he talks about, he talks about mostly sexual things, he's quite funny. ... So, yeah, he was having a bit of a laugh while he's teaching as well.

...

Alright, so it's not just the students who can be a bit of a lad, it's also the lecturer?

Yeah.

Alright then. So, you've said there's a fair bit of laddishness in class?

Right.

Does that disturb other people, do you think ... is that a problem, do you perceive, in class or?

I don't think so because the majority of people in our class are male. (Patrick, Y1a, Sports Science).

Patrick's comments not only homogenise men but they also dismiss women and make them completely invisible. Actually, challenges to disruptive laddish behaviours in lectures came principally from women who, according to the accounts of student and lectures, were anything but invisible when challenging the lads. It is to challenges that we now turn.

### **Challenging Laddism**

- Girls and women are frequently discursively positioned as having civilising effects on boys and men.

- Our H.E. interview data suggested that women, even though they constituted a small minority of students, often ‘moderated the behaviour’ of the lads in lectures, as Saisha (Y1, sports science), a mature student, reports:

... With that group of boys sort of like being rude or maybe being noisy, would that affect your learning do you think, in the class?

Saisha: Yeah, it does, it does, it does when you’re trying to listen to a lecturer explaining to you something you don’t know; you’re learning something new and you’ve got people in the background making noise, disrupting the class. It does interrupt your learning and it interrupts with listening, especially if ... you don’t get something because someone’s been making noise in the background and then you have to keep asking the lecturer ‘oh can you repeat yourself’. Even some lecturers find it quite difficult to constantly have to be talking over somebody because somebody wants to be rude in the back. ... a couple of times I had to say, and a couple of my other classmates had to say, you know, ‘quieten down, I’m here to learn, I pay my fees to come here, if you don’t want to learn come out of the class’.

- Indeed, some of the women students are presented by Hazel (Y1, Sports Science) as the only ones ‘courageous’ enough to challenge the lads:

Interviewer: Do you think the laddish behaviour affects other people’s learning?

Hazel: Sometimes, coz I know some students that sit at the back can get quite loud while lecturers are talking, so I know some of the girls at the front always have a go at them for talking too loud, or for talking at all during a lecture.

Interviewer: So students at the back are talking during the lecture?

Hazel: Yeah.

Interviewer: Right. And is it just a few people who find that a nuisance, or would you say most people?

Hazel: I’d say it was most people, but it’s only those couple of girls at the front that actually have the courage to speak up and actually tell them to be quiet.

The assertiveness, strength and courage of women students in tackling laddish students is also conveyed by John, one of the lecturers:

‘one student a couple years ago, she was great, a very strong lass who stood up, turned round and said, “Will you shut the fuck up, I’m trying to learn”. And they did ... peer pressure gets them a lot more coz suddenly they’re made to look fools by a girl, and actually, they didn’t like that.’

So the impact of lads was felt to be very negative by many students. What about on the lads themselves?

### *Impact on the lads*

There was general consensus that disruptive laddish behaviours decreased as students progressed through university, Students attributed this decrease to two main factors.

- First, whereas first year marks didn't count towards their final degree, those from years two and three did so students reported settling down and taking work more seriously in years two and three: 'First year ... you're a little bit sort of careless sometimes and you might miss the odd lecture and stuff ... also you find out you only need the 40% [to pass the year] and it doesn't really go towards your degree' (Jack, Y3, sports science and football coaching)
- However, not all students had the opportunity to settle down: despite the relatively low pass mark, many of the most disruptive students apparently did not make it beyond the first year.
- Indeed, some described the first year as time for 'weeding out' those not 'cut out' for university:

From year 1 to year 2 you see the biggest drop, where you lose all the students that either are not really cut out for the university life or don't really have the drive to carry on to university. And I guess that's the thing with year 1, it weeds out the people that are not really that focused and want to go on to year 2, and I guess year 2 to year 3's pretty much the same as well. (Ryan, Y3, sports science)

#### Summary and points for consideration ...

Our projects, like the NUS projects, suggest there are reasons to be concerned about laddish cultures. And, like the NUS, we call for more research in this sphere.

It's worth noting that Carolyn and Vanita Sundaram (York) have just got funding from SRHE for a project entitled *Are 'lad cultures' a problem in Higher Education? Exploring the perspectives and responses of HEI staff*. They are commencing this project now, and it will explore 'lad cultures' in higher education (H.E.) from the perspectives of a variety of staff across six universities.

Objectives:

- 1) To explore and analyse if and how lad culture is manifest in different H.E. contexts (we will explore differences within and between universities);
- 2) To explore and analyse if, how, and for whom the manifestations are problematic;
- 3) To investigate what, if anything, universities are doing to tackle lad cultures;
- 4) To consider whether universities could and should do more to tackle lad cultures, and how they might do this.

Currently, there are more questions than answers.

It's important to think about what is included by the umbrella term 'laddism'. 'Laddism' is perceived to be multifaceted. If we are to tackle it, we need to identify the different elements of it – some may need tackling in diff ways from others – e.g. inside and outside class 'laddism'.



Steve's research suggests that conceptualising laddishness as a continuum permits wider, nuanced and complex analyses of how individuals perform and respond to this template of masculinity. This represents a flexible, broad categorisation of how individuals within a particular social location position themselves and others in relation to laddishness, with each position being an individualised amalgam of practices – embracing some facets of the laddish template, while resisting others.

In both interview studies male interviewees positioned themselves at the less extreme end of the laddish continuum, and were critical of their most laddish peers and engaged critically with the stereotypes, assumptions and norms that are influential in their behaviours and identifications as men.

This suggests that a 'social norms marketing' approach (Hoover, 2004, p 32) may be a helpful tool in challenging some of the excesses of student lad culture. These recommend disrupting people's assumptions and misperceptions about an issue through research, and then disseminating the findings through a variety of media. If Steve's findings that even self-identified lads are at odds with extreme laddishness are valid, and "real" lads hear from their male peers that they would rather not associate with them, then this could influence them to reduce their more negative or harmful behaviours. Such an approach may also reinforce to those practising laddishness in its milder forms that the line between "banter" and "harassment" is a thin one.

While we are particularly concerned about the implications of laddism for women students, like the NUS, we are also aware that male students face a number of issues related to laddish masculinity. The perceived requirement to act laddishly—particularly during their first days as undergraduates—can promote cavalier attitudes towards drinking and risk taking, and sustain discourses of gender that could be potentially damaging for their health, well-being, attainments, and their relationships with others.

It will be interesting to see how, through Jackson and Sundaram's work, HEIs are responding to laddism (if at all), and also to see how successful the actions of the NUS to tackle laddism are.