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Approaching “sensitive” topics: Criticality and Permissibility in Research-led Teaching about Children, Sexualities, and Schooling

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This paper considers the feasibility and desirability of radical, critical pedagogies in teaching Higher Education students about “sensitive” topics with children, sexualities, and schooling used as an example to explore this. Reflecting on early career research-led teaching, I confront anxieties surrounding decisions about *what* and *how* to teach children’s geographies of sexualities in light of student and institutional expectations and evaluations, and in relation to how colleagues taught on the same modules. Scrutinising my pedagogy with respect to what could have been more evocative teaching and uncomfortable learning, I question the extent to which I achieved the radical and critical potential I foresaw in introducing teaching on children and sexualities; teaching which alongside student and institutional expectations and evaluations has been informed through broader social norms of acceptability and permissibility and contemporary imperatives for knowledge to be “relevant” and “useful”. In gesturing towards more challenging teaching, I consider the appropriateness of trigger/ content “warnings” and explore speakability (after Monk) as a strategy for approaching “sensitive” topics, including age of consent. As an alternative to trigger/ content warnings, I explore principles of content previews/ forecasts when broaching “sensitive” topics, although I remain critical of what constitutes “sensitive” topics/content throughout.

Keywords: children; sexualities; research-led teaching; sensitive topics; evaluations; trigger/ content warnings

Introduction

In the 1999 JGHE Symposium *Teaching Sexualities in Geography* (Knopp, 1999), England (1999, p. 97) initiated a discussion of *Sexing Geography* where sexing “relates not only to *what* we teach, but also *how* we teach”. Since then, scholars, including Browne (2005), Nairn (2003) and Simon (2009) have provided further reflections on “sexing curricula”, often in conjunction with earlier scholarship (Binnie, 1997; Skelton, 1997; Valentine, 1997). This work includes placing the personal in pedagogy, reflecting on gendered and sexualised fieldwork teaching spaces and the (re)production of geographical knowledge, and challenges and discomforts of feminist pedagogies. Emerging out of this context, this *Teaching Geographies of Sexualities: 20 Years On* JGHE Symposium paper complements more recent pedagogical research (particularly Evans, this issue) on broaching “sensitive” (geographical) issues by more broadly enquiring into criticality and permissibility in research-led teaching about (children’s) geographies of sexualities. Focusing on “sensitive” topics, “(in)appropriate” content, mode of delivery, and the suitability of “content warnings”, the paper makes novel and unique contributions to existing geographical and pedagogical literatures by considering *what* and *how* we research and teach higher education (geography) students about sexualities, children and/or schooling. In doing so, the paper responds to provocations concerning the sub-fields of children’s geographies and geographies of sexualities (Philo, 2011; Vanderbeck, 2008) while remaining highly relevant to the broader discipline and cognate subjects.

The paper also comes as a timely response to a recent JGHE position paper and Editorial on the characteristics of an “appropriate” and “challenging” higher education geography curriculum (Kneale, 2018), and the more important function of pedagogic research “to explore the socio-cultural construction of the curriculum and its subliminal messages of social acceptability and control” (Haigh, Cotton, & Hall, 2015, p. 305). While, in light of the Research/ Teaching Excellence Framework (REF and TEF), Kneale’s (2018, p. 488) publication focuses on research-led teaching which simultaneously supports critical enquiry skills while “encourage[ing] staff to be less adventurous in their pedagogic approaches”, Haigh et al. (2015, p. 306) examine unquestioned and inherited traditions in higher education where “subconscious elements of the curriculum define what is taught, how it should be taught, practised and assessed, and also how teachers and learners are supposed to interact”. Citing MacPherson (2011), Haigh et al. (2015) argue that conventional pedagogic research in geography tends to explore formally planned or explicit curriculum at expense of “the null curriculum”: subjects/topics ignored, avoided or rejected. This paper is attuned to these pressing debates and responds by examining tendencies to be less adventurous in explicit (children’s) geographies of sexualities curricula while accessing the appropriateness of an arguably more challenging “null curriculum”.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. First, I provide a broader context for children's geographies of sexualities, focusing in particular on evaded provocations concerning children's sexuality (Philo, 2011; Vanderbeck, 2008) before reflecting on *what* and *how* I have researched and taught about children and sexualities in geography and cognate subjects. Building on Nast's 1999 *Teaching Sexualities in Geography* JGHE Symposium paper, this work includes (re)considering student evaluations pertaining to "relevance" and "usefulness" of existing research-led teaching. In the second part of the paper, I use age of consent as one example of more challenging teaching, and I introduce Monk's (2011) notion of speakability as one possible way of broaching such squeamish topics (Philo, 2011). The final part of the paper reflects on the appropriateness of "content warnings" for "sensitive" topics and implications for student (non)participation.

Contextualising children's geographies of sexualities

Children's geographies of sexualities refers to two related, yet often separate sub-fields in human geography (Valentine, 2008): children's geographies (see Holloway & Valentine, 2004; Skelton & Aitken, 2018) and geographies of sexualities (see Bell & Valentine, 1995; Browne, Lim, & Brown, 2009). In the *Teaching Sexualities in Geography* JGHE Symposium, England (1999) began to trace and critique emerging geographies of sexualities teaching, particularly absence of *heterosexualities* and following this scholars, such as Browne (2005), Nairn (2003) and Simon (2009) highlighted other considerations. This work includes "frankly facing uncomfortable conversations" (Simon, 2009, p. 18) in using as stimuli for class discussion films such as *Paris is Burning* (Livingstone, 1991). More recently, Browne (this issue) has focused on the appropriateness of encouraging UK undergraduate geography students to reflect on heterosexual spatialities in the "here and now". This work is in addition to that by Evans (this issue) on supporting students' critical engagement via inquiry-based learning when broaching Female Genital Mutation/ Cutting (FGM/C) as a "sensitive" (geographical) issue. This pedagogical research has challenged the substance and remit of (geographies of) sexualities teaching; yet – to date – children (whether in terms of how or if they should feature) has not been the focus of critique.

Elsewhere, Vanderbeck (2008, p. 394) has commented how scholars in subfields other than children's geographies "often seem happy enough to know that someone's minding the children". This observation comes both as a critique of how children's geographies scholarship sometimes rarely inflicts other geographical subfields (see Horton & Kraftl, 2005; Valentine, 2008) and as a critique of children's geographies supposedly reaching "critical mass" (Aitken, 2004). Vanderbeck (2008, p. 393) brings existing culture of debate in children's geographies to the fore, arguing that there has

been unacknowledged and unresolved tensions relating to “dominant theoretical assumptions and their political implications”; namely, children’s agency, autonomy and “competence” (see Holloway, Holt, & Mills, 2018; Kraftl, 2013). Despite these labours emerging as “a critical project”, Vanderbeck (2008, p. 399) concedes that “critical energies have largely been directed outward”. This outward focus is particularly apparent in relation to sexual consent, Vanderbeck remarks, before provocatively asking “are young people sufficiently ‘competent’ to consent to sexual activity? As Levine (2002, p. 71) reminds us, age of consent laws define young people ‘as categorically incompetent to say either yes or no to sex’, yet children’s geographies literature has mostly given this issue a wide berth” (2008, p.398).

The exceptions Vanderbeck (2008) alludes to could include works by Collins (2006), Holloway, Valentine, and Bingham (2000), Thomas (2004), Valentine (2000, 2003), and Valentine, Skelton, and Butler (2003), all of which have somewhat brought children and sexualities together in geographical explorations. However, Vanderbeck’s (2008) specific arguments concerning avoidance of certain topics (particularly sexual consent) and possible limits of children’s sexual agency, autonomy, and “competence” have since only been partially addressed in Philo’s 2011 *Children’s Geographies* Editorial: Foucault, sexuality and when not to listen to children. Referring to tensions in Foucault’s accounts concerning the permissibility of adult-child sexual relations, Philo (2011, p. 125/26) outlines the point that:

while scholars almost take it as read that they should question absolutes/binaries, notably that which previously sealed-off “capable adult” from “incapable child”, there remains a reluctance to do the same for [the] boundary between “childhood” and “sexuality”, and even more so when the proposition arises of sexual encounters across the adult-child divide

Philo (2011, p. 126) acknowledges possible merits of such an approach, particularly as it “facilitates the transmission of otherwise unheard children’s views into more formal arenas of adult policy-making”. Against the grain of an orthodoxy of child-centralism which Vanderbeck (2008) began to problematize, Philo (2011, p. 126) also concedes that:

there are moments when it is imperative to remain more conventionally Foucauldian [insofar as] not being “seduced” by children’s own voices but instead retaining a (thoroughly and reflectively critical) sense of the adult discourses – the understandings and prescriptions derived from informed adult agents (scholars included) – which cannot but “see further and deeper” than is ever possible for the children themselves.

As Philo (2011, p. 126) concludes, the examples of sexual consent and adult-child sexual relations may well signal the limits of child-centric children's geographies as we "recoil from taking seriously what [children] actually feel and say in realms such as the sexual that are more 'discomforting' for us".

I cast my mind back to premature satisfaction felt when – in taking up Philo's (2011) conundrum about deciding when (not) to listen to children concerning matters of sexuality – I co-organised panel and paper sessions at the 2013 RGS-IBG International Conference (see Ali and Hall, 2014 for inspired Special Issue in *Global Studies of Childhood*) which broadly responded to Philo's provocations. This moment, in which an established interdisciplinary panel of scholars (Debbie Epstein, Deborah Youdell, Gill Valentine, Mark McCormack and Robert Vanderbeck) came together with early career academics and third-sector representatives felt – at least for me – like an important moment in which to unpack Philo's (2011) arguments. Yet, in retrospect, what was largely then and subsequently sidestepped were Philo's more specific and uncomfortable arguments regarding adult-child sexual binaries and when it may be appropriate to listen to children concerning their potential desire for sexual relations with adults.

To date, published research (including my own) continues to evade Philo's (2011) niggling and lingering provocations on the possible limits of "child-centric" geographies of sexualities with references to Philo's 2011 editorial only briefly acknowledging broader points about children's voice and agency in general discussions in children's geographies (see Kraftl, 2013; Mills, 2017; Pimlott-Wilson & Hall, 2017; Tisdall & Punch, 2012). Arguably, Philo's (2011) provocations have not been relevant to my research on gender and sexual equality and inclusion in education (Author, dates) or the research of others. Even if relevant, in an already sensitive area of research where discussion of children and sexualities can incite adult "moral panics" about the supposed corruption of innocent, naïve and vulnerable children (see the No Outsiders project in UK primary schools; see DePalma & Atkinson, 2009), career suicide could follow further consideration of children's sexual agency, autonomy, competence and, dare I say pleasure and bodies (see Talburt, 2009). Yet, consider this politics of research, including what Kneale (2018) terms "wicked problems" (unknown, unresolved issues in research) which are so crucial to broach with students as part of research training. Surely these may well have an absent presence in research-led teaching where – certainly in my case – applied outcomes have been foregrounded over potentially awkward discussions and uncomfortable learning (Dowler, 2002; Simon, 2009). In a contemporary climate of UK higher education, where employment-driven students increasingly – and supposedly – need only practical tools and "useful" and "relevant" knowledge to enact "societal change", awkward discussions and uncomfortable learning may be easily – and hastily – side-lined (cf. Horton & Kraftl, 2005; Kneale, 2018). After all, what is likely to be perceived as impractical,

irrelevant, and perhaps not immediately useful is also likely to attract “negative” evaluations from students-as-customers (Nast, 1999; Nixon, Scullion, & Hearn, 2018).

Student and institutional expectations and evaluations

I vividly remember a question during an interview for a human geography lectureship relating to the ability to meet students’ – and invariably institutional – expectations in delivering “practical” teaching about children, sexuality and schooling. The question, which perhaps unfairly cast the university’s undergraduate geography students as unwilling or unable to engage with critical or too theoretical material redoubled my efforts to present research-led teaching grounded in a teacher training type approach where practical tools and learnings are emphasised.

This framing of prospective research-led teaching intensified in relation to third-year Geographies of Education students which were predominantly imagined as teachers-in-waiting who enrolled on this popular, optional module to gain practical, “useful” knowledge in anticipation of PGCE applications¹. I had previously delivered research-led teaching to undergraduate and postgraduate Education Studies students in modules such as “Developing Inclusive Practice” and “Inclusion: Embracing Diversity” at three UK HE institutions² with content premised on applied outcomes of research, so in securing this lectureship I heavily relied on this experience and in subsequent teaching I followed through with this approach. Approaching research-led teaching in this way (ensuring applied outcomes come to the fore) is not something I want to wholeheartedly criticise. Indeed, arguments could be made to have more of this type of teaching where it might currently be lacking (see Kneale, 2018). What I want to problematise is the potential tendency for research-led teaching to rely too heavily on applied outcomes, especially when concerning topics like sexuality, children and/or schooling which runs the risk of not broaching deeper and more complex issues, despite potentially being awkward and uncomfortable for students and staff.

Without losing sight of the significance of evaluations,³ I have been prompted to reflect on my approach to research-led teaching as a fixed-term, early career academic wanting to make a good impression and not rock the boat (Kogan, Schoenfeld-Tacher, & Hellyer, 2010; Nast, 1999; Nixon et al., 2018). That reflection has been informed by Hill, Walkington & King’s (2018) recommendation to examine research-led pedagogy to see if – and how – it benefits student learning, given that supposedly “effective” research-teaching synergies can be assumed (see Healey, 2005) and Simon’s (2009) consideration of the appropriateness of “uncomfortable discussions” when broaching gender/sexualities.

Thus, in taking up my first temporary lectureship, I became module convenor⁴ for a third-year undergraduate geography module on gender and sexualities. As structured, the module did not include lectures or sustained discussion of sexuality, children and/or schooling so in keeping with prospective research-led teaching promised during my lectureship presentation, I redesigned the module to accommodate – amongst other things – practical teaching about children, sexualities and schooling. In accordance with how I framed this research-led teaching in the job presentation and interview, I devised a lecture which effectively took the content and approach of previously well-received teaching (in relation to student evaluations and peer-review observations) as the blueprint⁵. Written student evaluations inviting voluntary comments on what students enjoyed, did not enjoy, and would like to see in future lectures, collected in addition to verbal student/staff feedback immediately after teaching appraised research-led teaching in Education Studies at the three UK higher education institutions where I had first translated doctoral research into a “relevant” and “useful” format for student consumption.

In accordance with institutional expectations and wider imperatives to make social research “accessible” and “meaningful” (Kneale, 2018), the lectures amplified applied outcomes of research and provided students with practical tools for challenging and preventing school-based homophobia and (hetero)sexism.

In formal and less formal evaluations of this research-led teaching in the geographies of gender and sexualities module students provided verbal feedback in addition to anonymous written modular/ individual lecture evaluations on standardised institutional forms following completion of the module. They appeared to value “relevant” and “real-life” “solutions” in ensuing pragmatic teaching about children, sexuality and schooling with such comments illustrative of feedback/evaluations received.

The fact that students engaged so well – exemplified by how the approach taken “opened [students] eyes” – attests to how potentially fraught subject matter can be delivered in a non-controversial way and this should not be downplayed. Indeed, one student conceived of the research as simply “how children react to diversity”⁶. Enabling student engagement is not the issue here. Neither is empowerment that some students felt “to make a difference”. The issue is *speaking ability*, to borrow from Monk (2011) and how – in the context of sexuality, children and/or schooling – certain types of discussion will be more permissible.

This notion of speaking ability, emerging through the Foucauldian concept of “conditions of possibility” (discursive frameworks of knowledge grounded in and made possible by a particular historical epoch; Foucault, 1980) is utilised to expose the politics of progress surrounding homophobic bullying and “reveal the *conditionality* of what, on

the surface, appears to be an inclusive progressive politics” (Monk, 2011, p. 201; *italics in original*). This progressive politics is couched within a broader understanding of the sexual politics of neoliberalism (Bell & Binnie, 2000; Duggan, 2003; Stychin, 2003): “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them” (Duggan, 2003, p. 50).

Applying Monk’s (2011) work to a consideration of *how* sexuality, children and/or schooling can be broached with higher education students in this broader socio-political context and local conditions can be likened to permissible progress in English primary schools with respect to how gay and lesbian sexualities can be introduced to children (Hall, 2020b). Nixon (2009) – building on Silverstein and Picano (1993) and Rofes (2000) – uses the term “vanilla strategies” (highly sanitised representations of safe and approved sexual practice and fantasy that are deemed acceptable in the teaching profession) to refer to the acceptability of both popular and plain strategies which are overwhelmingly used when broaching sexualities with – or in relation to – children. This is epitomised in *Stonewall’s* ⁷ “Different Families, Same Love” initiative, which uses a diverse understanding of “family” as a “child friendly” approach to introduce primary-aged children to same-sex marriage as an “acceptable”, if increasingly homonormative (Duggan, 2003), expression of sexual conduct (see Hall, 2020b). In English primary schools and arguably with professionals, students, and wider communities – “vanilla strategies” have wide appeal by being less threatening than more radical initiatives and approaches (for example, aspects of *No Outsiders* ⁸). Yet, they are premised on problematic Western constructions of childhood (sexual) innocence and child development. They are also understood to bring about limited social change by overlooking heteronormativity ⁹: the condition in which homophobia is produced (Ellis, 2007; also see Hall, 2020a, 2020b).

This matter brings me to a point made by Nast (1999) in the earlier JGHE *Teaching Sexualities in Geography* symposium in relation to student’s (in)ability to judge modular (or lecture) content and delivery when evaluating teaching. As Nast (1999, p. 104) argues, “evaluative instruments are ostensibly designed to judge the performance and knowledge of faculty, a judgement that assumes that students possess a breadth of knowledge about the subject matter about which the faculty member teaches”. The fact that students did not overtly contest the framing of research-led teaching could well attest to how students may not be in the best position to judge content and delivery (cf. Haigh et al., 2015; Healey, 2005; Hill et al., 2018). Yet, students’ perceived ability to judge these aspects of pedagogy are reflected in the design of student evaluations which ask specific questions about content and delivery. For example, student evaluations used to assess the third-year geographies of gender and sexualities module included questions which asked students to appraise whether: “module content [was] *relevant*”; “the module was well taught with interesting *and appropriate* styles of teaching and learning”; and if they “enjoyed and was satisfied

with the *quality* of the module". In addition to these questions, which students either "definitely" or "mostly" agreed with optional written responses referenced module/lecture content and delivery in a positive way with illustrative comments including "I loved the content of this module" and "[author] gave really interesting, well thought out and useful lectures". While it was pleasing to receive this feedback in relation to a module that dealt with potentially sensitive subject matters (cf. Simon, 2009), I wonder to what extent I achieved radical and critical queer pedagogy (Knopp, 1999; Luhmann, 1998; Shlasko, 2005) which I foresaw in teaching children's geographies of sexualities when I anticipated a future teaching-self that queered – amongst other things – contemporary western constructions of childhood. While the argument that challenging content and appropriate is always best is debateable, I do wonder what teaching in more challenging ways could look like and do.

The what and how of teaching sexualities

"The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy"
(hooks, 1994, p. 12)

Reflections on *how* and *what* to teach in relation to (children's) geographies of sexualities have also been prompted by Haigh et al.'s (2015) consideration of the socio-cultural construction of the curriculum, particularly regarding social acceptability/control and MacPherson's (2011) notion of "the null curriculum" (subjects/topics ignored, avoided or rejected) as well as an awareness of the way others taught on the gender and sexualities module. In Week 4, I arranged for a guest lecturer – a social policy doctoral student from another UK higher education institution – to deliver a lecture broadly speaking to an existing topic on Sexed Bodies and Sex Work. The guest lecturer's previous teaching experience and doctoral research mapped onto this topic very well and provided an opportunity for final year geography students to receive a different take on theorising and researching sexualities, particularly in the potentially contentious context of "sex work". While we discussed aspects of the lecture beforehand, specific content and approach were left open. Days before the lecture we discussed the appropriateness of a "disclaimer" at the beginning of the lecture (Figure 1) which would draw students' attention to the "controversial" nature of the material that some may find "offensive".

Figure 1. Lecture disclaimer used at the beginning of the sexed body and sex work guest lecture.

Disclaimers!



Display full size

The disclaimer had previously been used at the guest lecturer’s home institution for similar content and approach. In consultation with the module convenor there, it had been decided that – given the subject matter and use of explicit imagery – a similar disclaimer to the one reproduced as Figure 1 would be appropriate for a sociology and social policy undergraduate lecture. In light of this decision, we agreed to take the same approach for the guest lecture since the subject matter and approach, including use of explicit imagery would be the same. Explicit imagery included photographs depicting full body nudity in opening slides where assumptions about sexed bodies were challenged. This “hook” proved to be very effective in engaging students and it soon became apparent that the “pros” of this potentially unnerving approach outweighed any reservations.

Students’ responses during and after the lecture indicated that close-to-the-bone content and approach had been well-received. Indeed, optional written responses in the formal end of semester institutional student evaluations specifically referenced this guest lecture under “aspects of [the] module that you particularly enjoyed” and “sessions you [found] most useful/interesting/enjoyable” with illustrative comments including how the guest lecturer had been “very interesting and insightful for all aspects of the course content” and “really helpful and so interesting to listen to”. Equally as important, no reference was made to the guest lecturer’s content or approach under “aspects of [the] module that you particularly disliked” or sessions

found to be “least useful/interesting/enjoyable”. Likewise, no complaints that I was aware of were logged elsewhere ¹⁰. It could be that this freedom to take “risks” is enabled through being a (white, middle-class male) guest lecturer from another UK higher education institution where teaching has not previously been a primary commitment (Nast, 1999). It could be that in mistakenly anticipating objections pedagogy is self-censored ¹¹, particularly by early career academics on fixed-term contracts and this may well be the case in relation to my existing research-led teaching.

What I am particularly drawn to in these student evaluations is a comment by one student, but perhaps shared by others under “sessions you [found] most useful/interesting/enjoyable” where “education and sex work” (my research-led teaching and the guest lecture) were listed together. Notwithstanding contrasting content and approach, both lectures were singled out as particularly “useful”, interesting, and enjoyable. This insight prompts me to inquire into the permissibility of each topic and the approach taken. Could or should an equivalent approach be taken with children and sexualities? To clarify, I am not referring to use of explicit imagery which – unlike the kind used in the guest lecture – would not be appropriate. Rather, I am taking the broader implications of this contrasting pedagogy to think otherwise about *how* and *what* to teach in relation to sexuality, children and/or schooling, and (children’s) geographies of sexualities more broadly. To what extent could/should more radical and critical approaches be taken in relation to sexualities, children and/or schooling or other “more sensitive” topics? Is more radical and critical always better or necessary?

I want to tentatively consider these pressing questions in relation to my research-led teaching, although these questions can equally be applied to other topics – currently conceived or not – in and beyond children’s geographies and geographies of sexualities ¹². This is not to suggest that radical and critical sexual/geographical pedagogy is necessarily absent in current geography provision. Indeed, domestic violence as an existing topic in a unit on the home in the gender and sexualities module attests to how radical and critical topics, including sex work, trans geographies, FGM/C, and heterosexual normativities and hegemonies (Hubbard, 1999; Browne, Nash, & Hines, 2010; Evans (this issue); Browne (this issue)) are already part of current provision, although – like children and sexualities – this can still be taught in various ways depending on institutional context/location and positionalities of the educator (see Nast, 1999; Rose, 1997). When topics are approached in radical and critical ways there are also important considerations regarding student (non)participation brought about by decisions as to whether lecture disclaimers are appropriate. Before considering this matter, I explore age of consent as a pressing topic which – amongst others – has been absent in my teaching and I imagine the

teaching of others. This example is fitting, I think, given Vanderbeck (2008) and Philo's (2011) provocations which opened this account.

I was recently struck by an out-of-the-vault "Right to Reply" feature on the launch of the 1990s UK version of *Queer as Folk*. *Queer as Folk* (1999–2000) was an edgy Channel 4 TV series charting the ordinary lives of a group of near-30-year-old friends as they encounter a 15-year-old-boy fresh on the Manchester/Cannel Street gay scene. This controversial series explored – amongst other things – a complex sexual relationship which the teenager instigates with one of the friends.

The series aired at a time when the equalization of the age of consent to 16 was a hot socio-political topic (see Johnson & Vanderbeck, 2014) and this provided the stimulus for the "Right to Reply" feature which was initiated by an outraged "ordinary gay man". The dispute centred on politics of representation as this coalesced with (un)desirable imaginings of the lesbian and gay community with the sexual relationship between the older and younger males a central feature of debate. The concerned and respectable white gay man leading the debate was accompanied by the then CEO of *Stonewall*, which – at this time – was an emerging politically-mainstream Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual campaigning organisation¹³. Together, they denounced this "negative" and "harmful" portrayal of gay life which they felt was "unrepresentative".

When watching again this special feature, I felt that an opportunity had been missed to include this illuminating example of fraught sexual politics in teaching about children and sexualities. It struck me that this could have illustrated the earlier, retrospective point about politics of – and "wicked problems" (Kneale, 2018) in – research since this provided a related, yet detached example of how research – or cultural representations in this case – are always already implicated in geographically-contingent, socio-political dynamics¹⁴. As the *Queer as Folk* production team argued in the feature, the sexual encounter, which was not meant to be representative of the "gay and lesbian community" (how can this ever be achieved) was more a reflection of an undeniable – if conveniently erased – reality which deserves recognition and discussion. The attentive way the production team framed this potentially awkward and squeamish (Philo, 2011) issue provides a lesson not only in *what* can or should be broached, but also *how* (the series complicated simplistic perceptions of older, predatory gay men while not shying away from the consequences of "adult-child" sexual relations). Rather than becoming implicated in moral judgements concerning the (un)acceptability of "adult-child" sexual relations, this example provides a case in point of how *speakingability* (to return to Monk, 2011) can be the issue under examination rather than moralism.

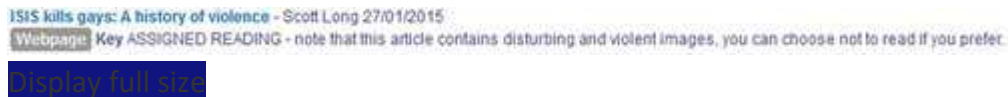
When teaching radically and critically

Focusing on speakability (what can be discussed and where or if parameters should be imposed around topics) could be used in addition to recommendations by Simon (2009) and Evans (this issue) as a strategy for approaching sensitive topics. For example, Simon (2009) urges students to talk about what makes them uncomfortable when discussing sexuality with conversation entered into *through* discomfort while Evans (this issue) makes the case for supporting students' critical engagement with FGM/C by starting from people's own cultural webs of meaning in particular places and using inquiry-based learning. Whether used in conjunction with these or other strategies, the appropriateness of using lecture disclaimers when teaching radically and critically remains. Lecture disclaimers, known as trigger/content warnings in pedagogic literatures from the United States have received much attention in relation to sensitive topics. Tracing their historical emergence in relation to post-traumatic stress disorder through to broader incorporation into predominately American higher education institutions, Halberstam (2017) and Robbins (2016) show how student demand has steadily increased for trigger/ content warnings concerning assigned readings, lectures, speakers, and curriculum content. On the one hand, scholars such as Jarvie (2014) and Halberstam (2017) outline issues relating to academic censorship, the politics of discomfort, exposure, and perceived student vulnerability, noting how trigger/ content warnings conform to a "structure of paternalistic normativity within which some people make assumptions about harm, and about right and wrong, on behalf of others" (Halberstam, 2017, p. 536). On the other hand, scholars such as Stringer (2016) and Spencer and Kulbaga (2018) forward social justice and equality of access arguments with trigger/ content warnings – misrepresented as coddling oversensitive students and censoring academic freedom – rather understood to be engaging students more fully in their own learning. As Stringer (2016, p. 64) argues, trigger/ content warnings are about mental preparation, "they are not there for students who want to edit out material that is challenging, confronting, upsetting, or uncomfortable".

Returning to the earlier guest lecture example, I now want to consider the appropriateness of using lecture disclaimers or trigger/content warnings for "sensitive" topics, including age of consent. I do this while reflecting on the sexed body guest lecture and how others have subsequently approached radical and critical teaching about leaky bodies and domestic violence in the gender and sexualities module. While the guest lecture used an explicit disclaimer to "warn" about "controversial" content, other approaches utilised what Stringer (2016) and Spencer and Kulbaga (2018) refer to as content previews/ forecasts in not explicitly naming controversy or giving a slide-based "warning", but rather subtly informing students of challenging content at the outset of the module, before particular lectures/topics (via

email or verbally) or in reading notes, such as the guidance in Figure 2. Regardless of whether sensitive topics receive an explicit or subtle warning/ content forecast, I want to consider the implications of student (non)participation.

Figure 2. Guidance note for an optional webpage reading in gender and sexualities module.



First, depending on context, disclaimers for radical and critical content and/or approaches may not always be necessary. It could be argued that in perhaps mistakenly anticipating controversy we inadvertently make something controversial. Indeed, this could well be the case when agonising over feared objections and backlash when broaching sexualities with – or in relation to – children. Therefore, the relative merits of pre-“warning” students about “sensitive” content need to be weighed-up against potentially inciting controversy. That said, I would argue that some topics, such as domestic violence deserve a written or verbal trigger/content warning (Robbins, 2016), although this could well take the form of a content preview/forecast (Spencer & Kulbaga, 2018; Stringer, 2016) as demonstrated in the following subtle announcement made by a colleague who subsequently conveyed the gender and sexualities module: “Please note that this lecture/reading includes discussion of sexual violence and assault” (personal email communication). When topics/lectures are deemed to be deserving of a disclaimer, I would argue that similar content previews/forecasts would be more appropriate. As Stringer (2016) explains, content forecasting does not necessarily propagate a “warning” so as to suggest a sense of threat. Stringer (2016, p. 64) provides another example of what this content forecast could look like in the following course email to victimology students: “with the early victimologists there is sensitive content about victim-blaming in general, and we will look at an example of victim-blaming in the context of sexual assault”.

While content previews/forecasts may be less inciting, the issue of student (non)participation remains when disclaimers are deemed necessary. As the subsequent conveyor of the gender and sexualities module explains in relation to domestic violence: “in the lecture before and at the start of the lecture, I mentioned the content of the lecture, said that it was ok not to attend or to leave during the break ... so I gave them assurances and strategies if they didn’t want to be there [and] every year someone left and I know people didn’t turn up” (personal email

communication). Again, I would argue that duty of care, particularly regarding students' psychological and emotional safety (Dowler, 2002) ¹⁵ outweighs any (non)participation implications since disclaimers allow students to be more fully engaged in their own learning (Spencer & Kulbaga, 2018; Stringer, 2016). That said, and to echo Nast's (1999) remarks in relation to students' (in)ability to judge module/lecture content, I wonder to what extent students are in a position to make decisions about whether it is beneficial or not to engage in uncomfortable learning (with the exception of some topics) if withdrawal – encouraged or not – is the potential outcome of lecture disclaimers. My reservations are that it may not so much be the subject matter that students are accessing as it is the willingness to engage in learning that is challenging in terms of existing beliefs, attitudes, and values. Even if students withdraw for the “right reasons”, this can still be problematic, not least for exclusion. As is the inability to leave for fear of missing out on course content or being perceived unfavourably by peers, even if a clear statement against these judgements are made.

Conclusion

I began this account by inquiring into criticality and permissibility in research-led teaching about (children's) geographies of sexualities. Using Vanderbeck (2008) and Philo's (2011) provocations concerning children's (sexual) agency, I reflected on *how* and *what* to teach about sexualities, children and/or schooling, particularly in light of the critical and radical potential I foresaw in teaching such topics. Within that discussion, I briefly alluded to a tendency with queer/feminist pedagogies to perhaps overly celebrate gestures towards more challenging teaching.

While I have largely explored what more radical and critical teaching about children and sexualities could look like and do, I am also mindful that this is not always preferable; whether in relation to these topics or other topics in geography and beyond. Indeed, despite being analysed critically, student evaluations do illustrate how more pragmatic approaches have value, even if these may not encourage the “gold standard” critical and radical thinking hoped for. Much depends on institutional context/location and positionalities of the educator. What constitutes challenging is geographically and temporally contingent.

Using the example of age of consent, the second half of the paper explored how more challenging teaching about children and sexualities could be approached given “squishiness” (Philo, 2011) in combining these topics, but also other “sensitive” topics. In making *speaking ability* (Monk, 2011) the object of inquiry, a more general point about criticality and permissibility can be made which has wider utility beyond discussions of

children and sexualities or age of consent debates. The (in)ability to ask probing questions and inquire into taken-for-granted or “common-sense” facets of everyday life is a key research skill for students of any discipline which should be kept alive in academia, especially in a contemporary neoliberal climate. As Monk (2011) demonstrated in relation to homophobic bullying, inquiring into speakability illuminates “conditions of possibility” (Foucault, 1980) and politics of progress, and this has wider applicability. What is at stake is the acceptability of being critical and thinking otherwise, and whether this can or should apply to *all* topics – currently envisaged or not – within and outside of geography.

Much like Philo (2011), I offer these reflections and provocations to stimulate discussion and further reflection; to open up – rather than close down – debate. In the main, I do not attempt to offer “solutions” or convenient ways out of conundrums for these must be contextually negotiated and reflected upon, particularly in the case of lecture disclaimers. While I deliberately – and unapologetically – leave some things hanging, I hope Monk’s (2011) notion of speakability offers a strategy when approaching “sensitive” topics in geography and beyond.

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Notes

1. I gave one lecture on children, sexualities and schooling in this co-taught module and those who attended remarked how they had been looking forward to this given a contemporary onus on schools towards equality, inclusion, and homophobia. This represented students’ first and only formal curricula engagement with these topics and children’s geographies epistemologies/ontologies/theories/politics more generally, including children’s voice and agency, autonomy, and “competence”. Some students enrolled on an optional, third-year geographies of gender and sexualities module a semester earlier (discussed later), but this only gave one similar lecture on children, sexualities and schooling.

2. These guest lectures, often delivered in tandem with 'Homophobia in Schools' public engagement events aimed at teacher trainers/trainee teachers, policy makers and youth workers were typically students first and only formal curricula introduction to combined themes of children, sexualities and schooling.
3. For example, Nast's (1999) exploration of the cultural politics of student evaluations demonstrate how these are used to assess teaching and can be linked to module retention as well as career development.
4. Administering and co-ordinating the module. Also known as module leader.
5. As with the Geographies of Education module, this one lecture represented students' first and only formal curricula engagement with children, sexualities and schooling. Students are formally exposed to geographies of sexualities in first and second year, but these are broad introductory lectures.
6. Cf. Simon (2009) who reports how broaching sexuality in geography already seemed controversial by some students before delving into sensitive topics.
7. A prominent and politically mainstream Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans campaigning organisation.
8. A 2006–2009 queer progressive politics inspired project (see DePalma & Atkinson, 2009; Hall, 2020a; 2020b).
9. Processes and practices through which heterosexuality is normalised (see Warner, 1993).
10. It's worth noting that students opt to take this module so – arguably – students not comfortable with broaching such topics would not have enrolled. That said, degree pathways, timetable clashes, a limited number of final year options, and the perception of easier higher marks for this kind of module means some students may not have wholeheartedly signed up.
11. Cf. Evans (this issue) on how students had a keen interest in discussing FGM/C, which could be perceived as a "sensitive" topic.
12. Here I cast my mind back to disciplinary paradigm shifts instigated by feminist geographers who brought inconceivable topics like home and the body into the realm of geographical inquiry (see Rose, 1993).
13. This example serves as an important historical moment in the emerging sexual politics of *Stonewall* and is in the vein of challenging "a world supposedly won" (see Browne et al., 2019; also see Hall, 2020b).

14. Indeed, Simon (2009) argues that films can be comforting for students when discussing “difficult” topics (also see Evans, this issue).

15. Dowler goes on to argue that “we must facilitate [...] uncomfortable discussions in a trusting and comfortable setting” (2002, p. 69), which – for Simon (2009) – begins with a preferable seminar teaching format.

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