Reframing power relationships between undergraduates and academics in the current university climate

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ABSTRACT
The undergraduate-academic power dynamic is being reframed in the current university climate. This article questions the research on power relationships within higher education whereby the dynamic is acknowledged without proper consideration. As such, the formation of power relationships remains unexplored and misunderstood. This article advocates a different approach to understanding power relationships within universities, one which seeks to unveil hidden mechanisms through a dialectical theorisation of systemic and constitutive power. It explores the ‘traditional’ power relationship between the social roles of teachers and learners, which is being reframed through the conflicting dynamics of the consumer-provider power relationship and the partnership power relationship. In this article, I use critical discourse analysis to explore 32 interviews, 12 observations and 12 documents from two post-1992 English universities. What was once considered a stable power dynamic is now under negotiation, creating confusion for undergraduates and academics regarding appropriate behaviour within universities.

Introduction
The transforming relationship between undergraduates and academics has become increasingly relevant in recent years. The role of undergraduates is being reconstituted, with particular emphasis on undergraduates as consumers (Williams 2013; Tomlinson 2016) and undergraduates as partners (Little 2010). The repositioning of undergraduates has had a significant impact on the resulting power relationships that exist between them and their academic teachers; it is critical that these power dynamics are understood. To present a coherent contribution to understanding the complexity of power, this article focusses on the three most prominent power relationships that undergraduates occupy in universities today: the traditional power relationship, in which teachers hold greater power to transmit predetermined knowledge to learners; the partnership power relationship, in which all participants share power in the pursuit of creating knowledge; and, the consumer-provider power relationship, in which consumers hold greater power to demand value for money from providers.
The literature surrounding power is vast, but not frequently contextualised for higher education (HE); power is often theorised within political contexts and focussed on power as domination. But there is a need to grasp the impact of power within universities, particularly in relation to the power granted to different social roles. As such, this article will explore the reframing of the undergraduate-academic power relationship through an emphasis on the power granted to the traditional learner, the partner, and the consumer as established social roles. This article uses the terminology ‘traditional learner’ in recognition of the social role’s prominence throughout all educational contexts and to provide distinction from the ‘undergraduate student’; it is not in reference to the concept of ‘learnification’. It will detail a dialectical theorisation of systemic and constitutive power in order to explore these established roles and their resulting power relationships. Whilst the literature acknowledges a traditional hierarchy between learners and teachers, the discussions do not relate this conceptualisation to an understanding of how this traditional power relationship is being reframed through the introduction of social roles with conflicting powers. The literature is missing a more interrelated understanding of these social roles and their associated power relationships within HE. This is crucial in the current climate because of the widespread enthusiasm for the encouragement of more collaborative pedagogical dynamics in HE; fostering effective partnerships requires understanding and acknowledgement of the barriers presented by the conflicting dynamics of both the traditional power relationship and the consumer-provider power relationship. It is necessary to first understand the construction, and enactment, of these power dynamics within universities before they can be overcome.

**Understanding power relationships in HE**

Power, as a theoretical concept, can be conceptualised in a myriad of ways; as such, this article acknowledges Haugaard’s argument that ‘there can be no single best definition of power. Rather, any theorist who is interested in power is interested in a cluster of concepts’ (2010, 427). Rather than exploring power through a narrow lens, this article draws from Haugaard’s notion of power as a ‘family resemblance concept’ (2010, 427), made up of ‘a cluster of concepts’ (Haugaard 2010, 427) and explores power relationships through the lens of both systemic power and constitutive power. Systemic power can be defined as ‘the ways in which given social systems confer differentials of dispositional power on agents, thus structuring their possibilities for action’ (Haugaard 2010, 425) and constitutive power focusses on the ways in which given social systems confer differentials of dispositional power on agents, thus structuring their possibilities for action’ (Haugaard 2010, 425) and constitutive power focusses on the ways in which individuals, their relationships and their social worlds are constituted by power relations (Foucault 2002; Spinoza 2002).

Much of the literature on power is narrowly focussed on either systemic power or constitutive power, which can limit an understanding of the relation between how agents’ actions are shaped and how they choose to act. Bradshaw argues that ‘we cannot envisage a scenario in which any actor is somehow liberated from all structural conditions’ (Bradshaw 1976, 121–2). Bradshaw’s stance on the effect of structural conditions on agents’ behaviour comes from a critique of the work of Lukes (2005), who focusses narrowly on constitutive power and purports that the interest of agents should be the central focus in the exercise of power. He reasons that those who exercise power over others do so as a way of reflecting their own interests, but this fails to consider the power to act, which is granted, and often unconsciously enacted, through socially structured roles and dynamics (2005). Lukes’
narrow focus is problematic for HE contexts; in order to understand how the traditional power relationship is being reframed, it is necessary to consider both systemic power and constitutive power alongside each other in a dialectical relation.

The systemic conception of power emphasises the structural limitations imposed upon individuals in terms of their ability to exercise power; Hayward notes, ‘when agents act, they act within limits that are set, in part, by the actions of other agents’ (2008, 14) but at the same time, ‘they act in contexts that are structured by rules and laws and norms: social boundaries to action’ (2008, 14). An agent’s ability to act in a specific context depends upon the rules of that context; Haugaard notes that a structure or system ‘constitutes a way of ordering the world, which precludes certain conditions of possibility and facilitates others’ (2015, 151). Regarding the structured rules of universities, academics and undergraduates are bound by both the actions of fellow agents as well as the social norms that govern a university as an educational institution. These social laws contribute to the shaping of the traditional power relationship; individuals know the behavioural expectations and powers given to the role of a learner, or teacher, because they are familiar with the rules of an educational context as a social practice. This is particularly pertinent within the context of the current university climate. The structural limitations imposed upon universities through the introduction of market policies and partnership models has a crucial impact on shaping agents’ subjectivities, which determines their power in relationships.

Isaac uses the traditional power relationship between learners and teachers to demonstrate his theory of the social conditioning of power. For Isaac, power is ‘the capacities to act possessed by social agents in virtue of the enduring relations in which they participate’ (emphasis in original) (1987, 22). Power is socially constituted and distributed in Isaac’s theorisation; the capacity to act is granted through ‘enduring relations’ (1987, 22). Those relationship dynamics that have become naturalised and familiar to social contexts because of their endurance over time are founded on the intrinsic natures of the social roles that possess power (Isaac 1987). The intrinsic natures are ‘not their unique characteristics as individuals, but their social identities as participants in enduring, socially structured relationships’ (Isaac 1987, 21), which determine the capacity of the social agent who performs in that role to exercise power. In universities, the role of the teacher is adopted in many situations, whether subconsciously or consciously, because of the internalised association between educational contexts and the traditional learner-teacher dynamic. But in the current university climate, the social roles of the partner and the consumer are also encouraged, through institutional discourse and interaction with academics and thus, so are their resulting power relationships. These socially structured relationship dynamics can explain why different roles are granted differing powers; the social roles, and their powers, are so familiar to social contexts that their capacity to exercise power is reproduced according to this dynamic.

These conflicting powers can be problematic in the negotiation of undergraduate-academic relationships at the constitutive level. The constitutive conception of power categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him that he must recognize and others have to recognize in him’ (Foucault 2002, 331). Individual power relationships, which are partly constituted by systemic structures, position people in roles that pertain to their particular social context. Because ‘power relations are rooted in the whole network of the social’ (Foucault 2002, 345), power relationships constructed at the systemic level are only perpetuated through
adherence at the constitutive level. Within universities, undergraduates and academics are positioned in terms of the ‘enduring relations’ (Isaac 1987, 22) of the traditional power relationship, which are formed and reproduced through structural constraints. However, undergraduates are also positioned as partners and consumers at the systemic level; the conflicting power of the traditional learner, the partner and the consumer are adhered to in various ways at the constitutive level, which entails negotiating a different power relationship with academics for each role.

It is futile to consider the systemic conception of power, and its impact on structuring social relationships, without considering the agents that are impacted by the structures being considered. The capacity to exercise power is based, in Isaac’s (1987) conceptualisation, on the notion of naturalisation; a naturalisation that is constituted by the structural powers that help to shape the social identities within the relationship, which become enduring relations over time. In considering the traditional power relationship, Isaac notes that the ‘powers to act are part of the nature of the relationship. They are not regularities, strictly speaking, but are routinely performed’ (1987, 22).

As Kreisberg describes: ‘there is, in fact, a dominant discourse of power in modern Western culture, which […] is intricately enmeshed in and reflective of a wider “regime of truth” that has both constrained and produced modern societies’ (1992, 35). The discourse that shapes the traditional power relationship between a learner and a teacher dictates that learners have less knowledge than teachers, that they should learn from their teachers and that learners have less power because of this. More than this, though, the dominant discourse dictates that this relationship is natural and based on truth. However, with the ‘reutilization, or reimplantation’ (Foucault 1996, 199) of market discourse into the university, this truth is in flux, which creates problems in positioning undergraduates ‘as both being subject to the authority of the university and as having consumer rights to hold the university to account’ (Fairclough 2015, 13). The dominant discourse within universities is under negotiation, and this has huge implications for reframing the undergraduate-academic power relationship.

Research design
This article draws from a research project conducted across two universities in England, referred to as University A and University B (A or B in the data), both of which have institutional policies for implementing student partnership. University A has a policy that promotes the concept of partnership at the institutional level. University B also has an institutional policy that encourages the partner role, but is far less pervasive. The undergraduate population of both institutions is almost all state-school students: 96.8% at University A and 97.7% at University B (HESA 2020), the remainder are from private schools. For clarity, the total percentage of state-school students attending university in the UK is 90% and more prestigious institutions, such as, University of Oxford and Cambridge University, have just 60.6% and 65.3% of state-school students respectively (HESA 2020). Both universities in this study are post-1992 institutions, which means they were only awarded university status in 1992. Researching within post-1992 universities provides insight into the traditional power relationship because ‘the most starkly challenging students go to the post-1992 universities, where most students need lots of pedagogical and pastoral support’ (Taberner 2018, 144). These universities were chosen to explore how cogent the
traditional power relationship is with undergraduates who are less confident and thus, more likely to defer to the entrenched power of the academic teacher role, which conflicts heavily with the shared power of the partner role. Moreover, according to a Universities UK report, ‘students at a post-1992 university are more likely than those who attend a highly selective institution to say they see themselves as customers’ (2017, 6). With the financial imperatives surrounding recruitment, post-1992 universities are thought to adopt ‘more aggressive marketing strategies than their pre-1992 university counterparts’ (Lomas 2007, 41) and this has a considerable impact on the traditional power relationship.

This project engaged in 32 semi-structured interviews with undergraduates and academics (12 academics and 20 undergraduates); the interviews explored interpersonal relationships, the methods of engagement for undergraduates, the impact of policy documents, and undergraduate-academic relationships. The article draws on observational data of six seminars and six lectures (Sem or Lec in the data) as well as six institutional documents from each university. I selected a purposive sample, which included academics of differing ranks and genders and undergraduates of differing genders and in different years of study (Year1, Year2, or Year3 in the data). Participants were all voluntary and have been given pseudonyms for confidentiality. This article recognises that, because the academics in this study were of differing ranks, there may be nuances in their perceptions. Some academics had far more teaching responsibility than others; this article acknowledges that academics’ perceptions are not homogeneous, but argues that the data still provided worthwhile insight into the understandings of power amongst the individuals in this study. Moreover, the research design of this project originally included administrators, to explore the other power relationship that is prevalent to an undergraduate’s experience, however, the exploration of this power relationship required more resources and time that could be given. This article, therefore, focusses on the academic-undergraduate power relationship, but recognises, and encourages, the need for further research into the undergraduate-administrator power relationship to consider a more holistic understanding of the undergraduate experience in the current climate.

The study uses Faircloughian critical discourse analysis (CDA) to interpret the spoken discourse of the interviews and the written discourse of institutional policy to conceptualise undergraduate-academic relationships. All data were analysed as a text (vocabulary and grammar), a discursive practice (situational context and intertextuality) and a social practice (social determinants influencing the text) (Fairclough 2015). The three-dimensional model was applied to key parts of the discourses from the datasets. The textual analysis involved pulling out specific textual elements, including vocabulary and grammar; the data was then analysed as a discursive practice, which involved interpreting how the text had used other discourses and how these had manifested; these stages were then used to explain the text as a social practice, which involved analysing the social determinants influencing the text, from systems of knowledge and belief, to social identities and relations. CDA is a dialectical method and provides a rich understanding of the relationship between structure and agency, and an exploration of the relationship between structured social roles and dynamics and their appropriation by individuals; this aided the exploration of the relationship between structure and agency and the resulting formation and perpetuation of social roles and their resulting power relationships. The study was approved by The Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School Ethics Committee at Lancaster University.
Findings

The interviews included a series of questions and prompts geared to students’ and academics’ perceptions of the nature of longer-standing power relationships in universities. From this came a number of key findings. First, the data demonstrated that the traditional power relationship between teachers and learners is socially constructed through specific behavioural characteristics and widely considered an appropriate pedagogical dynamic. Secondly, this power dynamic is under strain with the introduction of the consumer-pro­vider power relationship and the partnership power relationship, which is constructed through differing capacities for exercising power. Finally, the conflict that arises from these three power dynamics is resulting in discord amongst the expected and enacted behaviour within the undergraduate-academic dynamic.

Conceptualising the ‘traditional’ power relationship

The interactions between undergraduates and academics are defined by those ‘rules, laws and norms’ (Hayward and Lukes 2008, 15) that constitute the expected behavioural characteristics of the relationship: ‘the lecturers aren’t intimidating, but I think it’s just the situation that is’ (B, Year1, Bella). Hayward argues that ‘teachers and students have differential capacities and dispositions by virtue of their participation in the teacher-student relationship itself’ (2000, 28–29). The systemic configuration of the traditional learner and teacher roles means that there are expected behaviours present in any relation consisting of those roles; these expected behaviours constitute the traditional power relationship as ‘unavoidable’ (B, Michelle).

In their perception of the traditional power relationship, participants perceived the passive consumption of authoritative knowledge as an expected behavioural expectation. Within the dynamic, this gives the teacher role the power to ‘tell [students] what things mean, what to do’ (Shor 1996, 11–12). The spatial dynamic that perpetuates the notion that the teacher role provides authoritative knowledge was founded in the observational data of this study; academics consistently positioned themselves at the front of the teaching space, with undergraduates positioned further away and facing them (A, Year2, Lec; A, Year2, Sem; B, Year3, Lec; B, Year3, Sem). Kreisberg conceptualises the normalised behaviour of the traditional power relationship in terms of transmission teaching; he argues that, what Freire terms ‘banking education’ (Freire 1985), ‘cultivates passivity, conformity, obedience, acquiescence, and unquestioning acceptance of authority’ (1992, 8). The findings highlighted the expectation that academics are the holders of finite knowledge; undergraduates ‘perceive that [academics] know a lot more about the topic than they do and they want [them] to tell them about it’ (B, Michelle). The internalised passivity of the traditional learner role ‘makes them feel safe because they’re being told what it is they need to know’ (B, Alistair).

Because universities appear ‘so similar to [… ] school’ (B, Year3, Bethany), undergraduates naturally adhere to the rules of the associated power relationship. Haugaard argues, ‘the socially competent actor becomes constrained internally […] because he or she knows what to expect’ (2012, 39). As socially competent actors, undergraduates have internalised the behavioural expectations of the traditional power relationship, which dictates that academics
are ‘more educated than [undergraduates] are, and they’re there to teach [them]’ (A, Year2, Ben). This authority was perceived to be a natural characteristic of the power relationship. One undergraduate said: ‘you always feel stupid’ (A, Year1, Claire) and another argued that academics have ‘finished their study and, in that sense, have a prowess over [undergraduates]’ (A, Year2, Susan). As a social practice, accepting the academic’s authority of knowledge is in virtue of their social role and the expectation that ‘they know what they’re doing’ (A, Year1, Claire).

The discourses from the interviews suggested that the traditional power relationship is cogent through its seeming naturalness: ‘the silos that are naturally in higher education between students and academics […] are quite difficult to break down’ (B, Lizzie). One described the power relationship as ‘unavoidable’ (B, Michelle) and another thought that ‘there is inevitably going to be a division’ (A, Mary). The discursive terms ‘naturally’ (B, Lizzie), ‘unavoidable’ (B, Michelle) and ‘inevitably’ (A, Mary) suggest the inescapability of the traditional power relationship. Undergraduates generally had similar perceptions: ‘it’s drilled in during your secondary education that it’s respect’ (B, Year2, Edith). One said: ‘obviously, they’re still lecturers and there’s still a level of respect’ (B, Year1, Bella), another said: ‘there’s obviously a hierarchy’ (B, Year3, Charles), whilst another thought ‘naturally’ (B, Year2, Vera) there was a hierarchy. Again, the words ‘obviously’ and ‘naturally’ imply inevitability. Analysing the interview discourses using CDA provides understanding of the social practice that has influenced the perceptions. The above responses, that perceive of the power relationship as natural, are influenced by the system of knowledge and belief that emphasises the ‘unilateral authority’ (Shor 1996, 11–12) of the teacher role; this was noted by one academic in their argument that ‘the power’s in the structure, not in the relationship’ (A, Andrew). Because the relationship is systemically constructed, it is considered natural and appears unavoidable, which strengthens its appropriacy.

**Navigating the ‘consumer-provider’ relationship**

The traditional power relationship is affected strongly by the appropriation of the consumer-provider power relationship into universities. The consumer role holds power to demand more from providers: ‘I know students are bringing universities to court and saying, “The teaching was inadequate therefore I only got a 2:1”’ (A, Andrew). Undergraduate expectations are ‘not just an attitude of entitlement’ (A, Andrew) but constitute their power as consumers, which means they are ‘literally entitled to make a claim against the outcome of their exchange relationship with the university’ (A, Andrew). Underpinning the relationship, then, is an awareness of the power undergraduates have to impact the sustainability of the university and as such, there is ‘an anxiousness around how you deal with that entity’ (A, Bernard). The employment of the noun ‘anxiousness’ suggests discomfort at interacting with undergraduates because of the reconstitution of the traditional power relationship.

There is a tentativeness around communicating with undergraduates because of the ‘constant threat of student litigation and complaint’ (Naidoo and Jamieson 2005, 275). The discourses from the academic interviews at both institutions recognised a number of instances of undergraduates exercising their power as consumers and being ‘slightly litigious’ (B, Janice). One thought that there was a ‘bit more, kind of, pushing back against grades when students aren’t happy’ (A, Bernard) and another argued that undergraduates apply
the logic of consumer power to their interactions with academics: ‘I have occasionally heard other colleagues and academic acquaintances say things about, how someone has said, “Well I pay your salary” […] “So you should be doing more for me”’ (A, Mary). Undergraduates’ power as consumers is conflicting with the traditional power relationship because undergraduates are questioning the established authority of the academic.

Undergraduates at both institutions also perceived that they had greater power as consumers:

If you feel like you’re not getting out what you should of your degree then, I think you are entitled to ask for more (B, Year2, Edith).

It gives you more of a right to complain if the lectures aren’t up to standard, or you’re being taught in a way that isn’t beneficial […] since you’re paying for it, you can complain (B, Year1, Bella).

Although undergraduates’ perception of their power as consumers was attributed mainly to the ability to make ‘improvements or suggestions’ (A, Year3, Daniel), there was a shared feeling that ‘the student has the right to’ (University A 2018a; University B 2018b) participate in decision-making, through the emphasis in institutional discourse of students’ right to ‘participate in the governance of the University’ (University A 2018b).

Moreover, for both institutions, academics felt that because of the power of the consumer role, undergraduates will expect more. The inflated fee encourages undergraduates to question the investment of their studies; academics felt that it ‘utterly, utterly changes how they understand university education’ (A, Grace) because ‘they have to feel there’s an economic benefit’ (A, Grace). There was an assumption that undergraduates would be ‘questioning the value of their experience’ (B, Lizzie); the emphasis placed on value for money, from both inside the institutions and from external pressures, has the potential to transform the traditional power relationship. As part of the ‘enduring relations’ (Isaac 1987, 22) of the traditional dynamic, the learner has little power to demand; they accept the authority of the teacher and what the teacher provides. Positioning undergraduates as consumers allows them to expect more, particularly because the fee is so extravagant. Consequently, the power relationship is under strain because of the imperatives to satisfy undergraduates’ increased expectations.

These increased expectations were considered to be a concern by academics: ‘students feel that if they’re paying money, they’re paying for a grade’ (A, Louise). Another said: ‘the idea of consumer makes the student a client, which would suggest that a university is a mill, or a shop, you can go in, you pay for what you want, and you’d get that result’ (A, Mary). Like the above participant, other academics equated the degree or the university experience with a ‘product’ (B, James) or ‘like putting 20p in a slot machine and seeing a product come out’ (A, Louise). The use of familiar metaphors to explain consumer logic suggests the concern that academics felt about undergraduates misunderstanding the nature of learning. Academics generally considered consumerism to encourage an attitude of “I paid for this, I’m going to get my money’s worth. It’s your fault if I don’t deliver” (B, Vicky). The expectation of receiving something in exchange for money works to reverse the traditional power relationship because it allows undergraduates to think ‘it’s the tutor’s responsibility to do the work for [them]’ (A, Bernard). This places pressure on academics to provide for undergraduates because ‘students see higher education, and the outcomes it produces, as a “right”’ (Tomlinson 2016, 2). Tomlinson argues that the power awarded to the consumer ‘is likely
to place considerably more power in the hands of the “paying customer” (Tomlinson 2016, 2). Undergraduates taking this approach are perceived to be ‘more instrumental’ (A, Andrew) because they have ‘the wrong mind-set about what to expect and what they can bring to it’ (A, Anna). There was a strong perception of the consumer role promoting the passive consumption of knowledge with reduced effort from undergraduates because ‘the onus is on the institution to provide a service, so [academics] have become service providers, instead of educators’ (B, Vicky).

Similar to the academics, the majority of undergraduate interviewees shared the belief that there is an increased entitlement to expect satisfactory provision as part of the consumer role:

Because we’re paying for it, we would then expect the […] tuition that we receive to be of a good standard because we’re paying for it, and I think if we weren't paying for it, then we wouldn't be able to argue, when it's not up to standard (A, Year2, Ben).

Analysing this as a social practice, the participant is drawing from the established consumer-provider power relationship, whereby the legal rights of the consumer allow that role to criticise the provider. Undergraduates were aware that ‘there’s a, kind of, customer service almost, aspect, because you are paying for a service’ (B, Year2, Edith). As such, undergraduates generally related their situation to the social practice of established consumer relations. This drastically impacts the traditional power relationship because the power is reversed and the undergraduate has the power to criticise the academic, who has a legal obligation to provide satisfaction. As a social practice, the behaviours that dictate the consumer-provider power relationship are well established and it seems appropriate to apply those behaviours in universities: ‘if they don’t turn up, can I get my money back? Or, if I don't think it's good enough, can I get a refund?’ (A, Year2, Lisa). Participants, generally, perceived undergraduates as having greater power to expect more, which is the ‘encoded part of the discourse of complaint, “If I’m paying this, why isn't this happening?”’ (B, James); this encourages an emphasis on demand and heightened criticality of provision.

Consequently, academics perceived a greater pressure to satisfy undergraduates. One said: ‘it’s made students demand more of us. There are real times [when we] feel like we’re social workers and we're here 24/7’ (A, Louise). Academics are under more pressure to provide for undergraduates’ increased expectations; one academic argued that ‘there’s the endless, relentless drive to make sure students are happy and […] there can be a tendency to let staff martyr themselves’ (B, Janice). Academics become the providers of the educational services that the institution offers; they feel the pressure to ‘meet the needs of […] students’ (University A 2018c) and as such, they are responsible for satisfying undergraduates’ entitlement to high quality provision. This is in conflict with the traditional power relationship because teachers are normally in the position to challenge learners, not cater to their demands.

This pressure to satisfy undergraduate demand was perceived as ‘destroy[ing] the relationship between students and lecturers because if they think they’re buying something then I sometimes remember how many hours I’m actually being paid for and what they have a right to expect’ (B, Janice). The consumer-provider power relationship is self-serving, which is difficult to negotiate in a context of supposed collaborative learning. Undergraduates and academics are forced into an ‘antagonistic position’ (A, Andrew) where each party is concerned with their own objectives: ‘lecturers and students, presented as service users and
service providers, appear pitted against each other with competing interests’ (Williams 2013, 49). This has been exacerbated by the introduction of the Office for Students in the UK, which entails a ‘presumed need for an external regulating body to protect the interests of “vulnerable” consumers against “exploitative” academics’ (Williams 2013, 49). The social practice of consumer-provider relations is familiar and characterised by each party being self-interested; in a HE context, this relation is invoked because of undergraduates’ legal positioning as consumers, which emphasises their capacity to exercise power against the institution in order to serve their own interests.

**Navigating the ‘partnership’ power relationship**

The partnership power relationship emphasises undergraduates’ responsibility for learning, which participants generally perceived positively: ‘I like the fact that […] we all come together and share ideas, rather than it being a teacher stood at the front saying, “This is what this means and you will agree with me, or you will fail”’ (A, Year2, Daisy). The increased responsibility in the partnership power relationship encourages undergraduates to discover knowledge, rather than relying on academics to provide knowledge. This works to lessen the power differential and limit the behavioural norms associated with the traditional power relationship. It encourages undergraduates to acknowledge ‘that actually what I’m asking them to do […] is on a smaller scale of what I’m doing’ (B, Vicky). Academics felt it was very important to encourage this reciprocity: ‘getting students to engage with research and realise that staff are involved in the production of knowledge on an ongoing basis would be very productive’ (A, Bernard). The reciprocity and the responsibility for learning in the partnership power dynamic reconstitutes the learning process as ‘more democratic and more open to insight’ (B, Alistair). It is not characterised by the unilateral authority of the teacher role because ‘the lecturer’s do learn from [undergraduates], to an extent’ (B, Year2, Neve) and as one undergraduate noted: ‘they make us work as a team to learn and bounce off each other, instead of just being this person with all these qualifications who just talks at you’ (A, Year1, Claire). There was, in general, then, a positive reflection on the increased responsibility and reciprocal nature of the partnership power relationship.

However, there was also hesitancy. The internalisation of the behavioural expectations of the traditional power relationship manifests in HE because of the contextual familiarity. The traditional power relationship is characterised by the teacher’s ability to break or build a learner’s self-esteem; as such, it is difficult for undergraduates to take responsibility for their own learning because they are used to relying on teachers for validation. One undergraduate reflected: ‘they’re in more control than I am […] it’ll be typically me getting guidance, and obviously the person that can give that, is the person more in power’ (A, Year3, Daniel). The authority of the academic is one of the ‘structurally distributed powers’ (Isaac 1987, 24) of the traditional power dynamic; it is part of an undergraduates’ internalised understanding of educational contexts and as such, they believe that they are ‘not on the same level’ (A, Year2, Ben) as academics.

The responsibility encouraged by partnership power dynamics is not always accepted by undergraduates. The notion of ‘spoon-feeding’ (B, Year3, Bethany; A, Year2, Daisy) aligns with the unilateral authority of the teacher role; this internalised reliance on academics for knowledge dissemination led one academic to reflect that undergraduates ‘struggle with
independent, structuring their time, all the freedom’ (B, Michelle). As Shor discovered, undergraduates ‘don't want to share authority (it's easier for them to do it the old-fashioned teacher-centred way; it's more demanding to take responsibility for their education)’ (1996, 18). Undergraduates are used to relying on teacher roles to provide them with predetermined knowledge and to help them succeed in assessments. Because of the strength of the traditional power relationship, it is difficult for undergraduates to accept the increased responsibility for their learning and many continue to rely on academics in ways that constitute the traditional power relationship. The partnership power relationship also contradicts the separation between undergraduates and academics; this distinction is difficult to negotiate when reciprocity is being encouraged. One undergraduate argued: 'it’s very much, we are told to do this and we have to do this [...] It would be really cool actually to be able to do something as a collaboration' (B, Year3, Charles). This participant felt that collaboration was non-existent: ‘there’s this whole thing about when you come to university, you’re treated as an equal, as the tutors and things like that, but it’s definitely not the case’ (B, Year3, Charles). The findings illuminate the difficulty of emphasising a partnership power relationship when the traditional dynamic is characterised by a distinct separation that belies the ability for undergraduates to reciprocate in the production of knowledge.

Academics at both universities generally suggested discomfort at the thought of a genuine partnership dynamic. It was perceived of as impractical because ‘they don’t know what's best for them’ (A, Bernard) and because academics ‘know a lot more about the subject’ (B, Michelle). Sharing authority belies the distinction between the learner and the teacher and as one undergraduate argued: ‘we shouldn’t be given a choice because we don’t know what we’re choosing’ (B, Year1, Max). In the traditional power relationship, the teacher is perceived by society, and undergraduates, as ‘the unilateral authority who tells them what things mean’ (Shor 1996, 11–12). An attempt to redefine the role of the teacher as one who partakes in an equal partnership is met with resistance because it contradicts the system of knowledge and belief that dictates the power granted to teachers and learners as part of their socially structured relationship.

This overriding sense of authority was expressed by a number of academics: ‘I am willing to listen, but ultimately, I am the specialist’ (B, Vicky). Despite the willingness to dialogue with undergraduates, academics felt that ‘they cannot have free reign’ (A, Louise) because of the perception that the teacher’s authority should take precedent. For most academics, partnership was accepted only to an extent and the most common reason was the implications of a presupposed authority. As a social practice, the authority of the teacher subjectivity is embedded as a social practice and constitutes a natural part of the traditional power relationship. So, although a number of academics were willing to listen to undergraduates, the notion of a partnership of shared power was countered by the prominent system of belief surrounding the authority of the teacher, which encourages academics to endorse the traditional power relationship.

The institutional discourse of University A promotes a partnership model which contradicts the traditional power relationship through encouraging undergraduates to ‘work alongside staff’ (University A 2018d) as ‘collaborators in the production of knowledge’ (University A 2018d). The institutional discourse at University B encourages undergraduates to see themselves as ‘co-constructors of curricula’ and ‘co-producers of knowledge’ (University B 2018a). This undermines the positioning of the learner and teacher in the ‘enduring relations’ (Isaac 1987, 22) of the traditional power relationship because it gives
undergraduates ‘greater responsibility’ (University A 2018d) in pedagogical decision-making. However, undergraduates from both institutions expressed discomfort at the thought of this: ‘I guess you could be a partner in that […] you might contribute an idea that the teacher’s never thought of’ (B, Year3, Bethany). The use of the modal verbs ‘guess’ and ‘might’ imply uncertainty about an undergraduate’s ability to contribute an idea that the academic has never considered, which reinforces their authority of knowledge. Another participant thought that undergraduates should have limited power in terms of decision-making: ‘only a small level of input because obviously the lecturers have been through a lot more education’ (B, Year2, Neve). One said:

Working collaboratively sounds a lot nicer, but then I don’t know how that would work really, because we’re not on the same level […] I would see myself as a student, I wouldn’t see myself as a researcher […] those two things are a world away from each other (A, Year2, Ben).

The discursive metaphor ‘world away from each other’ emphasises the separation between teaching and research, and thus between the role of a learner and a partner; a dichotomy that is considered problematic within HE (Brew 2006).

In the traditional power relationship, the learner is positioned as hierarchically lower than the teacher. Haugaard points out that ‘if an actor can be socialised into taking certain structural practices for granted, as part of the natural order of things, any practice that contravenes these structures are perceived as unreasonable, which constitutes a powerful structural constraint’ (2015, 153). Indeed, the majority of undergraduates conceived of a partnership approach as unreasonable because of the established traditional power relationship. One said: ‘I don’t feel that we are at a high enough level to, kind of, add to what they already know’ (A, Year2, Daisy) and another perceived the purpose of the relationship with an academic was ‘to suck knowledge from them, to steal what’s in their heads’ (A, Year1, Claire). There was only one academic who emphasised the true principle of the partnership model; he acknowledged the need to ‘change the way in which we think about the situation’ (A, Andrew). Because of the prevalence of the traditional power relationship, the partnership model is considered impractical: ‘just saying, “Let’s work as a group” or “Let’s do this collaboratively” is, kind of, rigorous. You don’t just know how to do that […] people need roles and they need to know what they’re doing’ (A, Andrew). The traditional power relationship and its familiarity prevents people from understanding the partnership dynamic fully because they naturally adopt roles which contradict a collaborative process.

The unquestioning acceptance of an expert’s authority prevents undergraduates and academics from understanding the partnership power relationship. But as the same academic points out: ‘authority is what we represent, so I’m not in authority, I represent the authority of the subject’ (A, Andrew) and the partnership power relationship emphasises that undergraduates and academics both ‘have a contribution to make’ (A, Andrew). The authority of knowledge as a form of power granted to the teacher in the traditional power dynamic is appropriated into universities, but the authority of the academic is different to that of a teacher; they do not possess unilateral authority of knowledge because the purpose of the modern university is centred on the production, rather than distribution, of knowledge. With the strength of the ‘enduring relations’ (Isaac 1987, 22) of the traditional power relationship, though, it is problematic for undergraduates to consolidate the two conflicting roles of learner and partner, each of which possess opposing powers. The discourses of the interviews from both institutions suggested a conflict between the powers granted to the
roles of learner and partner. The latter entails that undergraduates have greater power and responsibility in the learning process and less reliance on the authority of the teacher. Both undergraduates and academics, generally, were hesitant in encouraging a partnership model in practice because it undermines the traditional power relationship.

**Discussion**

Reflecting on the positioning of undergraduates and the formation and perpetuation of those social roles at the systemic and constitutive levels within institutions provides greater understanding of how the traditional power relationship is being reframed. The literature seldom delves into the complexity of this power relationship; authors typically acknowledge it as a given dynamic which must be overcome by more appropriate pedagogical dynamics (Tong, Standen, and Sotiriou 2018).

This article provides a detailed understanding of the cogency of the traditional power relationship through adherence to the established social role of the traditional learner. The traditional power relationship is highlighted by this article as being inevitable within HE because of undergraduates’ and academics’ natural propensity to perpetuate the familiar dynamic. Viewing this relationship through the lens of systemic and constitutive conceptualisations of power provides understanding of how and why this traditional power relationship appears natural and inevitable. Moreover, it provides insights for understanding the conflicting power relationships that are being introduced into the current university climate and opportunities for dialoguing about ways to deconstruct the dynamic so that space may be opened up for new power relationships to exist. This is particularly important in the period of austerity-fuelled remote learning that universities now find themselves within; the unprecedented global pandemic caused by Covid-19 is reframing HE institutions in an unforeseen way, causing pedagogical relationships to move online. It is imperative to understand the existing power dynamics in HE if institutions are to successfully establish new pedagogical dynamics through remote and online learning.

If universities want partner power relationships to dominate, with an emphasis on collaborative learning in the current remote system, then an understanding of the formation and perpetuation of the traditional power relationship is necessary. Many authors acknowledge the barrier that the traditional dynamic presents for the implementation of a power relationship based on the partnership model (Shor 1996; Tong, Standen, and Sotiriou 2018). This article has gone beyond recognition and instead applied an integrated approach to detailing how this barrier is formed and maintained, which allows insight into how it can be disbanded. A power relationship based on the characteristics of shared power is impossible to effectively implement when the traditional power relationship still predominates. The power granted to the social agents performing within each dynamic is divergent, and thus, incompatible.

Simply acknowledging the structural constraint of the traditional power relationship and strategizing isolated partnership projects at the constitutive level is not enough. To disband a socially constructed and internalised power dynamic, it is necessary to deconstruct it at the systemic level before it becomes perpetuated at the constitutive level and to do this, its formation at the systemic level must first be understood. Many authors and practitioners have focussed on small-scale projects that aim to deconstruct the traditional power relationship at the constitutive level (Little 2010; Tong, Standen, and Sotiriou 2018), and although they can be successful, they do not aid in denaturalising what undergraduates
and academics perceive of as the unavoidable power dynamic. In other words, without an integrated understanding of how power relationships are formed at the systemic level and perpetuated at the constitutive level, institutions will find it challenging to successfully implement new power dynamics. Moreover, this article provides further understanding of how the traditional power relationship is being reframed through the illumination of the consumer-provider power relationship, which is becoming more pervasive at the constitutive level within universities. Positioning undergraduates as consumers at the systemic level prescribes a specific power relationship between them and academics, awarding each agent competing powers (Williams 2013). Because the consumer role is familiar and the positioning is encouraged strongly at the systemic level through institutional discourse, the power dynamic that follows is also cogent at the constitutive level.

If we consider the power relationship through the lens of the dialectical relation between systemic and constitutive power, we can acknowledge that undergraduates are having to negotiate three competing power dynamics, each of which awards them conflicting powers. The consumer-provider power relationship is unavoidable, to an extent, because of the legal imperatives of undergraduates’ financial contract with their institutions. However, if institutions want to encourage a partnership power dynamic, then they must understand not only the challenge of deconstructing the traditional power relationship, but also the barrier that is caused by the simultaneous encouragement of the consumer-provider power relationship. Without this understanding, institutions can hardly hope to foster a power dynamic based on shared authority and reciprocity. What is fostered instead is undergraduate-academic relationships based on discord, confusion and conflict in perceived and enacted behavioural expectations and powers. This article does not propose a solution to the conflicting power relationships present in universities, but it does open up the conversation for understanding these dynamics so that we can work towards reconstructing them. In the current unstable climate, power relationships need elucidation more than ever, so that stable and effective dynamics can flourish in a period of unprecedented uncertainty for HE.

Acknowledgements

This article is based on doctoral research carried out as part of a PhD in Educational Research. I thank the voluntary participants of this study for their time and insights. I am also forever grateful to my supervisors for their constructive feedback and dedicated guidance.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the ESRC under Grant ES/P000665/1.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, ES, upon reasonable request and subject to ethical limitations.
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