The risks of 'university speak': Relationship management and identity negotiation by mature students off campus.

Research finds that participation in higher education is generally empowering for mature students but that it can also create tensions in their off campus relationships. This article reports on findings from an ongoing study of the experiences of mature students at university in Ireland and draws from interviews with 15 such students in the final year of their studies. Following Baxter and Britton (2001), the article considers how mature students experience and represent changes in identities and social relationships brought about by entry to higher education. Specifically, the article focuses on the risks associated with using newly acquired academic language (or 'university speak') off campus. The findings reported here complement existing research and offer support for Baxter and Britton's suggestion that mature students often experience compartmentalisation and fragmentation in their self-identities.

Keywords: mature students; Ireland; identity; talk; language

Introduction

Research suggests that participation in higher education is generally empowering for mature students, yet that it can also pose *risks* to identities and relationships; new identities can conflict with older ones, and personal changes triggered by higher education can create unforeseen tensions in already-existing relationships (Baxter & Britton, 2001). Such tensions are often more pronounced for working class mature students, who typically experience university as a contradictory space of empowerment and exclusion (Burke, 2008), transformation and threat (Reay, 2001). This article reports on findings from an ongoing study of the experiences of mature students at university in Ireland and draws from interviews with 15 such students in the final year of their studies. As with the UK based study by Baxter and Britton (2001), the Irish study examines how mature students experience and represent changes in identities and

social relationships brought about by entry to higher education. As such, it acknowledges that identities are positional and relational, and that they are continuously and reflexively produced in shifting contexts; identities are socially situated and embodied practices of being and becoming, just as social life itself is an 'unfinished, ongoing dialogue' (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 4). The reflexive nature of identities helps to explain their performative aspect; identities often involve a certain comportment or presentation of self in shifting situations (cf. Goffman, 1959). Equally, it should be recognised that individuals have multiple identities and therefore that it is an empirical question when and how any specific identity becomes the most relevant at any given time (Eriksen, 2002). Therefore *mature student* is understood here as *an* identity that one inhabits and performs and identifies with to a greater or lesser degree on an ongoing basis, which is to say that the experience of *being* a mature student changes continuously.

This article examines how mature students describe their motivations for entering university and the responses of friends and family to their decision to do so. Against this background, it focuses more specifically on the acquisition and use of new academic language. Language is vital to identity; how one uses language is reflective of one's identity, but language is also perhaps the central mechanism through which identity is *accomplished*. The acquisition and use of new academic language is depicted by informants in this study as central to the process of self-transformation activated by higher education and to their claims to new identities. However, by the same token it also poses risks to their already-existing identities and relationships. In other words, learning academic language is part of the process of acquiring new cultural capital through education and it is often an early sign of a changing sense of self, and yet, as Baxter and Britton suggest, this process also tends to have significant effects on

relations with friends and family 'who still inhabit the 'old' world' (2001, p. 93). In the interview data examined below, mature students exhibit pride in being able to use and incorporate terms learned at university in their everyday discourse, but many also recount negative experiences of using 'university speak' (as one informant described it) off campus; on such occasions, it is the imputation of superiority that appears to most trouble these students (cf. Baxter & Britton, 2001). I suggest that this awareness and modification of language use offers a fruitful route into exploring how mature students manage different sets of relationships and negotiate their variously changing identities. In particular, my analysis offers support for Baxter and Britton's (2001) suggestion that mature students often experience compartmentalisation and fragmentation in their self-identities.

Elsewhere, I employed Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) to investigate the tensions mature students experience in attempting to integrate into university life and yet also preserve a sense of authentic and continuous selfhood. RDT developed initially as a critique of theoretical perspectives on interpersonal and familial relationships which tended to depict tension and uncertainty as detrimental to relationships. Against such attempts to 'iron out' the rough edges of relationships, Baxter and Montgomery (1996, p. 3/4) insist that a dialectical perspective acknowledges the unruliness and disorder of social life: 'From the perspective of relational dialectics, social life exists in and through people's communicative practices, by which people give voice to multiple (perhaps even infinite) opposing tendencies'. Therefore RDT advances from the assumption that tensions (or relational contradictions) are inherent in all relationships and that these should not be viewed as *problems* per se. Rather, oppositional forces in human relationships – such as the need for independence *as well as* dependence – are the very fabric of living, evolving relationships. As Baxter and Montgomery (1996, p. 7) put it,

contradictions are 'not evidence of failure or inadequacy in a person or in a social system. In fact, contradictions are the basic 'drivers' of change, according to a dialectical perspective.' In employing this theoretical perspective, I examined the role of friendship in mediating the shifting experiences of mature students on campus, finding that their friendships with other mature students are not only important for creating and sustaining identities but also act as important sites of resistance to negative representations of mature students (Author, 2014). However, if the previous article explored the campus lives of mature students, here it is their relationships and identities *off campus* that primarily interest me.

Keeping up appearances: mature students off campus

Widening participation in higher education has been a priority for Irish academic institutions for almost two decades and with some success. The National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education (or the 'National Access Office') was established in 2003 by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) to facilitate increased educational access and opportunities for under-represented groups in higher education. All Irish colleges and universities now provide a range of support services and alternative admission routes. For example, the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) scheme aims to broaden access opportunities to third-level education for school leavers from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, and all Irish universities currently participate in the scheme, along with other University-level colleges. The HEA reports that mature students – those who are at least 23 years of age on January first of the year they commence study – currently comprise 10 per cent of all full-time undergraduates attending university in Ireland and 14 per cent of those attending all HEA-funded institutions in Ireland (HEA,

2014a). When students with disabilities, those with migrant backgrounds, those on access and back-to-work programmes, and 'flexible learners' are included, the percentage of 'non-traditional' students in higher education in Ireland is potentially much higher. Nevertheless, some research also points to persistent low levels of participation in higher education amongst lower socioeconomic groups in Ireland, and suggests in particular that entry into university education is still strongly structured by social class (McCoy, Mei and Smyth, 2011). Equally, the HEA finds that 13 per cent of mature students fail to progress through Irish universities, compared to 8 per cent for those under the age 23 (HEA, 2014b). Widening and maintaining participation in higher education are therefore complex and challenging ongoing processes and in this context it must be recognised that the mature student cohort at Irish universities (as elsewhere) is highly diverse.

Despite their internal diversity, however, mature students often share a sense of separateness from their younger peers, which can make them apprehensive about university life and which helps to explain why they often gravitate towards one another early on. This sense of differentness is often compounded by such things as the unfamiliar physical terrain of the university, the routine of lectures and seminars and independent learning, and the need to speak and write in the language of academia (Read, Archer & Leathwood, 2003). As noted above, tensions and struggles associated with entry to higher education are generally more pronounced for working class mature students, and these often express feelings of insecurity, inadequacy and inauthenticity, especially in the early stages of their studies. In particular, these mature students often have difficulty in self-identifying as *a student* – a term which they generally feel is the preserve of young, middle-class people (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003; Read, Archer &Leathwood, 2003). In light

of this, Avis (1997) insists that we regard the development of a student (or learner) identity as an ongoing dialogue between individual identity and educational experience, and that we acknowledge the unique cultural frameworks that individuals use to make sense of their experience.

Various scholars have investigated mature students' motivations for entering higher education, often linking these to biography and life course (Avis, 1997; Mercer, 2007; O'Shea & Stone, 2001; Stevenson & Clegg, 2012; Swain & Hammond, 2011). For example, Mercer (2007) found that a desire to change or (re)discover the self is a key motivation for mature students; her research participants desired to feel happier, stronger and more secure; to re-find themselves and prove to themselves that they were capable of obtaining a university qualification. Similarly, O'Shea and Stone (2011) found that beyond instrumental goals, motivations for entering higher education were predominantly expressed in terms of self-validation and self-worth, freedom and personal independence, and a desire to restore a sense of self. As well as examining mature students' motivations for entering university, researchers have also investigated their experiences in higher education. These experiences are typically described as a series of transitions and risks (and sometimes ruptures) to self-identity, both on and off campus (Avis, 1997; Baxter & Britton, 2001; Brooks, 2007; Mercer, 2007; Stevenson & Clegg, 2012). In Baxter and Britton's (2001) study, for example, higher education again emerges as especially difficult for those moving away from a working class habitus. For these students, 'returning to education sets them on a trajectory of class mobility, which is experienced as a painful dislocation between an old and newly developing habitus, which are ranked hierarchically and carry connotations of inferiority and superiority' (Baxter & Britton, 2001, p. 99). Hence,

while the concept of habitus is flexible enough to allow for change and transformation, this is rarely tension free. On the contrary, when the habitus encounters an unfamiliar field – such as the field of higher education – the resulting disjunctures can generate ambivalence, tension and disquiet (Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2009).

Baxter and Britton locate their study within wider debates about social identity, and their findings contest the putatively declining salience of class. Much recent thinking on identities in postmodernity emphasises the contingency, malleability and changeability of identities: 'No longer are people placed in society by way of their lineage, caste or class, but each must invent and consciously create a personal identity' (Warde, 1994, p. 881). Bauman's (2007) notion of the 'serial birth' – which posits that individuals are increasingly recasting themselves as commodities and products – captures the thrust of such thinking. At the level of quotidian interaction, however, disposing of former identities and forging new ones is not so easily achieved. In this context Baxter and Britton point out that although education is empowering and liberating in many respects–such as allowing one to gain knowledge and confidence, providing a release from domesticity, and increasing opportunities for paid work–the *becoming* associated with it is also fraught with difficulty and risk. They observe, for example, that mature students often experience a sense of dislocation which registers as a kind of compartmentalisation of the self, and that their 'different selves' are often 'separated geographically by a car ride' (2001, p. 98). Baxter and Britton's findings therefore suggest that while higher education brings new identities into being, these do not automatically replace or displace older identities but rather exist in tension

with them. Transformation, in other words, 'is a fraught, risky business' (Reay, 2001, p. 341).

An important component of the cultural capital gained by participation in higher education – and, as such, the perception of self-transformation – is the acquisition of new language and new ways of expressing oneself. This entails 'becoming' but also in some respects an 'unearthing' of the self:

> Education changes people, therefore, by giving them a new language which reflects their different understanding of the world which surrounds them. In this sense they experience themselves as having become different sorts of people, of having developed aspects of themselves in different ways. Education is seen as realising aspects of the self which have been pushed aside or, more positively, as being part of a self-conscious reshaping of the self (Baxter & Britton, 2001, p. 94).

Above, Baxter and Britton highlight that the changes to self triggered by higher education are often profound, and typically include a changed outlook on the world and a modification or refashioning of how one communicates. The latter is especially important here.

On some level, every communicative act or gesture confirms or disconfirms identity. Talk is particularly important because how one talks is central to the identity one performs and embodies in any given context. Linguistic acts and practices, such as talking, bring to light the socially and discursively constructed nature of selves and collectives (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2001). As Burke (2008, p. 202) suggests, 'the production of subjectivity is always an interactive, inconsistent and unstable process

interlaced with and mediated by social, emotional, cultural, textual and discursive practices and relations.' As an instrument for affirming, constructing or reconstructing one's identity in any given context, talk involves a range of conscious and unconscious activities, including self-disclosure, impression management, privacy maintenance etc. Therefore how one talks – and indeed, if, and to what extent, one modifies one's talk – will depend on one's company and how one defines the situation at hand. In talk, the choice of *language* is vitally important. Above, I noted that the acquisition of new language is very often the first sign of the cultural capital gained by participation in higher education, but that the sense of personal growth and liberation this brings is often accompanied by a growing distance from family and friends, especially for those of working class origins. As James (1995, p. 461) puts it, 'language, one of the most robust indices of cultural capital and a deeply *embodied* facet of identity, comes to both signify and reproduce social distance between 'university life and home life.'' In James' study of mature students, for example, a research participant called Helen described how the experience of 'going home' had changed dramatically for her and how she increasingly felt a 'distinct divide' from her old friends, especially in terms of language:

> [At home] I'll be talking about certain things and I suddenly realise that I'm talking about specific subjects and they're looking at me as though I've come down off another planet, because I'm talking ... more academically. I'm talking about theories, and it'll come out in such trivial conversation and I think, Oh God, you know, shut up, don't say that ... I mean they don't know what you're talking about. And they look at you and say 'will you just give it a rest' (James, 1995, p. 461).

The palpable sense of frustration in the above interview excerpt – and the interviewee's efforts to avoid confrontation and keep up (outdated) appearances – is also strongly evident in the study by Baxter and Britton (2001), in which participants also stressed the difficulties of managing new and old relationships and identities. Here again, tensions surrounding language use indicated growing social distance. For example, the brother of one participant (called Tina) in Baxter and Britton's study observed that she was using 'big words' more often (p. 95). Likewise, the comments of another participant – a married wood turner known as Stan – describe this experienced tension particularly well:

> My situation, I have to be a Jekyll and Hyde really, no-one has a clue (I live on a council estate) about what I speak of ... in general my friends don't understand or don't want to understand, so I find myself very stilted conversation ... Sometimes it's a bore, it really is a bore, I can't cope with it. My friends will call round, um, friends of long standing will call round and I find it difficult to keep conversation going (Baxter & Britton, 2001, p. 97).

The above passages highlight that social identities are not always trouble-free accomplishments and that social approval for *new* identities is not always easily gained, especially if there is a perception that group identity has been violated. Stan's comments depict language as a boundary device and highlight that there are both costs and gains in assuming a successful learner identity (Reay, 2006, p. 301). His comments also imply a degree of self-surveillance and regulation with regard to how he communicates off campus. More directly, we might suggest that his comments are fundamentally about identity maintenance and transgression (Archer and Leathwood, 2003). Again, this compels us to consider the identities of mature

students in *relational* terms and to investigate 'the multiple contexts in which they are positioned and position themselves' (Burke, 2008, p. 202).

The study

The data presented and analysed below derive from an ongoing interpretative study of the identities and relationships of final-year mature students attending university in Ireland. The study incorporates focus groups, one-person depth interviews (interviewer plus a single informant), and paired interviews (interviewer plus two informants), with a view towards better capturing the complex, multi-layered experiences of mature students in higher education. The analytical approach is informed by Grounded Theory, and consequently research participants are referred to as *informants* – a term which suggests prioritisation of the language of the researchee and not that of the researcher (Spradley, 1979). All of the informants were given pseudonyms and discussion in interviews centered on encounters and episodes recounted by informants, who were encouraged to elaborate on their responses and to delve into salient issues (cf. Simmons et al., 2013).

To date, the study has included 17 informants, who were recruited initially by direct email and subsequently via the snowballing technique. Informants were all final-year undergraduate students in media and arts programmes and they varied in age, with the youngest 28 and the oldest 54 years of age. The majority of informants resided in the greater Dublin area, though several commuted to university from more rural areas. There was an approximately even gender split, and all were white. The data below are drawn from interviews with just 15 informants, as two of the 17 were 23 years of age and their interview responses suggested markedly different experiences at university to the other informants in the study (who were mostly in their thirties). The data presented

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and analysed in the following section derive specifically from one focus group ($n = 7$), two one-person interviews ($n = 2$) and three paired interviews ($n = 6$).

As noted above, in a previous article I analysed interview data through the prism of Relational Dialectics Theory, which yielded a number of distinct tensions or contradictions that mature students routinely experience on campus (Author, 2014). My analysis suggested, for example, that although my informants participate in university life, they are never fully integrated into it (cf. Lowry-Hart & Pacheco Jr., 2011). In what follows, I first examine informants' expressed motivations for entering university and briefly recall some of their experiences of differentness on campus. I then turn to examine how the decision to enter university was greeted by friends and families, with many depicting a somewhat cool and disinterested reaction by friends in particular. This was interpreted by informants as an early indication that their emerging identities as students might clash with their former selves and that they might need to develop strategies to *contain* their student identities off campus. In the final section, I look specifically at the risks of using academic language (or 'university speak') off campus, and mature students' heightened sense of split selves as a consequence.

Baxter and Britton's (2001) research depicts the troublesome transition from working class origins to the development of a middle class habitus, which is experienced by their participants as a painful sense of dislocation. As they put it, 'the process of moving between classes has very strong emotional and affective aspects which colour the lives of those who experience it' (Baxter & Britton, 2001, p. 95). In the study reported here, however, class does not register as strongly in the tensions and transitions described by informants, and yet their experiences of differentness on and off campus and the difficulties they encounter in managing relationships and in negotiating identities resonate closely with many of the comments by participants in Baxter and

Britton's study. With the exception of the two oldest informants in the Irish study (Jim and Barbara) – both of whom described their origins as working class – all of the other informants self-identified as middle class (though, or course, we must acknowledge that self-identification can be notoriously contradictory). And yet, just like the participants in Baxter and Britton's study, the overriding impression gained from their accounts is of fragmented and compartmentalised self-identities.

Becoming a mature student

I came in—and this probably sounds really awful—but not really caring if people spoke to me or not. Like I said, because this was my job for the next three years (Diane, 32).

When asked to explain their motivations for entering university, informants typically invoked an image of university as *work*, as illustrated by the comments of Diane (above). As also put by Sharon (31): "For me… this is like work for me. I'm not here to make friends, I'm here to get a degree." Similarly, Ben (28) commented: "You know, this might sound kind of cold, but I treated college like just… not for the bond with everyone but… I wanted to go in and learn and get my stuff done and get out of here. That's how I treated it." Nevertheless, over the course of interviews it became apparent that informants' motivations for entering university were multifaceted and not entirely explained by narrowly instrumental considerations. Jane's intervention in the focus group, for example, seemed to redirect the general discussion and kindle more considered responses. In the following exchange, beginning with Jane's intervention, the university shifts from a place narrowly associated with work and qualifications and job prospects, to a place of potential personal validation and social acceptance.

I knew it [university] was gonna be a process and I knew that it wasn't gonna be easy but I just knew inside me that I valued it so much that eventually it would take over and take me out of my head and into the world ... Like I needed acceptance you know. I needed to feel like hey, look, we'll give you a chance (Jane, 36).

It was like validation (Diane, 32).

Yes! (Jane, 36).

For me ... it was similar to Jane. It was something that I always wanted to do. It was something that I knew I could do (Sharon, 31).

Social acceptance emerges as a powerful motivation in the above exchange, however as I have noted elsewhere, this is not always easily achieved within the campus community (Author, 2014). For example, though informants described the process of getting used to and eventually mastering university life in terms of schedules and coursework, their responses suggested that feelings of differentness from traditional students remained with them throughout their time at university. This is not to suggest that informants were *continually aware* of being mature students; rather, it seems that certain triggers–particular occasions or particular discussion topics–prompted feelings of differentness on at least a semi-regular basis. Interactions after lecture hours or off campus were generally described as the more uncomfortable by informants. For example, Diane (32) commented in an individual interview: "I did want to get involved. But where I really felt it was the out of lecture hours. I felt much more different. Like in a lecture you're just in doing the work. I've seen people really benefit from joining societies but [mature students] just don't fit in." However, some of the responses of informants suggested that

interactions *during* lecture hours were just as capable of inducing feelings of differentness. For example, during the focus group, Sharon (31) recalled with humour a certain encounter with a younger student just before class:

> *I was doing an analysing media project, and we chose to analyse It's a Wonderful Life. And I remember being early for class and chatting to this lovely young fella, and I was telling him we were analysing It's a Wonderful Life–you know, a classic Jimmy Stuart movie. And he goes, "Oh no, Sharon, that's not from my era." [All laugh] And I went to him, "It's not from my era, either! It's something like the 1940s. How old do you think I am?!" [Laughs]. (Sharon, 31)*

In the above passage Sharon makes clear that despite her apparent ease in conversing with a younger classmate whom she clearly liked ("lovely young fella"), that (mis)perceptions about age sometimes hindered engagement with traditional students. In some respects, mature students are depicted here as campus insiders on account of their interactions with other students and their participation in course activities, and yet in other respects they appear as campus outsiders, or what Skeggs (2005) imaginatively terms 'proximate strangers'. In another example, taken from a paired interview with Sharon and Lisa, the latter recalled her probable *misreading* of the behaviour of younger students:

> *And the other thing is other students used to open the door for me ... and I used to dress quite well in the first semester. I've gone to pot since ... but I remember saying to my sister, "they're so mannerly" and she goes, "they think you're a teacher or something!" [Laughs] ... I was mortified because I thought I was on the level with all*

these people and we're all the same and then it was like, no they hate me. I'm too old!

[Laughs] (Lisa, 37).

Episodes of this sort, though often recounted with humour, betray the self-consciousness of mature students on campus, and the subtle (or sometimes very unsubtle) ways they are reminded of their differentness. Equally, they signal potential risks and also perhaps potential limits to self-transformation (Reay, 2001; Burke, 2008). Nonetheless, my informants also insisted that they participated as equals for the most part at university, without preferential or prejudicial treatment. This may explain why some appeared uncomfortable with the term 'mature student.' As put by Diane (32): "I hate being distinguished from other people … I hate labels. You know, I don't eat meat but I hate being called a vegetarian because people have these associations. And I hated being known as the mature student." Just as Skeggs in her studies discovered a certain amount of dis-identification with the label 'working class', here it is apparent that not all 'mature students' willingly identify as such.

Talking about university

The previous section offered a glimpse of how mature students experience feelings of differentness (and sometimes sameness) on campus. In this section, however, I turn to examine similar feelings *off campus*, beginning with how the decision to enter university was first greeted in already-existing relationships i.e. by partners, friends and family. All informants acknowledged that entering university was disruptive to household routines and schedules, and especially so in the cases of those with spouses and children (cf. Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003). As Lisa (37), a mother of three, put it:

"I didn't appreciate how hard it would be juggling all the balls." Despite this, the majority claimed that their families were generally supportive of their decision to go to university. The responses of close friends, on the other hand, were seemingly much more half-hearted. For example, in an individual interview, Sharon (31) commented:

> *I had a negative experience. My family, incredibly supportive. But my friends, no. I got, 'You're stupid giving up a job in a recession.' My parents were very supportive because I think it fulfilled an ambition for them. But it took a long time for friends to warm up to the idea of me going back to college (Sharon, 31).*

For many informants, this less-than enthusiastic initial response from friends later evolved into a more general kind of disinterest, which often made conversation difficult. As Barbara (45) commented:

> *[It's] hard when you've got friends who have no interest in it [university] whatsoever. If I turn around and say, "Well I'm doing an essay on the information society," they go [Pause] "Anyway so" [Laughs] … The only thing I could get people interested in was the photography side of things because I guess they can relate to it. But certainly not the academic side of things (Barbara, 45).*

Barbara's comments above suggest repeated attempts on her part to generate interest in her studies amongst her friends, followed by the realisation that this was unlikely ever to be achieved. She suggests that a failure to "relate" to certain subjects may explain her friends' reluctance – and conversely helps to explain their interest in discussing photography. However, her comments also convey a very clear impression of acceptable and unacceptable conversational topics, with 'university' firmly located in

the latter category. It is noteworthy here that Barbara was one of two informants in the study who self-identified as working class. In the above passage we are afforded a glimpse of her peer group culture off campus and the social costs of her entry into higher education; here one gets a sense that popularity amongst the peer group conflicts strongly with the developing learner identity (cf. Reay, 2006). Nevertheless, a similar impression is given by the following comments by Ben (28), who self-identified as middle class. Ben's comments similarly suggest that his off campus life is largely discontinuous with, or disconnected from, his on campus life, which is again suggestive of inhabiting different worlds and of having divided identities (cf. Baxter and Britton, 2001).

> *I'd say my [off campus life] is a lot more separate than, say, for some of the younger*
> *students, where a lot of their group and social network is student life, whereas a lot of*
> *my friends are either working or they're not inside that atmosphere. They don't want to*
> *talk about it really; they want to talk about other stuff (Ben, 28).*

Here again, disinterest and perhaps a failure to relate seem to explain the unwillingness of Ben's friends to discuss his university life. At other times, however, informants offered more complex reasons for the apparent apathy of (familiar) others. For example, in the following lengthy exchange in a paired interview with Barbara and Diane, the informants suggest that ostensible disinterest is in fact concealed shame:

> *Like for me for a long time there were people in the family and people close to me who*
> *just didn't seem interested or would always change the subject and I always thought,*
> *God they're being really rude or they don't have an interest in me but it was only my*
> *sister let slip one day on the phone about her husband's colleagues. She said she has*

nothing in common with them so she doesn't know how to talk to them because they're all economists and blah blah blah. And she said I'm lost because I never went to college so I don't know what to say to them. And I realised that it's the same, that's why she didn't seem to be supporting me (Diane, 32)

Yeah, she doesn't know what to say about it (Barbara, 45).

Yes. And it's the same with my boyfriend. He actually stopped me one day and said I have no idea what you're talking about so I had to simplify and break it down as to what I'm doing and then he went, ok, that makes more sense and then he was more encouraging. So I think when people don't understand … and they haven't been through it themselves, they don't want to talk about it because I think they are intimidated by it or, you know, they just don't know how to engage (Diane, 32)

In the above exchange, the informants suggest that the unwillingness of their friends (and sometimes family) to engage in discussions about their studies at university stems from a fear of being unable to communicate ("she doesn't know what to say about it") or a fear of being unable to understand certain topics ("I have no idea what you're talking about"). This offers a reminder that identity is a relational concept and that shared experiences and shared meanings conveyed symbolically (primarily through talk) are fundamental to perceptions of a shared social universe (see Kärreman and Alvesson, 2001). It also reminds us that social identities are not fixed indefinitely, just as the relationships which give rise to them are always in dialectical flux.

The risks of 'university speak' off campus

Informants in the study reported here were proud of their accomplishments at university and were excited by the prospect of using their new knowledge to critically analyse the world around them. At the same time, however, their interview responses suggested an increased consciousness of their identities as students when off campus and a heightened awareness of their language use in particular. In other words, informants appeared to experience tension in encounters with familiar others, stemming from the contradictory impulses to be open and expressive and yet also protective of self (cf. Rawlins, 1983). The following comments from Ben (28), for example, suggest a degree of tension around expressive boundaries when in the company of non-university friends:

> *Well the classic thing is some of my friends [say], "Oh, you're back with that student talk." [Laughs] I think if you get bookish as well, I mean, where are you coming with this? So just little words ... slip in. With some of my friends if you get too philosophical you start hitting pretentious very quickly. It's not like these people are less educated; they're quite smart people (Ben, 28).*

Ben acknowledges here that his language has changed since attending university, though he is often not conscious of it ("words slip in"). He also suggests that "student talk" carries the risk of appearing pretentious when in the company of old friends. Nevertheless, his final remarks seem to dispel or invalidate any suggestion that his friends might be ignorant or small-minded. On the contrary, he maintains that they are "smart" and "educated" people. Other informants were less inclined to defend the reactions of friends and family in this way; however, in all cases it was the fear of offending others or of being seen as superior that was most troubling (cf. Baxter and Britton, 2001). For example, Jim (54) – the oldest informant in the study – commented in an individual interview:

I would be careful not to use university speak [off campus]. Some conversations might start with me using my analysing hat – like it just comes out – but I don't. I purposely don't because before you know it, it'll be, 'What do you know?' … Because the last thing I would want to do is cause friction or an argument … A lot of the people I would know … would [not] have gone to university. But I would be very conscious that I don't cause any offence even though I can use university speak and I see things in people and relationships and how they react to one another that I wouldn't have seen before. You know, now you see stuff. You know, like where people place themselves in a social group … You're not consciously … I don't consciously go out to watch for it but you <u>see it</u> because it's already in here [points to his head]. For instance, a simple thing, a movie comes on and Karen [his wife] will say, 'Are we gonna watch this or are you gonna analyse it?' [Laughs] (Jim, 54).

As with Ben (above), Jim's comments suggest that his use of analytical terms and concepts learned at university is often unconscious ("it just comes out"), which also indicates perhaps the extent of self-transformation accomplished during his education. However, as noted already, such transformation is neither wholesale nor risk free; indeed, the comments of informants utterly undermine any 'fantasies of seamless transitions' (Reay, 2001, p. 339). It is worth noting that Jim (like Barbara) self-identified as working class and that he too appeared to experience a more pronounced division between campus culture and off campus peer group culture. In the above passage, we get a strong sense that Jim's new analytical repertoire is not always welcome in his interactions with friends and family outside of university; here it is depicted as a kind of relational interference (especially in the comments by his wife). Outside of the relationship with his wife, Jim's reasons for being attentive to his

language use are first, to not cause offence, and second, to avoid appearing superior. Here again, the informant's comments suggest a degree of friction (primarily in respect of expressive boundaries) between his various identities, new and old. Jim's comments also indicate that he engages in practices of self-policing, motivated by a fear of transgression. His comments therefore signal the impossibility of any simple refashioning or remaking of self, and instead suggest a careful process of manoeuvring and compromise within conflicting value systems and their concomitant forms of judgement, appraisal and evaluation (cf. Skeggs, 2005). A focus group exchange between Sharon and Jane further developed this theme.

> *I suppose if you're talking about yer man Manuel Castells and spaces of places and places of flow and all this stuff, I'm not gonna go home and say to mam, 'Guess what I learned today.' I would always put it in layman terms. That's something I do anyway. [But] I can't say I police my language ... it's just part of me anyway (Sharon, 31).*

> *You know, it can be different – they don't understand the lingo and they don't understand what you mean. So it's nice to be able to talk to someone who does understand the lingo (Jane, 36).*

The above comments suggest that informants either avoid discussing certain university topics with those who do not "understand the lingo," or that they modify and simplify their language ("put it in layman terms"). More broadly, these passages suggest an acute awareness of changed selves and of the different forms of language which necessarily accompany these variously situated selves. As such, they offer support for the suggestion by Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2009, p. 1115) that researchers should attempt to analytically separate learner and social identities, and try 'to understand the

varying extent to which individuals are able to move in and out of different identity positionings'. In addition to acquiring new knowledge and new language, the above comments by informants highlight that self-identities are changed and challenged in education. (Indeed, Jane's comments suggest perhaps a growing need for new and different company). Hence, 'to be 'educated,'' as Baxter and Britton (2001, p. 87) make clear, 'is to stake a claim to a new identity which can be threatening both to one's own sense of self or to others.' For example, in the following passage from an individual interview, Diane elaborates on her view as to why *her* education is unsettling for others. In the process, she describes some of the transformational effects of participation in higher education.

As I said before, my sister admitted that she feels intimidated; she doesn't understand what I'm doing because she never went to college. It's a little bit of intimidation, and a little bit of they just don't understand, and a little bit of jealousy maybe. But education changes you. Actually, I've seen it with a friend of mine – he's gone back to do [a distance learning] programme … I've just noticed recently some of his comments on Facebook since he's gone back to study English and Literature and even the phraseology now is totally different. And you're kind of going, get over yourself. Fancy words now! [Laughs] (Diane, 32)

Baxter and Britton (2001, p. 97) observe that their research participants' interview accounts are full of ambivalence, in the sense that their participants did not wish to appear superior to others but sometimes *did* actually feel superior. The same can be observed in the interview data examined here; indeed, this ambivalence is strongly apparent in the above comments by Diane. At first, Diane's comments identify fear and knowledge deficits in other persons as the primary reasons for their apparent disinterest

or unwillingness to discuss her studies. Like Sharon (above), who often puts things in "layman's terms," Diane later added: "I find now that I double-check with people, I'd ask, "Does that make sense to you?" (Diane, 32). However, in the above passage, when she moves on to talk about the Facebook comments of a friend who has also recently entered further education, Diane is condescending of what she considers his pretentious new phraseology ("fancy words"). Here Diane's reaction ("get over yourself") unwittingly gives credence to suggestions that education *can indeed* generate feelings of superiority in the newly educated. However, regardless of whether they fear being seen as superior, or whether their anxiety stems from *actually* feeling superior – or both – the comments of informants indicate strongly that education goes hand-in-hand with a changing sense of self, the result of which is that many of these mature students appear to feel as if they are often leading double lives, and inhabiting different identities in largely disconnected worlds.

Conclusion

In this article I presented findings emerging from an ongoing interpretative study of the relationships and identities of mature students attending university in Dublin. The article focused on mature students' evolving experiences of differentness (and sameness) off campus and paid particular attention to the importance of talk and language use in negotiating belonging. Though mature students generally consider the acquisition of academic language an enriching part of the self-transformation activated by higher education, this also emerges as a source of tension in their off campus relationships and identities. 'University speak,' though crucial to the *becoming*

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associated with higher education, can also potentially threaten other forms of *belonging*. 'The threat of losing oneself,' Reay (2001, p. 338) tells us, 'is as likely a prospect as finding oneself.'

As in the UK based study by Baxter and Britton (2001), the interview comments of mature students in the Irish study reported here suggest that they are forced to manage various relationships and negotiate various identities (new and old) and that these processes are often accompanied by feelings of uncertainty, tension and ambivalence. Their comments do not suggest that 'old' identities are perceived as entirely negative and that 'new' (university) identities are entirely positive – or that the latter simply 'replace' the former. Rather, their comments signal dialectical tensions in their relationships on and off campus and shifting feelings of closeness and distance, superiority and inferiority. In particular, the findings reported here offer empirical support for Baxter and Britton's suggestion that mature students often experience compartmentalisation and fragmentation in their self-identities and that they are always to some extent constrained by their own biographies. This constraint is revealed here in tensions surrounding expressive boundaries and in group conversational dynamics. Learning to talk academically is a core part of mastering university, but as suggested here, it is also sometimes a key source of heightened feelings of distance and difference amongst mature students off campus.

This analysis raises several implications for the sociology of higher education. Firstly, it suggests that in addition to rational choice and social reproduction frameworks, which have been used to good effect in analysing the entry patterns and experiences of mature students in higher education, that scholars should make greater use of *relational* perspectives. Relational perspectives emphasise the dynamic and dialectical aspects of social processes; they compel us to foreground significant

relationships in the lives of research subjects and ask us to consider the interlinked processes of relational formation, relational preservation and relational change. They remind us that entry into higher education sometimes comes with relational costs (as well as transactional costs), and that it is in our relationships with others that our identities are primarily fashioned and refashioned.

Secondly, this analysis suggests the usefulness of examining relational boundaries and identity negotiation from the vantage point of language acquisition and modification. (Indeed, many of the important sociological studies cited here provide richly detailed accounts of transformation, tension and ambivalence surrounding language use by mature students). The findings reported here suggest that language use (revealed in talk) is central to both feelings of empowerment and feelings of loss, as expressed by mature students. Furthermore, language modification (along with topic avoidance) appears the primary vehicle through which mature students regulate or contain their student identities off campus and avoid transgressing peer group boundaries. Although the primary focus of this article was on the risks of using 'university speak' off campus by mature students generally – i.e. regardless of their particular gender, race or class positions – the interview data nevertheless suggest that experienced tensions are often exacerbated in the case of working class students. Recent research in Ireland also suggests that geography – where someone lives – can equally dictate the extent and quality of educational access (HEA, 2013). At a minimum, therefore, this points to the need for greater attention to distinct *sub-populations* of mature students in future research of this kind. It also compels us to investigate further why it is that some mature students appear more versatile in shifting between social fields.

Thirdly, while this paper focused largely on talk, researchers should also examine other literacy practices with a view towards encouraging what Burke (2008) calls a 'participatory pedagogical framework' in higher education. For example, reading and writing practices are also crucial to how individual students position themselves in relation to the educational field (Burke, 2008). Just like forms of talk, writing (and reading) practices are 'tied in complex ways to subjectivities and the politics of identity and knowledge' (Burke, 2008, p. 208).

Finally, and in respect of sociological studies of education more generally, this study points to the potential benefits of utilising and synthesising theories originating in other academic disciplines (such as communications studies), which may potentially help us to develop richer and more nuanced understandings of the complex lives of mature students.

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