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Distancing to self-protect: the perpetuation of inequality in higher education through socio-relational dis/engagement

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This paper explores the social class-differentiated behaviours of access and traditional-entry students, based on a three-year constructivist grounded theory study with 45 undergraduates at an Irish university. The participant groups behaved significantly differently within the socio-relational realm, engaging in various forms of distancing behaviours motivated by a desire to self-protect and based on perceived relative social positioning. The paper illustrates some ways in which both disadvantage and privilege are performed at the post-entry stage in a widening participation context. It is argued that the ‘closure’ behaviours of class-based groups constrain the building of social capital by working-class students, thus potentially limiting the ability of widening participation policies in achieving equality goals.

Keywords: social class; higher education; widening participation; social experience

Introduction

In line with the international experience, Irish higher education (HE) has ‘massified’, growing from 20% of 17–18 year olds entering HE in 1980 to 55% by 2004 (O’Connell, Clancy, and McCoy 2006). The participation rate is currently at approximately 60% (Byrne, McCoy, and Watson 2009). Further significant increases are anticipated; the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2007) set a target HE entry rate of 72% of the population at typical age of entry by 2020. This target has been endorsed by the Higher Education Authority (HEA 2008), the rationale being to meet the economy’s skills needs. Despite such growth, and notwithstanding recent improvements for a number of lower socio-economic groups (HEA 2008), significant social class disparities remain in terms of participation in HE (McCoy et al. 2010). Given that the participation rate of higher socio-economic groups has reached saturation point (O’Connell, Clancy, and McCoy 2006), progress towards the 72% target will focus recruitment on lower socio-economic groups.

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Thus, the lack of focus in Ireland on the post-entry student experience and widening participation (WP) is unfortunate, and research in this area has been called for (McCoy et al. 2010). Even internationally, research has focused on issues at the pre-entry stage (particularly those factors that serve to enable and constrain 'choices' about progression; cf. Reay, David, and Ball 2005; Ball et al. 2002), or the point of entry or access stages (for example, McGuire, Collins, and Garavan 2003; Burke 2002; Haggis and Pouget 2002). Commonly recognised as best practice, the focus of WP models must go beyond initial access to include (student) retention and ultimately success (HEA 2008).

Hence, a vital focus is the post-entry student experience, a realm receiving increasing attention from researchers in recent years. Research suggests that working-class students experience significant socio-cultural disjunction, apparently sensing an oppositional 'habitus' with regard to the middle-class institution and general student body (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979). This is evident in their sense of uneasiness and feelings of not belonging; the literature is replete with examples of working-class students feeling like frauds, impostors and interlopers (Bufton 2003) and worrying about not fitting in and making friends (Read, Archer, and Leathwood 2003; Forsyth and Furlong 2000). This sense of uneasiness manifests itself behaviourally in some students' avoidance of social engagement more broadly in HE. For example, in the United Kingdom, Crozier et al. (2008) found that middle-class students are more likely to embrace 'traditional' HE life, which emphasises both social and academic engagement, while working-class students have less time, means and inclination to focus on more than the academic aspects. Similarly, in Christie, Munro, and Wager's (2005) study, the young and mature-aged former access students in two prestigious Scottish universities constructed themselves as 'day' students, focusing their engagement on '... the 9-to-5 day of the teaching university, and not with the broader social activities that are normally expected to be part and parcel of university life' (2005, 16). While they interacted with other students during the day, their 'real' friendships were at home. Similarly, in Goodwin's (2002, 168) US study, contact between the relevant student groups was usually limited to 'a "hi" or a smile in passing' and other students were not regarded as being particularly friendly or easy to get to know. Research also suggests that working-class students tend to 'stick together' on campus rather than making new friends, particularly where they have gotten to know each other in some form of pre-entry programme (Crozier et al. 2008; Christie, Munro, and Wager 2005; Aries and Seider 2005; Goodwin 2002). Goodwin argues that this is not merely a function of having bonded at the pre-entry stage, but is also 'a reaction to a social climate that they either couldn't understand or of which they didn't want to be a part' (2002, 166). This self-segregating behaviour is essentially a self-protective buffering strategy in the face of an external threat. There is evidence from the literature that these students feel intimidated by the affluence and other markers of

middle-class culture and lifestyle amongst other students (Aries and Seider 2005; Goodwin 2002; Lynch and O’Riordan 1998). However, most research in the area (although not all; cf. Crozier et al. 2008) focuses exclusively on working-class students and their experiences, usually not including ‘traditional’ (middle-class) students, and thus neglecting how privilege operates to (re)produce and sustain inequality (Ball 2003; Lynch and O’Riordan 1998). In this paper, I seek to address this, by examining the post-entry socio-cultural experiences of both working-class and middle-class students, focusing in particular on the realm of peer relationships, thus building on previous research that has begun to highlight the importance of this domain.

Methodology

This paper draws on a three-year study exploring the post-entry academic and socio-cultural experiences of 45 school-leaver-aged access (SLA) and traditional-entry (TE) students at an Irish university. Located within the interpretive paradigm, the methodological approach adopted was constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2006). Thomas and Quinn (2007, 15) claim that ‘widening participation is, broadly speaking, under-theorised ... [and] there is a lack of methodological innovation and creativity’. While the student experience in a WP context has been extensively *described*, there has been relatively little theorisation of this experience, and generally it has not been subjected to conceptual analysis. As grounded theory (GT) focuses on developing theory from data, it has the potential to make a valuable contribution to the area. Further, Green et al. (2007) note that GT research has not focused to any great extent on diversity phenomena and argue that the method may illuminate the field.

A *constructivist* GT approach involved a rejection of the traditional objectivist ontology, and a move away from seeing the researcher as passive or neutral, with an emphasis instead on the researcher–participant relationship. Whilst theoretical sampling is employed in GT to fill any conceptual ‘gaps’ in the emerging analysis, I also used this stage to involve participants in data interpretation and theory-building, thus aligning the process with a constructivist approach. A summary of my emerging findings and interpretations was sent to participants and their comments were invited (either in a second interview or via email). I was very conscious of the need to avoid the ‘colonisation’ (Lynch and O’Neill 1994) or ‘hit and run’ (Lynch 1999) approach to research when working with individuals from marginalised and/or minority groups. Including my participants in the analysis stage contributed towards a more democratised research process.¹ Data collection included background information questionnaires, two rounds of individual, in-depth semi-structured interviews,² and email updates.

The SLAs had entered HE following the successful completion of a one-year pre-entry access course, having not achieved adequate ‘points’ in the

Leaving Certificate examination³ to progress through the ‘traditional’ route. Students accepted to the pre-entry access course must provide documentary evidence that they fit certain socio-economic criteria relating to, for example, low family income, long-term unemployment, little or no tradition of HE progression, and family stresses. Thus, by dint of their acceptance to the course, all of the SLAs could be defined as being from lower socio-economic groups.

I also aimed to recruit a group of students who had entered HE through the ‘traditional’ route and who were *not* of lower socio-economic status (TEs). However, information on students’ socio-economic status was not available at institutional level. Hence, I used the ‘proxy’ of being in receipt of a County Council maintenance grant to indicate lower socio-economic status and disadvantage,⁴ and thus considered non-receipt of this grant as indicative of higher socio-economic status. In the absence of any other information, I felt that this was an adequate indicator, in the same way that eligibility for a medical card is often taken as indicative of disadvantage amongst pupils at school level in Ireland.⁵ All SLAs were in receipt of the maintenance grant, and in some cases additional financial and other support. While some information on receipt of grant was available at institutional level, it was incomplete, which resulted in the recruitment of two TEs who were, contrary to institutional records, in receipt of grant,⁶ thus ‘muddling’ the issue of socio-economic status. All of this highlights the significant practical difficulties involved in research of this kind where data are not available on students’ socio-economic status.

Of the 23 SLA participants who volunteered to participate, at the commencement of the study six were in the first year, seven were in the second year, and 10 were in the third year. Seventeen were doing Arts subjects, three were Commerce students, one was doing Science, one was a Nursing student, and one was doing Law. Sixteen were female, and seven were male. Access to institutional student records was granted, and the 22 TEs were ‘matched’ (i.e. in terms of sex, year of birth, academic discipline, year of study, etc.) as far as possible to this group.⁷ Thus, the majority of participants did Arts-related subjects (34 of 45) and were female (32 of 45), and the findings should be interpreted in that context. In Ireland, a majority of access students progress to Arts-type programmes (McGuire, Collins, and Garavan 2003).

The research was conducted in the ‘University of Ireland’,⁸ one of the Republic’s seven universities. The HE sector also consists of 14 Institutes of Technology,⁹ several Colleges of Education, and a number of private, independent institutions. The University of Ireland is very similar to the other six universities in many respects; for example, in its programme provision, its student intake and characteristics, and its aspirations to be ‘world-class’. Both the TE and SLA students at the university are broadly similar to such students in the other six universities, due to these institutions’ very similar entrance requirements, access courses, and student body socio-demographic characteristics.

Findings: distancing to self-protect

Through continual analysis, memo-writing and diagramming (Charmaz 2006), it became apparent that a number of emergent sub-categories relating to participants' views of and behaviours within the socio-relational realm¹⁰ could be conceptualised as various forms of *distancing*. Distancing can be described as a deliberate movement away from something that is perceived as different to oneself, or from something from which one seeks to differentiate oneself. It also involves positioning oneself as either lower or higher than an other/others, based on perceived relative social positioning.

Two forms were identified: subservient distancing and status-maintaining/raising distancing. The underlying motivation of both was self-protection. In *subservient distancing* (enacted mostly by the SLAs), the self-protective urge was activated due to feeling subservient to an other/others. Perceiving a threat to one's self-concept, the reaction was to distance or withdraw from that which was regarded as 'higher' or 'better'. In *status-maintaining/raising distancing* (evidence of which was provided by both participant groups in relation to students in general), one perceived an other/others as being 'less than' in relation to oneself, thus positioning oneself more highly. Self-protection remained the key motivation, but here the aim was to make one's perceived higher status visible to others in order to protect it, or raise it still further.

'Clique-ing'

Through the concept of 'clique-ing' we can consider examples of both forms of distancing. Most participants from both groups felt that there was a 'cliquey-ness' amongst students generally: it seemed that students distanced themselves from difference by grouping together, based on similarities and commonalities. These included socio-economic status or 'background' (indicated, in their terms, by family 'wealth', appearance, 'snobby' attitudes, and material possessions), shared interests, living arrangements, and previously-formed friendships.

The 'clique-ing' together of students in class-based exclusive groups is unsurprising. Theories of interpersonal attraction draw heavily on the principle of 'homophily', which holds that '... contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than among dissimilar people' (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001, 416). Research has found a high level of homophily on ascribed variables such as 'race'/ethnicity, social class, age, and sex, as well as acquired characteristics relating to education, occupation, and religion (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). Hence, friendship is often based on perceptions of similarity – 'social homophily' (Mouw 2006). Research has found that children and adolescents tend to make friends of similar social class (Mac an Ghaill 1994), so it is perhaps unsurprising that students on campus may group together in this way. However, most research on student friendships and diversity in HE

has centred on ‘race’/ethnicity (for example, Antonio 2001). Students making friends predominantly with their own ethnic group has been commonly found on campuses, particularly where there is a high level of prejudice (Fisher and Hartmann 1995). There has been relatively little focus on social class and peer relationships in HE.

Participants from both groups explained that ‘cliques’ provided a sense of comfort and security, because of the commonalities amongst individuals within a group and because group members knew each other well and felt understood and supported.

... it is a real comfort thing ... it’s nice to know that these people you get on with and you can turn to them and sometimes when you have your little comfort zone you retreat into it. (Deirdre, 3SLA¹¹)

Being comfortable in a group meant that one was likely to stick with one’s group and less likely to branch out. Participants commonly noted a relative openness amongst students in the initial weeks of the first year, but then a rapid retreat back into old, or newly-formed, groups. Making friends after this period was regarded as very difficult. The SLAs emphasised how students generally entered HE in pre-formed groups and that this exacerbated the situation. There was also a sense of boundaries and exclusion: some participants talked about certain groups being relatively impenetrable:

... they’ve made their groups ... I don’t know how they form and I don’t understand how they got like that, but they’re just not open to anybody else ... (Clare, 1SLA)

Examples of this ‘clique-ing’ behaviour will now be explored through the subservient distancing behaviours of the SLAs who ‘stuck to their own’ and the status-maintaining/raising behaviours of those students engaging in what I have termed ‘social peacocking’.

Subservient distancing: sticking to ‘their own’

The major form of subservient distancing was enacted by SLAs in their distancing from ‘other’ students and sticking to access students. Perceiving high stakes, the SLAs were determined to protect their main concern of getting a ‘good’ degree from any distractions, and as a result, many ‘sidelined’ the social realm of HE (see Keane 2009). For most of them, this meant not seeing HE as a place for making new friends, and there was an explicit distancing from ‘typical student’ behaviour. Emma’s (3SLA) comment was typical of the SLA position:

I didn’t see university as the place for me to be making friends ... The reason I wanted to go to university was to get a good degree.

They were generally friendly to others, but in most cases this was limited to a superficial ‘hi in passing’ approach (similar to Goodwin 2002) rather than ‘... a kind of “meet up with you later” kind of relationship’ (Jamie, 2SLA) or ‘... life-long friends or anything’ (Emma, 3SLA). However, it was not that they sidelined the notion of HE friends and relationships entirely; rather, they claimed that they had enough friendships already, forged with access students during their pre-entry year, with whom they noted they felt ‘safe’ (Gemma, 3SLA). Three SLAs who entered subject areas without any of their peers from the access course did seek to build more meaningful new friendships. However, they emphasised that their main concern was getting their degree, and the extent of their relational engagement was limited.

Distancing from other students and sticking to ‘their own’ was not merely a function of prioritising getting a ‘good’ degree or of bonding with other access students at the pre-entry level. This sort of reaction constitutes what Goodwin (2002) terms a ‘buffering’ behaviour, exhibited in reaction to a social context in which one feels subserviently positioned. Rejecting something before it can reject you is classic self-protection. Not having the economic or cultural resources shared by the middle class, the SLAs may have worried about being rejected as interlopers, and therefore refused to engage in friendship-building with ‘other’ students. Feeling subserviently positioned was a common experience for most of the SLAs. Gemma (3SLA) claimed it was a ‘different class of person that went to university’ and said she ‘felt a bit below them’ and ‘intimidated’. There was a consciousness that their family backgrounds were different, as Jamie explained:

... a huge proportion of the college are from a different background to myself ... You can sense the kind of surroundings ... you’re in a different, em, set-up ... Different societal kind of backgrounds, different ways of thinking, different attitudes ... a lot of insecurities and stuff ... lower income kind of backgrounds ... You feel uncomfortable ... out of your depth. You’re in with people that ... are a lot more comfortable in their surroundings. (Jamie, 2SLA)

Clare (1SLA) had felt so intimidated at first that it had affected her ability to concentrate in lectures. She explained that she had grown up in ‘one of the roughest areas’ where ‘students were alien’. Now, here she was ‘one of them ... it was just really frightening and it took a while to get used to’.

Further evidence that they felt ‘below’ other students is seen in the way in which the SLAs initially distanced themselves from the access programme. They worried that they would be seen as ‘a charity case’ (Duncan, 2SLA) or ‘not capable of being there’ (Brenda, 3SLA) if they disclosed their entry route. The few who did so encountered negative reactions:

... there’s a lot of, em, resentment ... towards Access students ... a lot of the girls can be very bitchy towards it ... ‘How did you get that like? How? Why?’

Ugh ... 'It's not fair, I had to work my ass off to get it'. Good for you. (Leanne, 1SLA)

Such a reaction demonstrates naïve meritocratic beliefs, and in particular a lack of understanding of the link between privilege and achievement.

Hence, distancing themselves from access initially enabled the SLAs to be self-protective until they sensed less threat from revealing more of the self. Over time, the SLAs grew in confidence and most disclosed their entry route to those they came to know and trust, commonly reporting that they had become proud of their entry route:

Now I do ... I'm proud of doing it now but in First Year ... I was like 'Oh, I'm not telling anybody that I came in from the Access Course'. I was afraid maybe that they wouldn't accept me ... I didn't want them to think differently of me until they knew me ... (Carolyn, 3SLA)

Subservience was also evident in the distance created by many SLAs between their HE and external worlds, achieved through compartmentalising. Research has found that this is a strategy used by students from under-represented groups to manage tension between external and HE lives (cf. Aries and Seider 2005; Bufton 2003; Goodwin 2002). Those female participants who had children most strongly compartmentalised their HE and non-HE lives, and more firmly distanced themselves from the social realm, and particularly 'typical' student identity, than did those without children, probably as a result of having less time and more responsibilities. Each emphasised their identity as a mother over that of a student. Compartmentalising was also very evident amongst non-parent SLAs: many were explicit about separating HE and their 'own' worlds. They reported a 'quick in and out' approach to HE, keeping their social lives separate:

... I come into college, I do my work, I can go home, I had friends at home ... treat it like a job, do as much as you can in college, then go home and forget about it. (Gary, 3SLA)

Feeling subserviently positioned and thus not 'sure' of the new world (HE), compartmentalising facilitated a sort of 'between worlds' existence, allowing tentative commitments to the new world to be made whilst still maintaining security through some rootedness in the old. Of course, having this 'old world' may also have meant less commitment to the new. Lynch and O'Neill (1994, 319) argue that when working-class individuals succeed in HE 'their class identity changes'. An important deterrent to HE participation for them is a fear of losing their class identity. Thus, while they wish to go 'through university' they want to ensure 'university doesn't go through them' (Archer and Leathwood 2003, 177–178). Maintaining one's pre-/non-HE life and friendships through compartmentalisation may also be an attempt to resist the class identity transformation that HE participation appears to engender.

In contrast to many other SLAs, Jamie (2SLA) had been unsuccessful in his attempts to compartmentalise. He had initially anticipated being able to ‘go in now, get my education, get my job, get my good money, get out of there again’ and return to his old world and socialise with his old friends. Instead, he had had to distance himself from old friends (and his family) because he was afraid that he would otherwise be drawn away from HE. He reported having ‘less and less in common’ with his old friends ‘with each year of education’. Certainly, the literature suggests that losing contact with external friends is more typical than maintaining these friendships, particularly where there is a perception of a change in social status (Allan 1998), and friendship ties are much more likely between individuals with similar educational levels (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). Jamie’s resulting upset was palpable. His story suggests that despite not wanting to change in terms of class identity, by participating in HE *one is changed by it*, at some fundamental level, whether one likes it or not.

Middle-class students typically do not perceive bifurcation between their HE and external lives, and so do not need to engage in compartmentalisation. However, in this study, three TEs (one of whom – Melanie – was one of the two TEs in receipt of a grant), spent a lot of time with their non-HE friends and did not integrate much with other students on campus. Whilst the SLAs used compartmentalisation as a sort of survival strategy, it proved dangerous for the relevant TEs. It resulted in them neglecting their studies and they almost dropped out as their engagement in their non-HE lives increased. One of them, Carla (2TE), actually withdrew after first year. She returned the following year to repeat the year, and emphasised she then took a completely different approach, making conscious attempts to integrate more with other students.

The SLAs’ subservient distancing behaviours – ‘sticking to their own’, not disclosing their entry route, and compartmentalising – demonstrate that they had internalised a discourse of inferiority about being working class, and that they perceived an oppositional habitus in terms of the institution and other students.

Status-maintaining/raising distancing: social peacocking

The status-maintaining/raising distancing behaviours in which both groups of participants claimed ‘snobby’ students engaged suggest that the SLAs may have had cause to feel inferior. Here we get some insight into the strategies employed by middle-class students that serve to perpetuate privilege, an important but often neglected focus in considering equality in education.

One ‘clique’ participants discussed repeatedly was that comprising ‘wealthy’ ‘snobby’ students. Dubbed ‘the Abercrombie and Fitch type of people’, the ‘snobby’ attitudes of these students (both male and female) were reportedly manifest through their highly-groomed personal appearance,

particular accents and expensive material possessions. Participants linked these to social class:

... people of similar kind of backgrounds do form groups ... people coming in prim and proper and their perfect hair and their branded clothes ... there's the Abercrombie and Fitch kind of people ... the boys with their hair ... all done a certain way and into their clothes ... the girls into their perfect hair ... you do see similar people sticking together ... you would see yeah a lot of kind of different classes going on there... (Marianne, 3SLA)

A second level of 'dressing up' involved girls wearing 'clothes I'd wear to a night-club' (Andrea, 2TE), for everyday wear on campus. Sally (3TE) reported that these girls were known as 'Plastics'. She explained:

... my sister is what we call 'a Plastic' ... It's from a movie 'Mean Girls'. There's a group of people, a clique, the popular people. They have the whole make-up, they dress up every day going to college ... my sister is one of those (laughs) ... So we're sitting in [canteen] some day myself and my friends, [we'd say] 'Oh my God such a Plastic', [seeing] this person wearing heels all dressed up as if they're about to go out ... (Sally, 3TE)

Both male and female SLA and TE participants felt that this 'dressing up' behaviour was very much 'the done thing' (Jamie, 2SLA). They also claimed that these students '... hang around together and ... won't mix with anyone else' (Amelia, 1TE). These cliques were also regarded as class-based: Melanie (1TE) reported that 'the people who have money will clique together in college'. Further, it was claimed that they often had poor attendance, and did little academic work.

Both participant groups (but particularly the SLAs) disparaged the behaviour of these cliques, positioning it as unworthy and almost morally questionable. Such strong rejection may have been motivated by defensiveness as many of them did not have the material resources to invest in producing their appearance in such ways. In attempting to explain the behaviour, some claimed such students had 'too much time and money on their hands' (Andrea, 2TE), while others felt the relevant girls in particular wanted 'boys to admire them' (Fiona, 3TE) or were looking for 'a wealthy husband' (Nadine, 3TE). This echoes the findings of Holland and Eisenhart (1990) 20 years ago, and Nathan (2005) more recently, who found that female students' talk was dominated by relationships, sex and bodies, and their sexual attractiveness to men. Some participants pointed to the impact of the media and celebrity culture as another reason for such hyper image-consciousness, emphasising the influence of particular US-based television programmes and films (e.g. *The Hills*). Finally, it was linked to HE being conceived of as merely the 'next logical step' for many middle-class students. As a result, Catherine (3SLA) felt that HE was seen as a 'social sphere' by these students and so 'it makes sense that they get dressed up like they are going out'.

Rather than being an end in itself, however, I would suggest that this behaviour constitutes a deliberate demonstration of wealth, and therefore of higher social positioning, with the aim of status-differentiating. Deirdre (3SLA) felt that those ‘... who have all the lovely clothes and the labels and who are definitely from a higher class ... *like to let people know that*’. Eileen (3TE) spoke of ‘your very obvious upper class people’ wearing ‘all designer clothes ... *as badges*’. For Bourdieu (1984, 394), aspects of appearance are ‘concerned with the symbolization of social position’. In the same way, and also drawing on Bourdieu’s work in this area, Archer, Hollingworth, and Halsall (2007, 234) argue that ‘style’ can be thought of as a form of ‘taste’, a ‘classed performance’ that operates to distinguish between social groups. Similarly, Skeggs (2004, 101) stresses the importance of aspects of physical appearance as ‘condensed class signifiers’. Whether how one chooses to re/present oneself symbolises one’s actual social position or a position that one wishes to claim is an issue for future research. Either way, in agreement with my participants, I would argue that re/presentation of self through appearance is related, in some way, to social positioning.¹²

Deliberately exhibiting one’s resources through appearance and behaviour I have termed ‘social peacocking’. In a Bourdieusian sense, it is a form of class-based ‘distinction’ (Bourdieu 1984). Investing in producing one’s appearance in this way enables one to explicitly position oneself more highly and thus to demonstrate the social distance that Weber (1978 cited in Bottero 2005) argued those in prestigious status groups do to those whom they consider inferior. It enables ‘wealthy’ ‘snobby’ students to ‘fix’ (Archer, Hollingworth, and Halsall 2007, 227) themselves more highly than others and thus facilitates competition for social positioning. Certainly, competition seemed to be very much part of the student experience: Duncan (2SLA) claimed that ‘getting dressed up’ was some students’ way of ‘competing, instead of say studying’. Several reported students (girls in particular) being ‘scrutinised’ by female students in terms of their appearance and material possessions, ‘star[ing] ... openly at you ... looking at what you’re wearing and what kind of bag you had’ (Clare, 2SLA). Both groups reported that they found this intimidating and claimed that they felt pressured to compete in order to feel accepted.

Distancing from class

Both the TEs and SLAs distanced themselves from the class-based social peacocking behaviour, emphasising that it was *other* students who behaved in this way.¹³ This is similar to the way in which Savage, Bagnell, and Longhurst’s (2001) participants played down any marker of their own distinction, claiming to be ‘ordinary’ and rarely identifying as ‘snobs’, in order to ‘evade social fixing’ (Savage, Bagnell, and Longhurst 2001, 889). Further, both groups disparaged such behaviour, sometimes in rather defensive tones, claiming they were disinterested in it and did not care:

... they'd form their own groups ... based on where they are from ... it doesn't bother me at all ... anyone who is snobby ... definitely notice it ... but I don't have any time for it. I don't care. (Liam, 2TE)

In addition, the SLAs reported that they had gotten 'past such things' and did not 'let such things defeat you' (Deirdre, 3SLA). Distancing from class was also evident in the 'wealthy' 'snobby' terminology preferred by both groups. This allowed participants to critique a particular class-related behaviour without acknowledging their own relative – lower or similar – social positioning. The participants' distancing from class is in line with previous research which has found that students are uncomfortable about making social class distinctions (Sayer 2002). Where class was more explicitly acknowledged, the TEs were far more comfortable doing so than the SLAs. The latter's additional distancing is understandable as they perceived themselves as occupying an inferior position. In line with the literature, however, both groups avoided categorising *themselves* in terms of class. For example, Deirdre (3SLA) described herself as '... not one of those people who can go around and buy loads of designer clothes but I'm certainly not without' but still claimed that 'I wouldn't put myself into any class'. While typically individuals acknowledge social class-related inequalities and distinctions, they are generally ambivalent in terms of their own class identity and tend to 'disidentify' (Skeggs 1997) on a personal level (cf. Reay 2005; Savage, Bagnell, and Longhurst 2001).

Discussion

This section considers the implications of the subservient and status-maintaining/raising distancing behaviours. As society has become increasingly credentialised (Collins 1979) through academic qualifications, it is argued that the 'masses' are catching up and 'a generalised downclassing' (Bourdieu 1988, 163 cited in Ball 2003, 20) threatens the privileged middle class, who become 'anxious' (Ball 2003). In a WP context, the need to status-maintain/raise, and thus defend, is heightened for middle-class students. Drawing on research in the United Kingdom, Brennan observes that a degree is 'no longer enough to obtain a high economic and social position' and that it must now be of the 'right kind', from the 'right kind of institution' and 'preferably accompanied by the right kinds of social and cultural capital' (2002, 77). It may be that, for privilege to be perpetuated, the competition of 'status reckoning' needs to be more heavily played out within a realm in which the working class will not, or cannot, as easily compete; that is, the socio-relational. Breen and Whelan (1996, 179) argue that social networks may be employed by the privileged to 'maintain their position against encroachment by outsiders'. Similarly, in the context of student cultures in the United States, Horowitz (1987) hinted that socially exclusive strategies might in future assume *greater* prominence as students competed for 'scarce goods' in trying to assure their success. While

HE, and particularly the more ‘prestigious’ institutions, always has been valued for the potential it offers of building social capital, this study suggests middle-class students may now be using the socio-relational as a way of competing for scarce resources in a less ‘elite’ institutional context also. As a behaviour, social peacocking enables competition within the socio-relational realm, facilitating attempts for middle-class students to status-maintain/raise.

While the subservient distancing behaviour of the SLAs within the socio-relational may be an understandable self-protective response to their perception of context, it may also be self-limiting, and perhaps self-sabotaging. Extra-curricular engagement and peer relationships play important roles in student retention (for example, Thomas and Quinn 2007; Tinto 1993) and impact on academic development and outcomes (Kuh 1995). Forging social connections through relationships with peers is vital for building social capital (Bourdieu 1986) and for future labour market success. Indeed, research from the United Kingdom suggests that one of the reasons why graduates from lower socio-economic groups are at a disadvantage in the labour market is the quality of their HE social experience (Little 2006; Van Dyke, Little, and Callender 2005). Brennan (2002) argues that middle-class graduates’ use of social networks is associated with getting a ‘better than average’ job, but for those from lower socio-economic groups is associated with getting a *worse* than average job. This suggests that the ‘quality’ of the social network is vital, and that not making links with middle-class students is potentially a major disadvantage for those from lower socio-economic groups, as they may subsequently be less well positioned when attempting to convert their academic credentials into economic capital. Indeed, Villar and Albertín (2009, 138) emphasise the demands on students today for ‘agency and proactivity’ in terms of (social) networking and planning their futures.

Are the SLAs self-sabotaging by deliberately opting out of the socio-relational and therefore, to an extent, ‘complicit’ in their lower social positioning in a Bourdieusian symbolic violence sense? This is an area for future research, but there are at least two possibilities. The first is that they ‘misrecognise’ the importance of the socio-relational and opt out, not realising the potential negative consequences. The second possibility is that they recognise its importance but still choose not to engage, either because they fear it may distract them from their goal of getting a ‘good’ degree, or in order to resist the class identity transformation that socio-relational engagement seems to involve. Villar and Albertín (2009, 140) also point to the possibility that deliberately investing in building social capital – for example, through friendships – may be regarded by students as being morally questionable. Similarly, whether the playing out of the ‘competition’ within the socio-relational constitutes a strategy *deliberately* enacted by the middle class to exclude the working class requires future research. Rather than a ‘concerted or foresightful’ strategy of exclusion, Breen and Whelan (1996, 179) posit that it is more a case of the privileged mobilising their greater resources in the face of a perceived threat to maintain their higher

positioning. Ball (2003, 10–11) also argues that ‘it is difficult to represent them meaningfully as forms of direct exploitation or oppression although they are caught up within the reproduction of more general relations of exploitation’. Deliberate or not, the playing out of ‘the game’ in the socio-relational, from which the SLAs self-exclude and/or are excluded, is a form of exclusionary closure (Parkin 1979), as it involves the ‘downward exercise of power by a dominant group able to close off opportunities to subordinate groups’ (Morrow and Torres 1995, 204).¹⁴

Conclusion

Building on recent research that has begun to highlight the importance of the social realm, this paper has focused on the role of the relational (specifically, peer relationships) in the perpetuation of inequality in HE. Through an examination of various forms of distancing behaviour, the paper has presented evidence of class-differentiated engagement within the socio-relational realm. It also contributes to the WP literature in its consideration of the strategies employed by middle-class, as well as working-class, students within this realm. The literature stresses the importance of building social capital through social integration and peer relationships for both HE retention and future labour market opportunities. The ‘closure’ behaviours of class-based groups limit the building of social capital by working-class students and may thus limit the potential of WP policies in achieving equality goals.

This research was conducted in one Irish university at the height of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ era, and the majority of participants were female and within Arts-type disciplines, and the study’s findings ought to be interpreted in that context. It would be illuminating to explore socio-relational engagement in other ‘types’ of institutions; for example, in an Institute of Technology, which higher proportions of working-class students attend. As a concept at the interactional level of sociology, and as a potentially generic process in grounded theory terms, I would suggest that ‘distancing’ is meritorious of further consideration, particularly in terms of its self-protective function. The concept may be useful in shedding light on behaviours in situations of perceived differentiated status. Further research also is required to examine the apparent disinclination of working-class students to compete within the socio-relational, and the implications for both working-class and middle-class students. Research is also needed on the extent to which both groups may be ‘conscious’ of, and deliberate in, their ‘closure’ actions. The role of the socio-relational realm in the perpetuation of inequality in HE merits further attention.

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Notes

1. A discussion of the methodology employed in this study can be found in Keane (2009).
2. Round two was conducted with 21 of the original 45 participants.
3. The terminal school examination in Ireland.
4. In Ireland, eligibility for a maintenance grant is means-tested, mostly based on parental income.
5. Eligibility for a medical card is means-tested and based on 'disposable' income. Those who hold, or whose parents hold, a medical card (thus exempting them from most medical expenses) are exempt from the payment of the various State examination fees).
6. This information only emerged during the relevant interviews. I decided to keep the students in the study because I felt it would be inappropriate and insulting to exclude them because they received a grant. It had also been very difficult to recruit TE participants in general.
7. A 'match' for one male first-year Commerce student was not found.
8. A pseudonym. Pseudonyms are also employed throughout in relation to student participants.
9. Similar to the United Kingdom's 'post 1992' universities.
10. These were: 'Disclosing access', 'Making friends and mixing with others (or not)', 'Seeing social class differences', and 'Seeing groups/cliques and 'Dressing up'' (cf. Keane 2009). Categories pertaining to participants' overall orientations to HE, and their academic experiences, are developed elsewhere (Keane 2009, 2011).
11. The number refers to the year group of the participant at the time of that particular interview.
12. The use – by my participants – of labels such as 'the Abercrombie and Fitch type of people' and the 'Plastics' requires further research. While the former group involved both male and female students, the 'Plastics' label attributed to the relevant female students is arguably gendered in its particular re/presentation of femininity.
13. In terms of the way in which participants chose to re/present themselves to me in person, I too would not have included them in their categorisations of either the 'Abercrombie and Fitch type of people' or the 'Plastics'. Over the course of my research, however, I observed students on campus who seemed to fit these descriptions.
14. Through their HE participation, the behaviour of the SLAs' is akin to Parkin's (1979) 'usurpatory closure', a strategy 'characterised instead by an upward exercise of power ... that is oriented towards gaining advantages from the dominant group' (Morrow and Torres 1995, 204).

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