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The Intersectional Geographies of International Students in Ireland: connecting spaces of encounter and belonging

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I am urban-social geographer, researching the geographies of diversity in urban contexts. My work engages with theories of encounter and the politics of difference. I am concerned with the ways in which belonging and not belonging are produced in the everyday geographies of peoples' lives. Having completed my PhD at University College Cork, Ireland, I am now a Lecturer and Foundation Year Programme Leader in Human Geography at Aberystwyth University where my teaching focuses on diversity, migration, and urban geography.

The Intersectional Geographies of International Students in Ireland: connecting spaces of encounter and belonging

Abstract: International students are often perceived as a singular, homogenous group. While accounts of their mobility and their encounters with others have addressed their racialised experiences of the university, the intersection of other axes of difference remain under-explored. Using an intersectional lens, I direct attention to international students' differentiated experiences of university sport and society spaces, with a particular focus on their gender, religion, and nationality. Using survey and interview data with international students, students' own narratives give voice to their complex

subjectivities that have so far been lacking in the student literature. These aspects of their identity structure their access to such spaces, and the outcomes of their encounters with others therein. I propose that these sites of encounter must not be considered in isolation from one another, but rather that considering spaces of encounter as connected and inter-linked demonstrates how social capital is developed, consolidated and deployed through participation in the traditional student activities that normalise a narrow and heteronormative ideal of studenthood across and between sites. Recognising the relational nature of spaces of encounter reveals the obstacles that exist to greater opportunity for female students' participation in university and social life.

Keywords: gender, religion, international students, encounter, belonging

Introduction

The distinctive geographies of students have been the focus of recent work seeking to conceptualise student mobility trajectories, the impacts of students on their surrounding environment, and the segregation of students in urban centres (Chatterton 2000; 2010; Holdsworth 2009; Smith 2009; Smith and Holt 2007; Sage *et al* 2012; Hubbard 2008; Fincher and Shaw 2009; 2011). Yet, there remains scope to explore more nuanced, differentiated experiences of international students. Ideas of the 'traditional' student are being eroded by the diversification of students' social and economic background, religion, age, language, and mobility (Chatterton 1999). In order to fully theorize international student mobility, King and Raghuram (2013: 134) call for an "appreciation that students are complex subjects who are much more than just students whose only function is higher education". There is a paucity of studies exploring the intersectional experiences of students within this field (Madge *et al* 2015; Holton and Riley 2013; Sondhi and King 2017). This paper gives voice in particular to students' gendered and racialised encounters.

Specifically, I focus on male and female international students' encounters with other students in the university, through participation in societies and sports clubs and associated student leisure spaces. I do this firstly, to demonstrate how an intersectional approach to the

experiences of students contests their conceptualization as ‘homogenous’, revealing them instead to be multifaceted subjects bound up in new and significant forms of mobility. Secondly, to advance our understanding of spaces of encounter, which have frequently been studied as distinct and enclosed spaces, revealing how these sites are interlinked in the production of ‘meaningful’ encounters (Wilson 2011; Laurier and Philo 2006; Hemming 2011). I explain how encounters produce feelings of belonging or not-belonging by engaging with students’ experiences of inter-connected encounters, proposing these sites of meeting as a ‘field’ of encounter. In this instance, male students taking part in sport/society activities provides access to further social bonding opportunities with other students that extends their sense of belonging from the university *to* the city’s leisure spaces. Female, and particularly Muslim students, have less access to these activities, and hence, a wider sense of belonging. Appreciating this inter-connectivity between spaces of encounter allows us to apprehend the ways in which certain spaces operate to exclude individuals and groups. This involves engaging with the ways in which identity emerges from social relations and is mediated by spatio-temporal conditions; as Valentine (2007: 19) argues, where identities are ‘done differently in particular temporal moments, they rub up against, and so expose, these dominant spatial orderings that define who is in place/out of place, who belongs and who does not.’ These ‘spatio-temporal orderings’ also operate across and between spaces and times, and so the connections between these moments of encounter produce mercurial experiences of belonging and not-belonging.

Sports clubs and societies, alongside university accommodation, feature in a discourse regarding the ‘right’ way to make friends and to develop social capital (Holton 2016). However, male students take part in these activities to a greater degree than female students, which allows them to activate social capital across spaces, developing bonds with other students. This stems from their capacity to take part in more traditional aspects of the

normative student experience after sport activities (Andersson *et al* 2012), where one site of encounter gives access to another. Their experiences are further complicated by religion, whereby male Muslim students face fewer barriers to social inclusion through such pursuits than do female Muslim students, whose activities and interactions are subject to surveillance.

Societies, on the other hand, illuminate how students are expected to perform gender to facilitate meaningful encounters between international and Irish students, as part of an effort to resolve the issue of ‘self-segregation’ that characterizes nationalities/ethnicities. These findings illuminate the ways in which the intersection of gender and religion differentiate student experiences in the university environment, which is itself a site of power (Hopkins 2010). Furthermore, it incites us to think about how sites of encounter are interconnected and may be considered as a field of encounter that are not fixed moments in time but are fluid, dynamic and variable in the kinds of social relations they produce. To demonstrate this, I begin the paper by situating international students in the geographies of encounter, before elaborating their experiences of university sports and social societies. The conclusion outlines the significance of the findings presented for conceptualisations of international students and of encounter.

Locating International Students in Geometries of Power

While research has explored the role of international students in shaping the use of public and residential space (Collins 2006; 2010; Fincher and Shaw 2009; 2011; Hubbard 2008), recent work has probed the university itself as a site of power that shapes the student experience in distinctive ways. Hopkins (2010) demonstrates contradictions between the multicultural ethos of the university, while simultaneously discriminating against Muslim students and surveilling their activities for evidence of sympathy for extremist ideology. Andersson *et al* (2012) outline a different contradiction arising from the perception of universities as liberal

spaces, as they become further subject to the forces of privatisation and neo-liberalisation. There are synergies between the normative student identity they describe, and that of the Irish student experience, with a particular focus on alcohol consumption and participating in the night-time economy (Andersson et al 2012). In a study of the University considered here, two-thirds of domestic students were found to regularly engage in ‘hazardous alcohol consumption’ (defined as: ‘a pattern of alcohol consumption that increases the risk of harmful consequences for the user or others’ (Davoren et al 2015:1), underscoring the significance of alcohol to student activities and associated spaces. Unwillingness to conform to this results in marginalisation and alienation. The predominance of domestic students normalises their way of living, imbuing university spaces with power structures, values, and differences that need to be negotiated (O’Connor 2017). These norms inform the everyday geographies of students, their expression of identity, their opportunities to acquire inter-cultural capital, and the potential to foster a sense of belonging (Bilecen 2013).

We can understand the university as being constituted by a number of potential sites of encounter, where students must negotiate difference regularly in their quotidian activities (Amin 2002). Ideas around encounter emerged in an effort to understand the geographies of everyday meeting and interaction between different groups, which could potentially help us to reconfigure social relations by creating more convivial social interaction (Amin 2002; Valentine 2008). Encounter is explicitly concerned with issues of social inclusion, exclusion, and prejudice, with much of the work in this field grappling with the notion of what constitutes a ‘meaningful’ encounter and how the conditions for such encounters may be produced (Wilson 2011; 2016; Matejskova and Leitner 2011; Mayblin *et al* 2015). ‘Encounter’ is a powerful lens through which to develop a multi-faceted understanding of the ways in which belonging is produced across multiple sites, as it is intimately tied to constructions and experiences of space and place. As Kate Simonsen (2008: 22) argues:

Place... becomes the locus of encounters, the outcome of multiple becomings ...
Places are meeting points, moments or conjectures, where social practices and trajectories, spatial narratives and moving or fixed materialities meet up and form configurations that are continuously under transformation and negotiation.

I explore how encounters in the university shape international student segregation, which go beyond 'international'/'domestic' student binaries (Fincher and Shaw 2011). Helen Wilson argues that encounters 'are about more than the coming together of different bodies. Encounters *make* difference' (2016: 455). Exploring how identities and belonging are constituted in more fluid ways in young peoples' everyday lives, I am concerned with how these encounters stimulate the continual reconfiguration of a sense of belonging (or not belonging) and how this unfolds across multiple sites.

This approach is informed by intersectional readings of social relations (Hopkins 2017; Sondhi and King 2017). Engaging with experiences of students through the lens of encounter builds on intersectional work seeking to acknowledge the role of social context in the production of subjectivities and in the operation of power (Collins and Bilge 2016). Looking at how subjectivities are informed across and between spaces of encounter reveals how power structures social categories (here, gender, nationality and religion in particular) (Collins and Bilge 2016). This recognises the role of power in shaping individuals' choices and understandings of what spaces are open to them, while also recognising that certain aspects of their identity will position them differently in relation to others within those spaces.

Extending an intersectional lens to the study of international students also addresses a gap within broader student and migration literature. Gendered and intersectional studies of migrants have garnered rich insights in the field of migration scholarship in the last two

decades (Hondagneou-Sotelo and Cranford 2006; Riano 2011; Mahler and Pessar 2003). However, such approaches have only recently come to the fore in the field of international students, focusing on the gendered dimensions of mobility, migration trajectories, and the constraints placed on women and men by gender norms when they become mobile subjects in a new environment, or indeed, return to their original environment (Sondhi and King 2017; Lin and Kingminhae 2018; Holloway *et al* 2012). Relationships form a crucial aspect of the decision making process for students regarding whether to undertake mobility, deciding whether (and where) to return, and navigating how child dependents are cared for in the process (Brooks 2015; Moskal 2016, 2018; Geddies 2013). Gender stereotypes and norms inflect these relationships, placing heteronormative constraints on women and men. Across these studies we see women and men at the centre of relationships, whether with intimate partners, children, or families, and how these relationships structure their mobility and decision-making. This worthy focus on gender begets further questions regarding the gendered experiences of students during the course of their study, particularly in terms of their personal subjectivity and how this transforms over space and time. To address this, I trace the operation of power in shaping male and female students' opportunities for (re)producing social capital, building a social network, and establishing a sense of belonging during their sojourn. In this instance, we see the entanglement of university sports with performances of hegemonic masculinity through the ritual of consuming alcohol after training or playing. Societies are also sites of complex encounters, producing belonging, but also marginalisation. These experiences show us how 'belonging' is contingent on the outcomes of encounters across time and space.

Methodology

The data presented here comes from a wider study endeavouring to understand lived experiences of 'difference' in Irish society. International students are particularly illustrative

of such experiences because of their innate heterogeneity, which is increasing as Irish universities prioritise international student recruitment. Such recruitment, from the USA, China, Malaysia and India, for example, are central to such strategies. As they pay much higher fees than domestic students, HEIs have identified student mobility as a tool to mitigate the effects of stringent government funding cuts (for more on internationalisation in Ireland, see O'Connor 2017). While Irish students pay an annual registration fee of approx. €3,000, international student fees can cost up to €52,000 a year depending on their degree (O'Connor 2017).

In contrast to the UK, where education mobility for domestic students is considered 'traditional' (Holton 2013), Irish students tend to study at the nearest university, and those who do move tend not to move long distance. This often results in long-standing bonds built in secondary school being maintained at university, with implications for international students trying to create new networks. Rather than focusing on one specific migrant group, I wanted to explore the multiplicity of experiences and narratives that constitute the everyday lives of all its students. Interviews focused on discussing the students' experiences of life in the city and university, and the spaces in which they interacted with others, in order to understand how students constructed meaning from those everyday encounters. For the purposes of anonymity, the university is not named here.

The research draws on 196 survey responses and 25 semi-structured interviews with non-European Union full-time, degree-seeking international students at an Irish university (the majority of EU students were ERASMUS students and therefore only studying in the University for six months to one year). It is further supplemented with data from six interviews with support staff and stakeholders in the internationalisation of the university. The survey was delivered via email to full time international students via the International Education Office, and analysed using SPSS. The survey respondents represent 22

nationalities, the majority of whom are from the USA (28%), Malaysia (27%) and China (13%). Sixty-eight percent (n=134) of the respondents were female, which was representative of the higher proportion of female to male international students studying at the university at the time (65% in 2012).

Seventy-one percent of the survey respondents were undergraduates, the remainder being PhD candidates and taught masters students. It is likely there is a difference in their experiences of university, as PG students are older and there is perhaps less expectation to engage in the 'traditional' aspects of the undergraduate experience. For some PG students, this was something to be actively avoided, meaning they sought friendship elsewhere. However, sports and societies were a common alternative to socialising in pubs for students seeking to befriend others. Most of the students were studying Medicine, but a number of other degrees were present in the sample, from electrical engineering to arts and humanities. Medicine is renowned for its intensive course workload and frequent assessment, and the location of the Medicine faculty adjacent to the main campus may have had implications for these students' opportunities for encounter. For some students, this meant attempting to embed themselves in existing 'cliques'. To maintain interviewees' anonymity, they have been given pseudonyms.

Encountering hegemonic masculinity

Universities are constituted by a variety of spaces of encounter; the classrooms, library, study rooms, cafes, bars, the gym, the concourse – all offer the potential for both fleeting and repeated encounters with other students. These spaces are frequently governed by a normative student identity focused on alcohol consumption (Andersson *et al* 2012). In this section, I present students' experiences of sports and club activities, which fostered particular patterns of interaction. These spaces are useful for unpacking the relationship between

gender, encounter and belonging. The division of gym and sport spaces along gendered lines has been recognised elsewhere; Johnston (1996: 328) for example, explores the inscription of feminine and masculine traits onto gym spaces and activities, arguing that ‘sexual difference creates feminine and masculine spaces, and these sexed differences help create feminine and masculine bodies.’ Women are under-represented in the uptake of sport and physical activity (Coen *et al* 2018). They tend to be associated with cardiovascular exercise and weight management, while men with strength training and body building, differentiating those spaces accordingly (Coen *et al* 2018). Health and physical activity are a vehicle for the performance of gender via decisions of what to eat, drink, or how and where to exercise (Coen *et al* 2018). These spaces frequently become associated with the performance of hegemonic masculinity which reproduces men’s sense of belonging within those spaces.

While some also resist this hegemony through reconfiguring the (female) body (Johnston 1996), van Campenhout and van Hoven (2013) encourage us to appreciate how norms, practices and the materiality of these spaces reproduce gender. The rugby club, its changing rooms and club house (and often the shift to a pub afterwards), become sites of a ritualised performance of hegemonic masculinity, but also sites of belonging (van Campenhout and van Hoven 2013). Sites of encounter, then, are interlinked in the co-production of identity and belonging. It further draws our attention to the relationship between sport and alcohol. Team sports and student clubs and societies share alcohol as a feature that works to secure bonds after a game or society social. Bearing the gendered nature of sport and gym spaces in mind, the following section outlines the experiences of students as they navigate these sites, revealing the limitations placed on female students’ participation in particular.

Below, Ali describes how sport helped him to consolidate friendships with Irish students. Sport allows for students to meet on more equal terms, and has been reported by the

male students below as crucial to their social inclusion. In the case of Ali, common interest in soccer allowed him to penetrate the existing clique of Irish students that had come through from secondary school together. While this was not a quick process, he was able to slowly increase his social network through that initial contact that allowed them to realise their common interests of playing in the same club:

But the group of friends that I have now are - they were already friends from before - they were all from [the same] school and I met them during the soccer... I'm on the soccer team and a few of the other guys were also from the soccer team so from there I started talking to them, and like me they were into the same kinda things, like sports and other stuff so I kept talking to them and they had other friends in their group who I didn't know, and slowly, slowly, I met everyone and so I'm like good friends with them now. So yeah it was kinda hard but, y'know (Ali, Pakistan, male, 18, Business and Law: Informant)

Ali overcame a significant barrier to social inclusion here through soccer – pre-existing cliques of Irish students who come from the same area and school. Many international students find such pre-established groups difficult to penetrate. Ali's experience demonstrates how sport was a conduit to further encounters and enhanced his sense of belonging. Other male students report similar experiences:

As far as I can see, most Chinese students - I'm better than them because some of them I know, they always stay in their room - I always try to join the Irish students. I also join the badminton society, because I used to be a semi-professional player so... if you have something very good, you are good at playing tennis table or anything else, it's much more easier to join them. They also want to play with you because

you're better than them. So you get to play with them and practice the language, so it's the mutual benefit (Li, China, 21, Business and Law: Informant)

Above, Li describes his desire to avoid mono-national clustering with other Chinese students. Using sport as a strategy to interact with others, despite language being an initial barrier, allows him to establish connections beyond the network of Chinese students living there. This resulted in Li being invited out to parties in bars and clubs with other Irish students. This enhanced sense of social and inter-cultural capital is manifested through his knowledge and familiarity with Ireland and Irish people (Leask and Carroll 2011). This resonates with Prazeras' (2017: 917) conception of belonging, which can be 'self-defined, but also socially determined in that belonging depends to a certain extent on recognition from the local community'. For Arman below, sport allowed him to expand his network of Irish friends outside of the activity itself:

So colleagues, then friends and they invited me once to the football and I said yes, that's ok, I come with you. So we went together and we just got friends with other friends of his, so then they became my Irish friends. (Arman, Iran, male, 29, PhD: Informant)

For these students, sport offers a gateway to future encounters and wider social networks. Through repeated, consistent interactions as part of a team, they build social capital that provides access to a broader friend network. In Mark Holton's work on student accommodation, a similar process unfolds (2016). However, this requires consistent effort on the student's behalf to have this capital recognised. As Holton (2016: 68) argues: '... while institutions suggest that interactions can be made quickly, in order to make this capital operational it must be recognised instantly during Fresher's Week and sustained regularly through interactions with housemates.' As social capital is recognised in the sport activity, it

is transferred and reproduced through the shift to the post-training social. Both Li and Ali were able to mobilise their social capital by adhering to these norms, generating social networks through ‘everyday practices and cultural ways of life’ (Prazeras 2017: 918).

This is significant for international students attempting to penetrate established cliques of Irish students who have come from the same area or even school (O’Connor 2017). Survey data reveals that students reported club and society events as the third most significant space of interaction with Irish students, tying with pubs/clubs (the top two sites are: on-campus cafes, and while working on assignments together, respectively). For 40% of male students, sports clubs were the site of most frequent interaction with Irish students, and for 27% of female students. Students who socialised the most (4-5 times a week) frequented both pubs and sports clubs regularly, and reported the most interaction with other students in general, showing a connection between these spaces. North American and Chinese students regularly used sport facilities with friends, while Malaysian students preferred societies (to be discussed in a later section). They reported less interaction in sport spaces and spaces where alcohol is consumed. These findings indicate the differentiated spaces of encounter according to nationality.

Social capital is mobilised by students across spaces of encounter, for example, socialising after training or at weekends away competing. Bonds are created through these social rituals. For students like Chris, this has facilitated the expansion of a more diverse social network:

I find that it was a huge thing, especially when I was the only Singaporean and the only Asian there, which kind of helped because there was no way for me to go back to my comfort zone and just stick to groups because it would be very easy to do that...

So trampolining did help with that, and getting to know people outside of Medicine
(Chris, Singapore, 21, Medicine and Health: Informant)

For these students, sport as a gateway to further encounters was dependent on their willingness to conform to the traditional student habit of alcohol consumption after sport. For van Campenhout and van Hoven (2013: 1008) post-game drinking was a ‘gendered and ritualised activity’. The same is frequently true of university sports clubs, as Chris and Kannan recount below:

With the trampoline club, they're essentially a party and trampoline club really. There's pre-competition parties, post-competition parties, competition-competition parties - to be honest it's a miracle no one has puked on the trampolines yet... when we have competitions in the inter-varsities, there'd be huge, huge, nights out organised before and after so I'd be going out to those. (Chris)

But badminton is pretty much OK, I used to play it back home as well. So that group is great for outgoing, socialising, they go to pubs, parties. (Kannan, Sri Lanka, male, 26, PhD: Informant)

These examples illustrate the need to recognise sites of encounter as connected. These encounters operationalise social capital across and between spaces, producing a sense of belonging for these young men. While sport activity itself is successful in creating encounters, more lasting ties are made in the after parties, and those reporting greater encounters through sport were all male. These spaces are linked by rituals that discipline their behaviour and reinforce their social capital.

The intersection of gender and religion is a complicating factor in terms of the divisions generated by these spaces. Ali is a Muslim who does not drink alcohol, but is

relaxed about being in the presence of alcohol. He resists other students' attempts to encourage him to drink on nights out, but takes it in his stride. However, not all male Muslim students share this perspective, and as shall be explored later, female Muslim students are further limited by their lack of opportunity to socialise with Irish students because of alcohol's hegemonic role in student social activities. Sport clubs provide multiple opportunities for encounter; training sessions, competitions, bus journeys to matches, locker rooms. In this sense, they are multiply-sited. Yet the sense of belonging they produce requires assimilation into a particular articulation of 'studenthood'. This signifies that these spaces of common interest produce more complex social relations worth unpacking.

Female students report more ambiguous experiences of sports clubs as a site of encounter. Those interviewed generally recognised that sports clubs would be a positive way of meeting others and potentially establishing friendships, but were ambivalent about joining clubs. They found this ambivalence difficult to articulate, beyond feeling that sport clubs were not a place where they would feel comfortable. Other informants highlight the potential of sport as a productive way of meeting others, but this was still contingent on alcohol. Below, Megan, a member of the athletics club, is critical of the relationship between sport and alcohol:

Back home if you're part of the running club - you run. And you enjoy running together, and you talk about running and then you go home. Whereas here - I'm part of the running club - we run and then everyone talks about 'when's the next party' and I'm like, but we're a running club, not a running-drinking club. And it just kind of like... I'm just like why do we always have to talk about drinking, we're running, why can't we talk about running? But that's just me. (Megan, USA, female, 24, PhD)

She describes making acquaintances through this club, which does not extend outside of those activities into what she would term friendship. These tensions speak to the difficulties experienced by students as they attempt to find a space of belonging where they do not have to compromise certain values. Megan's frustration with the 'running-drinking' club exemplifies the challenge in carving out a space for oneself where it is not necessary to cede to prevailing norms of student life. She has precluded herself from benefitting from the capital accrued from running by not 'activating' it through the ritual of alcohol consumption (Holton 2016). As a student with little interest in consuming alcohol, she is frustrated that this activity cannot be separated from the wider student culture, or exist harmoniously within it. Such encounters are significant in understanding place, belonging, and how belonging 'is situated around particular ways of being-in-place' (Robertson 2016: 550).

For other female students, they express regret at not making a more concerted effort to engage in sports as a way of meeting other like-minded people, but they also allude to their feeling isolated or excluded from such activities:

But I should have joined more clubs, that probably would have been a good way to meet them [Irish students] but you know, it's quite difficult to join the clubs, I'd been on the websites of a few of them back then and it was just y'know a bit... hard to get into them (Elizabeth, USA, female, 27, PhD: Informant)

Elizabeth struggles to articulate why she found it difficult to get 'into' the clubs; she recounts that they offered a way to avoid other activities geared exclusively to international students but could not imagine herself fitting in. Coen *et al* (2018) describe how hegemonic masculinity excludes women from gym spaces; expressions of hyper-masculinity can be off-putting to women (and men) looking to take part. The inscription of these spaces as hyper masculine can be intimidating and discourage women from accessing these spaces. For Zara,

her embarrassment for not regularly attending volleyball signifies a sense of failure for not having put in the requisite 'labour' and becoming part of a team. To return to play would result in her also feeling 'out of place'. As Holton (2016) describes, there are temporal limits to when and how one can operationalise social capital. Zara recognises the social capital of others through social media, and sees her failure to do the same as a deeper failure to engage with the host culture:

Me, my friends and I once joined the volleyball society and I joined the training just once, because we medical students are very busy and... when I skipped a lot of sessions I become quite embarrassed to come there! But I got friends who joined the Zumba class, and she's very good with the Irish. I saw her Instagram photos with Irish (Zara, Malaysia, female, 21, Medicine and Health: Informant)

Zara's experience – and that of other female Muslim students interviewed and surveyed – is further complicated by her non-consumption of alcohol and discomfort of being in situations where it is consumed. Frequently, female, Muslim students related their frustration at the absence of activities or spaces where they could interact with Irish students without alcohol consumption taking place. This resonates with Hopkin's (2011) work where Muslim students would not attend certain social events because they culminated in a bar afterwards, and found the dominance of alcohol consumption on campus restricted their use of it. For Rana, a Saudi Arabian Medicine student, drinking is 'the biggest thing' that prohibits her from taking part in more activities with Irish students outside of the class room:

*I find the social life here is all about drinking and going to bars... And that's an issue for me because I can't be found there. I can't, I **can't** go there, it would be so weird like. Maybe for my husband it's OK because he is a guy, no one knows he is a Muslim or anything but I wear a scarf y'know. So it would be weird for me to be in a bar. And*

I don't feel really comfortable around people drinking. (Rana, Saudi Arabia, female, 25, Medicine and Health: Informant, original emphasis)

Her personal discomfort and the visibility of her identity preclude Rana from encountering others in these spaces, marginalising her identity further from the mainstream student one. Her visibility as a Muslim stands in contrast to that of her husband, whose identity is misrecognised. Ali, in the previous section, is also misrecognised, but with different outcomes. In contrast to Hopkins *et al* (2017), this misrecognition means he has greater access to spaces of encounter and avoids the prejudicial stereotypes Islam has been associated with. As Ireland does not have the same history of post-war multiculturalism as countries such as the UK (MacEinrí and White 2007), it offers a novel environment in which to examine how encounters produce difference and how difference is (mis)recognised (Hopkins *et al* 2017; Wilson 2016).

Sport activities and clubs remain sites of potential encounter for students seeking to establish a sense of belonging in university life. However, such potential is mediated by gender, religion, and a willingness to engage in conventional student activities. Sport clubs act as a site of encounter by themselves, but also as a gateway to other activities that solidify bonds between students who participate in the typical student lifestyle, making such encounters continuous over time and space. Male students in particular benefit from this, as they describe none of the ambiguity associated with taking up sport that female students do, speaking to the masculinised nature of these spaces and the ritual of alcohol consumption afterwards. Female students who 'shirk' the 'more typical student activities' become excluded (Holton 2016: 68). These experiences demonstrate the importance of using an intersectional approach to understanding encounters.

Secondly, we see the value of analysing spaces of encounter as interlinked, or constituting a broader social field. Sports activities are connected to other spaces and activities that allow them to operationalise their social capital. This becomes routinized and ritualised through the corporeal act of playing sport and then drinking together. Students develop particular ways of 'being in place', and have emotional responses to the places they feel they do or do not belong (Robertson 2016). Understanding the experiences of students requires considering these inter-connected spatial dynamics, and 'taken for granted' cultural practices which produce such feelings.

Societies and Institutional Responses to Student Segregation

This section turns to the university societies as a space of encounter. The previous section outlined an argument for the connection between spaces of encounter as productive of further encounters, in this case, in student leisure spaces. This section shall explore the nature of the encounters that take place in university societies, focusing in particular on the *lack* of opportunities for potential future encounters. In certain cases, societies may reify cultural differences between student groups, propagating the racialisation of some nationalities (Coles and Swami 2012; Fincher 2011). The following explores the dynamics of society participation from both student and staff perspectives.

While religious, ethnic or nationality-based societies provide information, friendship and emotional support for international students, they can also reinforce difference through their identity-specific categorisation (Fincher 2011; Fincher and Shaw 2011). By catering to one group of students only, they limit the likelihood of others joining or interacting with them. Amirah, quoted below, is in the Malaysian and Islamic societies:

[The University] has an Islamic society so we're involved in that. We have our charity sale last month, so a lot of Irish came - just outside here (the student centre), it was a new experience to sell stuff! Our Malaysian society does have activities, like we have our celebration, our national celebration and they make the gathering with food and stuff (Amirah, Malaysia, 20, Medicine and Health: Informant)

For students in the Islamic and Malaysian societies, their interactions with Irish students are centred on promoting a particular representation of their culture through awareness of cultural celebrations, food, and religion. These are fleeting moments of exposure to difference where their culture is ‘consumed’ rather than engaged with in an attempt to understand it in greater depth (Fincher and Shaw 2011; Matejskova and Leitner 2011). Other nationality-specific societies operate in a similar manner, providing international students with the opportunity to consume Irish culture:

Yes, yes... there are a lot of Chinese students, so they have the Chinese Student Union, so they organise for us the city tour, and last month they organised the trip outside [the city] to Killarney, about 50 [Chinese students] on a bus, so it was very good (Li, China, 21, male, Business and Law: Informant)

In a similar process, Li’s description of the Chinese society also demonstrates the consumption of Irish culture where a certain idea of ‘authentic’ Ireland is presented to the students. At the time of interview, the International Student Support Officer also detailed the exclusion of Irish students from the university’s Chinese Society, due to objections to an Irish student running the society:

There's the Head of the Chinese Students in Ireland - his view on that is that the Chinese Society should be Chinese students only... I said: "We can't have a society on campus that excludes people." (International Student Support Officer: Informant)

This example highlights the contested role of societies in entrenching differences between students, and the ways in which students are expected to perform their identity. A mono-national society that limits its membership thus misses out on significant opportunities for Irish students studying or with an interest in Chinese to learn about the language and culture - it also limits the opportunities for encounter for Chinese students. Although nationality-specific societies can be sources of emotional support and comfort, the ethnic/religious/national labelling of groups does little to overcome differences or to decrease the likelihood of students forming mono-cultural clusters segregated from the rest of the student body (Fincher 2011). Furthermore, they become a focal point for institutional rhetoric regarding the 'problematic' nature of student segregation.

From the viewpoint of staff, Malaysian students in particular 'segregate themselves' through the Malaysia-specific societies they are involved in. Below, an International Student Support Officer discusses the segregation of Malaysian students through society activities:

They like to do things on their own, so this year I had a request to help book the [Gym and Sports facility] and I said: "Book it through the Clubs and Societies Guild", because I knew what was going on. And then they said: "no, we just want it for our own group, for our own games". So, parallel existence. The other thing that happens is - we have a welcome programme every year, participation rates among the Malaysian students - minimal. Instead what they do - copy it. The exact same stuff, copied. (International Student Support Officer: Informant)

Making an overt reference to rhetoric insisting Muslims live 'parallel lives' (Phillips 2006), the Support Officer maintains that nationality- or religion-specific societies facilitate self-segregation. This form of racialisation is acute, as Malaysian students occupy different ethnic and religious categories. However, reference is later made to the complex power dynamics

students must navigate within these societies, as the Support Officer describes how some students monitor the behaviour of others, particularly female students. The experiences of students like Amirah and Zara certainly speak to the contested and diverse range of wishes and expectations regarding inter-cultural interaction within the Malaysian cohort. Having recognised that segregation is an issue with Malaysian students, the Support Officer outlines the role of a student peer support leader in attempting to bridge the gap between Irish and Malaysian students:

*There's **policing**, of each other... I think we had a breakthrough finally this year in that we finally got a Malaysian Peer Support Leader, a girl, and she's Muslim and she wears her headscarf, and she tries to be the link between the two, but I don't know what impact that is having on her as an individual...* (International Student Support Officer: Informant, original emphasis)

Policing refers to the monitoring of other students' behaviour to ensure they do not transgress particular social and cultural codes. The appointment of a female hijab-wearing Peer Support leader was intentional, in the hope that she would act as a 'transversal enabler' (Noble 2009) between Irish and Malaysian students, symbolising the potential for cross-cultural encounters. Yet, this role as Peer Support leader was seen as transgressive and she was excluded from the wider Malaysian society as a result. The visibility of her identity as a young Muslim woman marked her out for even greater scrutiny of her behaviour.

Drawing on stereotypically gendered ideas of women as facilitators of social harmony, the designation of a young Muslim woman as the conduit between Irish and Malaysian students was an institutional intervention that sought to set an example of 'ideal' cross-cultural encounters, without being sensitive to the internal dynamics of a group with multiple identifications to navigate. She is expected by both her peers and the institution to

perform gender in specific ways. The former expect her to adhere to cultural expectations by not engaging with Irish students and their typical social activities. The latter expect her to do exactly this, or she is seen as part of ‘the problem’. Due to the intersection of her gender, nationality, and religion, she faces exclusion either way, depending on the spatial and institutional context. Lin and Kingminghae (2018:10) argue that female international students coming from a patriarchal society can be liberated from ‘cultural expectations and social surveillance in the home country... it brings about changes in belief, values and opportunities that that make gender equality more plausible to them’. In contrast with their findings, here the female Muslim student becomes a surveilled subject of both her peers and the university. Such surveillance is transnational in nature. The society perpetuates the monitoring practices of the home country in the new country, exerting gendered norms over female students despite their mobility. The replication of gender norms over transnational boundaries presents a challenge to students seeking to establish new and more diverse social networks.

The role of university societies is complex. While they involve the clustering of students, they may also be a source of familiarity, solidarity and friendship that does not require assimilation into more ‘typical’ expressions of studenthood. This narrow articulation of studenthood is not new. However, the ways in which it differentiates the experiences of students through gender and religion is significant. The case highlighted above demonstrates how societies may perpetuate narrow forms of belonging through the policing of women’s social interactions, thus transmitting gender norms over international boundaries. Comparing these spaces of encounter shows the diverse ways of ‘being in place’ and how gender and religion structure these experiences. Considering these spaces of encounter as interlinked allows for an appreciation of the ways in which power operates to marginalise or include certain identifications in university spaces.

Conclusion

This study advocates for a recognition of the multiply-located and connected field of encounters. The outcomes of encounter depend on the capacity of individuals and groups to access these inter-related spaces, which are governed by practices, rituals, and conventions that limit inclusion. They cannot be untangled from other leisure spaces where a typical student identity dominates and disciplines. Through an intersectional reading, we see the complexity of the international student as a subject of study. Male students derive more from sports as a pathway to other spaces of encounter than female students. Male Muslim students are misrecognised but to their benefit, and are able to avoid negative stereotyping and develop social capital through sport. The experiences of female and male international students are differentiated by their access to particular spaces and activities, in the case of sport, as performances of hyper-masculinity discourage women.

These gendered limitations intersect with other axes of difference such as religion and nationality. As such, the social capital generated through sporting encounters tend to be more positive and long-lasting for male students, consolidated in the rituals of post-training or post-competition socialising. The spectre of ‘the unquestioning hegemony of drinking’ haunts these activities and precludes greater female participation (Andersson *et al* 2012: 506). Although based in common activity (Amin 2002), the relationship between sport, masculinity and alcohol, ritualises a male-centric form of belonging within and between these spaces. In this regard, it is necessary to consider how one site of encounter is related to another, and how they may constitute broader fields of encounter through which social capital is mobilised.

Societies are an important avenue of encounter for many students, premised on uniting students in their common interests. However, while other mono-cultural societies may

help to anchor students in their new social and cultural environment, they can embed monocultural clusters and perpetuate gender norms across space. Their activities may also simply offer others the opportunity to consume their culture rather than have to engage in a deeper manner that disrupts what Amin (2002: 970) terms ‘easy labelling of the stranger’. Indeed, these are the kinds of encounters that ‘make difference’ (Wilson 2016). Strategically using the visibility of a student’s headscarf to encourage cross-cultural interaction is another way in which the university categorises students based on particular aspects of their identity (O’Connor 2017). Female students may be expected to perform gender according to prevailing cultural norms; this becomes difficult for students bound up in transnational social networks, where there are conflicting conceptions of how to perform womanhood and equality. Education mobility does not necessarily offer greater autonomy or agency for these students. It also demonstrates how female Muslim students are excluded across multiple sites and at multiple scales, from the personal, institutional, to the national.

Sport clubs and societies bring people together who share common interests; the kinds of activities through which people ‘get along’ and encounter difference. These findings suggest that university sport clubs and societies are not experienced by all as straightforwardly inclusive. As spaces that bring together individuals in order to share a common interest, we must resist privileging them as opportunities that guarantee ‘transformative’ encounters. They differentiate students by their gender, religion, or nationality and are experienced differently by students whose identities are constituted by multiple axes of difference.

The relationship between spaces of encounter which should draw together individuals who share common interests (Amin 2002) are imbricated in complex geographies of inclusion and exclusion, belonging and not-belonging, rituals and performances of gender and identity. There is a clearly gendered dimension to this with regard to sports, and the role

of societies in reproducing the social segregation of students is also troublesome. Theories of encounter must recognise the potential for such imbalances in presumed spaces of shared interest and common identity, as clubs and societies may actually segregate in novel ways according to the nature of the activity or groups involved. Further work may explore the inter-connected nature of spaces of encounter, considering wider spatial and temporal scales.

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