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# **I'm a Reddie and a Christian!: Identity negotiations amongst first-year university students**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Currently, there exists relatively scant sociological research on the identities of first-year UK university students, and specifically those holding a strong Christian identity. Employing a symbolic interactionist framework, this article explores issues of identity construction amongst a group of first-year undergraduate students based at a UK university, who self-identify as committed Christians. Based on a qualitative, exploratory study of the transition experiences of first-year students living on campus, we examine students' accounts of identity, transition, negotiation and confirmation. After an initial period of anxiety and uncertainty vis-a-vis establishing new identities, participants recounted themes of commitment to Christian identity, and considered that they had been accepted and integrated into the 'jock' campus subculture despite transgressing certain of its values and norms, primarily those 'commanding' heavy drinking.

## **INTRODUCTION**

*Vigorously I wiped away the tears and glared at my reflection. Stand up straight. Take a deep breath. Now, pull yourself together. Saying goodbye was bad, but worse than that was the realisation, here I stood, totally alone, knowing no one. Yet, somehow, this was meant to be the best time of my life. Everything was so new and different. I could be sure about nothing. I didn't know where I was, or who I was living with, or why I was here. It felt like I didn't even know who I was anymore. Could I be the same person here as at home? Would I fit in? Would I make friends? My heart pounded in my chest. With trembling hands I wiped the tears away. I didn't know the answers to any of these questions, but I had to find out... I had to be someone.*

As reflected in the above data extract, the transition to university can for many students be an intense and identity-challenging experience, characterised by emotional oscillations, from initial excitement, apprehension and anticipation to the loneliness of perhaps the first night away from family and home. As Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld (2005) highlight, students must negotiate between the old life they have (partially) left behind, with home, family and friends, and the new student life upon which they are embarking. This negotiation may require considerable 'identity work' (Allen-Collinson, 2007; Snow & Anderson, 1995) as individuals seek to forge a new, or at least a modified identity as university student. The nature of identities within higher education generally has formed a recent topic of research inquiry (e.g. Allen-Collinson, 2009; Whitchurch, 2008), and as Henkel (2010, p.10) notes in relation to academic identities, identity development can be portrayed as a 'continuous process of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction'. Whilst all students new to university life engage in identity-related processes, in order to sharpen the research focus in the project

described here, we were specifically interested in the processual aspects of identity re/de/construction and identity negotiation for first-year students holding a strong Christian identity, given the potential for heightened identity conflict in relation to engagement with a student campus culture, particularly a strong 'jock' student culture (described below). As Moran (2007) notes, there is very little research into the religious identity of college students generally, where, following McEwen (2003) such identity is defined as when religion forms an integral (and we would argue, salient) part of a person's identity.

Previous research has explored how Christian students seek to reconcile the norms and values of student campus culture with those of Christianity (e.g., Bryant, 2005; Magolda & Ebben, 2006), given that these two sets of meaning systems can be highly divergent (Moran, Lang & Oliver, 2007). Most of this research literature focuses upon evangelical Christians in North American colleges and universities. Here, we present the findings of a one-year, exploratory, qualitative study of five Christian students' experiences of the first year of higher education on a small, self-contained campus at a provincial UK university, where the students were undertaking a Bachelor's degree in sports science. The sometimes difficult balancing act between student and Christian identities, and the resulting identity negotiation and management strategies, constitute the focus of the article. The theoretical framework adopted is primarily symbolic interactionist, as elaborated below. The article is structured as follows: we first present the theoretical framework on identity, and consider the literature on sporting or 'jock' subcultures, as prevailed on the 'Redwich' campus. All names used are pseudonyms; 'Redwich' was one campus of a provincial, 'old' (pre-1992) English university campus where the research was undertaken. We then describe the research methods used, before proceeding to portray the identity-related themes that emerged from the data.

### **Symbolic interactionism and identity processes**

Within the social sciences (and beyond) there is a vast literature on, and intense debate surrounding, the concepts of identity and self (Callero, 2003), and there is not the scope

within an article of this nature to engage more fully with these debates. In brief, however, the conceptualisations of 'self' and 'identity' we utilise here are drawn from the symbolic interactionist tradition, and are congruent with Jenkins' theorisation (1996, p. 29) where self is defined as: 'each individual's reflexive sense of her or his own particular identity, constituted *vis à vis* of others in terms of similarity and difference'. In recognising identity as relational, 'a collaboration between the person and the social world' (McAdams, 1993, p.97), the influence of others is theorised as highly influential upon identity construction, maintenance and negotiation. As an ongoing element of identity construction, individuals are often faced with assessing how and in what ways they are similar to, and different from, other people (McAdams, 1993). As Stone (2006, p. 143) summarises: 'To have an identity is to join with some and depart from others...'. The context dependency and fluctuations of such joinings and departures emerged strongly from our research findings, as discussed below.

Symbolic interactionist perspectives on identity are somewhat diverse, but in general terms range along a continuum between more 'processual' and more 'structural' orientations (Allen-Collinson, 2007), although the differences can be highly nuanced. More 'structural' approaches tend to be based on concepts of role identities and social positions, linking social structures to persons (Howard, 2000, p. 371). Stryker's (Stryker & Burke, 2000) identity theory, for example, posits identities as distinct parts of the self defined by role expectations and social-structural positions. Owens, Robinson & Smith-Lovin (2010) argue that these 'social position' approaches focus upon the internalisation of social positions so that relatively stable identities influence the actor's behaviour cross-situationally. In contrast, the 'processual' approach places greater emphasis upon the processes of active identity construction within interactional contexts. These theories emphasize the influence of social context upon situationally-relevant identities (Owens, Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2010). It is upon the latter more processual and situational concept of identity that we draw for the purposes of this particular article, whilst fully acknowledging the power of social-structural forces and constraints upon

identity construction and negotiation. Our interest lies in examining how the Christian students brought into play their various identities within the interactional flow of student life at Redwich.

A further identity distinction is often made between 'social' and 'personal' identities, and whilst a myriad of different usages is evident in the literature, here we adopt Snow & Anderson's (1995) definition, where social identities are those we attribute to others, situating them as social 'objects'. Personal identities are the meanings attributed to the self by the social actor her/himself, and actively brought into play during the interactional flow. Personal and social identities may be inconsistent, and as our earlier research highlights (Allen-Collinson, 2007), may be contested and challenged by both significant others (such as family members, friends and colleagues) and the more generalised other in the form of the wider 'public' audience. Such contestation of identity was of interest in exploring whether Christian students experienced any challenges, intolerance or antagonism from fellow students, as previously reported (Mahoney, Schmalzbauer & Youniss, 2001; Moran, 2007), given the somewhat divergent value systems of Christianity and a sports-student subculture such as prevailed at Redwich.

We were interested also in exploring the intersectionality of identity to see how students negotiated the different aspects of their identity in various contexts, commensurate with the interactionist focus upon the context-dependency of identity performance. Here we focus upon the dual identities of Christian and 'Reddie' (a student perceived as committed to the sports-student Redwich subculture); our participants of course held many others, and the intersectional play of these is beyond the scope of this article. Before proceeding to portray the research project and the themes emergent from the data, we first consider the sporting or 'jock' subculture in which the first-year students found themselves enmeshed, and briefly address the sport-Christianity nexus and its tensions, in order to provide contextualisation for the study.

### **Christianity, sport and the 'jock' educational subculture**

The relationship between sport and Christianity has been studied from a range of theoretical perspectives, including Stevenson's (1991, 1997) research, which also adopts a symbolic interactionist perspective. Stevenson (1997) analysed the strategies employed by Christian elite athletes and distinguished three strategic modes. First, some athletes compartmentalised sporting and religious roles and so largely ignored conflicts between the two value systems. Second, as was applicable to most of the athletes studied, athletes encountered a 'crisis of meaning' in relation to role conflicts. Most dealt with this crisis by defining their sporting activity and achievements as a means of glorifying God, and/or 'spreading the word' of their faith. Third, Stevenson (1997) found a minority of athletes unable to reconcile cultural differences and who abandoned elite sport altogether. Analogously, Coakley (2003, p. 555) suggests that: 'combining religious beliefs with sport participation may require adjustments – either in a person's religious beliefs *or* in the way a person plays sports'. Such adjustments, we found, were requisite for the Christian students in combining their religious beliefs, sports participation and involvement in the campus subculture.

The campus on which the participants lived had a strong sporting or 'jock' (the term is thought to derive from 'jockstrap', a support garment worn by men who engage in certain sports) ethos, as described below. Although degrees other than sports science were taught on the campus, the majority of students resident there at the time of the research were sports-science students. Our participants were highly aware of the values and norms of the sports educational subculture into which they were being socialised. Donnelly and Young (1988) explore the socialisation process with regard to sporting subcultures generally, and posit four stages of 'career' development. These were certainly apposite to our findings relating to integration into a 'jock' student culture: i) presocialisation; ii) selection and recruitment; iii) socialisation; and iv) acceptance/ostracism. In brief, pre-socialisation refers to the information an individual receives before coming into contact with or seeking to join a specific subculture. In our case, this included information (both formal and informal) given to potential students



prior to their joining a university, for example prospectuses, information from the Student Union, accommodation services, and from friends and family who had already been to university. Selection and recruitment occur on actual contact with the group (virtual in the case of internet-based groups and communities), with prerequisites for membership including opportunity, motivation, and interest. During socialisation, an individual 'tries on' the new subcultural identity, learning to adopt the values and perspectives of the group, taking on new roles and modifying others, and establishing new identifications with the politics and symbols of the group (Donnelly & Young, 1988). In the fourth stage, the neophyte may be accepted into, or rejected by the subcultural group. Importantly, with regard to our interest in Christian students' potential role conflicts and acceptance into the campus 'jock culture', Donnelly and Young (1988, p. 226) argue that:

Members of subcultures who are unable to meet role requirements ... may face ostracism and/or banishment from the group. While some subcultures will be less rigorous in their internal policing procedures and allow such role conflicts to persist, others will require unconditionally that they be resolved.

In relation to male 'jock culture', Macdonald & Kirk (1999, p.132) define this as the: 'celebration of mesomorphy, anti-intellectualism, sexism, homophobia, competitiveness and binge drinking' (mesomorphy relating to a muscular or sturdy body build). Analogously, Skelton (1993, p. 296) identifies elements such as: 'Getting drunk, fooling around, showing your naked body in public, displaying toughness, heterosexual conquest, respecting hierarchy and ridiculing weakness'. Although the majority of the literature focuses upon male jock cultures, female jock cultures such as women's ice hockey (Theberge, 1997), and football (soccer) (George, 2005) appear to exhibit similar components, albeit the heterosexism prevalent in many men's jock cultures appears not to be endemic within women's (see for example, Harris (2005) on women's football/soccer). Although there is not the scope here to compare and contrast specific female and male jock cultures, we are using the term 'jock' as generally applicable to

both (as indeed did our female participants), whilst acknowledging that such cultures may well be gendered - and 'classed', 'raced', and so on.

In an in-depth study of 'jock' culture, Sparkes, Partington & Brown (2007, p.305) propose '12 Commandments' for those seeking to construct and confirm a 'jock' social identity. Included amongst these are Commandments to: be committed to the social life; attend socials regularly; respect the hierarchy; attend post-match drinking sessions, and importantly, acolytes are reminded that excessive alcohol consumption and associated behaviours are obligatory. As was noted by interviewees, certain of these 'Commandments' gave rise to significant role conflict for Christian students, particularly given religious exhortations banning or restricting alcohol consumption. Although we might conjecture that sports students perhaps adhere to the 'excessive alcohol consumption' commandment more firmly than do other subject/disciplinary groups, nevertheless, there are widespread concerns about high levels of alcohol consumption amongst the university student population generally, in both the UK and the USA (Black & Smith, 1994; Gill, 2002).

## **Methods**

With regard to research setting, approximately 220 students were living on or close to the Redwich Campus, the great majority of whom were studying a Sport & Exercise Science degree. The close-knittedness and friendly ambience of the campus were repeatedly mentioned by interviewees, who referred to it as a 'friendly family' and 'little community'. This was highlighted as one of its most reassuring and 'homely' features. Redwich had a significant history as a physical education teacher training campus and sport constituted an important part of campus life. Indeed, the campus had a reputation for proudly upholding a jock culture whose traditions were transmitted from generation to generation over decades by 'Reddies' (students perceived as committed to the norms and values of the sports-student Redwich subculture).

In order to undertake the initial exploratory study, five participants (4 female; 1 male) were selected via purposive or 'criterion-based selection' (LeCompte & Preissle,

1993, p. 69), based on: 1) being a full-time, first-year student based at the Redwich campus; 2) self-identifying as a committed, practising Christian. Two (including the male student) had entered university direct from school, whilst three had taken a 'gap' year prior to entry. The second author, a practising Christian herself, who had previously been a first-year on the same campus, had ready access to the student network and found no problem in securing participation from her fellow Christian students.

The project was granted ethical approval by the relevant university committee, participants were informed of the nature and purpose of the study, and gave informed consent prior to involvement. Repeat, in-depth, semi-structured, individual interviews were digitally recorded, but kept as informal as possible, congruent with Holloway's (1997, p. 94) portrayal of the qualitative interview as a 'conversation with a purpose' in which the interviewer aims to obtain the perspectives, feelings and perceptions of participants. Points of interest raised in the initial tranche of interviews were followed-up during the second phase, to clarify or further explore emergent themes. All participants were living in halls on, or proximate to, Redwich campus and interviews took place in their study bedrooms in order to provide a private, and familiar environment. Participants were offered the opportunity to view and amend the interview transcripts. Via thematic analysis salient themes were identified, both as emergent from the data and also as corresponding with those previously identified in the theoretical literature; a somewhat 'hybrid thematic' approach (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Thematic narrative analysis was undertaken, to explore the narratives presented by interviewees, for as Riessman (1993, p.2) notes, individuals construct narratives to 'claim identities and construct lives'. The personal and social identities claimed by our Christian sports students were complex and multi-faceted, as we discuss below.

It should at this stage be emphasized that it is the participants' *accounts* that constitute the data, and the limitations of the approach should be borne in mind. We are cognisant of issues surrounding memory and retrospective accounts, and very much aware that, in Goffmanesque style, our participants were choosing to present

themselves in a certain way; just as we as researchers chose our own 'presentation of self' (Goffman, 1974). Thomson's (Perks & Thomson, 1998) concept of 'composure' was apposite to our analyses of the ways in which the Christian students 'composed' their identities in an ongoing process, aligning past, present and future selves, and articulating these compositions or constructions first to self and then to others. As Perks & Thomson (1998) argue, in the process of remembering, we compose ourselves in an ongoing process, which is narratively performed to self and others, but never 'finalised' (Smith *et al.*, 2009). In relation to this 'self-composure', Kirk & Wall (2010) further emphasize that we compose (and articulate) ourselves in an intersubjective, dialogic relationship with what are perceived to be dominant narrative resources and modes, legitimated by mainstream culture. For us, it was the articulation of identities congruent with subcultural modes – both Christian and Reddie – which were of interest. For the purposes of this article, we have chosen to present the data in a form of 'modified realist tale' (Sparkes, 2002), which seeks accurately to express participants' points of view whilst also acknowledging our role as researchers/writers in the representation of those views and of the research in general. The findings are grouped under the following identity themes: i) disruptions and opportunities, ii) tensions, iii) disclosures, iv) negotiations and balance, v) acceptance, confirmation and affirmation.

### **Identity disruptions and opportunities**

As Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld (2005) note, becoming a student is about constructing a new identity and a sense of belonging. Silver (1996) examines the ways in which moving away to university has the potential to provoke identity disruption in relation to students' previous 'home' identities. This can be exciting as well as unsettling and anxiety-provoking, for a new environment provides an opportunity for a fresh start, to create a new or substantially modified identity:

You're sort of free to make a new start, even if you were fine back home you have an opportunity just to be new here... because when you first come to

university your identity from home isn't fixed anymore, you sort of have to create a new identity, whether that's the same as the one you had at home or a different one.

Participants described how, at the beginning of their new university life, everyone was a stranger. Consequently, they had relative *carte blanche* in choosing their identities and desired 'presentation of self' (Goffman, 1974), including modifying or even abandoning their Christian identity:

No one would know that you're a Christian and it would be quite easy to just change completely who you are.

The decision to maintain their faith 'publicly' (Moran, 2007), despite being in a new environment with the choice to 'opt out' of Christianity, and without the support of family and friends to buttress their faith, was seen as reflective of commitment to Christian identity.

Silver (1996) examines how, when faced with a transition involving changed physical and social environments, individuals often seek a way to retain continuous identities. This tension between establishing a new identity and retaining something of the old, generated uncertainty, particularly when participants felt in danger of being negatively influenced by their peers (c.f. Walseth, 2006) to such an extent that they feared being 'forced' into an undesirable new identity. As the male student explained:

I was anxious about how I might change negatively...I didn't want to become something that I didn't want to be... I was scared that might happen just from peer pressure.

Confronted with a changing social environment, however, one's belief systems may provide the requisite sense of continuity portrayed by Silver (1996); for our participants, their Christian beliefs were reported to provide a source of comfort and strength in times of change. They did, however, express having doubts as to their social integration into the new university life, given potential conflicts between Christian and student identifications. The wish to fit in with their student cohort, and with the campus culture generally, generated fears that Christian identity might have to be compromised in some way, particularly given that the jock culture on campus promoted values and norms that conflicted in many ways with those of a committed Christian. The 'commandment' to consume excessive quantities of alcohol emerged as a central concern.

### **Identity tensions: drinking and prohibition**

All participants reported being acutely aware of the drinking culture associated both with university and with student sports, even prior to their arrival at university. This pre-socialisation information (Donnelly & Young, 1988) provoked significant anxiety about integration into the Reddie subculture:

I wasn't really into that whole drinking, clubbing lifestyle, I thought I'd just sort of... stick out, not make any friends.

Participants all reported wanting to fit in and feel socially accepted, and were aware that failure to meet subcultural demands surrounding alcohol consumption might result in ostracism from the social group (c.f. Donnelly & Young, 1988). The requirement to display commitment to the social life, excessive alcohol consumption and anti-intellectualism noted by other researchers (Macdonald & Kirk, 1999; Skelton, 1993; Sparkes, Partington & Brown, 2007) was clearly reflected by interviewees:

You're expected to go out as much as possible, drink as much as possible, do as little work as possible.

The oft recounted legends of initiation ceremonies glorifying heavy drinking as fulfilling a key 'commandment' for social acceptance (Sparkes, Partington & Brown, 2007), presented first-year students with a dilemma, for conformity to the student drinking culture would conflict directly with their religious beliefs. A female student, for example, confessed to feelings of uncertainty regarding coping with pressure to conform, but noted that social support from older Christian students had eased the interactional dilemma at her first social event:

Everyone was like 'your first social will be the worst'... all the older people were sitting around the outside, and the freshers were right bang in the middle, but I had three Christian people near me, they were like: 'you don't have to do it', so it was nice to have support there and reassurance that there were other people who don't do it.

The older Christian students, who were already an established part of the social group, presented this student with a choice regarding conformity to the drinking norm. In this encounter, they encouraged her to view total compliance with the drinking commandment as not necessarily a *sine qua non* for inclusion in the Reddie subculture; a point we found of particular interest, given that other researchers such as Donnelly and Young (1988) found that transgression of such norms usually results in ostracism by the group. When, however, the social pressure to conform to the drinking norm actually emanated from the older students, who enjoyed greater status in the age-related student hierarchy, the pressure was intensified, as others recounted:

They want you to drink a lot, sometimes it can be quite intimidating to say no to somebody who's older.

There's always the pressure on you to like down it [drink] and actually you think would it actually be easier to do it, to go along with it just to kind of like fit in?

The ways in which students negotiated the demands of their Reddie and Christian identities involved making decisions regarding disclosure and 'public' display of their Christian identity and anxieties that self-disclosure might result in their 'negative marking' (Allen-Collinson, 2009) by fellow students.

### **Identity disclosures**

The nature of the Redwich campus on which the students were housed exacerbated some of these identity anxieties. The smallness of the campus (the campus being a self-contained part of a larger institution) was perceived as both a positive and negative feature. Whilst it fostered a sense of belonging and social cohesion, the very close-knittedness of the student community meant that Christian students initially worried that disclosure of their faith would result in their 'negative marking' (Brekhus, 1998, 2008; Allen-Collinson, 2009) by fellow students, as they were unable effectively to 'hide' amidst a larger student population. Brekhus (2008, p.1062) uses the marked/unmarked distinction, derived from linguistics, to analyse the relationship between the 'deviant', stigmatising, non-normative (marked) and the privileging, normative and 'generic' aspects of social identities. As he notes (2008, pp. 1062-63) the marked/unmarked framework has been used primarily in relation to analyses of 'race', class, gender and sexuality, but proves sufficiently generic to be applicable to other identities, amongst which we would include religious identity, where this constitutes part of a person's visible or declared 'presentation of self' (Goffman, 1974).

Decisions regarding the degree of visibility of Christian identification became part of interviewees' information management strategies. As Tsui & Gutek (1999) portray, social identities may be visible or invisible. Although some of their categories are open



to debate, examples of visible identities provided include 'race', 'sex' and age; whilst invisible characteristics include occupation, illness and religion (all depending upon outward insignia). The management of information regarding 'invisible' identities has generated considerable research interest given the potential impact of disclosure - for positive status enhancement, and for stigmatisation (Clair, Beatty & MacLean, 2005; Moran, 2007). With regard to the latter, Goffman's (1990, p.57ff.) seminal work on stigma is particularly apposite to our purposes in its theoretical distinction between stigmatised individuals as either already 'discredited' or potentially 'discreditable'. A discredited person has visible signs of their 'differentness' evident during interactional encounters, so that this is 'known'. Discreditable individuals, in contrast, appear to be 'normal', with no obvious outward signs of difference, and often engage in information management, requiring decisions as to whom disclosure is made: 'to display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; ... to lie or not to lie; and in each case to whom, how, when and where' (Goffman, 1990, p.57). Dilemmas regarding self-disclosure emerged strongly from the data:

I wasn't sure which way I was going to go when I came to uni, whether I would actually stand up and go to church.

I was quite nervous about that [revealing her Christianity] at first, because I wasn't sure how I would fit in and fear of reactions, you don't know whether they're going to think 'I don't want to be friends with you'.

Whilst disclosure was to some extent within the control of our students, others' responses were not, and could have significant repercussions for social acceptance within the tight-knit community. Participants subsequently reflected on earlier disclosure dilemmas, and noted that as time progressed it became easier to disclose their faith. They reasoned that if fellow students were rejecting of this aspect of their

identity, then they were not the 'right' people with whom to associate. As a female interviewee indicated:

It's really *not* that bad once you've told them and if they think that way then they're obviously not the right friends.

The importance of establishing good friendships, which could provide sustained social support particularly in times of difficulty, was repeatedly highlighted by interviewees. Congruent with other research findings (e.g. Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005), participants described how student friends became 'new family' and 'friendly family'. The social acceptance stakes were high, however, as without the support of good friends accepting of their Christianity, some students feared they would have left higher education altogether:

If I didn't have this group of friends I'd probably have dropped out of uni.

### **Identity negotiations and balance**

Potential identity conflicts were of particular research interest to us. Coakley (2003), for example, examines how individuals negotiate the conflicts between involvement in sport and religion, and argues that combining the two may require adjustments either in religious beliefs *or* in the way in which a person plays sports. Other research highlights the ways in which some Christian athletes seek to compartmentalise their dual identifications as Christian and sportsperson (Stevenson, 1991). At the general theoretical level, a form of situational role compartmentalisation is theorised in Goffman's (1974, p.137) dramaturgical approach via the concept of audience segregation, where the 'performer' seeks to ensure that those who witness her/him in one role do not witness her/him in a different role. Such role compartmentalisation might ostensibly seem attractive to Christian students, but the small and intimate social space of Redwich campus rendered such segregation highly problematic. Moreover, all

participants expressed the desire to combine (and be seen to combine) rather than to segregate their Reddie and Christian identities. They noted the importance of receiving social support from other Reddies in achieving an identity balance. Interestingly, rather than limiting their presentation of Christian identity to 'Christian settings' or compromising their religious beliefs, they sought to reconceptualise their understanding of being a Reddie. A male interviewee reported achieving a balance by regularly socialising with fellow Reddies but avoiding engagement in certain activities he considered compromising of a Christian way of life:

You can live the Christian life here... I don't think that being a 'Reddie' means you're pressured to actually do things, I mean you can still have fun with them, you don't have to do all the things that you wouldn't want to because of your Christianity.

Students also highlighted that Reddie subculture itself was not homogeneous, but fractured and differentiated in terms of social groups within the subculture, most noticeably perhaps, in relation to specific sporting groups. As a female interviewee noted:

For the sports rugby players it will be like, no you can't be a Reddie because you don't drink this amount or whatever, but for me it doesn't have anything to do with whether you drink a lot or like whether you're laddish or whatever ... but for some people I think they wouldn't see you as a *true* Reddie.

All participants self-identified as Reddies as well as Christians, despite their cognisance of not fulfilling all stereotypical jock criteria, as identified by Sparkes, Partington & Brown (2007) for example. Personal and social identities in some situations were not always congruent therefore. A strong sense of pride was nevertheless expressed about

Reddie identity, particularly as older peers articulated their valorisation of this identification:

I'm quite proud to be a Reddie because everyone says it's a good thing, just going on second year opinions.

Another interviewee expanded on the reasons for his pride in Reddie identification:

I guess it's just because you're not part of the main campus and that in a way makes you special and different... sort of proud to be different because it's better.

This collective pride in the Reddie subcultural identity was signalled by all interviewees, who highlighted their distinctiveness vis-à-vis of other student groups at the same university, reflecting Stone's (2006) formulation, where having an identity involves joining with some and departing from others. The context-dependency and fluidity of such joinings and departures emerged clearly in the students' accounts, for whilst in some situations Reddies felt part of the wider university population of 17,000 students, in other contexts they emphasized and celebrated their difference. Identification with, and embeddedness within the Reddie subculture conferred a sense of belonging and distinctiveness, just as did membership of the Christian community. As one interview neatly encapsulated in relation to her identifications:

I'm a Christian and a Reddie!

In order to negotiate such an identity resolution, our interviewees had modified their understandings of being a Reddie in order to accommodate their Christian beliefs, rather than *vice versa*. Their social acceptance within the campus culture as both

Reddie and committed Christian proceeded gradually as they established friendship groups that recognised and accepted the dual aspects of identity.

### **Acceptance, confirmation and affirmation**

Participants recounted how early in their transition to university they exercised caution and circumspection in disclosing what potentially could be 'marked' as a discredited identity as a Christian. Commensurate with Goffman's (1974) analysis of interaction, careful performances are required with those whom we do not know. As the students grew more familiar with, and confident about, life on campus, their interactional performances became less tightly regulated with those peers openly accepting of their Christian identity. A strong indication of acceptance and social inclusion was noted as the assigning of affectionate nicknames, and importantly the incorporation of these nicknames and associated 'vocabularic identification' (Allen-Collinson, 2007; Perinbanayagam, 2000) into personal identity. One female interviewee, for example, told how her friendship group assigned her the nicknames 'Bible basher' and 'Jesus girl', as indicative of her social identity. She in turn accepted and came to embrace these nicknames as friendly acknowledgement by peers of the salience of her Christian social identity; the nicknames subsequently became firmly incorporated into her personal identity. Snow & Anderson (1995, p. 245) note how the confirmation of vocabularic identification demonstrates that 'social and personal identities are congruent, such that the individual accepts the identities associated with [their] status'. Furthermore, our interviewees also highlighted the importance of recognition by their peers of their vocabularic and behavioural distinctiveness. One female student explained:

My friends are always, like, I'm really sorry, I won't swear which is like really good because they see that I'm different and that I don't do that.

Whilst another considered:

I think people see that I don't act in certain ways that others do, if you get me, how I treat others, it's not the same.

As highlighted in the literature (see Rickinson & Rutherford, 1996; Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005) the establishment of stable friendship groups emerged as a key factor in students' feeling settled and socially accepted - and continuing their university career. As would be expected, interviewees noted how, as time went on and they came to know their Reddie peers and to establish firm friendships, they felt more able to disclose aspects of their identity which, hitherto, they would have been uncertain or reluctant to reveal:

... you get to know people a lot better so people have got to know me a lot better and the more you get to know people, the more you can kind of open up to them, so certain aspects of my personality have come across more.

Another participant similarly described how:

I find it hard to fully be myself around people before I get to know them well... kinda recently I've started to sort of come out my shell more.

Studies of other 'discreditable' identities, such as lesbian and gay (at least in some contexts), have similarly emphasized the importance of relationships for identity negotiation and confirmation (Kaufman & Johnson, 2004).

### **Concluding remarks**

In this article we have considered the key themes that emerged from a study of first-year Christian university students and their ongoing construction and negotiation of Christian and jock identities. For all participants, their Christianity was highlighted as holding 'identity salience' (Stryker & Burke, 2000) and in the words of one, constituted

the very essence of 'Who I am'. They also strove to balance this with their Reddie identity. Interviewees charted their journeys of transition to university, from initial fears of loneliness and 'negative marking' due to their Christianity, through to a point when they felt confident and comfortable with a visible, 'public' presentation of Christian identification. The transition from initial self-questioning: 'what if I don't make friends and fit in?' to an attitude of: 'if they don't accept me then they're not the right friends' reflects such growth in confidence. Although the findings are based on a very small-scale, exploratory study, nevertheless clear themes surrounding identity construction and negotiation could be discerned, some congruent with the theoretical literature and some contrasting with previous empirical research.

In relation to our theoretical framework, commensurate with the symbolic interactionist theorisation of identity as relational, our participants emphasized the importance of interactions with their student peers. As Goffman (1974) reminds us, one's role performances are often tightly controlled in interaction with strangers. Particularly in the early days of transition to university when social acceptance was earnestly sought, participants reported a high degree of caution in deciding to whom they made disclosure of their Christian identity. The ongoing nature of identity construction and negotiation within the interactional milieu also emerged strongly from the data. Participants had continuously to 'work' at negotiating a balance between their identities of Christian and Reddie, involving ongoing judgments and decisions. Although interviewees reported feeling more confident in revealing Christian identity as time went on, this was not across all interactional contexts. Furthermore, it was clear that identity was not a 'once-and-for-all' accomplishment, but contingent and requiring ongoing identity work; it was always subject to potential contestation (c.f. Allen-Collinson, 2007). In relation to certain sporting subcultural groups within the campus subculture, for example, participants reported not being accorded full Reddie status, due to their lack of 'full on' engagement with the jock behaviours deemed requisite.

Donnelly and Young (1988, p. 226) contend that members of subcultures who are unable to meet role requirements may face ostracism and/or banishment from the group, noting that whilst some subcultures are less rigorous in their policing procedures and allow role conflicts to persist, others require unconditionally that such tensions be resolved. The heterogeneity of the Reddie subculture meant that whilst some individuals and social groups within the subculture were respecting of compromises made by Christian students in not fulfilling all Reddie membership criteria, others were less accepting, and not prepared to accord full Reddie social identity to the Christian students. Bolstered by strong friendships with Reddies who *did* accept and confirm their dual identity, however, participants' personal identification as both Reddie and Christian was strong.

Generalisability of findings was not a criterion we sought to meet in the project, but we hope in a small way to have contributed to the symbolic interactionist literature on identity processes, and to the empirical literature on student experiences in higher education. Some of the identification processes we found to be salient in participants' accounts are clearly applicable to first-year university students more generally: for example, the potential identity disruptions and opportunities engendered by moving away from home to university or college. Similarly, decisions regarding situational identity disclosure confront individuals with any 'discreditable' identity (Goffman, 1990), including in relation to religion, sexuality, ethnicity, dis/ability and a whole range of potentially stigmatising characteristics and conditions. Other identity dilemmas were more specific in requiring the achievement of balance between the Christian and jock elements of participants' identities, for example in relation to alcohol consumption, although similar dilemmas might well be encountered in relation to other religious, philosophical, health or lifestyle identities. Students with chronic illness conditions, for example, could also struggle to achieve a balance between conformity to student drinking norms and protecting their own health.



Here we have considered just two identity intersections, our participants of course held many more identities brought into play during the interactional flow, and further articles might profitably explore these other elements of intersectionality, for example in relation to gender. This article has portrayed the commonalities between the students' experiences, but future analysis might focus upon the differences in constructing, negotiating and balancing (or not) Christian and student and/or jock identity, in relation to, for example, gender, age, and residence on or off campus. In addition to the small-scale nature of the research project, there are other limitations. The second author, who undertook the interviews, made 'public' her own Christian identity (c.f. Moran, 2007) and this may well have had an impact on the narratives presented. As Gubrium and Holstein (2001, p.21) question in relation to the plethora of stories any given research respondent could recount: 'Which among these is the most tellable under the circumstances?'. Other narratives may well have been told in different interactional circumstances, to different researchers, as would be commensurate with symbolic interactionist theorisations of the context dependency and locally meaningful nature of social actors' 'scripts' (Goffman, 1981).

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