Young People’s Constructions of the Self: Late Modern Constructs and Gender Differences - Sociology, 40 (1) 2006: 107-124

Abstract
This article looks at the ways in which young people reflexively construct their self within a rapidly changing society. Drawing on texts written by young people aged 14-17 years, it explores the existence of patterns identified by theorists of late modernity as regards relationships, fateful moments, a search for authenticity, life plans and life styles and looks at gender differentiated trends in these areas drawing on a ‘weak cultural feminist tradition’ (Evans, 1995:91). These texts are part of a sub-sample of approximately 34,000 texts written by young people in a school context in response to an invitation to ‘tell their life stories’ to write a page ‘describing themselves and the Ireland they inhabit’. The article suggests that gender is a repressed but crucially important framework in the construction of young people’s sense of self, while also identifying areas where consumer society is eroding gender difference.

Key Words: gender, late modern, reflexivity, self, young

Introduction
Irish society is in a period of rapid economic, social and cultural change, involving dramatic increases in married women’s participation in paid employment; in women’s occupancy of positions of expertise; in younger women’s academic achievements; and a series of scandals involving abuses of authority in a number of male dominated institutions (Tovey and Share, 2003; O’Connor, 1998 and 2,000; O’Toole, 2003). Such changes are occurring in a society where the institutional Roman Catholic Church and the State have been important in creating and sustaining sharply differentiated but differentially valued gender discourses. However, the Women’s Movement has, since the 1970s and 1980s, created a discourse surrounding the evaluation of women’s roles, in a context where women have traditionally had higher educational levels than men and an emotionally stronger role in the family.

Little attention has been paid to the ways in which young people reflexively construct their selves in such a context i.e. ‘the sustaining of a coherent yet continuously revised, biographical narrative’ (Giddens, 1991: 5). In this article we look at the extent to which
texts written by young people aged 14-17 years reflect the kinds of patterns identified by theorists of late modernity as regards relationships, fateful moments, a search for authenticity, life plans and life styles (Giddens, 1991, 1992 and 1994; Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernschein, 2002). Within such an Irish context, in what is still a predominantly white society, there were very few references to race. Sexuality was a hidden discourse in the texts; it was not possible to identify variation in social class position. Thus, we focus on the absence/presence of gender differentiated trends, drawing on what Evans (1995: 91) called a ‘weak cultural feminist tradition’ much of it stimulated by Gilligan’s classic (1982) and widely critiqued work (see Stone 1996). This non-essentialist focus on women’s difference has been complimented by research on masculinities, particularly hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995a) which has acted ‘as a normative and indeed culturally specific standard’, ‘against which behaviours and identities can be evaluated’ (Hearn, 1996: 203). In this context a key issue in understanding gender differences is that men have managed, through male dominance of key institutions (such as the Church, State, schools, media etc) ‘to get a stranglehold on meaning. What it means to be a man, what it means to be a woman’ (Edley and Wetherell, 1996: 107). Such structures are not monolithic, nor devoid of resistance. However, the assumption that manhood involves hierarchical struggle with other men and/or domination of women has persisted (Clare, 2000). Indeed, Bjerrum Nielsen (2004a) showed that whether societies purported to endorse gender equality or gender complementarity, a positive male role vis a vis women and a positive valuation of womanhood did not exist.

This article explores the ways in which young people reflectively construct their self: focussing particularly on the extent to which they do so in terms of late modern elements and gender differences in these.

**Methodology**

Stanley (2000: 40) noted that auto/biography is concerned with ‘practices, that is the myriad of everyday and frequently competing social practices concerned with the articulation of (often competing, sometimes discontinuous) notions of ‘selves’ and
‘lives’. The accounts produced by the young people in this study are organisationally driven in the sense that the young people were invited to do them within a school setting. These texts in some ways can be seen as similar to solicited diaries (Bell, 1998) or externally required narratives (Stanley, 2000) in so far as they were produced specifically for this exercise. The influence of the setting on the content cannot be ascertained. Neither can one know to what extent the texts reflect normative narratives. The directions to schools specifically indicated that no selection was to be made on the basis of quality, appropriateness etc. Since the texts were seen as being written for unknown readers in a future millennium, the young people were free to imagine a reader. However, one cannot know to what extent they anticipated that they would be read by their teachers before being submitted.

In this article, the focus is on a sub-sample of 224 texts written by those in Transition Year in Second Level in Ireland (typically aged 14-17 years) in response to an invitation, as part of the millennium celebrations, to ‘tell their life stories’, to write a page ‘describing themselves and the Ireland that they inhabit’ ‘to provide a national data base’ ‘an invaluable archive’. The guidelines sent to teachers suggested that topics include: locality and community, family and friends, home, hopes and ambitions for the new millennium, pastimes and hobbies, role models and influences (fun, fashion, music, sport, technology and games: Write Now, 1999). These texts were part of a wider universe of 4,100 texts which were randomly selected from a total universe of 33,828 texts returned by half (51 per cent) of the 3,658 schools in Ireland, of which 600 (14 per cent) were written by those aged 14-17 years in Transition Year. Of these texts, 62 per cent were written by girls.

The method of analysis in the overall study was both quantitative and qualitative. A coding frame assessed the absence/presence of a number of themes including family, friends, school, descriptions of self, hobbies/activities, roots/ heritage and the future. A thematic qualitative analysis was undertaken of a random selection of 600 sheets each by two of the other researchers, of which 130 were written by those in Transition Year. A further random sub-sample of 94 texts written by those in Transition Year was drawn, making the total of 224 such texts which are the focus of the present article. Working
initially in the context of the categories identified in the quantitative analysis, themes and sub-themes were identified and quotations transcribed to illustrate these. This qualitative data was also used inductively to identify themes, which were in some cases reframed in interaction with the theoretical literature. Through this process, five analytically different modes of reflexivity are identified: some of these reflecting the original categories (such as relationships), while others (such as fateful moments) emerged from an interaction between the data and the theoretical literature. The absence/presence of gender differences was a persistent theme throughout the study.

The excerpts are verbatim quotations, with spelling, grammatical and other mistakes/capitalisation as in the original texts. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms are used and identifying information, local or school referents are not used in the case of individual quotations. Although the specific permission of the young people involved was not sought, this material came from an initiative aimed at providing an account of their lives for future generations: a reference to the use of such data for research purposes being included in the material sent to schools.

Type 1: Mode of Reflexivity: Relationships

In this section the focus is on whether young people constructed their ideas of themselves in terms of late modern types of references to relationships and/or the extent to which such references revealed gendered patterns. We look particularly at the extent to which such relationships could be seen as ‘pure relationships’ - relationship that exist ‘solely for whatever rewards that relationship can deliver;’ intimacy being seen as a key element since ‘trust can be mobilised only by a process of mutual disclosure’ (Giddens, 1991:6). It has been noted that there is a contradiction in Giddens’ treatment of parent/child relationships, since on the one hand, they are seen as ‘tending towards’ pure relationships and on the other hand, as crucial in the creation of children’s long term ontological security (Jamieson, 1999).

In the context of gender differences, relationships have been identified as a key discourse related to femininity (O’Connor, 1998; Skeggs 1997; Gray, 2004). For weak
cultural feminists (such as Gilligan 1982; Baker Miller 1986), the greater importance of relationships in women’s lives reflects women’s structural and cultural position. Uchida (1998) argued that it makes no sense to separate ‘difference’ from ‘dominance’ since the overall context within which women’s relational cultures are located is one of male dominance. Thus, in a society where hegemonic definitions of masculinity stress hierarchy, women are positioned as subordinates. By defining themselves in non-hierarchical relational terms they can attempt to transcend such a definition. However, as early noted by Ehrenreich (1983) and re-stated by Castells (2004: 292) such relational worlds typically have a weak economic base: their relational strengths ‘will remain ‘unreal’ and unrealised, if women do not have the power to put them into effective operation’ (Baker Miller, 1986: 115).

In the present study, girls were more likely than their male counterparts to refer to family, ‘friends’ and ‘best/close/really good friends’. There was a strong suggestion that family relationships (sometimes in addition to friendships) contributed to a sense of ontological security amongst both boys and girls and were juxtaposed with what were seen as the more transient, merely enjoyable aspects of their lives:

‘The things that are important in my life now are my family and friends. These will for me, never change.’ (Dolores)

‘Only my family and friends hold high importance to me. They are the only things I would live or die by because no matter how annoying they are and how often you fight you know you will always be side by side with them. My other loves but to a lesser extent would be women, hurling, Soccer and Smithwicks…. Again although they give me great pleasure, they are all things I could survive without’ (James)

The objectification of women (as ‘things’) in James’ text is strikingly illustrative of a dominant hegemonic view of masculinity (a point that is returned to later in the text)

Friendships were predominantly same-sex, reflecting the well-established tendency for young people to be embedded in same-sex universes (Blatchford, 1998, O’Connor, 1998 and 2002; Pahl, 2000). Insofar as references were made to disclosure, a key element in Giddens’ ‘pure relationships’, they were most likely to be made by girls in referring to best/close/really good friends:
‘I have two really good friends that I could talk to about anything, they know my deepest darkest secrets and know instantly if there is something wrong with me’ (Caroline)

Some of these friends, as in Linda’s case, were long-standing (see Hey, 1997) and although implicitly intimate, were clearly not transient relationships:

‘a friend is someone you can trust, rely on, talk to. My best friends name is Ann Murphy we have been friends for four years it all started in first year when I first saw her...All I know is that she can turn to me any time she likes and I can turn to her any time aswell to talk to. She is the greatest friend I ever will have and nothing or nobody will replace her’ (Linda)

As well as having such friends in whom they could confide, the girls also had side by side shared activity type friendships (the kind that boys tended to have, if they had any: Frosh et al, 2002). Such side-by-side friendships locate boys within a wider hierarchical context that validates their identity as boys, rather than affirming their more unique personal characteristics. The endorsement of girl’s categorical identity as girls through similar side-by-side activity based friendships can be seen as reflecting the changing structural position of women in Irish society, and a (contested) discourse that values women as highly as men.

Within the context of compulsory heterosexuality, having a boyfriend can be seen as proof of women’s ‘normality’ and as the acceptable face of women’s relational focus (see Griffiths, 1995; Lees, 1993; Mc Robbie, 1978; O’Connor, 2002). References to such relationships may have been affected by the school context. They were in any case brief and sometimes ironical. Sonya who says that she likes to spend time with her boyfriend, goes on to stress that the relationship is impermanent and fun: ‘Its not serious. We just concentrate on having fun. You’re only young once!’ Such relationships seemed to most closely approximate pure relationships although it was not clear to what extent they were characterised by the intimate confiding which Giddens has seen a hallmark of such relationships. In Griffiths (1995:157) study, attachments to boys were also often transient fun relationships and contrasted with ‘the intense long-lasting friendships between the girls themselves’. References by the boys to girl friends were much less likely to occur. This raises questions about the extent to which such
relationships are seen as involving an eroticisation of dominance or the objectification of women (an impression implicitly supported by James’ reference to women as ‘things’).

In summary then, other than in the case of boyfriends/girlfriends there was little evidence of Giddens’ (1991) ‘pure relationships’. There were gendered trends with the girls being more likely than their male counterparts to refer to family and friends, particularly best/close/really good friends. These young women were also likely to have those side-by-side categorical same sex friendships that the boys referred to, if they referred to any at all. This may suggest that affirmation of a categorical identity as female may be increasingly acceptable within Irish society, where social and cultural change has further strengthened women’s position and value.

**Type 2: Mode of Reflexivity: Fateful Moments**

Giddens (1991) suggested that in late modernity, moral crises relating to basic aspects of the life experience, such as sickness and death are ‘sequestered’ or separated out from the routines of everyday life. At fateful or critical moments (Thomson et al 2002) routines are disrupted and there is a ‘return of the repressed’ (Giddens, 1991: 202/03). It is suggested that gender is one of the repressed frameworks which is activated at that time- and that hence a focus on such moments enable us to see ways of ‘doing man/woman’ which underpin these young people’s constructions of their selves.

It is important to note that gender as an aspect of identity was only very occasionally explicitly adverted to: something that may reflect either its unimportance or its taken for granted quality. A lack of explicit gender awareness has been documented in other studies (Lynch and Lodge 2002; O’Connor et al, 2002) although schools, despite purporting to be gender neutral, have been shown to be involved in the reproduction of gendered subjectivities (Lynch and Lodge, 2002; Mac an Ghiall, 1994). In this section we look at fateful moments related to relational connectedness (reflected in references to death and to school musicals) and to attempted hierarchical dominance (reflected in references to football and fighting).
Death raises issues about connectedness. In an increasingly hedonistic, individualistic, competitive, materialistic society, it has become the remaining taboo (Mellor and Shilling, 1993). In this study, the intensity of the girls’ references to death was striking. It was depicted as ‘a scary issue’; the death of family and friends being seen by them as making them readdress their priorities (‘real eye openers’) and affecting them profoundly (‘I find myself numb to feeling now’ ‘I felt like I lost a part of myself’ (Deirdre); ‘I am the kind of person who always puts on a brave face but underneath I cry with pain’ (Anita). Where death was referred to by the boys, the reference was much terser: ‘I realised recently, with the death of a close friend, how much ill-health affects us’ (Paul). The same kind of issues surrounding the attenuation of ties with school colleagues were also reflected in the girls’ texts albeit less intensely: ‘As the year went on the class came closer and closer. The one thing I hate about the year is the class will all split up’ (Elaine).

At a very different level, school musicals were widely referred to by the girls, as fateful moments involving personal transformation where connectedness was recognised and strengthened. Thus, as Veronica went backstage to prepare for the opening night of the School Musical, in which she had a leading role:

‘my heart started thumping against my chest, the rush of adrenaline filled my body I felt a lump in my throat then suddenly tears in my eyes….My friends….talked to me, made me laugh, helped me through the nervous situation I was in …it was like something had come over me, something strange, something great…the audience clapped and clapped, I felt so proud, so happy …I felt brilliant …it was the best night of my whole life but I wouldn’t have done it without my friends there to calm me down’.

As she describes it, this experience transformed her: ‘something had come over me, something strange, something great’. This transformation from nervous tearfulness was made possible by support from her friends and this enabled her to deliver the impressive performance that she did.

For the most part, in the boys’ texts, fateful moments were rather different in content and affirmed not so much their ties with particular individuals as their categorical identity as a man. Thus, as in Willis’ Lads (1977) and Mac an Ghiall’s (1994) Macho
Lads ‘masculine narratives of remembering’ involved football matches, which expressed and affirmed a sense of we-ness and a male collective identity involved in the ‘reproduction of conventional gender identities and definitions’ (Willis, 1990: 115). In the text below, the language around football is emotionally intense- culminating in the repetition of the word ‘heartbreaking’. Identification with the Irish soccer team (reflected in ‘we’) is explicit and the memory of it and the vicissitudes of a county match (involving Kildare) dominate this young man’s account:

‘both World cups 1990 and 1994 had some of the happiest and saddest days of my life. When we bet Italy in 1994 [it] was unreal, but then to lose to Holland two weeks later was heartbreaking. But the moment in my life up to know was when Kildare won the Leinster final….. for the first time in 50 years. The celebrations went on for weeks… Kildare.. lost in the final to Galway and that was heartbreaking. Nothing much else has happened in my life since. I am content with life and that’s enough’ (Tom)

It is striking that these are, as he sees it the key events in his life- one which he describes as a contented one. The implication is that identification in a context that affirmed a gendered identity is ‘enough’: confirmation of that identity being so important that it is a source of contentment, even if the outcome involves failure/defeat.

Occasionally, as in the case of the Macho Lads, the narrative was a ‘hard man’ one (Thomson, 2000), referring to risk taking types of activities, including fighting and flirting with the law, such activities being seen by Connell (1995a) as elements in hegemonic masculinity. Thus having referred to the importance of rugby in his day-to-day life, Mick goes on to note that:

‘Then occasionally we go out to a disco, we get prepared by buying drink for that…. We usually buy the drink and go to a secluded area to drink and then have more going out on the bus... If you go out without being caught [by the Guards]... then you meet your friends and queue to get in. And if you don’t get in you might have to wait outside and maybe pick a fight for a laugh’ (Mick)

In Ireland although very high levels of alcohol consumption are common amongst both boys and girls, it is young male to male violence around clubs and pubs that has become an increasingly common aspect of young people’s lives, regardless of their social class background. Such violence can be seen as reflecting an endorsement of hegemonic masculinity and the failure of young men to achieve this- and hence can be seen as a form of ‘protest masculinity’ (Connell, 1995b; see also Canaan, 1996). On the one hand, young men expect to benefit from a ‘patriarchal dividend…in terms of honour,
prestige, and the right to command’ (Connell, 1995b:215) but their attempts to claim it are not seen as legitimate. Indeed as young men, they can be seen as a potential threat and as such are subject to the volatile and unaccountable authority of ‘bouncers’ at clubs and bars. They are thus in ‘a position of powerlessness where the existing cultural resources for a gendered claim to power’ are not available to them (Haywood and Mac an Ghiall, 2003:39). In this situation picking a fight can be seen as demonstrating that they possess one source of gendered power (physical strength). Doing this ‘for a laugh’ can be seen as indicating a rejection of a system which effectively ignores their expectations as regards a patriarchal dividend (see Edley and Wetherell, 1996 re attempts to normalise violence by describing it ‘as a laugh).

These fateful moments suggest that connectedness remains an important way of ‘doing girl’ while struggling for hierarchical dominance remains an important way of ‘doing boy’. Issues around connectedness were also referred to by boys, albeit more tersely, suggesting that they were less compatible with their normative discourse.

**Type 3: Mode of Reflexivity: Search for Authenticity**

In a late modern society, the creation of identity is seen as ‘a task, a mission, a responsibility’ ‘an overwhelming concern’, a ‘subjective challenge and an individual quest’ (Bauman, 1997:71; Sennett, 1977: 219 respectively) with the self becoming ‘an object of attention and sometimes anguished scrutiny’ (Berger et al 1974: 75; see also Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). Adolescence is the stage par excellence of such scrutiny: such depictions arguably being archetypical in late modernity.

Although the tenor of much of the literature is that this mode of reflexivity is non-gendered, Giddens (1991:106) suggestion that women ‘experience the openness of late modernity in a fuller yet more contradictory way’ leaves open the possibility of gender differences (a possibility also implied by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). Indeed, women are more likely to benefit from ‘structural reflexivity in which agency, set free from the constraints of social structure, reflects on the ‘rules’ and ‘resources’ of that structure’ (Lash 1994: 115). For Bjerrum Nielsen (2004b:11): ‘The modern competencies of reflexivity, self observation and personal biographical narration have
to a large extent been developed historically as modern feminine competencies’. Thus she argues that precisely because subject positions have been less self evident for girls than boys, it is more necessary for them to ask themselves who they are. She saw the State’s recognition of equality norms, welfare and child care rights as important contributors to such reflexivity in Scandinavia. These elements have not been present in Ireland, although their mother’s exposure to the Women’s Movement and a pattern of fostering resistance amongst daughters (O’Hara, 1997; O’Connor, 1998) has arguably encouraged a reflexive search for authenticity amongst girls.

For Giddens (1991: 79) ‘To be able to act authentically is more than just acting in terms of a self-knowledge that is as valid and full as possible; it means also disentangling ….the true from the false self’. There was some evidence of this in both the boys and girls’ texts, although the girls texts (in Bjerrum Nielsen’s study: 2004b) were typically more introspective and reflective.

‘Lately I’ve been searching for something that I know I need to find out. Who am I?.. Am I the selfish girl that some see me as? Am I the girl that everyone loves and gets along with? Or am I just another girl… that’s fooling herself while walking in the shadows of others? I look in the mirror and I see a teenage girl staring back at me. Somedays I know her. I laugh with her- get along with her. But other days she’s a stranger. I stand for ages trying to make sense...I need to know who I am or what I am when will I come to terms with me; myself; the person I really am...’ (Pauline)

If texts written by boys showed evidence of reflexivity, they shied away from such reflections. Thus for example, David, having began by apologising that his life was

‘not that interesting. Well what could I put down about my life? I am only 16’, shied away from this and half reverted to it again at the end of the text:

‘How can I put my life, my personality and my ideas down in a few lines? Oh just think of me as this. I am the best and I am great and wonderful’

There is a suggestion that this withdrawal from reflexivity reflected a fragile sense of his own value, ‘alternating between a grandiose and a worthless sense of self’ (Sennett, 1977:21). Even where boys referred to the felt existence of various kinds of pressure, this did not generate a reflexive search for authenticity, but was projected outwards in hostility towards those defined as ‘other’: ‘racists and fascists’ ‘junkies and the rest of the filth that pollute our city’ (David).
In this section, the mode of reflexivity focussed on a search for authenticity. This was more evident in the girls’ than in the boys’ texts. Such gendered trends seem to contradict the theorists of late modernity, although as has been shown they are compatible with views expressed by Giddens (1991) and Lash (1994) and with trends emerging in other studies.

**Type 4: Mode of Reflexivity: Life Plans**

It has been widely argued that an important aspect of individualisation is the disembedding of the life course and the substitution of a choice biography for a standard biography with life plans becoming ‘the substantial content of the reflexively organised trajectory of the self’ (Giddens, 1991: 85; see also Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernschein, 2002; Berger et al 1974).

The young people did not use the words life plan, and paradoxically, their hopes, and ambitions were a lot less detailed than the 10-12 year olds. However, as in Brannen and Nilsen’s study (2002) both boys and girls referred to leaving school, going to College, travelling the world and getting a good job. The identity of that ‘good job’ was frequently unspecified (except in the case of non–traditional jobs for girls -such as medicine, being a policewoman in the drugs squad etc). Amongst both boys and girls such hopes and ambitions were frequently altruistic, albeit sometimes with consumerist elements. The absence of any reference to an occupational identity in Stephen’s quote below is striking in a context where paid work has been the core element in men’s identity (O’Connor et al, 2002):

‘My ambitions/hopes in life are to get enough points to study medicine, to help people who arent as fortunate as me, try to stop wars, make the peace treaty in Northern Ireland, work and try hard to get rid of things such as racism and to learn sign language’ (Niamh)

‘My biggest hope is to get my degree and settle down, get a small house in the country and buy a nice jeep. I am planning to manage a football team when I am in my 30s ....Because I would not want a young child to miss the experiences I had with my [football] club’ (Stephen)

Marrying or being in a relationship were infrequently mentioned by either boys or girls as part of their life plan. Those who did refer to them endorsed rather traditional views:
‘With a good job I could provide myself with a home and also provide for a family if that’s the way my life goes’ (Keith)

Some of the girls wryly noted that romance and finding a partner was much more uncharted than pursuing a career and were almost embarrassed to have such ‘old dreams’: ‘I suppose I am just an old fashioned girl at heart. Especially with the ever increasing divorce rate’ (Ann). In contrast to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s (2002) expectation that girls would be more aware of work/family related gender issues, there was no recognition by either that gender might affect their life choices or that it might be difficult to combine work and family. There was occasionally, a wry recognition that their expectations were very high and so might not be attained:

‘When I'm older I want to be a lawyer or a teacher. I also want to move to a big house in the county and have two children. I also want a car, maybe a Lotus. I don't want much!’ (Aileen)

Brannen and Nilsen (2002) found that some of the young people in their study lived in ‘an extended present’ not wanting to think too much about the future. As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) would lead one to expect, a touch of fear about growing up was evident in some texts regardless of gender: ‘I’m growing up I suppose..... The world is a lot bigger to me now and a lot scarier...’ (Deirdre); ‘Now as we approach the daunting prospect of another century, it scare us a little’ (Jim). A focus on a hedonistic extended present also occurred, particularly amongst the boys (similar patterns emerged in Gordon et al, 2001 and O’Connor et al, 2002):

‘Right now I have nearly no ambitions or hopes in life only to enjoy it and I have enough to enjoy right now’ (Martin)

Amongst the girls there was a rejection of what were seen as the available adult scenarios and a blocking out of the future altogether:

‘I don’t want to spend my life in some boring job nor do I want to be married with about three [children] by the time I’m twenty seven. .....I cant really imagine myself in about ten years time but I’m not looking forward to it that much. I’d just love to stay young forever. Some hope!’ (Lara)

It is perhaps not coincidental that a wry desire to reject biological ageing and to ‘stay young forever’ was expressed by a young woman since this is arguably a much more fraught issue for women than men.

In summary then, there was some evidence of ambitions and hopes that constituted broadly defined life plans amongst both boys and girls, with references to education,
travel and getting a good job, although what that job was and whether or not they would be able to achieve these objectives was questionable. There were relatively few references to relationships and/or children by boys or girls— with the girls almost embarrassed about referring to ‘the old dreams’. Some boys and girls focussed on an extended present— with anxiety, hedonism and a desire not to grow up being part of that phenomenon.

**Type 5: Modes of Reflexivity: Life Styles**

In looking at life styles we will focus both on the young people’s descriptions of their own life styles as well as their authoritative interpretation of wider life styles. Giddens (1992:75) suggested that in late modernity ‘the individual is continually obliged to negotiate life-style options. Moreover……such choices….define who the individual ‘is’. In other words life style choices are constitutive of the reflexive narrative of the self’. Such life styles included ‘modes of acting and favoured milieux for encountering others’. The focus on ‘doing’ reflected a concern with identity as being ‘performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results’ (Butler, 1991: 25). Others (Bell, 1998: 74) suggested that such life styles included personalised ‘accounts which revealed preferences, emotions and attitudes’. For Bourdieu (1984:172) ‘Life-styles are thus the systematic products of habitus’ –habitus being the taken for granted mental structures of knowledge and cultural capital which we absorb within social contexts and which we carry around in our head.’ Finally, since the invitation to the young people included the possibility of them acting as sources of authoritative interpretation, reflecting ‘Status in the traditional order, rather than ‘competence’ (Giddens 1994: 65) we also look at these.

The life styles apart from going to school, were typically described as involving listening to music, playing sports, watching TV, ‘hanging out’ with friends, going out at week ends to night clubs and pubs and doing a part-time job. Occasionally there were references to playing computer games, reading, playing a musical instrument, going to the Cinema, swimming, singing in choirs etc. For the most part the texts were not sufficiently detailed to differentiate between life styles based on specific patterns of consumption (such as particular kinds of clothes, music etc: Thorton, 1997). There were
gender similarities: boys and girls being just as likely to refer to paid employment (similar trends emerged in Leonard 2004); to mention going out with friends, drinking and generally ‘having a buzz’ and with more ambivalent/less positive references to taking drugs. However boys were more likely than girls to focus on sport in describing their life styles (see Furlong and Cartmel, 1997):

‘I play Gaelic Football for Uptown Under 16 and I play right or left full back. For the same team I play hurling as well, I play in Goal Keeper.... Nearly every Saturday morning I go down to Jo’s snooker hall to play snooker and pool. I also like to play golf out in Downtown and I am a member of Greatlands golf club’.

(Dominic)

Occasionally boys referred to the impact of this kind of life style on the way they dressed: ‘I am very sporty and dress accordingly’ (Brian). There was no difference between boys and girls as regards such references to clothes (Miles, 2000; Mac an Ghiall, 1994). Since for the most part playing sport was less salient in girls’ life styles, they revolved less around community facilities, other than night clubs, pubs and discos:

‘In my free time, I like to watch television, read, cycle, walk, talk on the telephone, go down town with my friends and go out to discos’ (Deirdre)

The elevation of ‘personal and biographical generalisation into historical terms’ is most likely to be done by those who define public hegemonic discourses (Frisch, 1998). Despite the crisis tendencies in male authority in Ireland, it was boys were particularly likely to put themselves forward as sources of authoritative interpretation in a variety of areas related to technology, music, economics, politics etc.:

‘How glad I am to have lived as a teenager in the 90s, where Anerky (sic), Sex, drugs and music was the only thing on our minds. The 90s, the age of technology in my opinion. Advancement in Space technology has led to the excitement of millions of People (sic).....The 90s sadly showed us how Savage (sic) and barbaric the human race can be.... Good has come like in Northern Ireland..... Music has changed a lot since the 80s with the emergence of Dance and Computerised music’ (Jimmy)

Where a negative picture was presented, gender (and racial) equality were amongst the ways used to establish male credentials for what was seen as a more problematic authoritative interpretation (see Bauman, 1986):

‘I am not going to lie (underlined) to you....There is a lot of hunger in the world to-day. I don’t believe in hate or greed. There are people who are racist. I’m not. I believe everyone is equal....’ (Tom)
Girls were not unaware of or uniformed about social phenomena. Indeed basic information (about the kinds of subjects taken in school, the kinds of careers available; levels of minimum wages etc) was most likely to be provided by girls. However they did not perceive themselves as authoritative guardians outside a very narrow sphere of ‘feminine’ competence involving fashion and appearance:

‘Fashion! Looks! Labels! .... The fact of the matter is that no-one is happy with the way they look and to be popular and cool you have to be pretty thin. It mightn’t be fair but that is life.....It is important to everyone to look good and even labels can give us confidence we lack.... We know that the first thing we notice about someone is there looks’... (Mary)

In summary then, gender differentiated patterns continued to map many aspects of these young people’s life styles: with boys being particularly likely to refer to sporting activities. Reflecting their assumed position as traditional guardians, boys were also most likely to put themselves forward as authoritative interpreters over a wide range of areas, while girls only did this as regards fashion and appearance. However, boys and girls were equally likely to refer to paid work; to going to night clubs and pubs; to alcohol and drugs and generally ‘having a buzz’.

Conclusions

For Giddens (1994: 80) ‘Identity is the creation of constancy over time, that very bringing of the past into conjunction with an anticipated future’. This article is concerned with the way young people reflexively construct their self within a rapidly changing society such as Ireland.

This study suggested that, empowered by high levels of education and academic achievements, by the existence of emotionally strong female role models in the family who had been influenced by discourses generated by the Women’s Movement, and by the weakening of hegemonic masculinity, girls did not define themselves implicitly or explicitly as subordinate. Building on a traditional cultural validation of relational strength, they reflexively constructed their identity in terms of relational discourses that saw heterosexual relationships as fun, impermanent relationships (thus effectively nullifying any eroticisation of subordination in such relationships). The latter relationships were the closest approximation to pure relationships in Giddens’ terms,
although there was no evidence that they were intimate. Intimate long-standing ties existed with girls’ best/close friends. In addition, arguably reflecting an enhanced sense of their categorical identity as women, deriving from the changing position of women in Irish society, the girls also had side-by-side activity based categorical friendships (the kind that boys were most likely to have if they had any). Not surprisingly perhaps, fateful moments for the girls revolved around connectedness. Such trends are not unusual—and indeed have been reflected in a wide variety of research stemming from Gilligan’s (1982) work. Such patterns are however particularly challenging in a small county such as Ireland (population less than 4 million), since girls are very visibly the high achievers, and a patriarchal state and business elite do not see a relational focus as useful for economic development.

The boys constructed their idea of themselves in terms of their hierarchical position. Thus, their texts focused on competitive sports and on their presentation of themselves as authoritative interpreters of a wide range of economic, political, social and cultural phenomena. Although like the girls, they did not define themselves in terms of gender, and made few reference to heterosexual relationships, insofar as they referred to friendships they focused on side-by-side activity based relationships that arguably affirmed a categorical sense of themselves as male. The importance of their hierarchical position as men in relation to other men in their construction of themselves, was underlined by accounts of fateful moments which revolved around attempts to establish hierarchical dominance either competitively through football, or physically, through fighting. There were occasional insights into their perception of the fragility of their self-esteem and their frustration that their claims to hegemony were not taken seriously. Unlike the girls however, a reflexive search for authenticity was not compatible with this discourse.

It is important to stress that such trends are seen as cultural constructions, rather than as essentialist realities. Furthermore, there were areas where their construction of the self did not seem to be gendered. Firstly, references to part-time jobs, clothes, consumption of alcohol etc were not gender differentiated. This suggests that aspects of the consumer
society are eroding traditional gender differences since for example, fashion has been a more important element in women’s than in men’s construct of self, and paid employment and alcoholic consumption more important in mens’. Secondly, both were equally likely to think in terms of education and travel in what could be broadly seen as life plans while heterosexual ties and children were, for the most part, tenuously integrated into such life plans. This can be seen as marking a cultural change, since in the lifetime of many of their mothers, paid work effectively ceased on marriage (with a career being seen only as an insurance against widowhood: O’Connor, 1998). Finally, boys and girls were equally likely to take refuge from a daunting future in a focus on an extended present.

Cultural influences on constructions of the self in late modernity do not occur in a vacuum. The shape they take is affected by the existing social and cultural context and the constructions of self that are current at that time. Ireland is an interesting case example, since constructions of womanhood are in a recognised flux, and there has been a reluctance to engage with the impact of social change on constructions of manhood. These texts suggest that in these circumstances, gender has become a repressed but crucially important framework in the construction of young people’s sense of self. Thus, young women try to both avoid challenging hegemonic masculinity and to avoid subordination; young men seek arenas to assert hierarchy; and they come together in fun impermanent relationships. It is suggested that this kind of analysis, rooted as it is in a cultural analysis of reflexive constructions of the self, provides a broad context within which more specific social problems amongst Irish young people can be located (including high levels of suicide, attempted suicide, alcohol consumption, drug use and violence against the person).

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