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Deirdre Duffy

Technological University Dublin, deirdre.duffy@tudublin.ie

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Deirdre Duffy

Dublin Institute of Technology, deirdre.duffy@dit.ie



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Introduction:

Much research has been conducted to date considering the construction of identity in many disciplines. However this essay explores Irish men's construction of their identity in tandem with their lived existence in the social world. The interrelations and influences of their family, friends, peers and the media, ultimately human interdependency itself, all serve as potential cues upon which young men borrow to craft their own masculine identity.

In considering men's identity projects, the later works of French philosopher Michel Foucault are drawn upon to consider 'how subjects (individuals) come to create their own selves and "realise their own desires" against a scenario partly constructed by their own artistry' (Whitehead 2002): 102). However the influencing power of social environment on the development of an individual's life project cannot be ignored. Thus while Foucault's 'technologies of the self' provide a useful lens, the individual man is located within his interpretive community (Fish, 1980) which incorporates the social practices and interactions of men as their identity projects are constructed.

What follows is an overview of Foucault's key theoretical concepts of biopower, subjectification and governmentality, a prologue to his later explorations of the self's relationship to itself, that is 'technologies of the self'. Once the Foucauldian backdrop has been structured, the work of gender theorist Judith Butler amongst others will illuminate the scene with Foucauldian-inspired outlooks on gender and identity. The stage is thus set to consider

empirical research conducted to explore the Irish male subject within the web of human interdependencies that is his interpretive community.

A 'Mid-Era' Foucauldian Lens:

Foucault asserts his life work has primarily focused on the various ways humans develop knowledge about themselves in our culture through the pioneering of many sciences or schools of thought, such as biology, psychiatry and medicine. He calls such subject matters 'truth games' and rather than accept their knowledge at face value, he chose to analyse them to learn how these 'so-called sciences' might relate to specific techniques humans draw upon to understand themselves. His work encourages others to reconsider schools of thought typically originating from the Enlightenment era which are often inherited, adapted as 'truth' and applied to modern emancipatory theories. Instead he urges a questioning of inherited Western capitalist patriarchal traditions and to question their value.

Foucault's emphasis on the relationship between power and the self changed over the course of his life. In what are often referred to as his middle works, Foucault was concerned with technologies of power. He was interested to analyse the processes by which external powers worked on the body to produce a disciplined subject. He traces a shift from 'juridico-discursive' power and sovereign rule to what he coined 'bio-power' back to the turn of the seventeenth century and the development of capitalism (Foucault, 1978: 140-1). Foucault maintains this intrusion by government into individual's private lives was instigated by a requirement to control large populations in a disciplined manner. To maintain control over the population as a whole, efficient government of the life processes of the social body evolved.

Foucault goes on to explain, ‘there was an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations, marking the beginning of an era of “bio-power”’ (Foucault, 1978: 140). And so, in contrast to juridical power, regulatory or disciplinary power works not by imposing penal laws onto people, but through ‘categorization, normalization and administration. It is a form of power...in which we scrutinize, regulate and discipline our selves – the self comes to act *on* itself’ (Lawler, 2008: 56, original emphasis).

Foucault continues by observing how the widespread adaptation and infiltration of these ‘techniques of power’ throughout the social body and institutions (from the family, to schools, to hospitals, administrative bodies and beyond) facilitated social hierarchies developing and enabled ‘relations of domination and effects of hegemony’ to come about (Foucault, 1978: 141). He asserts that this infiltration of society is one of the ways in which power works to produce ‘truths’ about the world. Over the course of time, these truths come to seem ‘obvious, necessary and self-evident; they form part of the coherence of the social world and the place of the person within it’ (Lawler, 2008: 56). However these ‘truths’ are what Foucault cautions one to question before accepting.

A Latter Foucauldian Lens:

A major criticism of Foucault’s work on technologies of power is often the interpretation of the subject in question being ‘subjected’ to the external forces of power, with little emphasis given by Foucault to the consideration of the individual’s ability to resist such domineering powers (Sawicki, 1998). Sawicki suggests such an encapsulation renders the individual in question to a docile and subjected entity.

However, Foucault does go on to incorporate the existence of resistance within power relations. He firstly distinguishes his understanding of power to avoid further

misunderstanding. By 'Power' he does not envision a totalitarian, top-down, patriarchal power being done unto another. Rather he conceptualises power as being omnipresent. By Foucault's conceptualisation here, power is never owned but 'exercised' (Lawler, 2008: 56). He elaborates; 'Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere' (Foucault, 1978: 93). Understood as such, power can be envisioned as interwoven through the tapestry of society. He follows this with the assertion 'where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power... these points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network' (Foucault, 1978: 95). Here he is making clear his insistence of resistance existing in tandem with power throughout society. This distinction is imperative to Foucault's understanding of power and his rejection of emancipatory theories and certain movements' conceptions of liberation.

Foucault's concept of subjectification sheds light further on how he understands the interconnected relationship of power, knowledge and the subject. As aforementioned, with the understanding that categorisation of people occurs in society, and that it is through these categories people come to know themselves, one can say 'subjectivities and identities are created within regimes of power/knowledge' (Lawler, 2008: 61). In explaining the relationship of the self to itself, Foucault clarifies what it is he means by subjectification: 'there are two meanings of the word subject: subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to.' (Foucault, 1982: 212)

The former explanation can be a more easily recognisable scenario whereby the power is being done unto the subject so to speak. However the latter understanding is less commonly recognised and considered. Here it is seen that while individuals 'choose' to attach themselves to specific identities, paradoxically they become '*subject-ed* to the rules and norms

engendered by a set of knowledges about these identities' (Lawler, 2008: 62 original emphasis). So while there is not an obvious domineering power at work in this scenario, the individual is still adhering (typically unawares) to prescribed *ways of being*, available in given discourses, which in turn have become 'truths' (often unquestioningly) over the course of time. It is this moment, whereby power is cloaked as 'a taken-for-granted ontology' that the 'power/discourse regime is most fully dissimulated and most insidiously effective' (Butler, 1993: 35).

It is this relationship of the self to itself, what Foucault terms 'technologies of the self' that motivates his later writing. In present-day times, the power described above that operates through our social fabric in a 'normalising' fashion, particularly consumed his later works. Lawler explains the contemporary phenomenon:

We constantly act upon ourselves to be a certain type of subject; we have little choice but to be tied in to a kind of project of the self, in which the self becomes something to be worked on... We are subjected subjects across as many forms of identity as we have: as 'parents', 'children', 'workers', 'students', 'citizens' and so on' (Lawler, 2008: 62).

Thus it can be deduced that although the modern Western world is not being ruled by any sovereign or juridical stronghold per se, this has become virtually unnecessary as Western society so tightly govern themselves through what Foucault terms 'governmentality', whereby populations are managed through classification and categorisation (Lawler, 2008: 63).

Constructing the Masculine Identity

In a generic sense, identity in contemporary times can be derived from many sources, from 'nationality, ethnicity, social class, community, gender (and) sexuality'. It gives an individual a location in the world and provides one with a connection between themselves and the society within which they exist. Most noteworthy however is how this concept of identity raises 'fundamental questions about how individuals fit into the community and the social world and how identity can be seen as the interface between subjective positions and social and cultural situations' (Woodward, 1997: 1).

Gender Identity

In terms of gender, feminist critic Judith Butler records gender identities as 'a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (Butler, 1990: 33). Borrowing from Foucault, she states it is the repetition, or regulatory power of the norms that govern our performances of gender and lead to the assumption that gender identities are natural and essential. She describes identities as self-representations, that is, 'fictions' that are neither fixed nor stable. The gendered self is thus a regulated, but not determined, set of practices. This is not to say however that masculinities are simply myths or illusions, but are recognised as discourses invested with political dimensions. Meanwhile Connell describes 'masculinity' as practices in which men take on male social gender roles whereby the effects of these practices are expressed via their body, personality and culture (Connell 2005: 71). And so these acts of performativity posit not only a series of identities on the subject; they serve to locate that subject in associated regimes of power/knowledge. Butler asserts Foucault's approach to identity production demonstrates the role played by cultural norms in how we embody or perform our gender identities.

And so, Whitehead points out that the masculine subject is not innately male/man, it can only become this through being positioned in and positioning himself within those discourses that speak of and suggest maleness/masculinity. In reference to Foucault's technologies of the self, Whitehead concludes 'for the subject to 'create itself as a (masculine) work of art' it must reach for those ideal(ised) representations of gender that surround it. Consequently, being masculine must be constantly engaged with, worked at, and explored'. One such discursive regime to consider is that of the mass media. Debbie Ging's investigation into the consumption and use of mediated images of masculinity among teenage boys in Ireland suggest young Irish men use the mass media as 'a potent source of references for constructing a repertoire of acceptable codes and signifiers of masculinity' (Ging, 2005: 47).

The Identity Project

Shankar et al (2009) recently adapted Foucault's 'technologies of the self' when considering how people develop their identities over time through past consumption practices. Taking the perspective of identity as a project that is continually practiced rather than a static 'thing', they seek to explore the process of identity formation through the consumption practice of music. They take music to be a technology of the self that allows 'emotional work' and the care of the self to be undertaken. The authors understand identity to be a discursive construct wherein power relations operate and while the agency of the individual in constructing their identity is accepted, they also reveal constraints imposed upon individuals when documenting their life histories, constraints over which individuals have limited power to resist. A relevant finding of their work is the influencing power of one's social environment on the development of an individual's life project. What they have labelled 'narratives of socialisation', that is 'the stories and expectations we are socialised into and that reflect our relative social position', may be

more influential on an individual's construction of identity than the 'overemphasised ... agentic possibilities of identity construction through consumption'. And so these authors would elevate the importance of one's interpretive communities in their identity project over the act of consumption. They suggest it is the social practices and interaction within one's community that chiefly provides one's basis for identification.

Taking this Foucauldian optic, what follows is an exploration of young Irish men's construction of identity within their respective interpretive communities.

Setting the Scene

One interpretive community, what I have labelled 'The Townland Lads' serves as an entity within which we can explore how power relations operate and shift through institutional discourses and practices and thus in turn, shed light on Irish society and the constitution of the Irish male subject.

'The Townland Lads' are a group of five male respondents aged between 28 to 30 years. All respondents have been friends since secondary level school and grew up together in a provincial town in the midlands region of Ireland. While each respondent left the town at various life stages to attend college or for work, they all chose to return 'home' to live.

Life-story interviews were conducted to learn the respondent's life themes and life projects. In Foucauldian terms, such life stories will illuminate the men's practices of the self, how they go about constructing their self as a 'work of art'. Prior to each interview, it was explained that the purpose of the research was to explore consumption and leisure practices of young Irish men. In the interest of discretion, each respondent was assigned a pseudonym. Additionally in the interest of confidentiality, the village from which they hail is given the pseudonym of 'Mooretown'.

From the interview data gathered on the group 'The Townland Lads', a number of emerging themes have been identified. For the purpose of this essay, I would like to look at the following themes of 'The Village Voice' and 'Mediated Masculinities: A Narrative of Socialisation'. Two respondents feature in these emergent themes; Donal – musician and electrician, and John – a sales representative.

“The Village Voice”

‘The Townland Lads’ displayed a distinct consciousness of their self, and how this self could be acted out within the confines of their hometown community. There appeared unwritten rules of acceptability as to how one behaved and dressed “down the town”. In particular one respondent Donal, a relatively high-profile music band member, struggled greatly with his ‘mediated self’; that is the persona he was required to adapt for stage life, and his ‘home self’; Donal the electrician and lad around town. Within his hometown, he rigorously ‘policed’ his self to ensure he was not seen to be “stepping up above the crowd”. In considering Foucault’s term ‘governmentality’, whereby Western society is not being ruled by any sovereign or juridical stronghold per se but instead is subjected to an internal policing of its own social body, throughout the interview with Donal he articulates this concept poignantly when struggling to find a public mediated image that he could realistically embrace in his own personal domain, that is, his hometown.

Donal strives to establish a cohesive identity for himself between his mediated life and his habitual life. While he expresses a clear understanding as to why the bands’ record label requires them to project a smart fashionable image of the band for promotional purposes, his resistance to overstepping “his” comfort zone is resolute. His gauge of what is fashionably acceptable continuously returns to what ‘the town’ is prepared to accept. An anonymous entity, what I have called the ‘Village Voice’ appears to restrict Donal’s creativity to express his self in any “outlandish” fashion.

Donal: ...I suppose it’s a matter of getting comfortable with what you’re at, but at the time I wasn’t, and ya wouldn’t have worn that in a pub, or into town... and if you did, you, you, you were trying to, you were stepping up above the crowd y’know. You were kind of, do you know what I mean, in the sense that, the Mooretown fashion, or

whatever people were wearing, like if I wore something outlandish, I was trying to go in and say.. I, I was thinking this is what people were thinking, 'Here's your man, just because he's the drummer in The Band he thinks he can wear this or that'.

Likewise, John the sales rep alludes to this governing 'Village Voice' as he recalls a rare act of rebellious consumption on his part when away from the panoptic gaze of his hometown of Mooretown on a sun holiday. John laments his late teens as he describes it as a bygone era when he was true to his self. He wore his hair long, wore 'combats and the baggy knitted jumpers and the baggy t-shirts with like Nirvana and different bands written on it' and was into his music – he literally wore his passion (music) on his chest. And so he describes his rebellion:

John: Again I suppose the biggest kind of contradiction, I kind of, I was drunk on holidays once and I kind of had a flashback to the person I wanted to be, like, I was on holidays with a friend and we got drunk and we were going on our way back to the airport and I got my eyebrow pierced and I kind of, that was maybe me kind of rebelling

On returning home, John was met with various locals voicing their opinion of his eye-ring:

John: but like everybody just laughed at me because I had my nice short back and sides (i.e. *conventional haircut*) but I had an eyebrow pierced.... And kind of, it just, everybody kind of said, "Fair enough, yeah, it's not bad but it's just not you, the person we know you as you are, it's just not you."

The final straw came when John's minor act of individualisation risked him being extradited from a family wedding. When asked how long he kept the piercing:

John: Around three weeks 'cos my brother was getting married and again, he'd be a very conformative kind of person and he said, "There's no way you're going to my wedding with an eyebrow ring."

And so, the 'Village Voice' is indicative of the omnipresent power Foucault conceptualises in his later discussions of power and resistance. It is this ubiquitous power he identifies that can be envisioned metaphorically as being interwoven through society patterns. There is the temptation at this point to suggest the Village Voice is a disciplinary technology of the body, being done unto Donal and John, both unsuspecting agents of their own subjection. However to do this would be to entirely dismiss the respondent's individual agency and ability to resist societal forces. Donal is neither trying to shed his self of the shackles of a suffocating society, nor is he trying to liberate his self from the pressures of a commercial lifestyle. Rather his search ultimately is in finding a harmonious way to exist, unifying his life themes in an effort to avoid a schizophrenic existence but instead create coherency in his life. Thus in accordance with Foucault's later articulation of power, there is the knowledge that resistance exists in tandem with power, thereby eliminating lofty assertions of oppression or emancipation.

Nonetheless, John makes reference numerous times to 'having to conform', which does depict, in a similar vein to findings by Shankar et al's (2009) research, an aura of his being restricted by his interpretive community; in particular he pinpoints his 'career' as a sales

representative, and the 'kind of company' he has kept (here John was referring to his hometown friends) as having 'lead me down to being clean-cut and kind of looking a certain way'. The agency here is John's reluctant admission that he himself made these lifestyle choices regarding work and friends. However, cloaked within his reluctance lies the decision-processing mechanism powered by a 'legacy of socio-historical influences' (Thompson and Hirschman, 1995: 149), or what Shankar et al (2009) coined 'narratives of socialisation' whereby John followed prescribed ways of being, almost unconsciously.

So, in a Foucauldian sense, the Village Voice dictating the realms of acceptability for Donal and John can be considered a 'truth', in the sense of that which is made true through discourses. Both young men have constructed a large part of their identity on the basis of being a Mooretown Man and thus to comfortably align their self with this geographic association, they need to adhere to the boundaries or 'truths' set by the Village Voice of their hometown. The power being exercised here by the Village Voice and its 'truths' is in a sense categorising how a Mooretown Man can behave which in turn creates a template from which each man can deviate from at his peril.

Here it is seen that while these men 'chose' to attach themselves to specific identities, paradoxically as suggested by Lawler (2008) they have become *subject-ed* to the rules and norms engendered by a set of knowledges about these identities. This discursive regime, the Village Voice, can be seen in a sense to be running these young men's lives, almost without regard of their own role or existence. It is this incapacity to challenge cultural 'truths' or discourses of which Foucault urges individuals to be wary.

“Mediated Masculinities: A Narrative of Socialisation”

As illustrated in the previous section, John’s grooming practices are restricted in that he aligns his appearance in conjunction with how he understands a man of his working status, a sales representative, should look. He prescribes neat attire, ‘being clean-cut’ and sporting a ‘nice short, back and sides’ as necessary. We have seen John’s adherence to grooming according to this ‘truth’ of how a sales representative must look, restricts him from expressing himself. In addition, his consideration of pending baldness also reveals interesting negotiations of his self. John has noticed his hairline receding and has decided shaving his head is the option to take to deal with this looming event:

John: I think I’m going bald! Although I’m not that sure if I have a receding hairline but I’m not willing to take that chance... I’ll shave it off and then, once it’s shaved, it’s going to be shaved forever... Keep it tight, like, Phil Mitchell style (British soap character). Just so that if I do go bald it’s an awful lot easier to hide it then.

While there’s the obvious tension of this possibility of balding and the significations this may bring to bear for a man such as ageing, it is his legitimising of his decision that is most interesting. He points out that there was a risk in the past that those who wore their hair tight were associated as being ‘scumbags’ or ‘Eighties Skinheads’. However he goes on to assure the researcher that such is not the case anymore. How does he know this? He explains how it is much more acceptable now to have a shaved head without running the risk of being categorised in certain unruly factions of society as there are so many men in both the media,

and respected professions who present this “hairstyle”. He highlights doctors and bankers as two such groups. He also pays tribute to British soap actors - Eastender’s Mitchell brothers as having embraced this image. Although he mocks them slightly, he is happy to identify with their look as he associates them as being both ‘hard’ and ‘cool’:

John: No, as in, like I think people, it’s more acceptable now because a lot more kind of people in the media and stuff like that shave their heads and kind of, I’m just trying to think of anybody, the likes, there’s a lot of kind of cool people on TV that are going bald and shave their heads and stuff like that, like the likes of, I’d slag off the Mitchell brothers but like there’s something cool and hard about them like whatever. I think back in the eighties skinheads would have been seen as being tough and being kind of scumbags or whatever whereas now people working in banks have shaved heads, like... I’m trying to think...like lots of doctors and stuff like that, you’d see on TV, I can’t even think of anybody at the moment but like, you can be respectable now and have a shaved head, like, as long as it matches up with what you’re wearing and stuff like that, like.

As suggested by feminist Susan Bordo (1993), the mass media has played a major role in normalising a number of ‘medical practices’. Indeed Nikolas Rose has written extensively on what has been termed the ‘psy complex’ (Rose, 1991). This is where ‘medical’ disciplines such as psychology, psychotherapy and psychiatry have come to infiltrate Western culture, and most noteworthy here, how mediated medical ‘specialists’ have penetrated our daily lives via the mass media. While John can not specifically recall whether he viewed the above mentioned balding doctor on a TV drama, documentary or chat show, nevertheless, he is

satisfied that this mediated medical male role model is a credible resource upon which to build his own self project.

In conjunction with the medicinal authoritarians, the persistent channels of varying mass media bring with them a certain legitimacy, familiarity and influence thus to a wide audience. A combination of two key socialisation mechanisms, media technologies and mediated medical practitioners, have served as indicators from which John can absorb and come to learn that a shaved head is a respectable look, fitting to his role in society as a young sales professional. As Lawler states; 'we are addressed and address ourselves as, certain kinds of person, and through this process, we *become* that person' (Lawler, 2008: 59). John carefully negotiates the discourse of mediated masculinities to discern what grooming practices are befitting of his perceived role in society. He thus goes on to dutifully outline his intention to embody and perform the prescribed identity instructed within these discourses that 'suggest' how the professional masculine subject may present himself.

Conclusions:

It is clear that young men's identity projects are intrinsically connected to their own interpretive communities. How men negotiate and perform their gender identity is inextricably linked to their web of human interdependencies and networks. Taking the case in point of one's geographic location, or what was termed 'The Village Voice' within the essay - this theme served to highlight the power relations operating within such influential institutional discourses and practices, amongst which young men construct their identities. Likewise, the narratives of socialisation at play amidst the pervasive mass media with their subtly-instructive representations of masculinity all fall within the realms of men's interpretive communities to be negotiated by the Irish male subject.

By exploring how such discursive regimes order individual's lives, the self emerges and we begin to have a better understanding of the individual subject intertwined within these societal networks.

Foucault requests individuals to bear in mind that everything around them, in particular to this essay one's interpretive community, is dangerous. Whilst this may sound extreme, his angle is to instil vigilance amongst people to function with an awareness of their lived existence;

My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad... So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism. I think that the ethico-political choice we have to make every day is to determine the main danger (Foucault, 1983: 343).

To live with a heightened awareness of our own existence, and the power relations within which we exist, could promote a more proactive and inquisitive appraisal of current life practices. A curious, questioning approach to inherited Irish societal structures may instruct a more relevant, transparent community within which to exist.

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