

'The early secondary years: memories, transitions and expectations'

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'Well, in prep you feel really small and by grade six you feel sort of ... bigger, but in year seven you'll probably feel small again.'

(Comments from a boy at the end of grade 6 [Dec 1993])

In this paper we explore the issue of students' memories and expectations as a resource for understanding how their subjectivity is formed and redefined over the secondary years. Part of our discussion is based on interviews with pupils in grade six and year seven at four schools in Victoria. These interviews form part of the '12-18 Educational Research Project', a qualitative longitudinal study of students as they progress through school from the end of grade six (or the beginning of year seven), to the end of their formal schooling at year 12. The project began at the end of 1993 with the grade six interviews, and the students are now at the end of year eight. Each year we interview students 2-3 times, audio and video taping their responses. We are working with two metropolitan schools, one of which is a co-ed private school and the other a state secondary college, and two provincial schools in the same town, one of which has become a junior campus of a recently amalgamated school and was once a technical school, and the other of which is a state secondary school which has chosen to retain its name as a 'High School' (cf the new 'secondary college' nomenclature in Victoria). We have selected six students in each school¹ whom we intend to follow for the entire project, and each time these 'key' students are interviewed they are asked to invite 2-3 friends to participate in a group interview. We are also planning some individual interviews with the 'key' students.²

In an earlier paper to an AARE conference³ we discussed the background to this research project and some of the methodological and theoretical issues with which we are engaging. We emphasised that we were wanting to look at changing patterns over time between students from different schools as well as to examine the changes and developments within individual pupils over the course of their schooling and adolescent years. In that earlier paper, we identified three large issues that were being specifically investigated: students' thinking about their futures and their careers; changing engagements with and attitudes to school and to out-of school activities; and the making or development of gendered subjectivity. The present paper focusses on the latter theme of understanding subjectivity, and it raises some questions about interpreting and 'getting at' how the process and formation of gendered subjectivity works over time.

Section 1: Reading memories

In relation to these issues, one of our interests has been to explore certain propositions about subjectivity – propositions that tell us that subjectivity is not fixed and seamless, that it evolves and is contingent and that it is the product of both social inscription and self-fashioning. We have been attempting to devise approaches and forms of questions and activities that will elicit responses and 'evidence' from the students which will enable us to gain insight into the process of subjectivity; that is, into the development and ongoing making of subjectivity. The project allows us to observe this process over time, to see the changing ways in which the students position and present themselves, how they recollect themselves in the past, and imagine themselves in the future. Such acts of speaking about the self are

understood as part of the process of subjectification, and of constructing and reconstructing the self.

What we are exploring, then, is a kind of 'memory work' to understand how students imagine, construct and reconstruct themselves. What do the stories we tell about ourselves suggest about how we inhabit subject positions, negotiate those identities and the ways in which our sense of our subjectivity change? We will be reading memories as an aid to understanding how students, at different stages in their adolescent years remember and attach significance to events and to themselves in the past, and use the 'past' to make and interpret themselves in the present. 'Gender' will be, we are speculating, a central component of this process of self-imagination.

Our approach to reading memories has some resonances with, but is also to be differentiated from, the kind of 'memory work' developed by Frigga Haug and her co-authors in their study *Female Sexualization*.⁴ In that study, memory work begins from subjective experience and proceeds to construct an account of how certain ways of becoming a woman take effect: it foregrounds the personal as political, and as the basis for a more collective response and analysis. It is consciousness raising elevated to a methodology.⁵

Haug et al write that:

we are concerned here with the possible means whereby human beings may themselves assume control [in the face of socialisation], and thus with the potential prospect of liberation, our research itself must be seen as an intervention into existing practices ... memory work is only possible if the subject and object of research are one and the same person.⁶

In contrast to this kind of memory work, we are not primarily interested in reading memories in order to emancipate a repressed or distorted agency from socialisation, nor to vindicate the authenticity of Experience over the artifice of social regulation. Neither are the subjects and objects of our research self-consciously 'one and the same

'person': we are sensitive to this ethical issue in debates in feminist and radical methodology, but we are not setting out to offer a transformative experience for the participants.

We are studying the memories of other people. Indeed, we are deliberately resisting the temptation to turn this form of enquiry into yet another excursion into the researchers' autobiography. This, however, does happen incidentally: we obviously both have our own memories of schooling and growing up, and these are not irrelevant to the project. Nor are our own reactions to the childrens' stories and memories irrelevant—why do we find some of them so powerful and compelling? But we are attempting to keep in check this interest in reflecting on our own investments. A question here is whether we as researchers can attend to the stories told to us by others, without always trying to make them our own.

Other examples of 'memory work' have focussed explicitly on the ways in which reading memorabilia, such as photographs, can be a form of rediscovery, an analytic and therapeutic technique for better knowing the self, for returning to what has been repressed. In her recent study of memory and family life, the feminist film critic, Annette Kuhn, writes that:

Memory work is a method and a practice of unearthing and making public untold stories ... Practitioners of memory work may be conscientized simply through learning that they do indeed have stories to tell, and that their stories have value and significance in the wider world

... memory work can create new understandings of both past and present.⁷

Memories and narratives about the self thus hold clues for understanding how particular subjects see themselves and how these perceptions change over time. They are also one of the resources through which we construct our subjectivity.

In our interviews, we have asked students in several ways to recall an earlier experience, and to compare it to the present, such as prep to grade 6, grade 6 to year 7. We also have asked them to describe themselves, and to compare themselves say at the end of year 8 with how they remember themselves in year 7. (Most say they are basically the same kind of person.) We plan to continue with and develop these kind of questions. Next year we are also planning to ask the 'key' students to bring along a favorite photograph of themselves, and talk about that photo: why they like it; when it was taken; who else is in it; can they remember how they were feeling at the time. And we have started collecting students' 'autobiography projects': we have not specially commissioned these, and we are asking those students to supply one only if they have already done one in class. We realise that these projects

can be a fairly stylised form of writing the self. Nevertheless, what will be of interest to us is how the students read and interpret them when they are older: whether they write about their lives in the same periodisation, or same list of significant events and so on when they are 16 or 17; what they include and exclude; whether boys and girls tend to record or rewrite their lives in similar or in different ways.

Section 2: Making transitions

In the initial round of interviews we asked students what they could remember from their first days at primary school, and we were struck by the clarity and intensity of their recollections. One boy recounted with considerable detail how his mum was late for the first day, because she had forgotten to find out when school started, and that when he got to school he couldn't find the toilets. Other children also frequently spoke of getting lost. Both boys and girls remembered being scared - 'it was nerve-wrecking', 'I was crying' - and being overawed by the number of people and the size of the buildings. As one boy said, 'I remember a big place in front of me and ... you know, what am I doing here.'

Many of the children drew parallels between the prep experience of newness and of being lost and the anticipated experience of the early days at secondary school.⁸

- (I) What did you think about prep? How did you feel?
(B3) I sort of felt really small ...
(B2) [interjecting and looking solemnly at B3] Helpless
(B3) Yeah, helpless ... at this age I still sort of feel short ... to the people I was in prep with
(I) You said you felt helpless?
(B2) Yeah, when you're little you couldn't know you're way around an' that. It will feel like going back to younger years when you go to [secondary school] ... cos we won't know our way around there ... it'll take time again like it did ...

Yet, interviewed half way through year 7, students on the whole had not found the transition to secondary school to be as scary and overwhelming as they had anticipated. There were complaints about not getting enough access to sporting facilities at lunch time, of there being nothing to do. But overall, there was a strong impression that

the experience of transition had not affected them nearly as much they had feared.

For grade six girls and boys going on to one of the provincial secondary schools, the prospect of being bullied was a persistent anxiety, and one which was often expressed in relation to how secure and happy they then felt at primary school. 'Kids will probably bash

'us' was a commonly expressed fear. They had heard rumours, from older sisters, from cousins, about these kind of things. In year 7, some of the boys in the provincial schools were concerned about bullying from older and tougher boys, but overall bullying did not, compared to the students fear of it, figure overwhelmingly in their year 7 interviews. However, in the end of year 8 interviews with metropolitan students, there was a renewed focus on bullying among both girls and boys.

Discussions about bullying were usually linked to references to the 'in' or popular groups. At the private school, the popular group was easily identified by all students, but it was hard for them to pin down just what exactly made them popular: members of that group were described as smart, they had cool clothes, they had lots of friends, they had the power to ostracise others. At the metropolitan state school, the powerful group was equated more with the bullying or bitchy group, and it was most definitely not defined by being clever in class. Students at both schools defined themselves fairly strongly in relation to such powerful groups. But interestingly, none of our interviewees defined themselves as a member of the 'in' group – although some were implicitly identified by other students as being members of such a group. Most students had a reason to place themselves outside, if not marginal to the powerful group, and to think of themselves as simultaneously 'normal' and different. It will be interesting to see how students change the way in which they position themselves in relation to such groups, and the way they define the authority of these groups.

At the end of year 8, when asked how they felt about school then compared to at the beginning of year 7, there was a marked absence of any special or significant memories of the beginning of secondary school, and that experience was usually not, compared to the memories of prep, retold in powerful and vivid ways. Some recalled getting lost at the bigger school, but this was not presented as a terrible or traumatic event. They were conscious that they were the younger kids, but they did not see themselves as helpless. In contrast, remembering themselves in prep the students presented themselves as vulnerable and dependent, and as reluctantly making the transition from home to school, to enter a world where separation and autonomy were demanded. A young boy recollected his first days at primary school:

(B2) And another thing, um , when I was in prep I didn't like school at all ... I used to kick me mum [mumble] and the teachers all the time

....

(I) What was that?

(B2) Kick me mum and

(1) Were you cross?

(B2) No, I just didn't want to leave her ... I'd kick, well not really kick but I tried to get loose and run to the car ...lock myself in the car ... when I settled down I was alright. ...

(1) Do you remember what you didn't like about school?

(B2) I don't know, I think it was just leaving my mum.

While some girls remembered prep fondly – 'I couldn't wait to get to school', 'I loved prep' – , many more recalled it in terms of the experience of being separated from maternal figures. One girl

emphasised the differences between school and the more familial and protected environment of kindergarten. 'I was scared, it wasn't like kinder ... you don't always have the teacher by your side'.

In reading such memories, one is struck by the students' focus on a vocabulary of independence and dependence, freedom and helplessness, separation and closeness. These were the contrasts through which they understood themselves and the transitions they made and would make as they grew up. Looking forward to secondary school one boy thought it would be a 'good experience' because 'Oh you sort of take care of yourself ... no one looking after you'.

Recently, we asked year 8 students the question: 'When do you think you become an adult?' and the responses again drew on similar themes of separation and autonomy. You become an adult when you 'leave home', 'have freedom', 'get a job', 'are independent', 'don't rely on your parents'. None of the students at this age were in a hurry to embrace this status, to enter adulthood and independence. For example, in the same set of questions we asked whether 16 year olds should be able to vote and without exception they all said 'No': 16 year olds would not be responsible enough, wouldn't know enough, wouldn't be interested enough. These were unanimous responses, common to girls and to boys, and across the different schools.

And this commonality of response points to one of the dilemmas we have encountered in listening to students' memories and to their responses in general.

We are specifically interested in developing some insights about the formation and evolution of gendered subjectivity. We are highly conscious of what the educational and the feminist research literature tells us about these matters. Yet our initial and necessarily provisional findings from the early interviews suggest that gender differences in responses are not emerging as powerfully as we had thought they might. For example, both boys and girls think about being a child and being an adult in terms of transitions from dependence to autonomy –it has not been a matter of listening to boys seeking detachment and girls defining themselves in terms of relationship (cf. object relations theory). These observations have raised three particular questions: 1) Is it that gender difference in relation to the issues we have been raising is not as salient at this stage in the childrens' lives as it might be at a younger or an older age?; 2) To what extent can we rely on the overt meaning of what our interviewees tell us, to take what they say at face value? 3) In a study such as

this, what is involved in identifying and interpreting gender difference and, more precisely, in understanding gendered subjectivity? It is at least clear to us at this stage that we do need to interrogate our initial impressions, and to develop more nuanced readings of the responses, to be sensitive to subtle as well as to familiar manifestations of 'gender', to look, for example, at what is not being said, how it is being said and how similar questions elicit different responses at different stages – and this takes time.

Section 3: Knowing gender as a construction

In our interviews, we have found it a relatively straightforward matter to gain impressions of the changing and the constant attitudes children have towards, for example, school work, the image of the school, to social groups and to friends in and outside of school. And in some respects, much of what we are finding appears to confirm or to repeat conclusions drawn from other studies – telling us what is already well-known. There are class and school-based differences in the way in

which students conceive of the purposes of schooling; girls are more caught up in the intricacies and intimacies of friendship groups; both girls and boys describe girls as having bitchy fights but then getting over them quickly; many boys, but fewer girls as they get older, express a strong interest in sport; and at the private schools the doing of homework seems much more strongly enforced – by both the students and the school – than at any of the state schools

What is posing some dilemmas for us, however, is interpreting how students construct or form their gendered subjectivity and negotiate the changing and ongoing process of being girls and boys. At this relatively early stage of the research, when we have only just begun to accumulate comparative and longitudinal data, it is perhaps unsurprising that we have not gained definitive insights into how the process of 'becoming gendered' takes place over time. We are deliberately not conducting an ethnographic project, and that basic methodological decision is perhaps also part of the explanation or reason for this difficulty in 'getting at' personal meanings and experiences of gender: we are not establishing intensive and informal contact, we are not attempting to observe the students over the length of a week, or year in their school or home environment (We generally interview them in a small meeting room at their school.) Nor are we adopting an intimate or confessional relationship with the students. But, this is, we suspect, not the full answer.

Since the late 1980s, there has been a flood of feminist and non-feminist books that attempt to theorise the formation, or the production, or the performance of gender. Many of these studies – and some of them have influenced our thinking – can be broadly described

as poststructuralist and Foucauldian, and some also attempt to integrate psychoanalytic understandings into their analysis of decentred subjectivity and gendered subject positions.⁹ In the field of feminist educational research, there have been many studies telling us that gender is not given but constructed and that schooling is part of the complex social and discursive network which produces these categories of identity.¹⁰ There have been fewer studies of the ways in which gendered subject positions are inhabited and negotiated in different educational settings: Bronwyn Davies' influential work on gender identity and young children is an example of such work.¹¹ (Our methodology and time frame are significantly different from those adopted by Davies; and even though this paper is addressing the question of gendered subjectivity, in the overall project we are investigating other matters as well.)

In terms of feminist reform in education and gender equity policies, teachers are now being exhorted to examine the construction of gender as a central part of any feminist pedagogical and political practice. Feminist researchers in education advise us to listen to girls, to learn from what they can tell us about their experiences of schooling and of being girls.¹² All of these exhortations and pronouncements make it seem that knowing how gender works, how it is constructed and experienced, should not be a too complicated matter. Making the claim that 'gender is constructed' – either through an elaborate theoretical framework or through policy-speak assertions – is somehow meant to resolve the problem of how to understand that construction and that category. Yet, from our experiences of listening to and observing students, we have found that the task of understanding and researching how gendered subjectivity is constructed – gender as a process – is more elusive than we had initially imagined.

What do we mean by this statement?

When we first began this project, one of our motivating aims was to add depth and empirically-based knowledge to feminist and certain poststructuralist accounts of subjectivity. We knew the theory, and we wanted to investigate how this process of subjectification happens over time, with different individuals, or even in different schools. Now, immediately and with little critical reflection, it was easy to find examples of both the popular and the textbook clichés about gender difference, some of which I have noted above. Importantly, though, these were not always terribly marked at grade six. Both girls and boys were then very interested in sport and in recess and lunchtime activities, both girls and boys were anxious about bullies at secondary school. There were some differences in career aspirations, for example many girls wanted to be vets or to work with animals, and many boys wanted to have careers as sports stars. But both kinds of aspirations seem to be expressions of dreams and present interests rather than an example of boys having more serious career plans and girls having no

regard for their futures. None of this was especially surprising. There have been, however, some instances where notions of conventional masculinity are being undercut by young boys speaking openly and tenderly of their feelings and fears, of the closeness of their friends and of the value of being kind and helpful to other boys.¹³

But recognising familiar or unfamiliar instances of gender difference or even anomalies and subversive quirks in the performance of gender, is not the same as gaining insight into how gendered subjectivity is constructed over time, or has effects as an ongoing process, or is experienced, understood, inhabited and negotiated by girls and boys.

One of the tasks this year, then, has been to think about ways in which, given the design of our project, we could gain further insight into these matters. This paper has been a 'work-in-progress' report of one of the ways in which we are hoping to extend our understanding of how gendered subjectivity forms and develops over time. Our memory work has just begun, and, as we listen to the stories young people tell, retell and re-order about themselves, our provisional interpretations may also be revised and re-written.

1 In the first phase of the project we interviewed students at the end of grade six (1993) from three Victorian country primary schools (two town-based and one rural), and the following February (1994) we interviewed students at the beginning of their grade seven in the two metropolitan schools. In this first round, we interviewed one complete class from each of the participating schools and from these classes of between 25 to 28 pupils we selected our 'key' students.

2 So while we are focussing on six students in each school, we are also getting a chance to interview a much larger number of their contemporaries. This is not a research project designed or intended to study large numbers of students, but nevertheless the group interviews are providing us with important comparative material and contributing to our understandings of, for example, similar or contrasting patterns in students' responses to schooling at different year levels. The group interviews also allow us to observe students' changing friendship patterns and ways of interacting with peers of the same and of the opposite sex.

3 Lyn Yates & Julie McLeod, 'Masculinity, femininity, class, rurality, and schooling', paper presented at the Annual Conference of AARE, University of Newcastle, December 1994. A revised version of this paper

, entitled '"And how would you describe yourself?" Researchers and researched in the first stages of a qualitative and longitudinal

research project', is forthcoming in the Australian Journal of Education, 1996.

4 Frigga Haug (ed.) *Female Sexualization: A Collective Work of Memory*, [trans Erica Carater], Verso, London, 1987.

5 *Ibid*, p.39 and *passim*.

6 *Ibid*, p.35.

7 Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*, Verso, London, 1995, p.8.

8 For some of the students at the private school this was not a problem usually experienced at year 7 as the school has a junior school grade 5- year 7, and a middle school year 8-10.

9 For example, Valerie Walkerdine, *Schoolgirl Fictions*, Verso, London, 1990; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, New York, 1990; Teresa de Lauretis, 'Eccentric subjects: Feminist theory and historical consciousness', *Feminist Studies*, vol.16, no.1, Summer, 1990, pp.115-150; Denise Riley, 'Am I that Name?' *Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History*, Macmillan, London, 1988; James Donald, *Sentimental Education: Schooling, Popular Culture and Liberty*, Verso, London, 1992.

10 For example, Pam Gilbert and Sandra Taylor, *Fashioning the Feminine: Girls, Popular Culture and Schooling*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1989; Gaby Weiner, *Feminisms and Education: An Introduction*, Open University Press, Buckingham, UK, 1994.

11 Bronwyn Davies, *Frogs and Snails and Feminist Tales: Pre-school Children and Gender*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1989; Bronwyn Davies, *Shards of Glass: Children Reading and Writing beyond Gendered Identities*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney 1993.

12 Sandra Milligan, Karen Thomson & Ashenden & Associates, *Listening to Girls: Report of the Review of the National Policy for the Education of Girls*, Australian Education Council, Melbourne, 1991; Australian Education Council, *The National Action Plan for the Education of Girls 1993-97*, Curriculum Corporation, Melbourne, 1993; Jane Kenway with Sue Willis, Jill Blackmore & Leonie Rennie, 'Learning from Girls: What can girls teach feminist teachers?' *Melbourne Studies in Education*, 1993, pp.63-77.

13 For further discussion of this issue see Yates & McLeod, '"And how would you describe yourself?", forthcoming.