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The Village Voice: Masculine Identity Construction within an Interpretive Community

Abstract:

This paper looks at how young Irish men construct their masculine self/identity/body keeping in mind the mediated world within which they find themselves, and considering their own more immediate social surroundings and influences, that is to say, their interpretive community. The research paper combines Foucault's later writings on technologies of the self with literary theory, using critics such as Stanley Fish (1980) and his work on 'Interpretive Communities' to inform the study.

Introduction - 'Context':

Much research has been conducted considering the construction of identity in many disciplines. However this paper explores 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 lend to craft their own masculine identity. This study seeks to understand how young men construct their sense of self and negotiate this identity within their socio-cultural environment, be it mediated or peer.

Existing Theory: Technologies of the Self:

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. As Whitehead records: 'the question for Foucault is less on how individuals are subject to the power of others, and more on how subjects (individuals) come to create their own selves and 'realise their own desires' against a scenario partly constructed by their own artistry'.

It is through such a lens Foucault describes what he means by the term 'Technologies of the self': they are practices which 'permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality'.

Identity & Technologies of the Self:

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 to this study however is how this concept of identity raising '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'

Gender Identity & Technologies of the Self

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'. 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. **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'.

Shankar et al (2009) recently adapted this Foucauldian approach 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.

Methodology:

Three 'Interpretive Communities' have been identified with five respondents in each; 'The Consumptionistas', 'The GAA Sportsmen' and 'The Townland Lads'. For the purpose of this paper just one group is explored – 'The Townland Lads'. Semi-structured interviews ranged from 50 to 90 minutes duration. Each respondent, aged between 28 to 30 years, have been friends since secondary level school. The group was chosen on the basis of their geographic location – Mullingar, a medium-sized town in Ireland's midlands region. Choosing respondents based on a specific characteristic, in this case geographically, is an attempt to situate and consider the male respondent in relation to his social network. One of the participants, 'John' is a long-term friend of the interviewer, while she met the other four respondents within the group numerous times over the past 12 years through John. This familiarity allowed respondents to be more at ease in their discussion of sometimes personal topics.

Data Collection:

I draw upon Mick & Buhl's (1992) Meaning-Based Model of Advertising Experiences to conceptualise my consideration of an individual subject immersed within a socio-cultural context whereby their constitution of their self is embedded within their life theme and life projects. Additionally, Thompson and Hirschman's (1995) Foucauldian conception of each consumer embedded in a social world which by its nature enforces and reinforces systems of bodily meanings and practices is useful as it highlights how the consumer is led to discipline the body through a form of socialization.

The purpose of the life-story interview is twofold. The focus of the first half of the interview is to consider the respondent's experience of ads. In particular, ads are strategically chosen to reflect contemporary masculine imagery and products/services. How these ads are negotiated and interpreted are said to be based on the subject's 'identity theme' or 'life theme'.

The latter half of the interview purposes to learn the respondent's life story - their life themes and life projects. In Foucauldian terms, such life stories will determine the men's practices of the self, how they go about constructing their self as a 'work of art'. The latter half of the interview is then used to interpret the former. Prior to the interview, it was explained that the purpose of the research was to explore consumption and leisure practices of young Irish men.

Data Analysis:

From the initial data gathered on the group 'The Townland Lads', I have identified a number of emerging themes to date. For the purpose of this working paper, I would like to look at what I have called a 'Geographic Self Consciousness'.

"A Geographic Self Consciousness"

'The Townland Lads' displayed a distinct consciousness of their self, and how this self could be acted out within the confines of their 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 struggles to establish a cohesive identity for himself between his mediated life and his habitual life. While he expresses a clear understanding as to why their 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 Mullingar 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'. Now I'm happy that just kind of, whatever I wear, I wear, so I could have a function tomorrow, or a job or an interview in Dublin or radio stuff that whatever I'd wear for that, I'd wear for going out to Finn's or John Mac's or walking down the town like y'know. It would be kind of consistent, like I wouldn't go out of my way at any stage, do you know it would kind of be consistent with fashion, attire or whatever you call it.

Likewise, John 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 Mullingar 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 but I had an eyebrow pierced…. And kind of, it just, <u>everybody</u> 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."

The ‘Village Voice’ is indicative of the omnipresent power Foucault conceptualises in his later discussions of power and resistance. This ubiquitous power he identifies 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. Certainly John makes reference numerous times to ‘having to conform’, which does depict an aura of his being restricted by his interpretive community; in particular he pinpoints his ‘career’ as a sales rep, and the ‘kind of company’ he has kept as having ‘lead me down to being clean-cut and kind of looking a certain way’. The agency here is John’s reluctant admittance that he did make 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’ (Ewen cited in Thompson and Hirschman, 1995: 149).

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 Mullingar 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 Mullingar 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 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. 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'. As illustrated above, John's adherence to his understanding of how a sales rep must look, or this 'truth', restricts him from expressing himself through his grooming practices or clothing. In addition, his consideration of pending balding 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. 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 e.g. 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 makes tribute to Eastender's Mitchell

brothers as having embraced this image, however 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 '80's 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 Bordo (1993), the mass media has played a major role in normalising a number of 'medical practices', and indeed the channels of the mass media brings a certain legitimacy, authority and familiarity thus, to a wide audience. A combination of two key socialization mechanisms, media technologies and medical practitioners, have served as indicators from which John can absorb and come to learn that a skinhead is a respectable look, fitting to his role in his community 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).