Gender, Youth and Culture

Young Masculinities and Femininities

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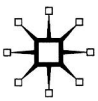

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Also by Mary Jane Kehily

SEXUALITY, GENDER AND SCHOOLING: Shifting Agendas in Social Learning (2002)

This book is dedicated to our fathers, Baidyanath Nayak and John Patrick Kehily, with love

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Part One

Understanding Gender and Youth: Concepts, Theory and Action

1
Introducing Gender

The question of how boys become men or how girls become women may seem absurdly simple. But if the question is simple, the answers are certainly more difficult. This book is about the making and unmaking of gender. It asks how do boys become men and how do girls become women in late-modernity? What does it now mean to be a 'proper' girl or boy? What are the costs of failing to inhabit this identity? And what are the possibilities for doing gender differently in the contemporary global economy?

Throughout this book we argue for a global perspective on gender that recognizes difference and diversity across time and place. We are interested in how gender relations are produced and reproduced on a world stage and the impact this is having upon new generations. Of particular interest here is the way in which gender is embedded in national and local cultures, institutional sites and settings, as well as everyday social relationships. Furthermore we are concerned with how gender interacts with age, class, ethnicity, sexuality and a host of other complex dynamics. In large part we are motivated by a curiosity to understand how gender is experienced, enacted and embodied in daily life, frequently in ways that are competing and contradictory. In this chapter we explore the different features of the title, *Gender, Youth* and *Culture,* through the following sections: gender practices; constructions of childhood and youth; playing with gender; and youth and youth studies. This is followed by an introduction to the structure and content of the book. As an introductory chapter we outline and discuss many of the contemporary debates and issues in these fields. Our focus is upon the salient features of gender, youth and culture that inform this book. Beginning with a consideration of gender practices, we document our interest and approach to gender as a lived process. This is followed by a discussion of constructions of childhood and youth in which we recognize the shifting boundaries between these social categories and the implications of this for understanding young lives. The third section of the chapter considers some of the ways in which gender and play come together in cultural analyses of children and young people's lives before moving on to a discussion of youth and youth studies. Here we focus upon the ways in which young people have been made visible through different research traditions and approaches. The final section of the chapter provides an introductory mapping

of the subsequent chapters of the book, outlining the content and main themes of each chapter.

Gender Practices

Recent developments in arts, humanities and social sciences have seen a growing interest in issues of gender, particularly in relation to young people, globalization and popular culture. Current scholarship on gender and youth is exemplified in works on class and gender formations (Skeggs, 1997; 2004), young masculinities and schooling (Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Frosh *et al.*, 2002), young femininities and girlhood (Hey, 1997; Harris, 2004; Aapola *et al.*, 2005) and young people's gendered and racialized relationships to post-industrialism (Delamont, 2001; Nayak, 2003a). This burgeoning literature points to the abiding importance of gender as a conceptual category for understanding the organization and interpretation of human relationships. While much work in the field of gender research has focused exclusively upon young women and more recently young men, surprisingly few studies have taken a holistic approach to the subject, integrating work on masculinities and femininities. An abiding focus upon the gendered subjectivities of either boys or girls has tended to privilege one or other of these identities by holding them apart. However, our own ethnographic observations would suggest that one of the primary means through which young men and women define themselves is through and against one another and alongside imaginary notions of masculinity and femininity. The impact of separate sex studies is particularly revealing where there is a tendency in at least some research to conflate sex with gender, thus identifying boys with masculinities and girls with femininities. In this way 'sissy boys' remain tied to some peripheral, if failing, notion of masculinity, just as 'tom boys', despite their name, continue to be positioned as the temporary occupants of an aberrant femininity. As even these more extreme subject positions show, sex continues to remain the ultimate arbiter of gender relations, that irrevocable grain of truth. Categorically sex relates to specific anatomical differences, chromosomes, hormones and developmental markers such as facial hair or breasts, while gender refers to the cultural elaboration of these bodily signs through clothing, hairstyle or, as we shall see, even one's taste in film or music (Chapters 7 and 8). However, as Cream (1995) illustrates through the example of intersex subjects who are born with genitalia that is explicitly neither male nor female, sex itself can be socially constituted through the surgical scalpel and parental choice at birth. When discussing sex and gender a danger haunts categories that unwittingly collapse to presume that masculinity is something all boys inhabit while girls are the sole occupants of femininity. In this way gender – we believe mistakenly – can appear as a product or outcome of the sexed body.

Looking at the working and reworking of gender between and amongst boys and girls offers a rather different way of approaching the topic. Our concern then is not to compare and contrast the behaviour of boys with those of girls and so reach conclusions – a routine means of preserving the sex/gender binary – but instead to focus upon what we might call the 'practice of gender'. In talking about *gender practices* we are moving away from notions of gender as either a biological essence or a knowable category that is fixed upon the bodies of men, women, girls or boys in the ways we previously described. Gender practices involve an understanding of gender as a lived process rather than a proper object that we are each magically endowed with as an unwritten consequence of our sex. Through this approach we aim to show how gender is a set of relations configured through technologies, bodies, spatial, discursive and material processes. Thinking about gender in this way enables us to see how it is 'summoned into life' under the weight of particular historical conditions, how it is discursively struggled over, repudiated or enacted. Exploring gender practices places attention upon the production, regulation, consumption and performance of gender in late-modernity – the structuring schematic of this book. By adopting this approach we aim to illuminate first, how gender relations are embedded in different societies; second, how they are discursively enacted and encrypted with specific indices of power; and third, how they can occasionally be reconfigured in different times and spaces. Throughout we argue that the making and unmaking of gender is no random occurrence, or *fait au accompli*, but the shaky happenstance of identification, embodiment and the rigidly routine rituals of gender demarcation that are a feature of everyday life.

By examining gender practices and in particular how they are produced, regulated, consumed and performed, we can gain a fuller insight into broader gender patterns and arrangements. This enables us to interpret the relationship between gender and power and to see how gender is institutionally organized, discursively constituted, embodied and transfigured in social life. It can begin to explain how gender relations are embedded within the social fabric of human societies and come to shape the choices and possibilities open to us as gendered subjects. This suggests that gender is not simply a matter of choice, but a negotiation that occurs within a matrix of social and historical forces enshrined in the ideological arenas of law, religion, family, schooling, media, work and so forth. And while gender structures may appear enduring, they too are continually subject to change and vary over time and place. In this respect, gender structures, rather than being determining, only come into being in and through social action, what we have been calling *gender practices*.

The production of a seemingly coherent gender identity is then the result of a series of successive, though never fully accomplished, 'gender achievements'. These 'achievements' conceal an extraordinary amount of mental and physical labour that go into making these identities appear normal, 'just so'. Yet if there is

no determining link between sex and gender, the question of how boys become men and how girls become women is itself theoretically constrained by a slew of political presumptions. By raising these questions we recognize that we too are in danger of replicating sex/gender categories, and in Chapter 8 we make a concerted effort to rethink gender 'otherwise'. The theory and illustrations we draw upon indicate that gender is not an identity that prefigures action, but is an activity that gives rise to how we come to understand and experience ourselves as gender subjects. Gender is not, then, the precursor of action, rather, it is its immediacy and after effect.

This book is concerned with the *coming-into-being* of gender. For young people the phrase 'coming-into-being' is especially apt as they undergo a great deal of physical, cultural and emotional change. In beginning to unravel some of the theoretical knots that bind gender to sex we do not seek to absent the role and agency of the body. Indeed some feminist poststructuralist accounts of gender have paid an enormous amount of attention to the multiple and complex configurations of gender power, but have occasionally rendered the human body obsolete. As part of a politically informed anti-essentialist project, this tendency to elide sex difference and the 'overdetermined' presence of the body as the atomized essence of 'who we are' is understandably compelling. However, as sociologists of the body and the new queer theorists we discuss in Chapter 8 amply illustrate, bodies are not docile, passive conduits for action. Bodies are both the objects and subjects of gender process: they are socially constituted but remain wilful agents that participate in their own making and that of others. Gender practices are embodied activities that carry with them a scattering of feelings, affect and emotion. These assemblages are also affected by the corporeal mechanics of the body regarding health, dexterity, dis/ability, body mass or skin pigmentation. Gender is sculpted through such mundane bodily processes as aging, giving birth, hair loss or weight gain. It is also culturally signed and manipulated through such corporeal activities as the use of cosmetics, tanning or plastic surgery. We should, then, be wary not to 'write out' the body from existence or set sex and gender apart from corporeal activity. For young people the coming-into-being of gender is always an embodied act. The proliferation of social terms already bestowed upon them throughout their short lives – as babies, toddlers, infants, children, offspring, adolescents, teenagers, youth and so on – iterates the discursive making of young people that come to mark their bodies in altogether different ways, as we shall now explore.

Constructions of Childhood and Youth

Over the last decade or so Childhood Studies has become a recognized area of research and analysis reflected in a growing body of literature that points

to the importance of childhood as a conceptual category and a social status for the study of a previously overlooked or marginalized group – children (Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers, 1992; James and Prout, 1997; Gittins, 1998; Montgomery and Woodhead, 2003; Kehily, 2004). How does this development relate to the concept of youth and youth studies? Is a young person still a child or does youth signal a move out of childhood and the onset of adulthood? These are key questions to ask, as they reveal how children, youth and adults are terms that gloss over a great deal of complexity and carry with them a substantial amount of discursive power. In this respect we can consider childhood and youth as contingent constructions, forever in the making.

Cultural investments in the idea of childhood as a state of innocence can be contrasted with notions of youth as difficult, 'out of control' and potentially dangerous – a symbol of what is wrong with the neighbourhood or the country more generally. The concept of childhood in the West is underpinned by twin images of children as either innocent angels or evil devils (Warner, 1994; Kehily and Montgomery, 2003; Valentine, 2004). The Romantic inspired child of innocence also calls into being its opposite – the demonic child. This duality is often used in the media and can be seen in contemporary views and images of childhood generally. Childhood figures in the contemporary British and North American imagination exist in an idealized state but children who break out of this state, especially through crime, are increasingly penalized and demonized. The potential wickedness of children seems to be reserved for some young people and aberrant children. Childhood innocence is celebrated and protected while individual children who transgress may be vilified – their behaviour placing them beyond the realm of 'proper' children and normal childhood. Central to contemporary approaches is the understanding that childhood and youth are not universal states. Rather they are culturally produced and as such will vary across time and place. An example of this can be seen in a British cultural geography study of 'fear of crime' with 449 school students aged 12–15 years (Nayak, 2003b). Those living in certain suburban neighbourhoods were repeatedly described as 'children' (i.e., those in need of protection), while those of a similar age in the inner city and nearby working-class estate were regularly depicted as 'youth' (by implication those that are likely to exacerbate fear of crime simply by 'hanging out'). Moreover these relations were gendered with boys (61 per cent) significantly more likely to be stopped by the police than girls (41 per cent). This reveals, first, how childhood and youth are contingent social constructions and, second, how notions of good/evil are tied to relations of gender, place and class. Economic and socio-cultural factors continue to shape childhood and youth on the international stage. A recent UNICEF report (2007) on the well-being of children and young people in 21 industrialized countries ranked the UK at the bottom of the table in their assessment of child well-being and the US as second

from bottom. The report focused on six areas: material well-being; health and safety; educational well-being; family and peer relationships; behaviours and risks; and young people's own perceptions of well-being. The report placed The Netherlands at the top of the table, followed by Sweden, Denmark and Finland. The report offers an economic account of the findings, powerfully suggesting that despite national wealth, children who grow up in poverty are more vulnerable, their experiences of childhood more difficult, leading the UK Children's Commissioner to comment, 'There is a crisis at the heart of our society'.

Developmental psychology has documented the stages and transitions of Western childhood. Within this framework childhood is seen as an apprenticeship for adulthood that can be charted through stages relating to age, physical development and cognitive ability. The progression from child to adult involves children in a developmental process wherein they embark upon a path to rational subjectivity.

Sociological approaches by contrast have been concerned with issues of socialization: ways of exploring how children learn to become members of the society in which they live. The differences between the two approaches are outlined and discussed in an academic intervention that sets out the parameters for a 'new sociology of childhood' (James and Prout, 1997). James and Prout propose that 'the immaturity of children is a biological fact of life but the ways this is understood and made meaningful is a fact of culture' (1997:7). They suggest that there is a growing body of research that signals an emergent paradigm for the study of childhood. Key features of the paradigm as outlined by James and Prout include the following:

- Childhood is understood as a social construction.
- Childhood is a variable of social analysis.
- Children's relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right.
- Children should be seen as active social agents.
- Studying childhood involves an engagement with the process of reconstructing childhood in society.

Most researchers working within this paradigm take their lead from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child by defining childhood as the life stage from 0 to 18 years, subsuming youth into the childhood years. Studies of young people and particularly those defined through the social category 'youth' have a history largely outside of Childhood Studies and continue to be studied as young adults rather than late childhood subjects (see below for a further discussion of youth and youth studies). We now elaborate our discussion of childhood by considering its relationship to gender.