Equality News

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Viewpoint

Sex, drugs and stereotypes

by Maurice Devlin, NUI Maynooth

"Three out of five 15 to 17 year-olds drink alcohol, youth poll finds."

"One in four 15 to 17 year-olds have had sex – poll."

"55% of young know of peer suicide attempts."

These were the headlines on the front page of *The Irish Times* on three consecutive days last September when the results of a 'youth poll' carried out by TNS MRBI on behalf of the newspaper were published. On each day, in addition to the front page 'news' story, a further two full pages were devoted to the poll's findings. In keeping with the headlines, these two-page 'spreads' were, on the first and second days respectively, devoted entirely to drink/drugs and sexual behaviour. The third day's spread dealt with a broader range of issues (health, media consumption, religion, politics) but obviously in much less depth. Taken as a whole, the thrust of the series was to portray young people as being in one way or another 'problematic'.

There is a remarkable consistency in the way the news media portray young people. The coverage of the survey in the Irish Times was reminiscent of a series in the Sunday World a few years ago. Over two weeks in 1998, that newspaper presented the findings of what it called 'Ireland's first major survey on our youth'. The front page headline on the first week was 'TEEN SEX: THE FACTS', with the sub-heading 'What our children are REALLY getting up to'. The second week it was 'TEENS DRUG DRINK SHOCK'. Fifteen pages were devoted to the survey over the two weeks, and only in the last two of these pages did aspects of young people's lives and lifestyles not related to drink/drugs or sex get addressed. There are many obvious differences between the Irish Times and the Sunday World, but clearly the editors of both believe that when it comes to stories featuring young people, what the public wants to hear about - what sells in other words - is the sex/drugs angle.

These are just two examples (countless others could be given) of the consistent pattern whereby young people are portrayed in the media, and in public life more broadly, in profoundly stereotypical ways. The precise nature of the stereotype varies considerably,

depending on a variety of contextual factors. For instance, while the picture sketched above suggests that young people in general represent a problem because of their drink/drug taking and their sexual activity, a more detailed examination reveals the ways in which young men and young women are presented differently (often with young women's behaviour presented as particularly decadent and alarming, in keeping with the old 'double standard' in gender relations). Where crime is at issue, the imagery used tends to be overwhelmingly of young working class males, and even the language used can be seen to follow a formulaic pattern (with the words 'youth' and 'youths' most commonly chosen to refer to the young people in question). In certain contexts it may suit to stereotype the young in more positive ways, as being exceptionally energetic, or idealistic, or socially and economically valuable ('our greatest natural resource', as the hackneyed political phrase has it). If the targeted audience consists primarily of young people themselves rather than adults (as in many TV 'soaps' and 'teen magazines'), the stereotype has a different complexion altogether, focusing on certain types of behaviour not so much as problems for society to confront but as norms for individual young people to conform to, almost compulsorily. But this is still stereotyping, and whatever the medium, these messages and these images are almost always being manipulated by adults.

And this is the key point. Stereotyping, regardless of who is being stereotyped, relies on the use of handy 'composite images' to capture what is seen as the essence of a social group or category (e.g. 'the drunken Irish'), and it most commonly occurs in the context of unequal power relations. Of course, not all adults have the same amount of power (far from it!), and the same is true of young people. However, adults collectively have more power than young people (a fact reflected in numerous pieces of legislation, including the Equal Status Act), and part of this power is the institutional power to create and apply labels, in a way that is not true in reverse.

A further common feature of stereotyping (in addition to its link to power relations) is ambivalence or ambiguity. The group which creates and applies stereotypical labels or images frequently has muddled - and even mutually contradictory - views about the group it is stereotyping, often based on fear or mistrust (e.g. historically, colonisers' views of the colonised have often encompassed both the notion that 'they're warm, friendly, spontaneous people' and also the notion that 'they're devious and treacherous and not to be trusted'!). This pattern clearly applies to many of the common stereotypes of young people. In fact, what is significant is that there are so many common stereotypes, many of them mutually contradictory, but any one of which can be drawn upon by adults as the context requires (be it news item, TV soap or popular film, public policy statement or press release). Again, it is important to stress that this does not apply in reverse. One very simple, but telling, reflection of this can be found at the level of vocabulary: there is a plethora of words and terms which can be chosen to describe and portray young people, depending on what image or message adults want to convey ('youth', 'teenager', 'teen', 'minor', 'youngster', 'adolescent', 'juvenile', 'young person' and so on). By contrast, how many words can you substitute for 'adult'?

This 'repertoire of labels' enables adults - and the institutions we run - to give profoundly mixed messages to young people. In one breath we tell them to grow up and 'act their age'; in another we tell them they aren't yet able to handle the onerous responsibilities of adulthood (e.g. as regards voting). In one we tell them we admire their exuberance, energy and idealism; in another we say we can't trust them and we don't like what they're 'getting up to' behind our backs. Is it any wonder that when we tell them we want them to participate fully as 'partners' - in organisations, in communities and in society at large - and then add that this partnership will be an 'appropriate' one, based on our definition of what is appropriate, their response falls a little short of unbridled enthusiasm? They are entitled to insist that as a first step we should get some of our own thinking straight!

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