

**Felicia Garcia, PhD student, Department of Anthropology, NUI Maynooth**

**Supervisor: Dr. A. Jamie Saris**

**Head of Department: Dr. Mark Maguire**

**Coping and Suicide Amongst ‘the Lads’:  
Expectations of masculinity in post-  
traditional Ireland**

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## **Abstract:**

**Suicide in Ireland is now considered a predominantly male phenomenon whereby for every female suicide, four men kill themselves** (National Office for Suicide Prevention 2009). Between 2008 and 2012, I conducted fieldwork among 40 young 'lads', aged 18-34, in and around Cork City. I relied on participant observation and interviews to retrieve information on the gendered over-representation in suicidal behaviours among of young, Irish working-class men.

In addition to suicide, I focused extensively on ideas of 'gender appropriate' behaviours and related issues such as alcohol, - and drug abuse and other risky and self-destructive behaviours prominent within Irish 'lad culture'. This also includes socialisation among peers, peer pressures and loyalties, chauvinistic jargon, homophobic bullying, humour and the 'culture of mocking' so as to grasp the cultural expectations of this particular form of masculinity.

I do not attempt to answer the wide-scoping question: why do people kill themselves, but I do believe that an anthropological approach can help explain why some groups in a specific society/community are more prone to do so than others. I analyse the everyday workings of gender segregation and gender-appropriateness while posing the question whether increased gender equality could lessen young men's vulnerability to self-destructive behaviours and suicide in Ireland.



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This is dedicated to the lads – my dear, dear friends in Cork. For showing me such generosity and the best craic I have ever had and ever will! Thank ye all so much!

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## **PREFACE: Thoughts on gender equity and feminism –a contrastive perspective**

In my early twenties in my home country of Sweden, I went through my ‘voluntary/activist-phase’. I joined one women’s organisation that operated on an international and national level that sticks to mind to this day. I will not name the organisation but I want to describe what happened at one of their yearly meetings in Stockholm –the only meeting I attended. The room was full of people but the odd thing was this: There were only women in the room except for one man. A women’s organisation, it seemed, does exactly what it says on the tin. The aim was to run an organisation for women and not to promote equality between the sexes –something that could and should involve women and men. The membership, it turned out, was to be based on sex rather than shared concerns for equality and fairness for women. One important issue on the agenda was that male membership. It was about whether the organisation should accept male members, -should they be allowed to join or support the organisation at all? I can only imagine what the only man in the room, who looked like he came from Latin America, must have felt like. He was obviously there because he was a supporter of gender equality and equal rights for women. The man eventually stood up and walked towards the door. He stood there for just a moment looking in. I had the most awkward feeling. When he finally decided to leave I was overwhelmed with shame and disgust. I still regret not doing something ‘outrageous’ like telling these women how incredibly wrong this was, or leaving myself.

Mac Ghiolla Bhain (2008) has taken a leading role in the Irish Men’s Movement and in the struggle to combat the prevalence of suicide among Irish men. Mac Ghiolla Bhain's discussion centres on what women and feminism do and have done to harm men. The discussion in my current thesis centres on how relationships between specific groupings of men (the lads) instruct what is said, felt and expressed amongst the lads and how male social networks and coping mechanisms differ from young women’s. Mac Ghiolla Bhain and I share a deep and genuine concern for what has become a male suicide epidemic in Ireland. Although we both recognise the depreciation of, I would say *certain forms* of masculinity in Irish society (and

elsewhere); we seem to differ in just what might be the causes behind men's particular vulnerability to suicide.

Mac Ghiolla Bhain's main criticism is aimed towards the commonsense in Irish society that women are always the victims of domestic abuse and never the perpetrators, that women should *always* be the custodial parents after a marriage break up and that a child of a non-married couple automatically 'belongs' to the mother. These *facts* are wrong and outrageous! Mac Ghiolla Bhain and I both argue against these assumption regarding maternity, paternity, violence and victimisation. Mac Ghiolla Bhain does however agree with the assumed nature of masculinity and femininity that become biological-, and therefore also life-destinies. He insists that gender differences cannot be socially "engineered away" solely because "the state has the will and deploys enough resources towards a utopia of gender equality" (Mac Ghiolla Bhain 2008:287). The fundamental differences between women and men he says are "hardwired into the brain."(2008:289)

The above commonsense statements rendering men and fathers superfluous to society is not, and I repeat, is *not* gender equality –it is the complete opposite! It is hardly contestable that women and men –people- are the results of biology *and* that we are shaped by the social world around us. It is not either "nature or nurture", but both. It seems however that what bears the most obstructive influence into peoples' lives is often the latter. The basic stereotypes we hold about men and women are not hardwired into the brain. For example, there is nothing "hardwired" –*biologically or even socially*- about calling a sensitive or an expressive man 'gay'. Or, to use the same name for a man who holds his girlfriend's hand in public, or one who cries, or, one who likes to eat healthy or "take it handy with the drink" –nor is this the typical behaviour of men everywhere. But he is right: there is contempt against certain notions of masculinity as they are lived and practiced in Irish society.

The depreciation of manliness he says "is the world that the feminists have created." He does unfortunately not go into any further detail of what else feminism has created. He does not for example discuss if perhaps there is a flip-side to feminism, whether it needs to be re-examined or that perhaps still, that it is the fear of a backlash against what has already been achieved that has blinded much of the

movement in terms of where we are heading today. These questions are left unexamined in favour of the overall message: that feminism is the serial killer of young men. He criticises the social sciences dominated by “campus feminism” that produce ideology and not science. In this thought-provoking and much needed volume he writes about how the Choose Life Campaign in Scotland speaks in a clear male language to prevent suicide amongst men, using a vernacular males can relate to – soccer: “Helping a friend stay in the game”(2008:179). He explains:

“Soccer is where Scottish men, on and off the field, provide each other with camaraderie and emotional support. Behaviour that would reek of homosexuality in any other scenario is not only accepted but also expected in the context of either playing in or watching a soccer match. For working class heterosexual men who must always pretend to be ok and in control of things this is a huge emotional safety valve.” (Mac Ghiolla Bhain 2008:179)

This description holds true for the young Irish men in my study as well. For this reason I found it odd that such a *cultural* and *social* phenomenon and what it does to male coping mechanisms and communications skills is not part of his analysis entitled “the scandal of male suicide in modern Ireland”. In particular, since we agree on the fact that: “What is needed is a cultural change towards masculinity in this society and that is something that has to take place in the culture, the media and in the courts.” (Mac Ghiolla Bhain 2008:221)

I am from Sweden, a country where, as the lads have told me repeatedly, “everyone is gay”. However in this thesis I have analysed, together with the young local people interviewed, the use of a language that helps regulate what is expected and excluded from a very narrow definition of masculinity and how this is a cultural construct.

The very real depreciation of masculinity in Irish society today is also a cultural issue. Mac Ghiolla Bhain argues that in the past 25 years Irish society is increasingly depicting men (especially working class men) as useless with little to nothing to offer as financial contributors or as carers, to their partners or to their children. This is all true. But to demonise feminism without mention of the good that came out of feminist theory and ideology in terms of *civil rights* for women when there were

little or none makes his arguments unnecessarily suspicious and open to a lot of howling from the very ‘feminazis’ he rages against –not unfairly at all by the way.

Also, from a contrastive perspective, to see the use of the words “feminist Ireland” (Mac Ghiolla Bhain 2008:130,131) seems a bit presumptuous to me. Coming from Sweden, a country regarded as far more feminist and liberal than Ireland, I remember my surprise as I learned how short maternity in Ireland was (26 weeks) and even more so to know that there was no paternity leave, none whatsoever. In Sweden, *parental* leave consists of 480 days to be divided between the parents as they see fit. An equal share of parental leave is rewarded with an ‘equality bonus’. I was also shocked and rather perplexed as to how Irish families could afford childcare when women went back to work as I was told of figures as high as 200€-250€ per week in childcare costs. The monthly rate in Stockholm is 3 per cent of the family income. There is however a cost limit set at 1260 SEK (approx. 150€) per month.

These developments that offer a fuller and more extensive role and presence for Swedish fathers also derive from the Swedish feminist movement and the political struggle for gender equality. The aim here is not to effeminise Swedish men but to increase men’s rights to fatherhood and involvement in rearing their own children. Irish men’s lack of entitlement to fatherhood and to their children, Mac Ghiolla Bhain argues, are a major influence on Irish male suicides.

Feminism can today be read as two different ideologies under the same name. The first version aims to expand and increase women’s power and resources, to have women progress into all spheres of society. The other view aims towards gender equality or ‘gender equity’. The definition of gender equality I use in this text is borrowed from Swedish research which suggest that gender equality is:”more or less similarity between women and men in every sphere of human life, including the private sphere.” (Backans *et.al.* 2007:1893)

Fathers’ rights are still undermined in Sweden whether we regard Sweden as a ‘super-feminist’ or a ‘*relatively* equal’ society. Swedish law says for example that: “If a cohabiting hetero-gendered couple has a child the man has to ask the woman’s permission to get joint custody. If he does not, or if the woman does not give her

consent, she will automatically get sole custody.” (Ström 2012:12 my translation) In his recent publication *Man-prohibition (Mansförbjudet, 2012)* Swedish author Pär Ström maps out the different domains in Swedish society where men are excluded or undermined. Ström recognises from the first page that he will be labelled and accused of being ‘anti-women’ and says: “What I am calling for is that men and women will start to be treated equally –no more no less. Those that see this as being anti-women have a distorted perception of reality.” (Ström 2012:7 my translation) From a Swedish perspective but much like Mac Ghiolla Bhain, Ström reads the social and cultural status of women, the formerly “weaker sex” as the now “appreciated sex” and he asks with much concern: how are boys and young men affected when they realise that they belong to the sex that is not appreciated? He also recognises how women or, the female gender, has much more ‘freedom of movement’ than men. In other words, that the pressures to conform to rigid gender boundaries are greater for men than for women whose femininity is not challenged because they are seen to take an interest in their health or well-being.

My son was born in Cork in January of 2012. From my experiences as a new mother who has recently gotten a glimpse of the conditions of Irish fatherhood my heart goes out to organisations such as Men in Childcare Ireland who, just before I returned for Sweden, appeared on Ireland AM to make the case for paternity leave. I left an encouraging message for them on Facebook to which they responded that it was a shame that I would have to go that far to “get some equality”. How has Sweden come to represent both feminism and gender equality when they often seem to be ideological opposites? When did feminism lose sight of gender equality as its overall aim?

In many legal situations, the Swedish father is no better off than the Irish father. As part of this sociocultural analysis I have also got to mention however, that had the opportunity been available to my Irish partner to stay at home with his son where we lived in Ireland, his social life among his male peers would have suffered. Had he made a full time job out of carrying his new son in front of him in a baby sling to the park for baby-salsa as we now do in Stockholm, I would have feared not only for his immediate social life but in the long term for his mental health (my partner still laughs when he imagines this scenario). If walking in the lashing rain with an

umbrella, eating a salad or hugging a male friend is 'gay' then what is a stay-at-home dad? If what is expected of men and what men are permitted to be was hardwired into the brain, then in the capital of Scandinavia, Swedish feminism has created (through intense re-wiring of the male brain) a city of "baby-carrying fags". Two things are not true; Stockholm is not full of "baby-minding fags", (although fathers on paternity leave are indeed seen everywhere and gay fathers are of course also on paternity leave). Secondly, this social and cultural script and definition of maleness, is not inherently male.

I started getting into masculinity studies in 2005 when I did my Master's thesis for the University of Stockholm. My supervisor was Lars Jalmert, one of Sweden's leading men in the field. To start working together he asked me if I wanted to come to one of his under-graduate lectures. Lars began the lecture by asking a full auditorium to raise their hands if they considered themselves to be feminists. Many did- both men and women- but I surprised myself when I realised that I could not raise my hand. "Humanist???" I thought to myself. I had heard Swedish feminist-extremist politicians make outrageous comments like "all men are animals" and "women who sleep with men are sex traitors". I remembered "the International" being sung from early childhood with the words changed to "I hate all stupid men except for my father and my brother" (In Swedish: *Jag hatar alla dumma karlar, utom far min och min bror*). I just could not raise my hand.

Feminism was supposed to be about gender equality when there was none. Now that there is some, however flawed and unbalanced, much of the feminist movement is about the over-protection and fear against a back-lash towards what has been built so far. The march has gone forward for so long and in such a straight and focused fashion that many -most of us- have forgotten to have a good look around. There are perhaps feminists who would argue that women fought their own struggle against male chauvinism and patriarchy and if men want to expand their rights it is up to them. They really should have seen the face on the only attending man at a world-renowned women's organisation who had to leave because he believed in equal rights for women.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This is an anthropological study about the workings and complexities of coping and gendered self-destruction. Over the last four years I have been sharing a tight-knit community with some 40 young ‘lads’, aged 18-34. I have adopted an anthropological perspective on contemporary theoretical frameworks and psychosocial analysis in explaining what has become known in Ireland as a suicide epidemic among young Irish men. I rely on long term participant observation and interviews to retrieve information on the causes behind the gendered overrepresentation of self-destructive behaviours and suicide among white, young, working-class men within a settled population in Cork. In what follows I will introduce the reader to the backgrounds of these topics, myself, as well as the geographical, social, and theoretical fields of enquiry.

I focus extensively on related issues such as alcohol, - and drug abuse, self-exposure to harm and other risky and self-destructive behaviours (misadventures, the ‘performativity of recklessness’ etc.) which are part of Irish ‘lad culture’. This will include peer socialisation, regulatory norms and scripts, exaggerated heterosexuality and a ‘culture of mocking’ but also bullying, to grasp the cultural expectations of this *particular* form of masculinity.

On one level, I discuss gender as a social construct: I believe masculinity (and femininity) to be historically, socially and culturally shaped and re-shaped. The evidence to support this are the different ways in which masculinity and femininity *are* interpreted and experienced in different parts of the world and over time. On yet another level, as expressed by some of my informants, I might phrase it as if gender and masculinity was something more fixed, as male or female characteristics or properties. There is a curious truth in this view as well: If we hold it to be true that certain characteristics, manners and scripts are the only legitimate properties of a specific sex then these same behaviours will become part of our identities. As a result, alternative feelings; thought and actions will become inaccessible, unpracticed and unthinkable. These two views on masculinity and gender, and the ways different life-styles are adopted as a consequence of these views, will be the underlying discussion throughout this thesis.



In the title and the subsequent chapters I also use the term self-destruction rather than self-harm. I have chosen to use 'self-destruction' because certain actions and behaviours does damage - physically and emotionally- and sometimes destroy individuals. I refrain from using self-harm which I read as an indication of an intent to 'do harm' which I believe is not the case for the lads who are trying to feel better and not worse. I have read 'destruction' as a *result* from actions that are taken in order to cope, to assess, to gain perspective, release, relief and much more. This distinction is of course theoretical and not as clear in practice and is therefore readily debatable, but I still see them as useful categories for the following discussion.

My conclusions from this fieldwork are that social and cultural expectations of masculinity and 'gender-appropriate behaviours' have a negative influence on the well-being of many Irish men. They make coping mechanisms and strategies for wellbeing that are available to women, inaccessible to men. The strict cultural codes of gender-appropriate behaviours adhered to by young working class men in particular, reward behaviours that lead to ill-health and negatively sanction behaviours with health-promoting benefits. My most fundamental observations, as they were continually confirmed and elaborated by informants in the field, suggested that cultural expectations of masculinity bore important influences on group dynamics, drug and alcohol abuse, coping mechanisms, risky behaviours and suicide. It was also apparent that gendered segregation was socially and culturally structured throughout all social institutions; family, education, work, politics etc.

This thesis asks a question borrowed from a previous study by Backhans, Lundberg and Månsdotter (2007): *Would increased gender equality lead to a convergence of health outcomes for men and women?* It asks further: *Would it lead to a convergence in young people's development of life- social skills and coping mechanisms and would it lessen young men's vulnerability to self-destructive behaviours and suicide in Ireland?*

**This thesis is not about suicidal subjects talking about their experiences of suicide or self-harm. This is a social and cultural analysis of what the young men and women who have participated in this study perceive as the causes behind the higher suicide rates among young Irish men.**

The thesis addresses suicide as a sociological problem. This problem is investigated through anthropological methods; local enquiry and local knowledge. My discussion will be carefully balanced between the abstract theoretical models that are used within social theory and suicide research in Ireland, and the actual realities presented by my informants, - ‘the lads’ and ‘the girls’. I will not describe ‘the day he went out to the shed’, ‘the day he was found in the river’ or ‘hanging in the forest’. I am familiar with these painful narratives. I have felt the sombre and eerie atmosphere at some of these funerals, -so have all my informants. The following pages are dedicated to the problem of young, mainly working class suicides in a cluster of Cork communities. This problem will be reflected upon by ‘the lads’ who grew up and live in these communities, their family members and friends. Some participants have experienced suicidal thoughts, some have also attempted suicide and all of my informants know several friends and many times family members who have died by suicide. Although none of the participants were asked about specific cases or their personal stories, it is based on these experiences that they reflect on the increasing suicide rates among young working class men in their own communities. We might call this indigenous theorising without the personal focus. As they attempt to answer and reflect upon the link between locally held expectations of gender and suicide, the focal point –the linking key- is *coping*; well-being and quality of *life*.

### **1.1 The social and geographical field**

A number of sociological facts are commonly used to explain rising numbers in suicide and specific suicide trends, namely; sudden and dramatic societal changes which in turn leads to moral confusion among society’s members. Social change is often debated within the theoretical frame of ‘anomie’ which is an important concept that will be discussed in detail throughout this thesis. Irish society has within the last fifty years gone through extreme, unparalleled change: from a devout Catholic, poverty

stricken, traditional society to what became known as the “Celtic Tiger”. Marked and measured by unprecedented affluence and prosperity this economic ‘boom’ was brought on by foreign (US) investment in exchange for low corporate taxation and subsidies from the European Union. The ‘boom-years’, during which Ireland became the fastest globalised country in the world, featured an over-expansion of the building sector and a property bubble that stretched over a decade and a half. This period was abruptly ended by the global economic crises that hit in September of 2008 and where Ireland was one of the worst affected in the OECD.

Following first “boom” and then “bust”, public attention was drawn towards the rising numbers in suicide, primarily amongst young men. Through alarming reports in the Irish and international press in 2004, Midleton in County Cork became known as having the second highest suicide rate in the world.<sup>1</sup> In 2004 the Irish economy was still at an all time height. After Ireland had entered into recession during the spring of 2009 it came to my attention that seven young men had died by suicide within six months in the epicentre of my fieldwork and the same surrounding area of Midleton. I did myself attend the removal of one of these lads, aged nineteen. He had ended his life only five weeks after his friend had done the same at age eighteen. Continuing into December of 2010, the Irish Independent reported that the Samaritans, Ireland’s primary voluntary suicide hotline service, “answered a desperate call for help every two minutes over the past year, as crippling unemployment and financial woes took their toll on the nation’s emotional well-being.” (The Irish Independent 16/12/2010)

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<sup>1</sup> The Irish Independent: ‘Rural town has second worst suicide rate in the world’ SOME 34 young men have killed themselves in a rural town in the past three years, with a stretch of the local cemetery now grimly known as "suicide row". In the prosperous East Cork town of Midleton, the per capita suicide rate is not only the worst in Ireland but it is the second-worst in the world.’ From 01/06/2004 accessed on 14/07/2009

<http://www.independent.ie/health/rural-town-has-second-worst-suicide-rate-in-the-world-165666.html>

The Times: ‘How small town became suicide capital of world’ “It may be a statistical anomaly, but the spate of suicides in Midleton means that it now has a rate equivalent to 80 per 100,000, double that of Lithuania, currently the worst country in the world for suicide.” from 12/06/2004 accessed on 03/11/2010

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/article444292.ece>

I stepped in to this field rather unintentionally with regards to the now dominant themes. I first arrived in Cork City from Sweden in March of 2008 as a student of Uppsala University where I was doing a one year Master's course in Developing Democracy. For my MA thesis which led up to this extended field study, I wrote about contemporary Republicanism and cultural expectations of masculinity. Cork which is referred to locally and nationally as the 'Rebel County' was the ideal location. I was already settled in the field in early 2009 when my attention (together with my informants') turned towards the mounting reports of young male suicides in my own and neighbouring communities. In hope of continuing with a PhD, I was still taking field notes after concluding my Master's thesis and I quickly faced up to the ever more frequent and devastating entries in my journal from 2009 onward. I did not select a vulnerable community for the purpose of study. Instead I resided in an area that was noticeably becoming affected by these gendered suicidal trends as Cork entered the economic recession with the rest of the country.

The geographic and social profile of Cork has changed considerably within a short period of time. The number of people employed in agriculture in Cork County had fallen by 25 per cent between 1996 and 2009. (Cork County Council 2009:186) Instead, new-found prosperity was to be found in the growing suburbs or 'metropolitan areas' around Cork City. Fahey (*et.al.*) wrote in their pre-crash publication in 2007:

"The accelerated suburbanisation of Ireland is one of the key legacies of the Celtic Tiger. Population growth and a robust economy have contributed to an unprecedented demand for housing. Suburban expansion, particularly on the periphery of large cities, has been largely developer-driven, leading to concerns about the viability and sustainability of these communities in the long term." (Fahey *et.al.* 2007:196)

The Eastgate Retail Park in Little Island stands as a prototypical marker of what was to be. With a catchments population of "325,745 persons with a 30 minute drive zone 4km from Cork City Centre" the retail park was located "Convenient to the

rapidly expanding suburbs of Midleton, Youghal, Fermoy, Glanmire, Glounthaune, Carrigtwohill.” ([www.eastgatecork.com](http://www.eastgatecork.com))





Photos: Eastgate Retail Park. Taken by author during a weekend in February 2011

East Gate does not draw the intended numbers today. Apart from two department stores the vast retail complex is empty. Some facilities have been left without flooring where big mushrooms grow in the rubble. A few fast food places remain in the area. In the surrounding resident estates ‘For Sale’ and ‘To Let’ signs are also significant markers of the housing bubble that burst in 2008. The semi-detached three to four bedroom houses built during the boom already show what is really under the surface and behind the façades as the plaster cracks on walls and ceilings and water pipes freeze and break during cold winters. New property taxes and most recently water taxes (2013) are some of the means by which the Irish State tries to repay its massive debts.

East Gate is located in one of the so-called ‘rurban’ areas: “no longer a village, but also not part of the city.” (Keohane and Kuhling 2004:64) The areas listed above; Midleton, Fermoy, Glanmire, Glounthaune, Carrigtwohill, but also Little Island and inner city areas such as Mayfield and Knocknaheeny, are part of the devastating



anecdotal, statistical and testimonial fabric of lost young lives and are thus part of the scope of this study. The lads and young women in this study are linked to these neighbouring communities by current or previous residence, social or familial ties. The stories and testimonies stretch in between these areas so that the target group is defined by social ties rather than geographical boundaries. Some of the lads were brought up in the immediate vicinity of my field work and some still remain. Others went to school, grew up, or lived in a more remote town or suburb or in Cork City at some point which is why I use the spatial description ‘in and around Cork City’, ‘metropolitan Cork’ or indeed, ‘in-between’ and ‘rurban’ areas. Some of the leading concerns and prototypical characteristics tied to these ‘betwixt and between’ localities are according to Keohane and Kuhling:

“While the accurate “mapping” of suicidal behaviour in any great detail has proven unreliable to date, anecdotal evidence would suggest that for our young people, the increase in the rates of suicidal behaviour is most marked in the country towns – places that are neither villages where the fabric of community remains relatively intact, nor cities where conditions of anomie have themselves become normalised. Contemporary Irish country towns are in-between places, characterised by uncertainty and anomie.” (Keohane and Kuhling 2004:61-2)

I spent the first year of my field work in Cork City and I was but a frequent guest in ‘the lads’ house’. However, as the recession affected my personal circumstances and I lost my job as a customer service agent for the ‘Nordic market’ at one of Cork’s large multinationals, I moved in with the lads. I spent the next two years of my research co-occupying a locally typical three-bedroom semi-detached house with an over-sized back garden in a quiet estate in a suburb just outside Cork City, built during the Celtic Tiger. On occasion, one of the lads moved out (one moving in with a girlfriend and another emigrated) and another would move in. One other co-occupant who remained for nearly a year was female. On average it was a male dominated living environment whereby the life-style (not suicide) discussed in subsequent chapters were the constant and fundamental features.

## 1.2 The lads

*“The concept of “the lads” has been extended in the media, in politics, and even in boys’ popular worlds to represent “all boys”. As a result it is difficult to retrieve the touch-stone of the critical engagement signified by the class cultural studies of the 1970’s. The transformative project developed in the critique of social democracy is not clearly reflected within the critical analyses of the globalized economy and performance-based choice cultures of schooling in the current decade.” (Dolby and Dimitriadis 2004:36)*

Related literature on lad culture will be referred to throughout the text as I draw upon previous definitions of who the ‘lads’ are to help frame this category. Among those are Willis’ (1977) ethnography from the East midlands in England in the 1970’s, Gaetz (1997) from 1980’s Cork, and Barnes (2007) whose work was also situated in Cork in 2002-3. “The boys in Ballinaclasha, like Willi’s “rebels” or the lads as they called themselves, reflected “not rebellion against working class values but an exaggeration of the ‘traditional’ working class valorization of masculinity”.” (Gaetz 1997:83)

The concept of lad-hood is uneasily translated from the 1970’s and 80’s when the transition from anti-school cultures among working class boys was played out on the factory floors as they left school. The transition from education, low-performance and academic defiance now leads into much narrower opportunities and into a shrinking manual labour market. Part of the reason why Dolby and Dimitriadis’s *Learning to Labor in New Times* (2004) is more relevant than the book to which it is a tribute (Willis 1977) is that the lads in this study and across much of Western Europe can no longer look to the transition their fathers made from an itchy school bench to the shop floor or the building site. The bursting of property bubble of 2008 when the Irish building sector came to an almost absolute halt will be the focal point as we ask how Irish lad-hood will come to manifest itself in the coming years.

So are all of the 40 lads out of the social network and field the same? No. The lads share cultural norms and references typical for and within lad culture (or Irish working class masculinity). Their positionings within the social structures of



hegemonic<sup>2</sup> and subordinate masculinities vary. What in the end comes as a singular is the “unitary *notion* of masculinity” (Cleary 2005a:156 my emphasis) and the activities and concerns that are deemed appropriate for males. Being part of a lad culture is not like joining a club. It does not require formal initiation or membership but as this thesis will show, there are similar processes at play. The lads, as the young men are referred to and as they call themselves, are simply the average young men or boys who share similar socioeconomic backgrounds and relate to specific, local and gendered identities. “The lads” also refers to a social status and a temporal (juvenile) state. The lads are ‘the boys’. It is a status that by traditional standards ended after adolescence, when boys became men. However, as adolescence extends into adulthood, the status of ladhood becomes a more permanent position.

The gendered markers of ladhood are either typical or atypical. For the most part in this study the focus is on those who are situated in this juvenile state and status for a prolonged period and those that are typical, -the collective representations of ‘lad culture’. The concept itself will be discussed throughout by my informants –the typical and atypical lads- and by the young women who know them as family, friends or partners.

In Gaetz’ study of community action and youth culture in Cork in the late 1980’s he distinguished between the following social categories; advantaged youth, mainstream youth and “the boys”: “This latter group, on the other hand, might use the categories of ‘snobs’, ‘boring lingers’ or ‘the lads’ (Gaetz 1997:80). I confirm without reservation the relevance of these categories some two or more decades later. However, from my observations in a very similar field, I suggest that the same classifications can be used in relation to life-cycle positioning (a juvenile state) as will be suggested in the discussion on extended liminality (see chapter 5). Also, as I will put forward in my analysis, the two latter groupings; ‘mainstream youth’ and ‘the lads’, are categories that run along ‘gender lines’. Gaetz explained how ‘mainstream youth’ were the more ‘respectable members of the working class’. Interestingly he noted, these members of different social categories were sometimes

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<sup>2</sup> Hegemonic masculinity here refers to the most desired and socially accepted way of ‘being a man’. Hegemonic masculinity is always specific to context. This will be discussed later in the thesis.

part of the same families and “they [mainstream youth] did not typically react to such structural limitations through the lifestyle choices characteristic of the boys.” (Gaetz 1997:82) As I will show in later discussions on Barnes’ study (2007), the local young women and young men, assumed to be each other’s counterparts, often serve categorically as collective representations of opposing social classes. The lads represent a category of discredited masculinities, commonly debated as youths that are socially, economically and culturally problematic based on their gender. The girls, who share the lads’ backgrounds, neighbourhoods and sometimes even the same families, do not share the same problematic categorisation of laddishness or ladhood. Instead, the local young women seem to represent Gaetz’s category of ‘mainstream youth’ and the more ‘respectable members of the working class’. The girls and young women in this study for example, had greater opportunity in the labour market and did not uphold the cultural resistance towards further studies that was so strongly emphasised amongst the lads.

### **1.3 Theoretical field and methodological approach**

*“I have learned most about research methods from the people whose social circumstances and cultural understandings I have studied.” (Davies 1999:vii)*

In terms of methodology, I am trying to avoid the pitfalls within social theory which is whether or not to take on a structuralist approach or focusing on agency, automatically it seems, undermining one or the other. I am hoping to tackle this problem by focusing on an anthropological; emic<sup>3</sup> perspective since between structure and agency lays subjective perception. It is my belief that one can only approach a specific social or cultural issue through the understandings of those who

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<sup>3</sup> “emic” meaning the views and perspectives of the people I study.

engage in or relate to it. For sensitive issues in particular, one needs to look at how thoughts and narratives of angst, sadness, frustration is shared, and if they are not shared, -how sensitive issues are avoided, compensated through other means, ignored or covered up.

Unlike theoretical contributions made in other studies, (see Sheehan 2004, Feeney 2012, Fincham et.al. 2011, Mac Ghiolla Bhain 2008) I did not collect life biographies or suicide narratives. None of the participants were asked if they had ever considered taking their own life nor were they asked to speculate on their friends', relatives' or acquaintances' specific suicides. I do recognise the many benefits and the relevance of so called 'psychological autopsy studies' whereby retrospective information is retrieved by survived relations. I believe also that I am doing something similar in adopting a cultural perspective. This study is a form of sociocultural autopsy in that it refers to collectively shared cultural reference points relevant to the local young men. I will continually refer to these points insofar as they are brought up by the local young women and the lads themselves. With my interrogation into local knowledge and even local analyses, perhaps this could be called an indigenous cultural diagnosis. In the interviews the participants reflect on the gender order in their local context so that they can shed some light into, not individual reasons behind suicides, but the causes behind the particular characteristics and high frequency of young male suicide in their own communities.

Two things need to be stressed about both male and female informants in the field: *Everybody* interviewed in the field knows of multiple, recent and for the most part intimate cases of suicide. *Every report* made to me during the course of the four years of research has been exclusively of male suicides. All men were relatively young, starting from their late teens and all through the twenties and into the mid thirties. Those who participated in this study were asked to reflect on the coping mechanisms that were in place for young lads and how constraints and possibilities, obstacles and relief informed their everyday lives.

As I look for the causes behind overrepresentations of self-destructive behaviours within lad culture I will also consider what contemporary research within the fields of gender studies, social anthropology, sociology, psychology and education, has

determined to be the most likely explanations behind the overrepresentation of young male suicide in Ireland.

An investigation of a *social context* where suicides are roaring will make visible, in a very direct way, how lived un-sustainable life-styles are structured and how they are locally defined by age, gender and social class. Looking at a specific social setting instead of individual cases sheds light into the more blurred definitions and unintended suicides, gambles and risk-behaviours. Taylor, an important reference in my discussion on risk and gamble, criticises the acceptance of unreliable statistics and the ignorance of the variety of suicidal behaviours and the key component of risk-taking. Taylor argues for those studies that have been undertaken on the micro-social contexts and the suicidal acts where “only hairbreadth differences separate death from survival” (Taylor 1982:39). Risk enacted and caused by acute depression and fatalistic apathy which is often fuelled by alcohol will be discussed in some detail in parts 4 and 5. For now it will suffice to introduce the idea that suicide is understood here as Janus-faced, oriented towards both death and destruction and life and survival: “It appears that *most* suicidal acts are gambles with death, and *most* suicidal acts are undertaken with ambivalent intentions. This clearly has important implications for theorising about and attempting to explain suicides.” (Taylor 1982:143)

There are vast discrepancies between the ethnographic experience, ‘ear-to-the-ground reporting’ and national statistical data. Keohane and Kuhling (2004 cited above) talk about how anecdotal evidence may suggest what official behavioural mapping has yet to identify. Walker points out how an inquest must be held by coroners in all deaths that occur in a “violent and sudden manner” or “suddenly from unknown causes” (Walker 2008:70). After the inquest a confidential form is filled out by the Gardaí (Police) which is then passed on to the Central Statistics Office (CSO) where it is registered as a national statistic. This leaves a lag in registration that can extend for years. Within a set community a suicide is determined and communicated almost immediately after the fact compared to the process of classification and registration where coroners, the Gardaí and the CSO are involved. Sweeney and colleagues (2009) comment on the delay in official reporting and registration of official statistics which make it difficult to identify and intervene

against “community cluster effects” (2009:104). Acknowledging this important ‘lag’ the authors call for high-quality research on suicide in Ireland that must emphasise the needs of specific communities and population groups. Finally, they express their disappointment at a comment made in an 2008 Health Research Board (HRB) where the HRB admittedly lamented the lack of detailed empirical research on suicide Ireland yet persisted that when it came to “unearthing the contributing factors involved in a suicide death, “we must remain in the dark”” (Sweeney et.al. 2009:104). The authors ask: in what other aspect of research into any other public health concern of such importance would such a perspective ever be applied? ”Surely, we must investigate underlying factors associated with suicide risk by researching the relationships between experiences of the *lived life*, e.g. mental and physical health, adversity, social ties, heretofore unresearched in Ireland.” (2009:104 my emphasis)

Few things will ever shake and devastate a community like the news of a suicide, and certainly not when they are reported with frequency. One could argue that one important difference between local reporting from people who knew the person (in most cases very well) and the coroners’ reports is that the former know circumstances better and would be better equipped to determine whether or not their friend or family member died by suicide. Therefore “a general acceptance by family and friends that a person had in fact died by suicide” (Walker 2008:64) is given particular importance in classifying individual suicides and possible explanatory factors. More immediate relations would also hold the key to some aspects of the life that was rejected as they are familiar with and are even likely to share important elements of it.

The gender ratio in Irish suicides is 1:4, -for every female suicide at least four men take their own lives. In my field I have together with my informants, had reports of some twenty suicides in the locality and surrounding areas in the latter three years of my study -all of them male. Local reports reflect national statistics and qualitative research on suicide with regards to suicide methods. The vast majority of men had died by hanging and the second most used method used was drowning. So called ‘contagion suicides’ have also been a devastating feature over the last few years. One young lad I spoke to had been affected worse than most for his young age (20). He

had lost eight of his friends (again all male) to suicide within less than three years. Another common feature amongst local narratives is that of completely unexpected passings where suicide victims had just been seen the day before their deaths described as, ‘chatting away’ and ‘he seemed grand’.

Walker’s very important study also points to the differences between national averages and demographic particularities. According to a 2006 Oireachtas report the sociodemographic vulnerabilities to suicide are; being male, under 35, single, unemployed, separated or divorced. (Walker 2008:13) The high numbers of suicides within the Traveller community for example, became apparent to Walker in the field where she served as a social worker for Wicklow County Council in the 1990’s. However, the CSO does not categorise suicides according to ethnic group hence making invisible the now acknowledged fact that suicide within the Irish Traveller community was on average three times higher than the national average. (Walker 2008:1) Walker also shows that the gender ratio of the suicide numbers within this demographic are much higher in that ‘the male suicide rate is 91%, over nine times as common as female suicide.’ (Walker 2008:xi)

The CSO figures show an 8 per cent decrease in suicide from the record high of 527 in 2009 to 486 in 2010. The following two years showed a further increase of 525 in 2011 and 507 in 2012. I hold these figures under the suspicion that they are highly under-representative of the actual numbers of suicides in Ireland. Also, as I will emphasise throughout this study, any national average does not reflect the local, social realities where gender, ethnicity, social class, age, and sexuality, structure suicidal tendencies within a specific population. The charity Console has stated that the “national rate of 11 deaths per 100,000 of the population masked some “alarming” regional data. It said the figures were “only part of the picture of suicide in Ireland”. When analysed by region, the suicide rate in Limerick city was 26.6 per 100,000, while it was 25.6 in Cork city”. (The Irish Times 01-06-2013) Kept at arm’s length, statistics still serve to “indicate those differences that warrant further investigation.” (Sainsbury 1972:193) I have taken national statistics on suicide to warrant further in-depth research into demographic particularities and vulnerabilities.

## 1.4 Main methods and Ethical considerations

Anthropology's task is to highlight the structures of the particular, and, how people within these structures make sense out of life as they live it. I have chosen to look at suicide by looking at different aspects of life and focus on life-styles rather than suicidal biographies. I will highlight the norms and beliefs that inform the lads' behaviours within the socioeconomic and cultural context in which they live. In this study I rely as much on direct and continuous participant observation as I do on interviews. A study solely based on interviews would have been insufficient. There are many things that are left unsaid on the topics of suicide and self-destruction and, even more so, on the rather uncomfortable association between masculinity and "weakness" which is strictly avoided by the young lads in the field.

I did attempt for a very short time to distribute questionnaires amongst 'the lads' and young men in the wider community but to no avail. The questions were based on the statements from the National office for Suicide Prevention (NSRF) survey *The Male Perspective: Young Men's Outlook on Life* (Begley et.al. 2004). This, I thought, could be a good opportunity to elaborate of some of the issues put forward in the report. However, anonymous surveys often fall short due to lack of self-reporting amongst men in particular. This will be discussed in detail in part 4. Out of my 40 trial handouts only a handful came back. I have thus chosen to follow in the footsteps of many anthropological classics in looking at what people actually do in relation to what they say. For the most part my main method in the field was to relax and enjoy the company, the trust and friendships offered, and of course, the *craic*<sup>4</sup>. My interest in what the lads actually do, how and what they communicate with me and each other, led me to many insights into the workings of lad culture and the lads' struggle in dealing with the fact that the conditions of the lives they expected to lead were changing in ways that were painful and debilitating.

As I have already mentioned, I was already established in the field as people in the neighbourhood and surrounding areas looked on with horror at the mounting suicides

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<sup>4</sup> A colloquial term in Irish loosely translated as fun/enjoyment. It is also a social activity closely connected to alcohol and binge or as I say here 'the drink'.

amongst local young men. When I first arrived in Cork in March of 2008, before the recession, I got a quick and short-lasting look into a life where work and means for enjoyment were readily available to the lads. It was truly an act of serendipity that I came to settle in Cork and not in any of the other places I had in mind when I made my very first trip to Ireland in January 2008. I had arrived for a week's visit to select a field for my MA thesis. I was meant to choose between Belfast and Drogheda when I spent my last night in Dublin before flying back to Stockholm. It just so happened that I sat next to an Australian couple in Temple Bar and got caught up in their conversation. I told them about my plans and was quickly advised to go to Cork. As I came back two months later it was "Aussie" who introduced me to 'the lads'.

The lively and extended social scene made it easy to get to know the lads who then spent most of their time in pubs, different sporting events, house parties and barbeques. They were generous with their time and camaraderie as long as I was willing to join the party but took very little interest in my research at first. At that stage I was writing about republicanism and cultural formations of masculinity for my Master's degree at the University of Uppsala. It was only on a couple of occasions that I was asked about my stay in Ireland and my particular interest in 'lad culture': On one such occasion I was in the pub for a sporting event. One of the lads who was fairly drunk asked me what I was going to write about. I said without going into too much detail that my study was about masculinity in Ireland to which the young lad asked me: "Shouldn't you be studying women?" "Feminism like?" I said that it had been done before. To this he replied with a laugh: "I know it's *boring* isn't it?"

On another occasion I got to know an even more curious character in the group. I was at a party at a house shared by two lads and was told beforehand about this 'fella' that I was 'really gonna wanna met' but who was suspicious towards newcomers. The party went on from midday Friday and lasted for the rest of the weekend. This, I was to learn, was how most weekends were spent. After some hours in the kitchen corner starrng at people –me mostly- and after several ecstasy pills, the young man approached me and asked what I was doing there. It was obvious that he already knew something about why I was there. One of the lads quickly said,



“she’s writing about you in this book, see?” to which all the lads started laughing. Most of the lads had grown up together and knew each other in a way that made much of their behaviour obvious and predictable to each other. In this way I was often introduced to characters and anecdotes before I met the actual person. As word had already spread about me they also knew about me before introductions were made.

I arrived at an interesting time and a dramatic breaking point: I caught a glimpse of the lads’ life before the recession and followed them into a new life marked by the loss of jobs -opportunity and prospects-, and lives –through both emigration and suicide. Never will life become as visible as when things and people reach breaking point and established structures become undone. This point also becomes a moment of critical reflection and new questions are asked. In this curious situation, the researcher is not alone in her enquiries. Perhaps now, more than would have been the situation if life would have carried on as before, I was approached by people –many times in secret- who wanted to know what I knew and tell me what they knew. This became the situation in 2009, a year into my stay in Cork, as those who were now my friends asked “what the hell is going on??!”

Since 2009 I observed the young lads dressed in white shirts and ties in the cemetery burying their young friends and in the pub afterwards as they drank and tried their best to cope. My initial transgressions as I tried to talk about suicide, masculinity and weakness, and the reception and sometimes corrections made by my informants have been considered both in analysis and in showing the lads their due respect. Some individuals have felt the need for, and have thus instigated conversations on personal experiences of suicides. These informants have been treated with outmost care and confidentiality and have ultimately been referred to the proper agencies and services. They are not included here as this information is beyond the scope of this research and because anyone in the close-knit communities is too easily recognised. There are no concerns or possibilities of disclosing identifiable information on any deceased person as no individual case is mentioned or discussed in this study.

To insist on the disclosure of sensitive revelations instead of paying valuable attention to the actual means of communications like avoidance, relief (humour,

banter and mocking), social surveillance etc. is not only disrespectful to individuals and group dynamics but in the end, the ethnographic data. Finally, as was agreed with the participants, those who did open up in conversations with me on the general issues of suicide, masculinity and vulnerability (which are personal reflections all the same) approached me with reassurance of anonymity and the guarantee that they themselves could edit or withdraw any quotation before publication. No one is mentioned by name. Instead I have applied a collective pseudonym for all participating young men in the study which is “one of the lads”. (For the young women “one of the girls”.) For quotes and transcript extracts I use the letter “X”, and if more than one voice is included in a dialogue the subsequent inputs will come from “Y”, “Z” and so on.

All local informants who contributed by interview were asked to sign a ‘Declaration of participation’. This was an agreement to contribute to “the anthropological field work conducted by me, the author, between March 2008 to July 2012.” ‘The lads’ and ‘the girls’ were then given photocopies of the transcripts some time after the interviews had taken place so that they could read through and carefully reflect on the comments given. They were all given the opportunity at this stage to alter, delete or add comments to the transcript before signing them off and handing them back to me.

## **1.5 Selection of research and authors**

Much of the research on the topics of gender, self-destruction and social change are treated in a kind of pan-phenomenological manner where implicitly the Western world (mostly English-speaking) is debated in a culturally and socially neutral manner. Although this very broad cultural map share many similar patterns I see this approach as highly inappropriate for this thesis where I explicitly and consistently refer to the specifics of culture, class, gender, and age. In highlighting local, socially

and culturally specific problems which I would suggest, have equally specific solutions, I have made efforts to explicitly distinguish the different settings. Reading about cases and empirical examples on the contemporary issues ‘on men’ for example, one is mostly left with the impression that whether the context is Australia, the US or Britain is irrelevant. Even in the case of Irish-British relations where history, politics and culture are often inseparable and similarities are abundant, there are still specifics that are relevant. This is why I rely primarily on literature that discusses the specific Irish context. When I refer to an author who is discussing a different social, national, cultural context I will make this explicit.

I found it very rewarding to communicate personally with some of the local authors on contemporary Irish social change and suicide out of my own bibliography. One cannot get more updated information and further reflections than those from direct conversation. In my case, this was of fundamental importance as I am not Irish, was not overly familiar with the historical context and was without first-hand insights into just what changes Ireland had gone through and how this might be qualitatively felt. Finally, it was important to make sense of some rather shocking local reports and discoveries made in the field. Barnes, McCormack, Feeney, Keohane, Kuhling, and MaLachlan (all listed below) were all very helpful and engaging in their meetings with me:

Dr. Cliona Barnes, Department of Sociology, University of Limerick: Barnes’s thesis *Boy Cultures and the Performance Of Teenage Masculinities* (2007), is a classroom ethnography about the reception (and rejection) of the Exploring Masculinities programme (EM) as it was taught to second-level pupils in a working class area in Cork City. Her field work covered the two school years of 2002-2003. The generation of boys studied by Barnes are interestingly in the ‘same-year-generation’ as my ‘lads’ as they *would have* been in, or about to enter the transition year in 2002-03. Hence I follow the same age group some five to ten years later as they enter into the adult world of disappearing manual labour and continue to build on ideological frameworks around the concept of masculinity. Field: Cork

Dr. Maria Feeney, (School of Sociology, University College Dublin)

Dr. Feeney was finishing her PhD thesis *Pain and Distress in Rural Ireland: The Narratives of Men who Engaged in Suicidal Behaviour* (2012) when I met up with

her to discuss the burning of issues of suicide and theories social change. I owe her my Alternative Reading (part 2.2) and interpretation of anomie. Anomie has had significant influence on how Irish research has framed and interpreted Irish modernity and social change and is therefore a major part of this study. Field: Rural west of Ireland.

Dr. Orla McCormack, Department of education, University of Limerick: As it stands clear from the title of her thesis *Exploring Masculinities – the Sequel* (2010), McCormack also investigates EM, as “*An examination of the views and attitudes of Irish parents and a sample of journalists towards the exploration of masculinities with young men at senior cycle*”. Field: Ireland

Dr. Kieran Keohane, (Dep. of Sociology, University College Cork) and Dr. Carmen Kuhling (Dep. of Sociology University of Limerick): Keohane and Kuhling’s books *Collision Culture: Transformation in everyday life in Ireland* (2004) and *Cosmopolitan Ireland: Globalisation and quality of life* (2007) provide the broader theoretical framework on the most important changes Ireland underwent during the ‘boom-years’ and how fundamental cultural, social and economic changes impacted on the quality of life in Ireland. Field: Ireland

Dr. Malcolm MacLachlan: (Dep. Of Psychology, Trinity College Dublin) edited and co-authored *Cultivating Suicide? Destruction of self in a changing Ireland* (2003) and *Binge Drinking – Alternative Perspectives* (2004) These volumes bravely deal with the most inflammatory topics that I also tackle in this study; the complex processes of over-consumption and self-destruction. With the contributing authors’ honesty, self-examining approach and culturally introspective insights these books are important pieces to the very difficult and painful puzzle I lay out in the following chapters. Field: Ireland

There are some other relevant researchers that have explored the issues of Irish lad culture and social change in Ireland that deserves mentioning. Although the authors were not interviewed for my research their texts have greatly informed this thesis and my own learning:

Gaetz, S (1997): *Looking Out for the Lads* is based on an ethnographic study in Cork carried out in the 1980's, a time also marked by a deep recession. With its focus on community action this book considers in detail the workings and structures of lad culture. Field: Cork

Cleary, A. School of Sociology, University College Dublin: I believe the relevance Cleary's work *Young Men on the Margins: Suicidal behaviour amongst young men*, (2005b) is rather self-explanatory to my work. In the same year, Cleary also edited a special edition on masculinity in the Irish Journal of Sociology where she wrote one of the articles which critically addressed culturally informed coping mechanisms and male vulnerability to self destruction *Death Rather Than Disclosure: Struggling to be a real man.* (2005a) Field: Ireland

Inglis, T: (Dep. Of Sociology, University College Dublin) I look to Inglis's texts; *Global Ireland – Same difference* (2008) and *Moral Monopoly: The rise and fall of the Catholic Church in modern Ireland* (1998 [1987]) for an 'home-grown analysis' of how traditional Catholic morality was learnt and embodied by the Irish and how this became "intuitive knowledge" and "an in-built, automatic way of relating to situations" (1998:10). I was raised by parents (one born Catholic and one Protestant) who had denounced religion or was indifferent to it. Also, I was born in a secular society where morality is structured and operates differently. For these reasons I had to rely on 'insider-sources' (also O'Connell (2001), Garvin (2005), Cleary and Brannick (2007)) who discuss, based on research and personal experience, the "inherent, inner logic to the practice of Irish Catholicism which those involved know and understand and enact almost intuitively." (Inglis 1998:10)

With some helpful inputs from local authors I have come to contextualise what to me have become some very useful concepts; van Gennep's and Turner's extended or permanent "liminality" (thanks Dr. Kieran Keohane) and "disavowal of dependence" (thanks Dr. Carmen Kuhling). In those cases where concepts and theories have been discussed in person with the authors they will appear as interviews as any other statement or quotation in the text.

Finally, I could not but turn my gaze back to Sweden and relate back to how in the Swedish context, it is young *women* who have been the focus of public and academic

debate for quite some time as the sufferers of the demands of (post)modernity. Swedish research on the gendered crisis of self-mutilating and self-sacrificing girls and young women are in abundance while academic literature and debates on male suicide are a bit of a scarcity. (The Swedish gender ratio is just over 2:1, male to female) To make sure I consulted with my MA supervisor and leading man on masculinity studies in Sweden, Lars Jalmert (University of Stockholm) who confirmed that there have been no significant or recent developments on the issue of male suicide in Sweden. That concerns in the Swedish debate focus on women adds a new interesting dimension to the development on a concept that I will highlight as part of my study: Susan Bordo's (2004) historical analysis of "gendered histories" (see part 2:6) helps explain the contrast of public debate on gender in Sweden (Wiklund 2010, Dagens Nyheter 2009) and in Ireland and how discourses and understandings of gender are contextually specific and shaped by culture.

What is important to note here is how all these authors emphasise culture as a fundamental focal point in their analyses whether it be binge drinking; suicide, social change, or the implementation of educational programmes to interrupt the problematic and self-destructive behaviours of Irish young lads.

### **1.6 Ethnographic reflexivity: Participating in the *Craic*<sup>5</sup>**

*"The ethnographer needs to be sensitive to the nature of, and conditions governing, their own participation as part of their developing understanding of the people they study."* (Davies 1999:73)

The dramatic reports on suicide shocked me as well as the entire community. Because this happened while I was already established in the field, I found myself in

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<sup>5</sup> Here bluntly translated as "fun" or "good times". This Irish term will be thoroughly analysed in part 5 which is in part dedicated to this concept.

a different situation in where the problem was not hand-picked before I found a location. Not only confusing and ‘new’ I have also been made to feel with everyone else around me what a local atmosphere becomes after so many losses of young lives. In a recent conversation a young woman commented on just how eerie she and her partner perceive the now well established local ambiance and mood to be. She told me about how the local soccer teams now take down their goal posts after every match after a number of young men have hung themselves by these goal posts at night. Funeral after funeral one wonders, as a couple of the lads have put it to me: “who will be next?” In a painful setting like this, I have also come to appreciate just how important it is to divert angst in whatever way possible and ‘let go’ of an otherwise overwhelming feeling of despair.

By talking about issues that are normally not talked about (especially with outsiders and particularly by and among men), I have already influenced and altered the field. By first acknowledging my unavoidable interference with normal practice, what I need to include in my analysis then, is *how* did I interfere? As already discussed I have tried to keep this to a minimum by not ‘banging on’ about suicide, masculinity and vulnerability but instead looking at how these issues are tackled through other interactive strategies; avoidance, relief, social surveillance etc. This seemed appropriate since these strategies are identified in contemporary research, but also by the lads themselves, as the main hindrance in coping with depression and personal difficulties and to be an important aspect of a gender specific problem. The crucial requirement here is time. When quick answers to direct questions are methodologically inappropriate and practically impossible, the only option becomes to *wait and see* as behavioural patterns unfold and cultural scripts are played out. The ethnographer needs to remain, be seen and known in the field. Consistent and close proximity to the community is essential and any ‘hit-and-run ethnography’ is strictly out of the question. The four years spent with local participants and the wider communities were absolutely necessary due to the sensitivity of the topic and, the sensitivity owed to participants.

During my time as a tutor in Maynooth I consulted the first-year anthropology students in my four Friday groups what they reckoned would be my biggest issues as I attempted to tackle this issue of male suicide in Cork. Conducting a field study

among young, working-class, white, settled males in Cork on a subject as sensitive as suicide, -myself being a young, no longer working-class, mixed race female from Stockholm -there are some specific hurdles. Some students thought I should be careful “not trying to fit in and be one of the lads too much”, others thought that trying to get “lads to open up to an outsider” would be my greatest difficulty. Another student argued against this saying that being an outsider “would probably be my one advantage”. Seeing as I had not grown up alongside the young men and women and their families and would be less involved in local gossip, intrigues and conflicts a certain and required level of distance and ‘objectivity’ would open up for some necessary confidentiality. I have found both sides to be right:

Initially the difficulty was, as would be expected, to give reassurance as an outsider that I would not reveal anyone’s personal issues. Later on in the field work, what I came to represent, not only as an outsider but as a confidential and non-judgmental, academic, young, female Swede, lead to more confidence and trust than I would sometimes know what to do with. However, what I believe is all the more telling of how the lads perceive their social positioning, is that to some of the lads, the simple fact that I took an interest was the main factor for those who decided to contribute and very explicitly *help* with my work.

I had been chatting with the lads about what I do and life in general for over two years before I started recording a few one-on-one sessions with some of the lads who I was by then close to. In one such interview on the many suicides in the area I asked one of the lads why he usually would not talk about these serious issues with anyone. He said that he had tried to be subtle about it as he first mentioned it to me and that the reason he did talk to me about it was because he considered me to be a friend and that he knew I would listen. He was of course ‘after a few drinks’ when he brought it up as well: “That’s the only time you can talk about it really.” Mainly he said: “If you told anyone else they wouldn’t really listen... They’d try and blank it out. They wouldn’t really talk to you properly about it.” (one of the lads, age 24) I initially thought it was because of my ‘sensitivity’ and ‘expertise’ as a researcher that he was willing to talk to me. As an outsider, I stand out by being particularly interested in what is going on in the lads’ lives and what they think but ultimately I was approached as a friend. When ‘the lads’ are mentioned in public debate and in the



media, it is as joy riders, for their anti-social behaviour, their immaturity and now, as an alarmingly overrepresented *category* in suicide statistics.

Theory, method and analysis are fundamentally intertwined. The controversial issues in this research require a great deal of ethnographic reflexivity and self-confrontation. Not only do I observe but I also partake in processes of over-consumption (and hence by definition self-destruction). I will thus have to include some other complex considerations: How do I analyse the interviews that I have conducted with the lads after, as a prerequisite, getting a few cans of beer? Even the informants that are very close to me and who I strainlessly interact with on a near day-to-day basis have insisted on having a few cans when they go on record to talk about the topics related to my research. It should be noted nonetheless that we did not have to finish any number of cans or get drunk before being able to talk. Interviews would start carefully but without being intoxicated in the slightest yet the need to include “the drink” for what was about to be formally addressed set the only tone that would enable this type of sensitive and serious conversation. The very important question remains: Do I include drunken comments? Do I trust the statements less than those made by someone who is sober or is the opposite true? If so, why?

I decided to ask those who would know best. I put this very specific question to the lads themselves in their ‘declaration of participation’. At this stage the lads are asked to read the full transcript(s) of their own interview(s) *absolutely sober*, months after the interview was conducted. They were then free to alter, delete or leave the text unchanged however they saw fit. It was at this stage that I put the question to them: “Also, we talk in some interviews of how one needs to be drunk to talk about these sensitive things (suicide, depression). If we do an interview where we talk about suicide (or any other difficult topic) and you are drinking or even drunk, would your statement be less true or accurate or, should I trust what you say even more? If so why? Please explain.”

One statement I got back was from one of the lads, then sober, after he had signed a transcribed interview over a year after the fact was: “Trust what I say even more

because I'm being open and honest. Maybe some "rambling" but it's just easier to speak about these issues after a few drinks."

Here is where my theoretical approach becomes intertwined with my methods. To imply tradition; psychological (release, escape), social (communication, the qualities of relations), and cultural elements (terms of conduct and scripts) I will use "*the drink*" instead of 'alcohol consumption'. 'The drink' is also the colloquial term which describes a social forum and even, as both friend and foe, a social entity. This broader meaning becomes apparent in how the drink is discussed amongst my informants who describe going 'on' or 'off the drink' or declare how much they 'love the drink'. The drink was the prerequisite that would accompany the lads and me as we sat down to talk about what would otherwise be avoided. The properties and characteristics of 'the drink', its functions as a social lubricant serves the ethnographer whose analysis *is and depends on* the same social fabric that operates in their field of study. As I mentioned above, I became involved and befriended the lads through 'the drink'. Trust was gained in the pubs, at house parties and later on, through ceremonial drinking in our front room. There is a certain intimacy gained from mutual and regular bingeing-occasions that would otherwise have taking considerable time, like growing up together, to achieve. Also, as the mind deflects all inhibitions, the drink provides an important opportunity to re-set its initial settings and to take in new senses and impulses. Peace concludes in his study of Irish rural fishermen and "drinking's contribution to the reproduction of social identities within the community" (Peace 1991:3):

"Finally, it is in such settings [the local pubs] and with several rounds of drink behind them, I propose, that fishermen are able to not only take stock of the social relations around them but also reflexively evaluate their own particular circumstances within that social field and their own social selves." (Peace 1991:14)

In a different study set among middle-class university-lads in Manchester, Gough and Edwards (1998) took particular interest in "men's talk *during* a fairly typical drinking gathering (rather than talk *about* alcohol related activities prompted by a researcher)" (1998:411 emphasis in orig.). In these sessions the authors argue, influenced by alcohol, opportunities are given for release and allowance of "hyper

masculine banter” and other discourses perceived as inappropriate in every day public contexts. (1998:431) This they say, is masculinity in the making, the negotiations of male roles, identities and relationships: “the consumption of beer (in particular) with fellow males seems to be a potent resource for the enactment of conventional masculine identities”. (1998:409)

As I will argue in relation to ritualistic relief and contextually specific stressors for the lads in this Irish context, alcohol does play a part in ‘doing masculinity’ but it also allows for displays of affection, intimacy, sharing and emotionality, spheres and aspects that in this cultural setting are more ‘taboo’ than political incorrectness. The social requirements for any interview and topic depend in this case *on context* and the gendered expectations attached; me as a female and whether the person interviewed is male or female, communication skills and scripts, norms and, how I have earned the participants’ acceptance and trust.

During my field work with *malandros* (gangsters) in Caracas Venezuela where I did my 2006 MA thesis for the University of Stockholm, I interviewed the young men in groups. In the field in Cork I had to interview all the young men individually and anonymously because of their own admitted concerns about being exposed, mainly to each other. In the Venezuelan context the male participants were very eager to declare their views not only to me but to the other participants in the group, both male and female. For them, the issue was very much political and there were no inhibitions when it came to sharing personal narratives of stress, sadness and loss, violence and trauma. In many cases these group sessions were both intimate and emotional. For the current study again, in the relatively lengthy interviews with the local girls, a different social setting became possible. The young women were interviewed either alone where alcohol was neither involved nor mentioned or, in groups where conversation and debate lasted over hours accompanied by wine and snacks.

During my work in Cork the main issue also became to stay long enough to ‘get the joke’. (This idea will be explored at various stages throughout the thesis.) The jokes are not supposed to be funny once one steps into a different moral setting yet the field work could not have been executed without this understanding. It is a

controversial endeavour getting to self-destruction through over-consumption and the use of humour but these elements are intrinsically linked within the group dynamics amongst the lads. By acknowledging (and more importantly observing) the *craic*, the funny –the humour and bravado, I am not undermining the severity of binge drinking culture, drug abuse, recklessness etc. -I am critically addressing it. The physiological and psychological damages caused by alcohol and drugs are only part of the problem of self-destruction (hence the distinction between alcohol and ‘the drink’). The real *meaning* behind binge and its compensating functions will draw light towards what is really going on within the destructive processes themselves. Smyth (*et.al.*) argue that these problems must be understood “not as singular entities but as interconnected and mutually reinforcing or diminishing phenomenon” (MacLachlan in Smyth et.al. 2003:x): “such thinking is central to the practice of social sciences: problems need to be considered in a broad societal context, rather than being seen as discrete entities in isolated systems working away on their own.” (ibid.)

Participating, observing and all the while reflecting on the compensatory functions of the *craic*, banter and mocking I came to appreciate the social support offered amongst the lads. In the end I am left with a very personal question indeed: Do I have a drinking problem? I have now left the most extravagant aspects from the field behind and can now answer ‘no’ with some confidence. I do however still appreciate the positive qualities of both the *craic* and binge. Inglis declares: “It may well be, then, that what attracts cosmopolitans to Irish pubs is partly the attraction of letting go, of becoming detached from over-involvement in the world, through a ritualistic form of self-elimination achieved through hard drinking.” (Inglis 2008:100)

Indeed. It is not by chance that choice of topic, field work, social context, interactional requirements and ethnographer are what they are and ‘get on’ so well. I did not mind at any one stage participating in the pubs or any other of the many, many ‘drinking sessions’ during my four years with the lads. I still don’t. On my last visit to Stockholm I picked up a free ‘Irish-Swedish’ magazine in one of Stockholm’s many Irish pubs. There was an article in this issue that described the different drinking cultures in Sweden and in Ireland:

”And in Ireland ”Alcohol” is not a bad word like it is in Sweden. If an Irish person goes to work with a bit of a hangover their boss will tease them, if it happens in Sweden, panic strikes and the medical people are called in, and this poor person is named an alcoholic and probably gets sacked.” (ACE Publications 2011:7)

‘Writing back’ on processes over-consumption and self-destruction; what they mean and how they are structured, what emotions are at work and what functions they fill, would not have been possible without having shared the drinking sessions with the lads. It would have made this study objective, impersonal, superficial and un-lived. There are loads of those studies around already.

### **1.7 The structure of the thesis**

The dramatic times in which this fieldwork took place require an explanation as to what happened in, and to Ireland. To do this I will start part 2 with a discussion on how the social sciences have theorised social change. Particular attention will be given to anomie, a concept that has been used for over a century to explain the causal effects between social change (modernity) and suicide. In part 3 I outline the socioeconomic and macropolitical specifics of this change in Ireland focusing specifically on age (youth) and social class. Part 4 focuses on the different aspects of gender and expectations of masculinity. Considering the differential impact of social change I will look at the effects and implications of specific changes as they trickle down and manifest themselves amongst the lads. In part 5 I move even further into the lived and complex processes the lads have immersed themselves in. I will frame the lads’ liminal experience through a discussion on gendered practices of self-destruction. Part 6 will end the thesis with a discussion that will bridge the broader context with the particular: I will do this by re-theorising the social and gendered processes of relief, coping and cultural resistance.

For now, I wish to stress one more time: My aim here is not to analyse any one’s death but the life conditions that were abandoned, recklessly lost or defiantly rejected. I will show how what might seem to be collectively damaging processes of

self-destruction also fill complex and contextually specific functions of relief and comfort against macropolitical structures that are ignored in current debates on suicide prevention. Relevant research suggests that the suicidal behaviours expressed by young men today “is not a defining characteristic of their lives. Rather, it should be seen as a by-product of a life beset by multiple problems and a range of self-damaging behaviours.” (Sharpe cited in Smalley et.al. 2005:150)

Under “Future research and implications for action” Wiklund writes, based on her on findings about the gendered contemporary history and stressors among young Swedish women:

“The age and gender gaps in the subjective health and stress of adolescents and young adults need to be further explored, particularly from sociocultural and gender perspectives, as well as young people’s own perspectives; qualitative studies are suitable for this purpose. Explanation models based on young people’s own experiences of their lives and health can be further developed through future explorative studies. Girls’ and young women’s (as well as boys’ and young men’s) experiences of stress and strain in life can be further studied in other contexts and sub-groups. In addition, young people’s own solutions and suggestions are important to investigate.” (Wiklund 2010:81)

## 2. THEORISING SOCIAL CHANGE IN IRELAND

*“Though human society has roots which lie deeper in history than the beginning of human life, men have made comparatively but little progress in solving the problem of their aggregate existence. Each century originates a new complexity and each new generation faces a new vexation in it.”* (Niebuhr R. 1960:3)

*“Not only indicators of collapse, but also strong economic growth, rapid technification and high employment security can unleash the storm that will sail or float into a new epoch. --- --- --- The insignificance, familiarity and often the desirability of the changes conceal their society-changing scope. More of the same, so people believe, cannot produce anything qualitatively new.”* (Beck et al 1994:3-4)

The following chapter is a discussion on the overall context of the fieldwork. The primary focus is on social and cultural change in Ireland at the time of writing: I will look at how social change has been theorised in the past and how it is viewed now; transformations that have echoed through time, ‘more of the same’ and the genuinely ‘new’ that go beyond “traditional *fin de siècle* anxieties” (McDowell 2003:20). I will also consider the different consequences these changes have in relation to gender, class and age. This chapter is an analysis of suicide and unsustainable life-styles and how these are structured; socially and culturally, by gender, and how they are positioned historically.

It is clear that the transition from traditional values to what is now often referred to as ‘post-traditional’ Ireland goes back almost a century. However, this transition has accelerated significantly since the time of Ireland’s first classic ethnography from county Clare in 1937 by Conrad Arensberg who had this to say about traditional Ireland:

“In retaining older custom and a more intense emotional and purely social organization of life, Ireland may well have a preserved better than most nations of western civilization that unity of spirit which, underneath strife, welds a nation into a single crucible. If the rationale of economic and social individualism with its attempted divorce between sentiment and logical self-interest seems lacking, the matter is no cause for lamentation or disdain. Who ultimately knows which is the better way? Each people seek its own better union; unconsciously in social habit,

consciously through religion, through politics, through detached and enlightened social thought. Either the conscious or the unconscious may be the more congenial, to nations as well as to individuals. But danger lies in neglecting one entirely for the other.” (Arensberg 1937:154)

Anthropologists have long played a part in pushing forward the cultural diagnoses of an ever declining yet ever preserving Ireland. Saris speaks of themes related “to aspects of European ethnography in general and Irish ethnography in particular.” (2000:13) At its peak at the end of the twentieth century, the Irish mental hospital became the domicile of one per cent of the Irish population. Saris explores this colonial heritage of Irish institutionalisation and “how narratives that invoke a “tradition” stretching back into contested and intellectually murky histories can be experienced as felt orientations within a cultural environment.” (ibid.) Scheper-Hughes’s ethnography, also set in the rural West of Ireland, examined how stagnant traditions and mass emigration had led to a situation where the last remaining farmer sons who had inherited the family plot were left behind with ageing parents in an isolated and emotionally deprived world. She described how not all, but a minority of young bachelor men:

“grew into angry, isolated, hurt, and bitter individuals, cut off from the flow of human life. Some of these became depressed and alcoholic bachelor farmers who populated the several village pubs that catered to the village; others became the saintly hermits who retreated to their barns and sought companionship in their dogs and cows; still other became mental patients at St. Finan’s hospital, men who were often obsessed with paranoid fears of bodily encroachment or possessed by unfulfilled and unruly sexual and generative needs and fantasies.” (2001[1979]:46)

Suicide was the ultimate way out for a generation “caught between old and new social systems and moral economies and between conflicting interpretations of the values of autonomy, industry, intimacy, and generativity.” (2001[1979]:49) Scheper-Hughes’s diagnosis was one that has accompanied Ireland for counting generations said to be burdened by their own suffocating moral codes and at the same time suffering from their disappearance:



“Given the observable values conflicts and threats to social self-identity that were already apparent in An Clochán in the mid-1970s I might have anticipated this diagnostic and experiential shift from schizophrenia to depression and suicide. Indeed the villages Durkheimian paradigm of anomie, the loss of moral force, meaning, and certainty, accompanying the transition to a more secular, industrialized, and materialist society in which the rights and demands of the individual would begin to conflict with those of family, Church, and community.” (2001[1979]:50)

She paints a melancholic if not crushingly depressing picture of a ‘collective social tragedy’ of harmful family dynamics that is embedded deep in the Irish collective unconsciousness. In fact it is so deeply incorporated into the social organisation of Ireland’s declining South and West that the data she had uncovered, and which the people studied later read, unleashed a violence of its own. As the subjects of Scheper-Hughes’s study read her analysis they became aware of their own dilemma, “thus exacerbating their sense of entrapment in a no-exit, double binding situation. Insight without the power to change the conditions of one’s existence is cruel indeed.” (2001[1979]:46)

Fears about abandoning a historically unified and always rural and collectivistic Ireland have also been accompanied by angst towards “tradition” -which has become quite a tradition in itself. Kiberd discussed the Irish nationalism of Eamonn de Valera’s new, ‘far-from-free state’ (Kiberd 1996:266) who in 1922 recruited “a past for a war against the future” (ibid. p. 303). At the same time, embarrassment and contempt towards the ‘old ways’ is observed in Arensberg’s field study: the morally corrupted young man engendering ‘near-urban values’ and ‘grand ideas’ with little or no regard for past traditions (1937:151). In Scheper-Hughes classic and much debated ethnography we read about the small Kerry farmer’s embarrassment over his under-achieving “grass of three cows and six sheep”. (1979:42)

O’Connell’s gives an account of a traditional Ireland which could easily be described as “a bleak, economically feeble, intellectually closed, begrudging, priest-ridden,

sexually repressed but also hypocritical and smug land.” (2001:26) He follows up with an assessment that could equally be deemed a logical outcome: “Perhaps given its awfulness, we have been racing from what we were towards what we are now without any reflection or planning in between –a change based on panic and self-disgust.” (2001:26) The critique of the boom-days and its taste for and conviction of the evolutionary superiority of progress created the ‘rush-culture’ described by contemporaries Smyth et. al. (*Cultivating Suicide?* 2003), O’Connell (*Changed Utterly* 2001), and Keohane and Kuhling (*Collision Culture* 2004 and *Cosmopolitan Ireland* 2007) Inglis (*Global Ireland* 2008) and many others. This era instead, seemed to recruit an imagined future for a war against the past. There is an interesting continuum between the two views to be observed in Irish ‘traditional’ and ‘post-traditional’ debate.

The academic, traditional showcase of ‘stagnant, crazy and self-mutilating Ireland’ was not recognised by or present in my informants’ reflections about the current conditions of Irish society as it takes on, to them, a new gloom in its own right. Now often referred to as the ‘celtic cubs’, this generation that grew up during the ‘Celtic Tiger’ knew an Ireland that did not suffer from mass-emigration and decline but one that saw the first major upswing in migration the country had experienced –ever. The lads, and even the young women that have gone to college, did not see the images of Saints, Scholars and Schizophrenics as a familiar concept or in any major way reflective of their national heritage. Towards the end of my study, one of the girls came to me with an idea of something she would like to study –schizophrenia. I recommended of course, the within academic circles much debated work by Scheper-Hughes (1979) as a great place to start. I added that there really should not be any problem finding a lot more literature on the topic since Ireland, and the Irish, have become particularly linked to discussions on schizophrenia. “Fuck off!!!!” she says. “No way!!” None of the participants in this study recognised the classically studied idea of ‘Irish-repressive-crazy’. Born and raised during the Celtic Tiger, the generation of lads and young women in this study genuinely believed in the incessant progress of their country. That Ireland had been anything but a modern and successful country was part of an old story relevant only as historical pride -a survival story of previous generations. My informants’ main preoccupation was with

contemporary Ireland now tormented by massive job losses, a new and quickly growing number of young emigrants and rising suicide figures. ‘Professional opinions’ however, by the agencies set out to fight against and prevent current suicide trends in Ireland, still rest upon much of this theorising of social change, decline and anomie.

### **2.1 Anomie- the sociological explanation for suicide (past and present)**

*“The first theory developed to explain the societal factors associated with changing national suicide rates is generally credited to sociologist Émile Durkheim and his development of the concept of ‘social deregulation’ or anomie.”* (Lucey, S. Corcoran P. et.al. 2005:90)

The concept of anomie was coined by Durkheim in 1897 (*Le Suicide*) and the first anomie scale was later developed by Leo Srole in the 1950’s in order to measure a range of psychological experiences identified as anomic:

- A sense of social isolation (that personal relationships are no longer trustworthy or reliable)
- A sense of disillusionment (towards leaders).
- A sense of estrangement (the experience of failure and retrogression towards personal goals)
- A sense of powerlessness (due to structural strain).
- A sense of normlessness (the perception of deteriorated social values and standards). (Cohen, D. in Adler & Laufer 2000:189-90)

Suicide as a social (or sociological) fact, anomie as a theoretical concept, and social change still have the same causal relationship in social theory today as it did in Durkheim’s time. Ireland has a range of suicide prevention agencies, organisations and voluntary groups. The overall state-funded agency is the National Office for

Suicide Prevention (NOSP). To carry out the research used in their strategic work on suicide prevention NOSP relies on the National Suicide Research Foundation (NSRF) which is based in Cork. The 2004 report *The Male Perspective – Young Men’s Outlook on Life* produced by the NSRF (Begley et al. 2004) is based on an ‘anomie scale’ which measures the degree to which the individual looks to society for terms of reference or ‘social regulation’.

“Underlying the notion of anomie is the belief that human desire is basically infinite, human beings will always want more unless society controls desires through the existence of everyday shared values and institutionalised rules or laws. Without a sense of accepted social values individual behaviour or desire may not be controlled or regulated and the level of so-called deviant or unacceptable behaviour, including suicide, increases.” (Begley et.al. 2004:5)

Anomie, most commonly associated with Durkheim’s theories on anomic suicide, is “a term derived from the Greek *a* meaning ‘without or ‘away from’ and *nomos* meaning ‘values’ or ‘laws’ (translated as without norms or normlessness).” (Adler & Laufer 2000:272) According to Robert K. Merton, widely acknowledged elaborator of anomie theory, anomie is caused by “a faulty coordination between culture and social structure”. It is the strain produced by a “socially induced disjunction between culturally valued goals and available means for their attainment” (Passass, N. in Adler & Laufer 2000:94) with consequences such as “a weakening of the guiding power of social norms, a loosened social control.” (ibid. p.107) *Strain theory* which is fundamentally linked to Merton’s particular definition of the anomic psychological experience can in a simplified sense be explained as frustration from unattained goals and is more commonly used to explain criminal behaviour.

Another instructive definition particularly relevant to the current Irish context is that anomie is “a by-product of the strain produced by fundamental contradictions in a society before and during times of societal change.” (Waring et.al. in Adler & Laufer 2000:209) Not surprisingly, anomie is also described as “*one of the liveliest dialogues in the history of the social sciences.*” (ibid. p.192 my emphasis) As a theoretical back-drop to my discussion on coping and suicide amongst the lads, I will look at how these definitions apply to this specific context: Can this model with its

focus on strain and frustration from social change or from unattainable goals in an unequal society explain the copings and devastation experienced by the lads? As the main explanatory model for suicide used in Ireland today I pose the question: **As a concept built on abstract generalities, is it really applicable to the specifics of culture and ultimately *real lives*?**

Durkheim chose suicide to demonstrate his principle of ‘social facts’ -that what happens in society can be measured and analysed like any other scientific fact. Durkheim argued that suicide, otherwise thought of as the ultimate individualistic act or even ‘the most egoistic act of all’ was a knowledgeable, observable social fact. What better way of demonstrating sociology’s span? And *how* better than to highlight the most extreme manifestation of the dissolution of social bonds? According to Durkheim, suicide can only be explained sociologically since suicide is a social phenomenon: “what explanatory relations are there between forms of social life and individual acts of abandoning it?” (Taylor 1982:12) My designated task is to make anthropology out of Durkheim’s Grand Theory: I concur with Durkheim’s interpretation of the individual act of suicide as a response to existing social forms (but add) *in relation to cultural resources and demographic particularities*. With “social facts” come cultural *factors*; codes, signifiers and scripts.

Going through much of the Irish literature on social change and/or suicide, the words ‘anomie’ and ‘anomic’ appear frequently. (Begley et.al. 2004, Fahey et.al. 2007:185, Fincham 2011, Kuhling and Keohane 2004 and 2007, Scheper-Hughes 1979, Smyth et.al. 2003 and 2004, O’Brien 2009, Walker 2008 ) For the most part however, this concept is explained with very few words. Anomie has gained an authoritative status and its presence seems to need no validation or further explanation. In the 1970’s Scheper-Hughes used anomie to describe the decreasing moral worth of a small society and “the emotional state of a majority of Ballybran villagers.” (1979:54) Today, state-funded agencies within public health and mental health in Ireland still use anomie as a theoretical starting point. It was however meant as a sociological argument rather than an explanation for actual and demographically specific cases. Smyth et.al. write admittedly: “Although some now argue that Durkheim’s Le Suicide ought to be seen more as a demonstration of sociological methods than as a

study of suicide, it remains one of the key texts discussing the social and cultural aspects of the issue.” (Smyth et.al. 2003:51)

I would like to stress here that I do not intend to account for Durkheim’s original texts but how anomie is used in Irish suicide research today and whether it carries any relevance to my findings regarding the extremely high numbers of suicides amongst the lads. However, I believe one alternative reading might change the applicability of anomie. The difference is that between an explanatory model and a qualitative (felt) state and deserves some particular attention:

## **2.2 Alternative Reading**

In using anomie as a concept, the danger in building theories around a presumed earlier stability becomes obvious. Freda Adler, co-editor and co-author of the extensive volume *The Legacy of Anomie Theory* (2000) coined the concept and term synnomie which she “derived from the Greek *syn* meaning ‘congruence’ or ‘togetherness’ and *nomos* meaning ‘values’ or ‘laws’ (translated ‘with norms’) to describe the condition opposite to anomie. The two ideal types are on opposite sides of a continuum distinguished as follows: *Synnomie*; norm conformity, cohesion, intact social controls and norm integration and *Anomie*; norm divergence, diffusion, defunct social control and disintegration. She clarifies that “(s)ocieties in a ‘state of synnomie’ and societies in a ‘state of anomie’ do not correspond to a concrete reality, but as constructs they allow comparison.” (ibid.)

The idea, reflected in Arensberg’s already mentioned longing for an ossified ‘then’, of ‘traditional’ societies as ‘synommic’ and ‘evolved societies’ as anomic is a common feature in how social change has been theorised in the past. However the norm contradictions that usually follow rapid or gradual change are societal facts

best studied as something constant but variable. Kuhling and Kehone describe Ireland's experience of collision culture:

“– the incomplete and faulted transformation of social structure; strung out on the tensions between the global and the local, between Catholicism and secular materialism, between the rural and the urban, between the moral orders and social institutions of traditional community and modern society. --- --- --- These forms of life and states of consciousness coexist uneasily and incongruously in contemporary Ireland. Tradition and modernity share the same time/space.” (Kuhling and Kehone, 2007:119)

Yet in a sense, all times and spaces share both tradition and ‘modernity’, - old and new. Meštrović and Brown's (1985) investigatory and distinctively clarifying text suggest that ‘normlessness’ and ‘deregulation’, interpreted from Greek's *a-nomos*, are poor translations of *anomie* and has lead to widespread misinterpretation within the social sciences. They claim that the only synonym used by Durkheim himself was *dérèglement*. *Anomie*, they argue, is a relational and painful affliction experienced by both individual and society: “[it] implies a condition of madness or something akin to sin.” (Meštrović and Brown 1985:81) The authors emphasise the importance of the etymology of words and the fact that language and indeed concepts, are social facts as well. *Anomie* has in effect, a life beyond Durkheim and the context and language from which the concept evolved. Meštrović and Brown are not the only theorists who have emphasised the importance of socio-linguistic analysis. In fact, Bourdieu had a keen interest in “the epistemology of the social sciences” (Grenfell 2008:34) and claimed that the concepts, or “thinking tools” within the social sciences are a reflection of the different contexts from which they have sprung and that they must be used with caution, critical revision and a reflexive approach.

Meštrović and Brown focused explicitly and exclusively on the usage of *anomie* and insisted that the ancient Greeks use of *a-nomos*, read as “lawless”, had been lost in translation. Furthermore, the original Greek definition of law was very different from any contemporary definition. (Meštrović and Brown 1985:83) To scholars of classical languages, *a-nomos* is the mismanagement of distribution (indeed a social

malaise): “the dispensation of land, law, and reason are all conceived as sacred tasks; thus, the “mismanagement” of any of these is understood as a form of sacrilege.” (Meštrović and Brown 1985:83). This, according to the authors, is *dérèglement* -the only synonym that Durkheim used in his original French to describe *anomie*.

Hence *anomie*, seen as a social and historically operative fact seems in more recent times to have lost its sensitivity to context. Meštrović and Brown account for the historical meanings of *dérèglement*. Referring to Bourdaloue, one of the linguistic scholars discussed in their text, they explain by giving an example of particular relevance to this study: “the *dérèglement* that is exhibited by the ecclesiastic order and by the priests does harm to Christendom, when they are supposed to provide guidance and exemplify good conduct.” (Bourdaloue cited in Meštrović and Brown 1985:84) Identified as a social ill, inflicted by those who are meant to ‘do good’, *dérèglement* can best be described as the social mismanagement of any social institution. After exploring the etymology of *anomie* and its intended synonym *dérèglement* Meštrović and Brown propose that “Durkheim used *anomie* as the secular equivalent of sin – literally, as a derangement or disarrangement of collective representations.” (Meštrović and Brown 1985:84) As plain as I can possibly put it, *anomie* could by this definition be read as societal heartbreak, a condition many people in today’s Irish society would admit to suffer from.

The different meanings of *anomie* (*dérèglement*) and normlessness are fundamental. “Normlessness is a quantitative expression denoting external controls while Durkheim describes a qualitative state.” (Meštrović and Brown 1985:87) Durkheim, according to Meštrović and Brown, was essentially preoccupied with morality. Hence, structures of moral failure were the structures of *anomie*, -that which both society and individual suffer from:”Durkheim attacks classical economic theory, the lack of ethics in the business profession, and problems with democracy”. (Meštrović and Brown 1985:88) In short, these are the issues that outline Durkheim’s idea of *anomie*. –”Anomie is the obverse of justice.” (ibid. p.89) It is a socially mismanaged society.



### 2.3 The land of saints, scholars and schizophrenic indicators

In the remaining pages in this chapter I will put forward the argument building up so far: that if prosperity is grossly mismanaged one should not assume that a country that prospers financially is doing well. With regards to a so called “post-Catholic” Ireland I will make the point here, that although the most influential force to govern social and moral conduct has lost some of its power, it is difficult to say whether that power bore more weight as a source of faith and comfort or as a source of fear and intimidation. What is clear is that social change and conservatism is as ambiguous and complex as ever.

Kuhling and Keohane’s (2007) multilayered study of a ‘*Cosmopolitan Ireland*’ written and published at the height of the economic boom paints a highly contradictory image of Ireland as the happiest depressed country in the world! In 2004, the EIU (Economist Intelligence Unit) published a survey measuring the quality of life in 111 countries and found the Republic of Ireland to be the happiest country in the world. This was the same year that Midleton in Cork was appointed the second ‘suicide capital of the world’ (See chapter 1). According to the World Bank in a publicised survey from the same year, Ireland was one of the best countries in the world to do business in while at the same time being “the second most unequal society in the OECD and the most individually indebted society in the western world.” (Kuhling and Keohane 2007:111) Inglis writes: “(d)espite having one of the highest levels of Gross Domestic Product per capita, it is estimated that in 2004 one in five Irish people were at-risk-of-poverty.” (Inglis 2008:258)

Kuhling and Keohane use Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in their analysis to represent “the enigma of identity that underpins modern subjectivity” (2007:120). Hamlet will then in turn reflect the melancholy spirit of a country of ‘inbetweenness’, juxtapositioned between pre-, and post-modernity, between vestigial traditionalism and accelerated modernisation. They argue that: “the cold reality is that the rates of suicide and deliberate self-harm have been soaring, especially amongst young people who, like Hamlet, seemingly have everything to live for.” (Kuhling and Kehone, 2007:112) The NSRF report in 2004 that “by examining the narratives, the tragic stories surrounding these deaths, the conditions of anomie are often related, for example

among young men who would seem to have had so much going for them and appeared to be ‘in good form’.” (Begley et.al. 2004:5-6) (Just why young men in particular report to be in good form or ‘seemed grand’ days or even hours before a suicide will be addressed in parts 4, 5 and 6)

*Hamlet*, although set in Denmark, is according to Keohane and Kuhling (2007) a reflection of Shakespeare’s own experiences of early modernity and dramatic societal change which would consequently be the reason why it resonated so well in Elizabethan England in 1603-4 where it was first performed: “old established traditions, religions and hierarchies of power were in a state of flux.”(2007:113) Monarchy against parliament, town versus country, bourgeoisie and feudal landed aristocracy, sober Puritans against popular mass culture etcetera. By the time of the release of *Hamlet*, England was experiencing a dark age of witch hunts and trials for heresy. London’s dramatic population growth and inadequate health and sanitation services lead to outbreaks of the plague. (2007:114) In 1880’s France Durkheim spoke of a society that “while able to uproot the institutions of the past, has put nothing in their place” (Durkheim 1951:369). In his 1912 publication *The Elementary Forms of religious Life* he insisted that as a society “we are going through a stage of transition and moral mediocrity” (Durkheim 1995[1912]:429). This also resonates with Derek Chambers’s statement in 2008 that “social forces and services have to take its [the Church’s] place but right now brave new Ireland is in a transition period.” (Interview with Chambers 2008). Rather than being a temporary state, anomie theory and its association with social change seems to echo through time. In the particular Irish case however, it is difficult to overestimate the power that the Catholic Church has had over Irish society but also, the extent to which the Irish have come to reconfigure their religiosity in such a short time. Inglis explains:

“The Catholic Church had considerable influence in the way people viewed and understood the world and was able to set parameters for how people behaved socially; for the type of people who got jobs and became leaders; for the kind of laws that were passed; and for the type of economy that was developed and the way business was conducted.” (Inglis 1998:65)

Religious commitment was to Durkheim a potent counterbalance to anomie and suicide. The change in the religious habitus in Irish society has been more noticeable and has resulted in more concern and social commentary than in any other European country. This important factor was also weighed in by the NSRF's 2004 anomie scale. As has been emphasised by O'Connell (2001), Garvin (2005), Cleary and Brannick (2007), Chambers (interview 2008) and Inglis (1998), the Catholic Church has up until recently exercised more power and influence than any other institution over the social fields of family, politics, education, health, social welfare and the media and not least the moral and 'religious habitus' of the vast majority of the Irish people. (Inglis 1998) As the most profound and deeply structured institution Ireland has ever had, the Catholic Church still bears considerable influence on personal levels of socialisation within the social provision of the educational system which will be discussed further in parts 4 and 6.

The 'informal consensus' that the Common Good was unanimous with Catholic teachings held up until very recently. In 1983 and 1986 respectively, the Irish voters followed the Church's teachings and went against the referenda on introducing legislation allowing for abortion and divorce whereby "the Church could have rightly claimed that it still represented the moral conscience of Irish society." (Inglis 1998:220) It was not until the 1990's that the moral/religious habitus of Irish society started to show signs of significant and fundamental change. In 1993 homosexuality and suicide was decriminalised and in 1995 a second divorce referendum was passed, all in direct contradiction to the Church's moral monopoly. This, according to Inglis (2008), does not reflect a simple shift from Catholic to a 'post-catholic' vacuum but a transformation from a legalistic-orthodox to a more individually principled (individually interpretative) adoption of Catholic teachings.

The institutional power and the legitimacy of the Hierarchy have been shaken to the core in the last few decades. The roaring scandals in the years of my fieldwork uncovering the sexual abuse committed towards institutionalised children in the care of religious orders around Ireland is intensifying the moral disassociation with the Catholic Church as an institution. However, the image of a 'post-Catholic' Ireland is often simplified: Although religious participation has decreased significantly since the 1970's (from 90% to 50% in 2003) both Church attendance and religious

affiliation is still higher than in many other EU countries. “Secularization has advanced in Ireland but at a much slower pace than in other European countries.” (Cleary and Brannick 2007:83) Also, the fact that the Catholic Church in Ireland no longer serves as a collective control mechanism to the same degree as it did some 30 or even 20 years ago does not necessarily suggest that the level of personal commitment and alternative forms of individual spirituality do not coexist or are emerging.

The Church today means less to young Irish people than it ever has in the Christian history of Ireland. However, it is important to recognise that the long established cultural and social elements of moral values, ‘good conduct’ and socio-religious habitus still bear major influence on the Irish social fabric and Irish institutions although these moral codes may work relatively independently from their original source. Inglis writes: “Such was the dominance of the Church in other fields, besides the religious, that it was able to control what people did and said when they met socially, engaged in politics and dealt in the marketplace.” (Inglis 1998:65) Like O’Connell (2001), Inglis (1998) focuses on how ‘we, as a society, came to be the way we are’. He looks at how Ireland, by being a religiously organised state, has influenced other aspects of Irish life in terms of structure, identity and selfhood. He paints a more complex picture of how a large proportion among the young whose commitment is falling and who disobey certain rules and regulations of the Church still do not disagree with its teachings. Inglis also suggest that the depth of the Catholic ethos, also among those who have left the Church and who disagree with certain aspects of its teachings, goes deeper than affiliation and commitment to the Institution and further into what is morally right and wrong and also how to raise children to follow similar moral codes. Religious commitment to the Church is also highly influenced by socio-economic background where urban, highly educated, professional, middle-, and upper classes are less bound to traditional religious engagements than their counterparts.

Whether or not religious faith worked or works as a deterrent for suicide would be nearly impossible to evaluate however. Before 1993 when suicide was decriminalised in Ireland, it was more stigmatised than it is today. Traditionally, those who died from suicide could not be buried in consecrated ground But although

underreporting of deaths by suicide has decreased over time (Lucey et.al. 2005), some Irish studies have shown that many open ended deaths, especially those that occur on the road -and especially those of men- still can be read as a cover up of intent where the individual wishes to spare the family the stigma by having it look like a road traffic accident (Connolly et.al. 1995).

Rather conflicting with my approach is the fact that I look at the unsustainable lifestyles that lead some individuals to decide that life is no longer worth living. How can we ever determine for example, whether religion serves as a source of comfort protecting us in life's darkest moments or, as a regulatory mechanism based on fear. If the thought of eternal damnation scares someone from abandoning a life he or she really does not want to lead, then it does not satisfy my distinction between those who believe and feel that life is 'liveable' and worth living and those who do not. This again, draws back to my focus on quality of *life and life- management*. Irish Catholicism is nevertheless an essential factor for anyone taking on the study of Irish culture and its history and especially when we take on an analysis of 'weakening traditional moral values'. As we are on the topic of religiosity I will address how the decline in religious belief is seen in contemporary research as one of the major reasons for the "the breakdown in the moral framework or value system associated with anomie" (Begley et.al. 2004:31). Also, the Irish Catholic Church plays an essential part of traditional and contemporary family organisation and schooling and deserves separate commentary for that reason alone. I will also refer to some of the lads' views on the issues of religious decline and morality.

The Free State as it was created in 1922 was based on a vision of a Catholic Republic. State legislation endorsed Catholic social teaching and the education system was under the control of the Catholic hierarchy. Garvin (2005) goes further and claims that "In the areas of health, education and much of public ideological discourse, the power of the Church was enormous. Above all, the Church attempted to control, some would say enslave, much of the intellectual and emotional life of the entire country." (Garvin 2005:3) The difference between State power (physical coercion) and the Church's power (moral, religious and social coercion) is that the Catholic ethos and moral values will live on long after the Church's institutional power has gone. This power was traditionally maintained at a local and intimate

level by what the parish priest knew about his parish. He held detailed knowledge of his parishioners through the Church's social services and care and through his functional role "as a social consultant, through house visitation, and in Confession" (Inglis 1998:47). In order to gain symbolic capital it was common for parishioners to vigil and sometimes inform against fellow members of the community hinting or directly accusing them of moral indecency or defiance against the priest who "was the one who supervised access to social and moral respectability" (Inglis 1998:48). Even though the priest is no longer automatically granted the privileges of house-calls for moral intervention and social surveillance, the intimate knowledge of dysfunctional family issues, social and personal dramas, mental health issues and certainly suicide are still guarded narratives that are handled with great sensitivity and care.

Under the heading "Social Change and Anomie" the NSRF 2004 report on young male suicide in Ireland, the authors describe some of the most dramatic changes affecting family structures, working life and religious practice. (Begley et.al. 2004:5) The young men interviewed in the study recognised these fundamental changes in religiosity and had both negative and positive feelings about these changes. The majority did not however, want to return to a time and place where everyone knew what to expect and how to act. As already discussed, the previously stifling and inhibitive nature of fixed social positions and cultural conservatism has for a long time in Irish social theory been the main explanation behind psychological suffocation, schizophrenia, institutionalisation and suicides -especially among Irish rural men. Still, some of the young men felt that the social and spiritual commitment previously channelled and fulfilled by the Church was now unspecified or even lacking -that "nowadays all the concentration is going somewhere else" and that it was difficult to identify where this somewhere else was (Begley et.al. 2004:30).

For the lads in this study, the Catholic ethos and cultural values are both present and significant in their lives but any direct religious practice was not inherited from the previous generation. One of the lads suggested that if he had been a religious person, the doctrines of the Church would have offered him the discipline and structure he believed would have benefited him in his life:

F: Tell me that again please, if you were a religious person?  
 X: I would have been a little better at school, probably would have gone to college, and I would have had a better job! ...-That's what I said.  
 F: You actually said your life would be better.  
 X: It would.  
 F: How would religion have done that for you?  
 X: I would have been more disciplined.  
 F: Why? Would the priest tell you what to do?  
 X: No. I wouldn't wanna say like being in the army but... but you learn things. You learn right or wrong better. You learn: if I do this it's bad for *myself*, not that I get away with it. You know? That kind of way.  
 F: Explain that.  
 X: That... Alright, if I don't learn this...eh... homework, I can get away in the morning by saying that... the dog ate it but, if I'm religious, I want to learn this *for myself*, cos it is good for me and God wants me to do it and the better I do... that's where I'm gonna go at the end of my life... Good? That's the Catholic way of thinking like. You're always being watched.

This young lad in his late twenties expressed how religious-moral vigilance, the sense of 'being watched', was accompanied by a personal responsibility and moral consideration of behaving in the right way. To reflect the shift from a legalistic-orthodox religiosity to a more inward-looking, individualised spirituality he made the point that "the Catholic way of thinking" was no longer simply to do what the priest says or to do right only to avoid sanctions. This he believed was a good thing – to do good for the right reasons. To do what was right and doing right by oneself and God was an award in itself. This rather blurry and not yet finalised shift also reflect a sense of 'betwixt and between', an unfinished transformation from a morality that was external (reserved for clergy) and one that is internal (reflective and personal). Like the majority of the lads I spoke to, this young man did not look for comfort in nostalgic conservatism. He believed changed was a good thing and was happy with a new Ireland where everyone did not know what to expect and how to act:

I like changes. Life would be more boring (if it did not change).

## 2.4 Differential Impact: Gendered Histories and the Hysteresis Effect

The following segment will explain how recent changes in the lads' lives are not just new but disadvantageous. I will argue that people's stressors and quality of life vary according to age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality but also over time and that assumptions made on the generalities of suicide do not offer the valuable insights offered by specific contexts. The argument has been made in previous studies in Ireland and internationally. Here I will combine these arguments with important theories on gender (Bordo 2003, Wiklund 2010), social change and suffering (Bourdieu) introducing two new concepts; histories, and, the hysteresis effect.

An elaborated study focusing on the years between 1968 and 2000 (Lucey et.al. 2005) found that there was no significant association between major socioeconomic indicators and suicide mortality in the overall Irish population. Instead, the report recognised "the need for age and sex specific data on socioeconomic indicators such as alcohol consumption and the challenge of understanding trends in suicide in its socioeconomic context." (Lucey et.al. 2005:93) Dr. Anne Cleary who has conducted important research on issues concerning young male suicide in Ireland wrote in 2005: "It appears that it is the marginalisation of particular, often male groupings resulting from social change which is associated with suicide, rather than social change in general." (2005b:15) Another Irish study (Doherty *et.al.* 2010) recently argued that men who are less educated and who live in more deprived areas are less likely to disclose mental health problems and distress than women due to increased self-monitoring and stigma ("self-stigma") within this socio-demographic (2010:224-5). In fact, socio-demographic factors appear to be more significant for men than for women. Walsh and Walsh (2011) highlight the most common effects brought on by social change and specifically economic recession. Focusing on the Irish context the authors state that while evidence of the influence of alcohol and unemployment on females suicides is generally lacking (except the 15-25 age group), these two factors have been found to have significant influence on men and young males in particular (Walsh and Walsh 2011:27). Irish suicide trends have also changed over time and between age groups. Walsh and Walsh further explain how, although consistently higher among males, suicide in the period 1968-87 was most prevalent among those aged 45 to 64. This changed for the time period 1988-2009



when suicide became closely associated with the younger age bracket of 15-34 “among whom the rate more than doubled.” (Walsh and Walsh 2011:27)

Dr. Peter Sainsbury (1972) published a study on *The Social Relations of Suicide* which confirms this phenomenon. Examining suicide trends in various Western cultures between 1901 and 1961 he found that from the beginning of the last century suicide among the elderly was high (especially among elderly men but also on the increase in elderly women) and lower in the younger populations. By the late 1960's there had been a definite increase of suicide in young men which suggested that the vulnerability of specific age and gender groups also varied over time as culture and social conditions change:

“further studies were undertaken to test the hypothesis that in later life men and women, in their different ways, have come to lack a useful function in our society: Their occupational and domestic responsibilities are diminished and consequently their lives have lost purpose and meaning.” (Sainsbury 1972:189)

To test Durkheim's theories on the social factors that predispose suicide, Sainsbury conducted contrastive studies in countries where culturally, the elderly were revered and social status was gained with age (in this case China and Nigerian tribal communities). He found that the trends were indeed reversed, that it was the younger age groups, rather than the elderly that showed higher numbers of suicide. (Sainsbury 1972:189-90) Sainsbury's methodological and theoretical stance was that absolute suicide rates were not the primary indicator of suicidal trends:

“Epidemiology is much more concerned with establishing valid differences between the rates of specified social, demographic or clinical categories: and the official figures, if critically examined, can indicate those differences that warrant further investigation.” (Sainsbury 1972:193)

Sainsbury concluded that it was not in the average, absolute rates that we would come to understand how and why stress and distress took over in certain demographics. Instead he argued that we must look at particular social settings and the conditions that “create certain routes for the expression of distress” (ibid.) To do

this, Sainsbury deemed it necessary to collect qualitative data to examine the actual social (and certainly cultural) crises and circumstances that precipitate the act in the selected cases.

With a focus on gender in the Swedish context Wiklund (2010) conducted such a study. Her research on girls and young women highlights the gendered embodiment of stress in modern youth. Through qualitative research she shows how gender and age are intrinsically related with experiences of stress and distress. The experience of stress she says, "occurs as an imbalance between the demands and pressures that an individual experience and the resources or the competence she or he have to handle the situation." (Wiklund 2010:25) She sees health as something created in the interaction between individuals and the environment: "In the biomedical approach, health is defined as the absence of disease, whereas holistic and socially-orientated approaches define health in a different way" (Wiklund 2010:24). Wiklund recognises a multitude of health definitions such as 'health as a condition', 'health as an experience', 'health as a process' and 'health as a resource': "Health as a resource is gained by the ability to control and master one's life situation. Moreover, health can be defined in terms of wellbeing, the ability to accomplish vital goals in life, and experiences of meaning and sense of coherence" (Wiklund 2010:24).

Different expectations of gender, tied up with historical conditions and culture, bear a great influence on how stress, distress and resources are expressed and adopted amongst men and women in different contexts. Smyth *et.al.* (2003) touch upon the concept of 'hystories', a term referring to cultural narratives of hysteria. Hystories are described as conditions that "reflect the anxieties and fantasies of the cultures that harbor them." (Smyth *et al.* 2003:85) The authors identify hysterical paralysis (hence the term 'hystory') among women as an expression of a contextually specific anxiety in the Victorian era at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Building on an idea which is easily linked to the concept of hystories, Susan Bordo highlights eating disorders (where an estimated 90% of the sufferers are women or girls) as a gendered hystory of our time. She argues that: "culture – working not only through ideology and images but through the organization of the family, the construction of personality, the training of perception – as not simply contributory but *productive* of eating disorders." (Bordo 2003:50)

Bordo's analysis focuses on body dysmorphia -the diagnosis that women suffering from eating disorders have a pathological and distorted body image. She proposes instead, that women suffering from eating disorders really are more in tuned with our *culture's* distorted body *ideals* than we might think. This raises the question: does the individual deserve a pathological diagnosis as he/she misreads the norms of society or, is this a rather well-socialised individual who perceives, fairly accurately, what his or her culture is communicating about our different roles in society on a daily basis? I believe the following quotation captures perfectly the arguments for differential impact and gendered hysterics. As the discussion continues I am hoping this will further illuminate the impact that depreciated gender roles can have on young men. Do Irish young lads for example carry inherently pathological characteristics or, have they absorbed the cultural and social expectations of their gender and age group?

“Thanks to the benefit of historical distance and the work of feminist scholars, almost all clinicians and theorists today agree that the ultimate sources of hysteria and neurasthenia as characteristic disorders of elite Victorian women are located in Victorian culture, and especially (although not exclusively) in ideology and upheavals related to gender. Most Victorian physicians, we should remember, lacked this perspective. It is only as hysteria has shed its symbolic, emotional, and professional freight, as it has become a historical phenomenon, that it has become possible to *see* it, in some ways, for the first time. Among the important elements now revealed is the clear continuum on which the normative and the disordered were located for Victorian women; it becomes possible to see the degree to which *femininity itself required the holding of breath, the loss of air, the choking down of anger and desire, the relinquishing of voice, the denial of appetite, the construction of the body.*” (Bordo 2003:50 my emphasis)

Inglis describes by reference to Taylor, how the Catholic Church and a wider puritan ethos dominant in nineteenth century Ireland forced Irish women into “an exaggerated femininity, magnifying their relative weakness into complete helplessness, their emotionality into hysteria and their sensitivity into a delicacy which must be protected from all contact with the world.” (Taylor quoted in Inglis

1998:188) I argue that present day Ireland is marked by a new gendered hysteria. The stereotypical dichotomies in the gender order have become inverted and public concerns now centre on exaggerated masculinities and the reactionary ethos that make young men ‘weak’, ‘vulnerable’, inherently ‘immature’ and too mentally frail to mind others, themselves and their general well-being.

As a convenient but nonetheless relevant reference I look to Sweden to contrast the male-crisis debate to quite a different focus: The gender gap in suicide in Sweden is lower than in the Irish case and lands at approximately 1:2-2.5 (more than twice as many men than women die by suicide)<sup>6</sup>. To contrast this relatively lower gender gap and theoretical conclusions made in Sweden it should be noted that the over-proportionate suicidality among men is represented in the older age groups. Suicides in Sweden are 40 per cent more common among men over 65 than among the younger male age brackets and three times higher than among women. ”Younger and middle aged men have seen a significant decline in deaths caused by accidents and suicide, particularly during the 1990s.” (Statistiska Centralbyrån 2011) Suicide numbers in the general population have decreased since the 1970’s into the last decade. The exception to this decrease is seen among the younger age groups where in more recent years a slight increase has been noted, particularly among young women. (Socialstyrelsen 2009:9) In Sweden’s major newspaper (*Dagens Nyheter*) in the summer of 2009, an essay written by social commentator and analyst Ulrika Kärnborg was published highlighting an age specific gender crisis of considerable national concern: “Razorblades alleviate the inner pain - Young women are not doing well under the new Swedish Government [*alliansens Sverige*]. They feel worse and medicate the most –and they cut themselves. But what do these razorblades and the blood really tell us about the existential pain of our time?” (Dagens Nyheter 28-06-2009 my translation) Her thesis is that in this ‘ultra-capitalist culture of achievement’, women are doing all *too well* in meeting the requirements of the new flexible market economy. They are now the best performing, most flexible, most obedient, disciplined and self-sacrificing players within the feminisation of the economy yet the income gap between the sexes is still there as ‘a slap in the face’.

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<sup>6</sup> Figures for 2009; Men 887 women 353 and 2010; Men 836 women 302. These deaths also include violence and poisoning where intent could not be determined. Source: Socialstyrelsen 2011

As uncertainty prevails and women's sacrifices go unrewarded she makes a 'cultural diagnosis' and draws a parallel to anorexia as well. Kärnborg concludes that "this is the conflict that I believe, is enacted every day, every hour upon young women's bodies." (Dagens Nyheter 28-06-2009 my translation)

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz said the following about conducting cultural diagnosis: "In the study of culture the signifiers are not symptoms or clusters of symptoms, but *symbolic acts or clusters of symbolic acts*, and the aim is not therapy but the analysis of social discourse" (Geertz 1973:26 my emphasis). It is through this sociocultural perspective, -when stressors are defined as demands and pressures in relation to resources and competencies, -that different forms of self-destruction can be read as an extreme form of social critique. Expressions of ill-health and distress mirror the social circumstances that created them.

A classic example of a 'hystory' was the angst present in Durkheim's Europe at the end of the nineteenth century when rising suicide rates were interpreted by many contemporary writers as "further evidence of the social malaise sweeping European societies as a result of declining influence of traditional institutions of social change" (Taylor 1982:11). In Ireland at the same time, the mounting populations in the towns resulted in anxiety before rising alcohol problems, crime, the deterioration of public order and issues of social and moral hygiene became increasing concerns to the authorities (Kuhling and Keohane 2007:219). Today, lad culture; the under-performance of boys, young working-class men's overrepresentation in crime statistics, the perpetuating of violence among themselves and against women, and most recently suicide, now draw the attention of all the social sciences, the media and the general Irish public. Issues of moral panic and pathological perspectives on suicide are still a public concern today yet we still lack important insights into how suicide and coping, skills and resources, stress and distress, are fundamentally gendered. Bordo urges us to make connections based on these historical lessons on gendered hysterics. These lessons should be applicable to masculinity-in-crisis paradigms as well as suicide and self-harm: as responses to particular cultural settings and specific social changes. A thorough examination of experiences of depression, angst, social pressures, unemployment etc., with careful consideration of age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and cultural scripts, is urgently needed.

Upheavals in the gender order as well as drastic socioeconomic changes in Irish society have created a moral panic with regards to working class masculinity and, a compromising and dubious situation for many young Irish lads. Sociological concepts, what Bourdieu effectively called “thinking tools” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1989) are important here. Some useful analytical tools have been developed to explain how people adjust and suffer during dramatic societal restructuring. The concepts “habitus”, “field” and “capital” are three of Bourdieu’s major contributions to the social sciences. They explain how people make the most out of available resources (capital) to advance and maximize their social standing and opportunities within a given social system (field). Habitus is the compilation of accumulated experiences that make our reasoning and practices into ‘second nature’. It is not a fixed state but develops as we continuously experience new things. These processes and practices are “characterized by a combination of constancy and variation which varies according to the individual and his degree of flexibility or rigidity.” (Bourdieu 2000[1997]:161) What remains a constant feature of habitus is that it is “always oriented towards *practical functions*” (Bourdieu 1990:52)

Bourdieu’s main argument is that people adopt whatever resources are at their disposal in order to cope and deal with changes in their environment or “field”. A person’s adaptability to changing life conditions depends on his or her degree of rigidity or flexibility but also on how fast changes come to pass and how drastic they are. When social actors know the unwritten rules of ‘the game’, and play it well, they are, according to Bourdieu, like ‘a fish in water’. Grenfell is the main elaborator of Bourdieu’s work, he explains: “Here your habitus matches the logic of the field, you are attuned to the *doxa*, the unwritten “rules of the game” underlying practices within that field” (Grenfell 2008:57) When habitus is out of synch with the social field, e.g. when the internalized structures (habitus) does not encompass or adjust to rapid changes in the objective structures (field) the agents become like a ‘fish out of water’ and social suffering occurs:

“in what might be called the Don Quixote effect, dispositions are out of line with the field and with the ‘collective expectations’ which are constitutive of its normality.

This is the case, in particular, when a field undergoes a major crisis and its regularities (even its rules) are profoundly changed.” (Bourdieu 2000[1997]:160)

When society undergoes sudden and significant changes there is a lag in how we adapt and cope with new circumstances. As I have argued throughout this segment, different groups in society are affected by change in different ways. Some groupings in society will gain new and better prospects and others will suffer disadvantages instead. As society is in a state of flux and previous experiences and references no longer apply to the new reality that has presented itself, social suffering occurs. This lag or, dislocation of habitus is called the “hysteresis effect”. Suddenly there is an acute need for new pathways for thought and action:

“The hysteresis of habitus, which is inherent in the social conditions of the reproduction of the structures in habitus, is doubtless one of the foundations of the structural lag between opportunities and the dispositions to grasp them which is the cause of missed opportunities and, in particular, of the frequently observed incapacity to think historical crises in categories of perception and thought other than those of the past” (Bourdieu 1977:83).

Hysteresis was further compared –although not synonymous- to Durkheim’s anomie. The Durkheimian school of thought tells us that society regulates its members but when regulation is lacking, during times of change, suffering occurs. Bourdieu looked at how inexperience with new circumstances in society impeded *self*-regulation (meaning habitus) (Grenfell 2008: 134). Hysteresis was according to Bourdieu, scientifically better equipped than anomie to make intelligible the strategies people adopt as they, depending on their dispositions in the field, effectively ‘pick themselves up’, reposition themselves and refigure their resources but also when they fail to do so. Hysteresis also lacked Durkheim’s moral implications. The hysteresis effect applies to processes of acculturation, suddenly competing discourses, changing gender orders, generational changes and shifting work opportunities.

In *The Rules of Art* (1996?) Bourdieu explained how those groupings in society that were more likely to benefit from social change and to advance to new dispositions

were generally those “who are richest in economic capital, cultural capital and social capital who are the first to head for new positions” (Bourdieu 1996a: 262) According to Bourdieu the “*hysteresis* effect” benefitted those who already had favourable dispositions and adequate capital, “while the less successful continue to misrecognize the strengths and weaknesses of relative field positions” (Grenfell 2008: 135). Bourdieu’s ethnographic account of the War of Independence in Algeria describes in this way, how severe disruption to established social, economic and political structures resulted in a situation where new opportunities and dispositions were “up for grabs”. “There was then a plethora of new field positions to occupy, but no guarantees; too many norms rather than a lack of them.” (Grenfell 2008:137)

I would argue that actors do not necessarily misrecognise the strengths and weaknesses that new discourses and opportunities offer. Instead, I believe that careful consideration of what is often a *lag in rewards or benefits* offered by new or alternative opportunities makes ‘outdated’ practices more attractive. In other words, it is not necessarily a case where some groupings misrecognise the new ‘offer on the table’ but rather that new opportunities still offer relatively poorer guarantees than an ‘outdated’ habitus. For example, one could easily say that the social support structures offered amongst the lads fulfil more acute needs that ‘alternative masculinities’ can offer long term with regards to health benefits. Immediate coping is for many of the lads more favourable than increased opportunity structures that they feel are unfamiliar and deeply threatening. When former capital (whether it be economic, social or cultural) is devalued within new field structures some people, as Cheryl Hardy explains some people become “stuck” and are aware that this is so. (Grenfell 2008:141) Furthermore, much socioeconomic restructuring are beyond the scope of actors. One such example is the fundamental restructuring of the labour market and the decimated work opportunities experienced by the lads. If habitus is a compilation of accumulated experiences, references and preferences, then we could easily assume that actors cannot re-imagine habitus from a cognitive vacuum and the complete denunciation of all things ‘already lived’.



## 2.5 Mismanagement: institutional imbalance of power

*“The importance of social inequalities and social institutions in determining or undermining youth transitions is becoming increasingly apparent.” (Barry 2006:3)*

The following pages contain a model-description of the objective structures or “field” mentioned above. This macro-description will illuminate some recent developments in Irish society where market forces have come to dominate over other social institutions which have compromised well-being and quality of life in Ireland. This, I hope, will lay the groundwork for chapters 3 and 4 where the discontent and disillusion felt amongst the lads are analysed more closely. As we leave Bourdieu for a while, it is worth noting that over the course of his career, especially in light of the overall increase in human misery which he ascribed to neo-liberalism, Bourdieu came to appreciate the value of a Durkheimian notion that presupposes that the State is the ultimate source of society’s “gravity”. (Grenfell 2008:180-1) I have chosen to pay considerable attention to the underlying values of social institutions and the consequences of what Rosenfeld and Messner describe as an institutional balance of power: “Culture does not exist in isolation from social structure but rather is expressed in, reproduced by, and occasionally impeded by, social structure.” (Rosenfeld and Messner in Adler & Laufer 2000:166)

The authors describe social institutions as the building blocks of whole societies and distinguish the following four institutions; economic, political system or ‘polity’, education and the family. The state of anomie (read here as a socially mismanaged society) is according to an institutional, capitalist logic, explained by the fact that the institutional balance is tilted toward the economy which is observed 1) “in the *devaluation* of noneconomic institutional functions and roles; 2) the *accommodation* to economic requirements by other institutions; and 3) in the *penetration* of economic norms into other institutional domains.” (Rosenfeld and Messner in Adler & Laufer 2000:171 italics in the original)

The latest research trends on *Suicide and Changing Values and Beliefs in Ireland* (Cleary and Brannick 2007) suggest that the causes of social disintegration and individual distress are fundamental shifts in moral concepts and values, religious

beliefs and rapid political and economic reforms. (2007:86) As I stated early on, the issue is not *that* Irish society has undergone major changes, but *how*, with *what implications* and finally, -for *whom*? The following short summary is a social critique towards the imbalance of social institutions and building blocks of Irish society and Western culture in general:

- **Polity**

“[Governments] have sought to sustain national and state economies by steering them in particular directions away from certain industries and business practices and toward others. This takes the form of policy advice, various deregulating practices, sundry incentives and disincentives, and strong intervention in the ideological climate.” (Kenway and Kraack in Dolby and Dimitriadis 2004:97)

Nowhere in Europe has this been more apparent than in Ireland which during the so called Celtic tiger became the fastest globalised country in the world. According to Rosenfeld and Messner’s theoretical model, the public confers little honour in the role of the politician and is as a result relatively disengaged in political activity which is left to the “career politician” (Adler& Laufer 2000:171). The contrast between economic and political activity is illuminating the authors argue: The citizen who refuses to vote may experience mild social disapproval while “the ‘able-bodied’ adult who refuses to work is socially degraded.” (Rosenfeld and Messner in Adler & Laufer *ibid.* 2000:172) Just as economic participation is obligatory for most adults, voting which could be considered as the very minimal form of political participation:

“(which has more in common with shopping than with work) is considered discretionary and useful primarily to the extent that it leads to tangible economic rewards (e.g. lower taxes). Moreover, the very purpose of government tends to be conceptualized in terms of its capacity to facilitate the individual pursuit of economic prosperity” (*ibid.*)

Commenting on the signifying markers of the Celtic Tiger, Kuhling and Keohane (2007) state that the Irish Government “has reimagined its role as primarily about ensuring that markets operate efficiently, rather than as a player in the market, buying and providing services for its citizens.” (Kuhling and Keohane 2007:155) The highest level of agreement (73.8%) on the anomie scale analysed in the NSRF’s study on young men and suicide was for the statement that “People in public offices are not really interested in the problems of the average man.” (Begley et.al. 2004:21) Chapter 3 is dedicated to the social implications of the moral failures revealed and displayed during the years of economic recession, political tumult, and what Meštrović and Brown claim was the intended meaning of anomie (*dérèglement*).

#### - **Education**

Rosenfeld and Messner’s thesis continues with how education is highly valued primarily and insofar as it promises future economic rewards but not to the same extent for learning for its own sake: “The ‘good student’ is not looked up to by his own peers; the ‘master teacher’ receives meagre financial rewards and public esteem in comparison with those to be gained by success in business.” (Rosenfeld and Messner in Adler & Laufer 2000:171) Nolan and Anyon (in Dolby and Dimitriadis 2004) explain the backgrounds and implications of high-stake standardised testing that students must pass in order to graduate which also serves as an example of this imbalance.

“High stake testing holds appeal for both conservatives and neo-liberals because on the one hand they help to carry out the conservative agenda by maintaining tight control over what constitutes “official knowledge”, while on the other hand these exams fit nicely into the new corporate logic as they help to shift blame for school failure onto students, foster competition, and create new markets within the burgeoning testing industry.” (2004:141)

The Irish equivalent is the Leaving Certificate. Within a period of two to three weeks Irish students take ‘the Leaving Cert’ in June of each year. They are then tested on at least five subjects undertaken over the last year. The negative pressures and

psychological implications of ‘taking the Leaving Cert’ are always highlighted in the media during the weeks surrounding it. The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) conducted a study where the qualitative data showed that students place an enormous weight on their performance emphasising the perceived implications for their future quality of life. This research further indicated that some of the school staff also noted increased stress levels among students and that they in some cases feared for their health and mental well-being. (Smyth, Banks and Calvert 2011:94-5) Considering gender differentials it was also clear that “female students have higher stress levels than male students, even controlling for a range of school experiences and prior achievement-“ (Smyth, Banks and Calvert 2011:78) Again, this reflects the ambiguous paradox as to whether those who are doing better are also feeling better or if the opposite is true. The implications of this overall logic are illustrated in McCormack’s thesis (2010): “Over emphasis on the economy and human capital may result in a situation where a country is doing very well but the people living there don’t feel very well.” (McCormack 2010:34)

McCormack stresses that the imbalance has resulted in an over-emphasis of human capital in Irish education and that greater emphasis needs to be placed on well-being. Adopting Bourdieu’s notion of capital she argues that to become, not only competitive players in the labour market but participative members of society we need social and cultural capital. (McCormack 2010:34) Despite a gradual awakening to the need (especially for boys where it is currently undermined) for the development of social and cultural capital, McCormack argues that there is still a “prevailing anti-intellectual bias” and “a preoccupation with coverage of course material and preparation for final examinations--- designed for assessment in public examinations --- [with] an absence of non-instructional forms of learning” (McCormack 2010:30) Inglis proclaims that:

“(t)he monitoring of schoolchildren is almost as relentless and rigorous as of patients in intensive care. Pupils are seen and understood, and see and understand themselves, in terms of their educational performance. Schools and colleges are places where young people learn to become orthodox capitalists. (Inglis 2008:175)

From what the lads have shared about their school experiences some of them expressed sentiments about how schooling in their opinion should have offered more than it did. This is how one of the lads (age 28) put it:

F – What kind of function is school supposed to fill in your opinion?  
What is it there to do?  
X - Get you set up for adulthood like.  
F – And did it?  
X – To a certain degree like.  
F - What did you get out of it?  
X – A Leaving Cert.

What this informant recalls was that he liked to sit in the back of the classroom away from the immediate attention of the teacher and close to the radiator to keep warm. I asked another one of the lads what he had liked most about his time in school. He compared his schooling to traditional same-sex schools and he appreciated going to school with girls and making friends in general. Other than this his comments were: “That’s all that matters. Get the results. Pass your exams at the end of it. I wasn’t pushed to attend.”

Some of the lads were always persistent in that I read *Keane* (2003), the autobiography of Roy Keane, -famous and infamous footballer and Corkman. Keane was born in 1971 in Mayfield, a working class resident area in Cork City. One of the lads felt it necessary to write this down in my journal himself: “Roy Keane- You either love him or hate him. Sportsman or not, he is a leader of men that never forgot his roots. A LEGEND.” (One of the lads age 27)

In the book Roy Keane looks back on his roots, his childhood and school in particular. Growing up during the country’s previous recession in the 1980’s he wrote:

“To observe that in 1983 the Irish economy was a basket case of high unemployment, high interest rates and rising inflation is not to pardon my lack of interest in learning. For I didn’t know those economic statistics. What I do recall is the palpable sense of pessimism and apathy among the people Mayfield Community School purported to serve.” (Keane & Dunphy 2003:6-7)

With an unmistakably similarity to what the lads describe Keane kept to the “customary obscurity at the back of the classroom.” (Keane & Dunphy 2003:7) The preparation for life and adulthood the lads had hoped for was not provided by the school system. In-depth accounts of the implications of these deficits in social learning, social-, and cultural capital in the Irish educational system will be dealt with in parts 4 and 6.

#### - **Family**

Anthony Clare (2000) argued for the importance of *time* spent, by both men and women in their families and in their communities. Writing extensively on the implications of the removal and under-involvement of fathers, he stated: “The truth about both parents<sup>7</sup> working in the world of work as it is presently structured is that the world of home and family is invaded by the very time and organisational modes that make work efficient.” (2000:211) Kuhling and Keohane paint another gloomy picture of how Ireland has one of the worst records of balancing home and work life in the EU and that the Forum on the Workplace of the Future has revealed that Irish childcare costs were the highest in Europe. (Kuhling and Keohane 2007:19) The Eurobarometer measured gender equality in the EU in 2009 found that 89% of the Irish public agreed that “in many cases, childcare facilities cost almost as much as the mother earns from working” (Eurobarometer *Gender Equality in the EU in 2009* 2010:84). This rendered Ireland the second highest out of all other EU member countries that deemed childcare too expensive. (Only Greece was higher by a 92% agreement.)

Kuhling and Keohane argue that neoliberalism as the dominating political ideology ‘disassemble the collective household ... to aggressively promote market opportunities for enterprising individuals’: “Social security, housing, pensions and health care in particular are increasingly privatised. The health and well being of Celtic Tiger cubs is now a matter for themselves in the economic jungle of the free market.” (Kuhling and Keohane 2007:123)

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<sup>7</sup> A gendered analysis on family and domestic responsibilities will be included in parts 4 and 6.

- **The Market Economy**

The over-emphasis on the economy and economic participation before all has various consequences; personal responsibility for failure both within education and the labour market, social stigma attached to unemployment also during economic recession, deficits in social and cultural capital amongst marginal groups to name a few.

“Globalization is characterized by the worldwide primacy of financial and speculative capital, the creation and integration of flexible systems of production of goods and services, increased international mobility of workers, and the bifurcation of national economies into rich and poor.” (Nolan and Anyon in Dolby and Dimitriadis 2004:137)

This is how one of the lads expressed his frustration over the state that the country was in, and in his opinion, the world. As in most cases when this topic comes up, the language the lads used was characterised by a lot of swearing and some much needed comic relief.

X: I'd like to see radical changes!! Not just... Europe is pissing me off as well you know that?! And America? They can go away and fucking... suck the back of my balls! Did you hear that guy on the telly there the other day you know on Bloomberg? (In an American accent) “In the next sixty days...” You know when he was doing that? You know you're gonna see...one night--- Vincent Browne was talking about them. There's them kind of guys over in America...

F: They want to make Ireland cheap so they can buy the whole lot of it...

X: Yeah! And they're making money out of making it a bigger recession than it is... for like –an hour! They make money! I'll like to shoot that ...bah, fu--- face in the hole you know!!! (One of the lads age 28 January 2009)

The very last few words are very hard to make out in this extract. There is so much swearing coming out all at once that one foul word simply interrupts another.

Chapter 3 will describe in further detail how outrage and disillusion is expressed amongst the lads.

## 2.6 Summary and conclusions

The National Suicide Research Foundation (NSRF) who carries out research for the National Office for Suicide Prevention (NOSP) used an anomie scale to investigate *Young Men's Outlook on Life* in 2004 (Begley et al.). The report determined from a sociological perspective that “a sense of community (social integration) and shared values (social regulation) can influence the behaviour of individuals”. (Begley et.al. 2004:4) It concluded that social changes in Irish society had impacted on young men's self-worth and their sense of belonging in modern society which would explain the higher prevalence of suicide amongst young Irish men compared to women.

The long legacy of anomie theory, its sustained popularity and how it is used in suicide research to explain the implications of social change motivated me to try to contextualise the concept itself. It is evident that anomie theory, as *one of the liveliest dialogues in the history of the social sciences*, despite its common usage, has become under-theorised and widely misconstrued – assumed self-explanatory. Meštrović and Brown argued that *anomie* has been lost in translation; etymologically, historically and culturally. After examining both common usage and alternative interpretations I have come to read *anomie*, not as normlessness, but as a societal heartbreak brought on by mismanagement of society's most important institutions; polity, the family, and the school system.

The norms and interests of the economic markets have in effect penetrated and devalued non-economic institutions that have come to accommodate these to a point that have affected the actual quality of life for many Irish people. The moral failure displayed by political leaders who let the financial markets free reign has weakened



the belief in the moral fabric of Irish society. I argued that Ireland had not ‘lost its religion’ but that it had been run with complete disregard of its soul.

A more individualistic version of Irish Catholicism has resulted in a shift from legalistic religiosity to one of personal moral reflection. Empirical evidence seem to indicate that young men in Ireland today do not hold nostalgic aspirations to return to solidified social roles where ‘everyone knew how they were expected to act’ (Begley et.al. 2004). Rather, many young men seem disheartened by recent developments towards an increasingly selfish society.

Sainsbury’s (1972) argument was that suicide rates among the older age group were lower than in the younger groups in societies where the elderly were revered and gained social status with age. Sainsbury (1972) and Walsh and Walsh (2011) affirm that this was the case in Europe from the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but that in the last three decades the younger age groups have become increasingly vulnerable to suicide and self-destruction. Age as an influential variable and a disadvantage will be the focus in the next chapter where I will move away from this abstract theorisation towards the actual structures affecting young people in Irish society.

I have addressed some of the ‘gendered histories’, -the psychological and physiological conditions that emerge as a consequence of upheavals and challenges to the gender order. I have also addressed, as part of a cultural diagnosis, how stress and distress are expressed through symbolic acts of self-destruction and how they are structured through ideas and discourses on gender. I have argued that experiences of stress and distress, coping skills and resources, are fundamentally gendered. As part of contemporary discourse some resounding concerns keep reoccurring: Women’s role flexibility and role conflicts as they accommodate –all too well- the demands of the ‘feminisation of the economy’ and, the burning issues of working class men’s role *inflexibility* and role *restriction*. This will be discussed specifically in subsequent parts.

It is essential that we make these important connections based on these historical lessons on gendered histories because we have entered another gendered history – not the first one! The stressors of masculinity –like femininity - are responses to

particular cultural settings and specific social changes. Therefore, a thorough examination of the gendered –specific experiences of depression, angst, social pressures, unemployment etc. is urgently needed.

When we look at how *generalised* social change is connected to rising suicide rates, what we mean to answer is why *more people* kill themselves rather than, as I attempt to address in this thesis, –why *some groups* in our society are more prone to do so than others. Recent developments in Irish society have undoubtedly led to decreased quality of life for those demographics that are now overrepresented in Irish suicide statistics. Considering the social relations of suicide (Sainsbury 1972) the research presented here would suggest that it is young Irish men within a particular sociodemographic that “lack a useful function in our society” (Sainsbury 1972:189): Their occupational responsibilities have diminished and those responsibilities that are deemed feminine are still regarded as inappropriate for boys and ‘real’ men.

Although the lads firmly adhere to cultural norms and have a strong moral core, in the following pages I will show some of the behaviours they resort to when they lose heart and when they face the negative changes in society that affect them personally.

### 3. LOW INCOME YOUTH: AUTNOMY AND INDEPENDENCE

*“Moving through the phases of transition –from childhood, through youth to adulthood –can be an isolating and disempowering experience for young people, not least when they also lack political and economic power.” (Barry 2006:1)*

*“Young people’s life situations may affect their health in various ways, and are thus potentially important sources of knowledge.” (Wiklund 2010:17)*

The last chapter was a discussion on how in social theory, *anomie* has been connected to social change and rising suicide rates. I accounted for how this has been interpreted historically and how a focus on the specific stressors related to youth and gender might offer insights into how particular groups in society experience and express distress differently. In this part I will outline the current changes experienced by the target group and examine young men’s particular vulnerabilities to suicide. The institutional imbalances discussed in the previous chapter contribute to the moral issues that will be highlighted in what follows as I apply them to the circumstances affecting the young lads in this study.

Social norms are today less defined and our roles more negotiable than ever before yet gendered cultural expectations are *increasingly* limiting a lot of young white, working class men in terms of coping mechanisms and general well-being. There has been a drastic downturn in industrial work, traditionally classified as masculine work, and an increase in the service-, and information sectors that are regarded as feminine jobs. (McDowell 2003, Smalley et.al. 2005). In this fundamental socio-economic restructuring the lads have been adversely affected. My concern regarding my informants is not primarily the self-destructive behaviours that they to an extent share with young women, but more importantly what means are at their disposal to change certain behaviours and cope with these changes: If one defines oneself by conservative and self restricting boundaries, then one is all the more unlikely to willingly *redefine* oneself or *reconsider* what behaviours and activities are “gender appropriate” or, those that are paramount to ones well-being regardless of gender. As highlighted in Wiklund’s study: “coping and coping strategies are often studied on an individual micro level, without taking contextual factors into account.” (Wiklund 2010:28) Keeping our focus on the contextually specific issue of rising young male

suicides: In what type of world is this all happening? Why this age group? And why males?

*Reflexivity* is increasingly seen as an existential necessity as traditional identities are threatened and our social, globalised realities undergo fundamental restructuring (Beck *et.al.* 1994). Structural reflexivity can be usefully read as when the individual incorporates the social structures and resources around him and into his reasoning and action. Self-reflexivity is when he considers his own position within these structures. Beck suggests however, that to avoid a fundamental conceptual misunderstanding the idea of ‘reflexive modernization’ needs to be distinguished against ‘reflection’: “Reflexivity should be read (first) as *self-confrontation*.” (Beck *et.al.* 1994:5) The need for reflexivity emerges, all the more urgently, precisely *because* the certitudes of “the thought and action of people of industrial society” are dissolving (Beck *et.al.* 1994:5).

The aim of the NSRF (Begley *et.al.* 2004) gender-focused anomie study was to find out about young Irish men’s experiences of life and help-seeking behaviours but also their capabilities in identifying, comprehending and naming the problems they faced, -not least societal issues. Many young men had expressed dissatisfaction with both ‘old *and* new’, disagreeing with strict social norms of the past and with today’s society as well. Over half of the interview respondents in McCormack’s study believed that young men today were under great pressure: “They believed that young men experienced pressures socially, from peers, academically, sexually and financially, in comparison to young men twenty years ago.” (McCormack 2010:170) Beck makes an important point in that even at the height of social and economic restructuring:

“To speak of detraditionalisation, however, is not to talk of a society without traditions –far from it. Rather, the concept refers to a social order in which tradition changes its status. In a context of global cosmopolitanism, traditions are today called upon to defend themselves: they are routinely subject to interrogation. Particularly important in this respect, the ‘hidden substratum’ of modernity, involving traditions affecting gender, the family, local communities and other aspects of day-to-day

social life, becomes exposed to view and subject to public debate. The implications are both profound and worldwide in scope.” (Beck et.al, 1994:vi-vii)

This would certainly be the case for the increasingly discredited or ‘redundant masculinities’ (McDowell 2003) that are misplaced against middle-class, cosmopolitan values as they are defined as backward, racist, sexist and homophobic. Willis (1977) groundbreaking ethnography from 1970’s England paved way for new educational research into masculinity and social reproduction. This was during a time when the working class was in close to full employment unlike the current situation in post-industrialised countries where the manual labour force has been made all but redundant.

It is important to note here however that the *reactionary* behaviours of what is often referred to as ‘protest masculinities’, are not traditional, nor are their drinking patterns or drug habits. They are *new* behaviours because they are *responses* to new cultural influences and new socioeconomic circumstances. Therefore I will also apply the term *neo-traditional* to meet the logic of this reactionary ethos. Understood as a form of cultural hybridisation, a neo-traditional ethos is based on traditional values (imagined or actual) that have fallen under the influence of new (and subjectively disavouring) discourses and ideals.

### **3.1 Independent living**

Globalisation, according to Inglis, ‘has changed the nature of our social bonds’: “The Irish way of being in the world is now structured more by market and media forces which emphasize the importance of difference, self-realization and continual self-transformation and which rarely emphasize the importance of self-denial and self-surrender. (Inglis, T. 2008:6-7)

Spellissy explains how the traditional agricultural family structures in Ireland have been broken up by modern day life. He describes how previously, every family member had a functional role within the family setting. The older generation, still within the immediate family setting, took part in raising grandchildren. The younger generation worked the land and “children were regarded as *social and economic assets* who could assist their parents and grandparents from an early age.” (Spellissy 1996:118) According to Spellissy, modern living is designed for young couples leaving no extra room for the previous generation who are instead left in nursing homes or to cope on their own. This, he says, “renders old people very vulnerable. *It lowers their self-esteem, making them feel unwanted, rejected and useless, with little or no future*, and often drives them to suicide out of sheer loneliness.” (Spellissy 1996:118 my emphasis)

This clearly resonates with the argument provided by Sainsbury (see discussion in 2.6) that different age groups that ideally should be cherished and fill valuable functions in the family and society as a whole, in certain cultural contexts become peripheral within a social structure. Emphasised here are the living conditions that by design have cut off the older generation from the immediate family structure. I would argue however, that the Irish housing-boom did not design living conditions with young people in mind -whether they are a couple or single-, and certainly not those on low or uncertain incomes. I also want to stress that the formation of couples and the age in which they set up and purchase a home has also changed from the traditional setting first described by Spellissy. The age at which young people set up homes, create families and secure long-term employment has not only been significantly delayed but has also become more difficult.

Young people are economically disadvantaged during both boom and bust. The Celtic Tiger-era did not set up apartments for overall independent living for young men and women entering their twenties. Quite the contrary, housing was over-supplied to those on already comfortable and abundant incomes who could afford the typical semi-detached 3-5 bedroom houses in the expanding suburbs or, all those who were willing to take out up to a hundred per cent mortgages available during the property boom. In their important contribution to this debate Keohane and Kuhling wrote about a male suicide case in *Collision Culture* (2004). Written during the

'boom years', under the heading "Understanding Irish Suicides": "The incongruous element that reminds us that this is Ireland is that the young man is still living with his parents. Though employed and independent, he is not fully individuated and autonomous." (Keohane and Kuhling 2004:63)

The authors describe how it would have been common for adult children (who had not emigrated) in traditional Irish society to remain in the family home. Traditional structures and, changing expectations of young people, make the situation complicated. Adolescence now extends into adulthood and the availability of affordable living arrangements during these prolonged years are scarce, not to say non-existent. Not being able to afford independent living (i.e. not moving in with peers or remaining in the family home) was one of the major stressors for the lads in this field study. The vast majority of the lads would have to remain in the family home past their teens and twenties and sometimes well into their thirties. The next available option for the many young men who are single, is setting up house with friends. Opportunities to acquire and employ new skills and take on responsibilities for oneself and dependents are delayed and made increasingly difficult. The lads who do not stay in the family home dependent on their parents set up home with other lads in the same situation. This set up creates a space where over-consumption and self-destruction (binge) become ritual which will be discussed in chapter 5.

The NSRF study on male suicidal trends and anomie indicated that "Men living with their parent(s) perceived greater anomie." (Begley et al. 2004:21) The report argued that, although of marginal significance, those men who had moved out of the family home had a greater sense of control, indicative of suicidality, than those who had remained. (Begley et al. 2004:22). The lads who have contributed to this field study expressed how living in the family home further enhanced the feeling of being out of control, bored, remaining dependent and instead being under the control of parents. One of the lads described what to him were two major stressors about being unemployed and living at home:

X- Well like it's money as well like. When you have no money and you can't do nothin and all your friends are going out. You know? They're all

going to town, they're all having a good time and you're stuck at home by yourself doing nothing... Really depressed about that...

Another one of the lads in his early twenties described his frustration about being called by his mother to come home when he was out with his friends:

I just got depressed and eh... every time I was with my friends and then... my mother rang me and, 'come home right now' and I went home and put my fist through the wall and all this shit.

Yet another one of the lads (late twenties) who felt more comfortable putting his thoughts on paper left me some notes about living at home when unemployed. The positives (pro's) were: "It's financially safe, probably hot meals everyday, no bills..." He said that the negative elements of staying at home were the unavoidable intimacy with siblings and nagging parents: "If you lived out of the home before unemployment, there probably was a good reason!"

The lads' sense of control may not be significantly enhanced by sharing home with their friends but a shared understanding and empathy for this increasingly common situation (like unemployment) and their strategies for distraction and relief easily becomes an appreciated sanctuary and a valued support system. The letter handed to me by one of the lads also covered the 'pro's' and 'con's' about house-sharing with peers (the lads):

Pros: Great parties. You can't afford the pub so that's the next best thing.  
Cheap rent. Stay in bed all day if ya want without being nagged.  
Cons: Bills, Rent [since the family home meant rent and bill-free accommodation], Constant parties, cleaning up after parties. Very little privacy.

The great but incessant party-life is listed as both positive and negative. As will be discussed further in part 5 it seems that it is the length of the stay in this living arrangement that ultimately affects how much the consistency of parties and the maintaining of the *craic* will be enjoyed, tolerated or suffered. To my final question



about the positive and negative factors of living independently in a single apartment the same lad wrote:

Pros: Privacy. A sense of independence. Control of who enters the house!

Peace and quiet.

Cons: High rent. High bills. Loneliness. Probably a shit flat like all one bedrooms in Ireland. Dampness!!

This lad, now entering his thirties, had never experienced independent living and neither had anyone of his friends. We discussed in some detail what kind of apartment he would want for himself and the type of apartment he would have any hope of getting. He would have liked a simple but comfortable little pad where he would be ‘king of the castle’ and where he could invite friends (also to leave) at his leisure. Instead he imagined that at best, and at a high cost, all he could hope for was a damp and dark bed-sit. He imagined a place where he would invite no one, where nobody would want to visit and where he would not want to stay himself. His brother had recently looked at some of the bed-sits on offer in Cork City.

“They were all up in town you know. They were all fucking manky[disgusting]. You wouldn’t want a dog living in there. Not when you have the option of living at home. They were asking for about a hundred a week. My mother wanted him to move out but persuaded him not to after looking at them places.”

In most other European cities the most desired and attractive places to live are in the city centre (especially for young single people). Yet even along Cork’s main streets (the Grand Parade, St. Patrick’s Street and Oliver Plunkett Street), those little pads over Cork’s most popular bars, shops and restaurants that are ideal for young single tenants are boarded up or abandoned or used as storage for the businesses lodging below. Neither Cork City nor the rest of the county accommodate young single men and women on lower incomes. Instead this large demographic make do with the family home or set up home with their many friends who share this bleak situation.

It is clear from statistical and testimonial evidence that the independence that is expected of young people is many times unachievable for those on lower income. Young people are expected to take full responsibility of their lives yet even with full time employment which is getting increasingly hard to come by, many, (*all* informants in my field) will up until their mid,- or late twenties and often until their early thirties remain dependent on their family home or their peers. McShane stated in 2003:

“We know from recently published Central Statistics Office data that this is very much part of a sociological trend, whereby the number of people in their late twenties and early thirties still living in the family home has burgeoned over the last ten years or so, not least because of the difficulties they are experiencing gaining a foothold on the property ladder.” (McShane in Smyth and MacLachlan 2003:107)

Further figures provided by McShane suggested that 50% of Ireland’s 15-24 age-group feared that they would “never be able to afford a house/apartment in Ireland.” (McShane in MacLachlan and Smyth 2003:112) It is not surprising that the young men who are unable to live up to the expectations of setting up an autonomous living situation would rate as ‘more anomic’ or unsatisfied, than those who can. A sense of being in control (to have the choice); of *taking on the responsibility* and gain an autonomous status as a citizen, the gained self-belief, -confidence and social-esteem, would make a big difference in a young men’s outlook on life.

Recent changes –deteriorating circumstances in the labour market- have also had different impacts on different groups in society. Because the building and manufacturing sectors were the worst affected by the recession in 2008, the outcome for young men and women are quite different. The gender difference in unemployment for 20-24 year olds in the year 2000 stood at 0.1 per cent (5.3% for men and 5.4% for women) (CSO *Women and Men in Ireland, 2010* 2011:24) Ten years later in 2010 figures about the same age group show that 32.9% of men and 18.7% of women were unemployed (ibid. p.10) The gender difference in unemployment within the same age bracket, 20-24 had thus risen to 14.2%.

Out of the 40 lads that I knew in the field by 2010, 22 still live in the family home (12 had emigrated, lived with friends or with partners). The remaining 4 lived alone. The average age of those 22 living with their parents was 25. 13 out of the 22 were aged 25 or over. Seven of those ‘still living at home’ were unemployed and 15 had some form of employment. The following policy changes were made by the Irish Government for the young and unemployed in the 2010 budget announced in December 2009:

“New maximum personal rates of Jobseeker’s Allowance and basic Supplementary Welfare Allowance will be introduced for new applicants aged 20 to 24 inclusive. The new rate will be €100 per week for new applicants aged 20 to 21 and €150 per week for new applicants aged 22 to 24. [This was cut by an additional €6 per week in the budget of December 2010] The Qualified Adult rate applicable to Jobseeker’s Allowance/basic Supplementary Welfare Allowance applicants aged 20 and 21 will also be €100 per week and for those applicants aged 22, 23 and 24 will be €130.10 per week. These rate reductions will not apply to claimants with dependent children.” ([www.budget.gov.ie](http://www.budget.gov.ie))

Ireland’s biggest property site [www.daft.ie](http://www.daft.ie) supply the government and the media with figures and quarterly reports on rent and house prices around the country. I saw within my first three years in Cork a significant drop in rent prices from pre-crash Cork in March 2008 and the figures at the end of 2010. To exemplify I will demonstrate the independent living options on offer for;

- 1) a minimum waged full time employed and
- 2) a 22-24 year-old unemployed without children in and around Cork City in the year 2011:

The minimum wage-worker: Minimum wage in Ireland from 2000 up until December 2010 was €8.65 per hour meaning that a full time employed minimum wage worker earns €346 weekly (40 hour week) or approximately €1384 per month (This income would fall under the taxation limit). According to Daft’s second quarter report for 2010 the average rent for a one bedroom apartment in Cork City was €630, down 7.1% from the previous year. The same figures for Cork County was for the same period €637 a month, down 1.1%. The next option towards

independent living would be purchasing a house which is far less likely for a young person who has had but a short time of labour participation. In and around Cork City then, a minimum wage worker would spend just under half of his or her wages (approximately 47%) on rent/independent living (waste collection, electricity, gas bills etc excluded).

The unemployed 22-24 year-old:

The highest paid Jobseeker's Allowance and basic Supplementary Welfare Allowance for claimants between 22-24 years will receive a monthly rate of €600, (€576 after December 2010), just under the average rent for a single-headed household. However, rent allowance is available to a person living on their own with a maximum weekly rent of €108 (with some conditions). This amounts to a monthly rent of €432, - €196 *under* the average rent in Cork. The rent allowance, if granted, would add up to all but €26 out of the total rent which is paid by the tenant/claimant. If the accommodation was to be shared by more than one person the maximum weekly rent for rent allowance eligibility drops to €65.80 per person sharing.

In January 2011 when the latest cut for the age bracket 22-24 had come in effect, I found a total of 10 apartments in and around Cork City available to this demographic<sup>8</sup> if they could prove that they had lived six out of the last 12 months in a private letting or if they would pass Cork City or County Council's housing need assessment criteria. These criteria are mainly the cases regarded by the Council as an "emergency", a person deemed to be "homeless" or "overcrowding". (Cork City Council: Scheme of Letting Properties articles 1.4, 1.5 and 1.6)

The opportunity years that could have potentially remodelled living conditions for the younger Cork demographic is depicted by Keohane and Kuhling in the

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<sup>8</sup> All but three of these were studio apartments or bedsits. Six out of ten ads stated that rent allowance was accepted, four of them did not specify. I excluded those apartments that quoted rent per room, not apartment (meant to be shared) and one only allowing Third Level students. Four out of the ten apartment ads accessed on [www.daft.ie](http://www.daft.ie) on 11.01.10, were located in the City Centre and six in the surrounding suburbs. Searches in Cork Commuter Towns resulted in 0.

representation of the Giant/Developer “whose huge hands and lined face tell of a youth of physical labour as he built his empire up through the lean years”:

”The Colossus sat through a meeting of architects, planners and citizens convened by Cork City Hall to share views on the future development of their city. Dreams and schemes and talk of the future ground to a halt when the Developer interjected, stating: ”Whatever about what the city needs, I’ll tell you what people want. They want a three-bedroom semi-detached house on a nice estate in the suburbs, with a patch of grass front and back. That’s what they want and that’s what I’ll give them.” Irish pseudo-Faustian developers aspire to being high-flying global visionaries, but their visions are still bounded by the farmyard gate and the parish pump.” (Keohane and Kuhling 2004:180)

This is an exact description of the Lemon Tree Pub as we used to call it: the house shared over a five year period by the lads and where I lived for two years. A room in a shared house with a rent between €250 and €400 per room and month is for a young single person on a low income the only option other than a rent-free family home.

### **3.2 Unemployment and responsibility**

Young people today in Ireland just as in many other Western European countries, are expected but not considered by the State to be independent, nor are they financially rewarded as such. “Like women before them, young people’s wages are regarded not as a ‘breadwinner’s’ or ‘citizen’s’ wage but rather as a component in a total household wage.” (McDowell 2003:84) Residential conditions make independent living nearly impossible for the younger generations on lower incomes yet the moral obligations of labour participation are very binding and the stigma and shame perceived by social welfare claimants seem in the current recession to have remained the same or even increased. McDowell argues that,

“(t)he postwar compact, based on economic planning and a universal welfare state, underpinned by full, lifetime employment for men who would share their income with dependants, has been replaced by the notion of flexible employment for all those who are physically fit, regardless of their responsibilities, including the care of children.” (2003:40)

It might be considered proper that young people know their place, but in many cases in today’s Ireland the problem is just that they do. The younger age bracket earned considerably less than the middle-aged population also during the boom-years: “Ireland’s under-20-year old workforce receive less than a third of the earnings of 45-54 year olds and the 20-24 group less than half (only two EU countries out of the other 14 have age differentials anything resembling this).” (O’Connell 2001:174 source: Eurostat Yearbook 2000)

Specific to the current financial crises is the exodus of Irish youth who emigrate to mainly Australia, the US, Canada and the UK. One of many headlines in the Irish press, this one from December 2010, read how “one-in-three aged between 18 and 24 planning to emigrate in the next 12 months.” ([The Irish Examiner 03/12/10 http://www.irishexaminer.com/home/youth-exodus-138359.html](http://www.irishexaminer.com/home/youth-exodus-138359.html) Accessed 10/01/2011) On year later CSO had indeed identified a sharp rise in emigration among Irish nationals in the 12 months prior to April 2011. “Overall emigration is estimated to have reached 76,400 in the year to April 2011, an increase of 11,100 (or 16.9 per cent) on the 65,300 recorded in the year to April 2010.” The age bracket 15-24 amounted to 33.1 % of all emigrants and the age group 25-44 34.4%. Hence 67,5 % were between the ages of 15-44.

In her book about working class lads in England, McDowell (2003) discusses neo-liberalism and the exaggerated belief in agency. She writes about a general culture and specific economic policies based on the supposed superiority of individual effort. The moral implications behind the personal responsibilities attached to the individual with regards to one’s own success and happiness have for a long time been reflected in social state policies in many European countries. Based on the English context McDowell criticises the unemployment programmes which “will

prove not to be sustainable in periods of recession.” (2003:48) This sense of personal responsibility is remarkably evident in the many faces in the ever extending dole queues in the current recession or “at the bottom of the cage” as one claimant described it to me in the queue to see the Community Welfare Officer in 2009.

The policies based on individualised responsibility of claimants are reflected in the questions formulated in the forms job seekers fill out for the Social Welfare Office. Claimants have to “show you are making real efforts to find work”. They are also asked to verify “why do you think you have not succeeded in getting work?” At the same time, and to many of the claimants, the Social Welfare Office and its staff are seen as an extension and as representation of the government held by most members of the public as responsible for the recession. To Willis, reflecting on the current socioeconomic climate, “[t]his is a state-mandated attempt to regulate and reform the labor power of the working class whole-sale, attempting to make “idleness” impossible just as work disappears.” (Willis in Dolby and Dimitriadis 2004:182)

Testimonies of ‘suspicion’ and ‘degradation’ are repeated among the male respondents in a survey by the Irish Institute for Public Health (IPH) on unemployment, the recession and implications for mental health where “much frustration, even despair, was expressed in relation to support with job seeking and jobs training.” (IPH 2011:25) One strongly emphasised issue among the male respondents was whether social service providers “are actually aware of, or even care about, the challenges men face” in their dependent position as unemployed. (IPH 2011:26)

In one interview from 2010 with one of the girls (mid-twenties) I brought up the case of one of the lads who, although fully entitled had not managed to get social welfare payments because of the angst he felt after a previous attempt when he went through the formalities of ‘signing on’ (register with the Social Welfare Office). He had admittedly smashed his fist against the wall in the Social Welfare Office. Knowing this lad very well the young woman explained in our interview that:

“that was out of frustration and because he didn’t understand what they were saying to him and because they are playing a mind game on him

as well like. They are trying to really... they probably don't want to give you the money and they're trying to catch you out on everything you know. And X is very honest you know so he'll just tell you honest and then they're trying to catch him out and stuff and he just gets frustrated I'd say. I'd say it was just frustration."

Some of the lads ended up waiting several weeks after they were made redundant to actually go up to the 'dole office' dreading what they expected the experience to be. One of the lads spent those weeks smoking weed and "doin' fuck all". Yet another one of the lads was escorted out by security after losing his temper during his second, and several hour-long visit one day after staff had advised him to first stand in the wrong queue and then to come back after lunch when the hatch he had been re-directed to had closed for the day.

The hostility perceived by the lads in the Welfare Office is part of the added sense of dependence and humiliation that the so called 'Celtic Tiger cubs' now had to face for the first time. At the time of my arrival they young lads who had left school were being channelled directly into an over-congested social welfare system.

Apprenticeships were discontinued and the lads in unskilled or semi-skilled manual labour were now facing redundancy or an undetermined future in their line of work. They were unfamiliar with bureaucratic procedures that were proving to be inefficient and poorly prepared for the hundreds of thousands of people who were lining up in the queues all around the country. There is a clear fluidity in the battle actors who project the blame and the inner struggle of conscience of those who do not identify themselves as responsible for their difficult situation but caught up in a structure of policies and inadequate support measures that treat them as if they were. Even though many traditional, masculine manual labour opportunities are all but disappearing, Willis wrote that as the new millennium began:

"[t]here are still plenty of male working-class kids, like "the lads", who are perhaps more willing than ever to take on exploited manual work in traditional masculine and antimentalist ways (---) but there is not enough work to go around, and many are left in suspended animation on varieties of state schemes and dead end training programs. Many simply disappear from the radar screens." (Willis in Dolby and Dimitriadis 2004:183)



The lads describe how they were able to pick and choose between jobs during the height of the ‘boom’ when construction was at its peak. The situation has changed dramatically from 2008 onward. The reports of someone losing their job became increasingly frequent in 2009 and the conditions for employment became more precarious. One of the lads (age 26) talked about his last job in a factory that only lasted three months:

They had me on eight machines there at one time. I thought I was a pretty good worker and how he fired me he said eh... ‘Hm, we probably won’t have any work for you next week.’ And then I got a phone call the next day, ‘you’re... you’re let go.’ Stupid thing. They can do anything they want now like because you know... you’re desperate for money... You’re desperate for a job. They can do anything they want now, even the government which, I just totally don’t even... And that’s that.

One of the lads made redundant in 2009 (aged 23) signed on for one of the Work Placement Programmes provided by the Irish Unemployment Agency, FÁS, where he was meant to be training as a tire fitter. This did not mean any additional payment but promised acquirement of more skills, hopefully greater employment opportunities but most urgently felt by him, it would alleviate boredom and provide some structure in the daily routine. He was assigned to deliver cars to the airport only to wait, sometimes for hours, to be collected and taken back to the factory. Back at the factory he would wait around once more to be sent up to the airport again. He quit after a few weeks since he felt that the company was taking advantage of his situation and he was not learning any new skills. Instead he was spending money on lunch and petrol and was only compensated once by an employee who felt sorry for him gave him €20 so that he could “go for a few pints”.

An interesting aspect of FÁS, the Irish unemployment agency, is that its budget peaked during the years when Ireland’s employment numbers were at their highest. In addition to many revelations in the media of lavish expenditure on behalf of FÁS, in May of 2011 a study by the ESRI showed that those on a FÁS Government Programme were 17 percent *less* successful at getting jobs than those who looked for jobs alone. (ESRI 2011) The inefficiency of FÁS was revealed again in August 2011 by the Irish Independent stating that: “unemployed people are being placed on the

same FÁS course they have already completed. --- The practice means that the number on the Live Register is kept artificially lower.” (The Irish Independent, front page 12/08/2011)

### 3.3 Public Morality and Public Morale

*“Politics will, to the end of history, be an area where the conscience and power meet, where the ethical and coercive factors of human life will interpenetrate and work out their tentative and uneasy compromises.”* (Niebuhr 1960:5)

*“Our government’s default policy of fumbling through cultural change exemplifies the directionless confusion that many young people experience in trying to establish just who they are and just **what does matter.**”* (Smyth et.al. 2003:124 emphasis in original)

More recent theories on societal change suggest that increases in average incomes and living standards are not adequate indicators to conclude that a society is better off, particularly not in cases where people who are worse off remain in poverty or where their circumstances are getting even worse. (Fahey et.al. 2007:266) In 2002, Saris and Bartley (2002) wrote about socioeconomic exclusion in the midst of economic prosperity. Only a few miles away from Dublin City Centre:

*“the new construction of high-street capitalism’, Gallanstown, Cherry Orchard still remained high in crime rates and illicit drug use throughout the ‘boom’ when employment only slowly trickled down to its population whereby many people were ‘still losing socio-economic ground –most notably young, unskilled males.’”* (Saris and Bartley 2002:14)

The contours and skylines around the river Lee in Cork did not change as dramatically as they did around the river Liffey in Dublin but both cities are run by the same neo-liberal policies. A review of the Cork City Development Board

Strategy in 2009 uses a deprivation index ranging from -50 (most disadvantaged) to +50 (most affluent) and concludes that the relative position of Cork City had dropped 11 ranks from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 30<sup>th</sup> position in relative affluence from 1991 to 2006 (from 0.1 to -3.2) (O'Donovan 2009:10) The review further states that the affluence and deprivation differences within Cork City are considerable and that the deprivation indices from 2006 were more than likely to deteriorate further with the then emerging economic downturn. (O'Donovan 2009:11)

A sign of notable change can be seen in the generational shift in attitudes towards economic distribution provided by the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) as observed by O'Connell: In 1996 two-thirds of the older age groups in the survey wanted tax cuts before more social services but the older age brackets were exceeded by the youngest group where as much as three-quarters preferred tax cuts to social services (2001:177). Although these attitudes were surveyed at the start of the boom-years, this can perhaps be explained by the generational income gaps discussed earlier. Trends and variations in social commitments and values, offered here by the ISSP, are instructive. This is because our imagined ideal societies lay the foundations to the social realities we collectively produce and reproduce. Durkheim stated that "(t)he ideal society is not outside of the real society; it is part of it": (Bellah 1973:196).

"The formation of the ideal world is therefore not an irreducible fact that escapes science; it depends upon conditions which observation can touch; it is a natural product of social life. - - - For a society is not made up merely of the mass of individuals who compose it, the ground which they occupy, the things which they use and the movements which they perform, but above all is the idea which it forms of itself." (Extract from *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* Durkheim in Bellah 1973:195, 196)

An old quote by Oscar Wilde has echoed frequently in various media debates since the start of the economic recession when the public retrospectively revised the last decade and a half: "We know the price of everything and the value of nothing." The impact of the policies developed and implemented during the boom years have been a devastating blow to Irish society and Irish consciousness. Kuhling and Keohane

(2004, 2007) and Fahey (et.al. 2007) conclude that inequalities have grown in Irish society since the Economic Boom. The shift to neo-liberal policies and a new ‘ego-ideal’ (Keohane and Kuhling 2004) is not only a philosophical matter. The conclusion reached by a wide range of recent studies is that societies that have a more equal distribution of social goods and greater parity of recognition are healthier and happier than those with sharper polarities. Some of the empirically proven consequences of maldistribution are coronary heart disease; obesity, depression, stress-related illnesses, alcohol and drug abuse.

Some strictly qualitative enquiries put forward by O’Connell are: are societies ‘better places when they are wealthier?’ and, while Ireland indisputably became wealthier, - ‘are we richer, as people, for it?’ (*Changed Utterly: Ireland and the new Irish psyche* 2001:51) Authors Wilkinson and Pickett (*Spirit Level: Why More equal Societies Almost Always do Better*, 2010) show how crime rates, drug abuse and other ‘anomic trends’ correlate with economic inequality. The underlying inequalities in Irish society became greater and much more evident as the country fell into recession. Unemployment figures from the aftermath of the financial crash are staggering and the consequences crippling. The effects of the economic downturn are both age specific and gendered. At the start of 2011 over a third out of the forty lads/informants in this study had been made redundant (9) or emigrated (4). This corresponds with the national youth unemployment rate (under 25s) that in 2010 stood at 29.1% (Eurostat 2010). According to the Central Statistics Office (CSO) the number of persons on the Live Register<sup>9</sup> in December 2010 stood at 437,079 which represented an annual increase of 13,484 (+3.2%). Out of this figure, approximately one third are female and two thirds male.

“*Craft and related* (26.3%) was the largest occupational group on the Live Register in December, followed by *Plant and machine operatives* (16.0%). In December 2009 *Craft and related* (27.4%) and *Plant and machine operatives* (16.1%) were also the largest occupational groups.” (SCO January 2011)

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<sup>9</sup> The Live Register does not measure unemployment since it includes persons who work part-time (up to three days a week), seasonal and casual workers. It does however signal a continuing and alarming deterioration in the labour market.

These are the sectors where the lads work or used to work in. The same report further shows an increase of 4,800 males and 400 females in the seasonally adjusted series in December. In the same monthly adjustment series, long term male claimants increased by 4,110 while females increased by 887.

Hoffman and Ireland (Adler & Laufer, 2000) distinguished between the externalisation of blame and the internalisation of blame. The former is when a person attributes the cause of personal failure to the social order rather than to oneself (internalised blame). Blame balances rather ambiguously between personal responsibility (internalised blame) and externalised frustration and rage as my informants express a collectively painful awakening of structural reflexivity (see page 83). The abuse of exuberant wealth that was hidden, accepted or ignored during the Celtic Tiger became the focal point to which all fury was directed as the bubble burst in 2008. Compared to other affected countries however, the Irish outrage has been relatively contained. It was brought up several times in my conversations with my informants that “sure no one was complaining during the boom!” The Irish public now looked back with contempt at an era of “unthinking materialism”, and a “desire for an easy life, luxury and uncomplicated happiness” (Kuhling and Keohane 2007:124) that has now become a painful memory. It became increasingly clear in public analysis that “the primary way Ireland has become rich is that it has allowed the market and transnational companies free rein.” (Inglis 2008:168) For the vast majority of the Irish public, the internalisation of blame has been hard to avoid. People who criticised the public waste of opportunities for social inclusion and well-being were scrutinised at the height of the boom. As Keohane and Kuhling have argued: globalisation and the Celtic Tiger *could have* strengthened the Irish welfare state which was never particularly strong to begin with but, “the neoliberal policies which have pursued economic growth at the expense of social cohesion are to a large part responsible for the problems impacting negatively on quality of life in Ireland.” (Keohane and Kuhling 2007:154) This is an infamous quote from 2007 by the then Taoiseach (prime minister) Bertie Ahern for which he later apologised:

“Sitting on the sidelines or on defence, cribbing and moaning, is a lost opportunity. In fact, I don’t know how people who engage in that don’t commit suicide, because,

quite frankly, what you need to... The only thing that motivates me is being able to actually change something.” (RTE News 04-07-07)

A retrospective –and introspective- reimagining of Ireland’s new ego-ideal now dictates public debate. Specific to the turbulent time in which this study was conducted was the regular display of confrontational narratives between the media and political (and to a significantly lesser extent the financial) elite. Moral compromises, contradictions and subjectively perceived moral failures were showed and communicated daily in the Irish media and press. Following our discussion on institutional imbalance (see 2.5), Kuhling and Keohane point to the radical disjuncture between the economic and political. This entails a democratic deficit that in Ireland has resulted in a serious rolling back of the welfare state and a marketization of the state (2007:17). The authors explain how Ireland, although relatively small on a global scale, during the Celtic Tiger became regarded as one of the more corrupt countries in the EU (2007:30). Their symbolic interpretation of the Corrupt Irish Politician takes the form of one most famous Irish myths and commercial commodities: the Leprechaun: -reluctant to reveal the whereabouts of his treasure as he is captured and questioned by costly tribunals and the media:

“The Leprechaun squirms and wriggles, struggles to get free. He procrastinates, prevaricates, evades the questions, he raises red herrings. He uses every trick in the book to avoid giving answers. He pleads ignorance, forgetfulness. He protests his innocence. --- --- --- Even when he seems to have been successfully apprehended and reveals his riches to his captor, it turns out to be a trick. The Leprechaun hunter is fooled, and is left as poor or poorer than before.” (Kuhling and Keohane 2007:31)

Further on in their analysis Kuhling and Keohane go deeper into the spirit of the Trickster politician arguing that the Trickster’s or Leprechaun Politician’s apparent faults are the characteristics by which ordinary people recognise themselves: “so that the politician, even if he is the scion of a family dynasty, can appear to be humane and down to earth.” (2007:35) The authors offer us an explanation as to why the Irish people have up until very recently been so forgiving towards embezzlement, corruption and waste of public expenditure and how public cynicism and blasé attitudes have only been enforced by costly tribunals with petty outcomes. They

argue that even after having caught several Leprechauns, revealing scandals, the electorate go on to a predecessor who eventually ends up caught in a similar or even worse debacle that compared to the standards in most other Western democracies would have ended in resignation. The Irish response however was another: “the electorate, apparently inured to so much petty corruption, said, well, fair enough so, sure carry on!” (2007:43) Kuhling and Keohane explain how the political ‘Trickster’ had in fact courted American investments with tax incentives and the EU which had showered the country with grants and subsidies. “The paradox of the tribunals is that they appear to represent our desire to eradicate the Trickster from Irish political culture at the very moment when we are enjoying the dubious fruits of his handiwork.” (Kuhling and Keohane 2007:45) Evidently, Fiona Fail was re-elected in 2004 during the ongoing tribunals of several senior party figures.

Another regular commentary within the public debate that followed the recession was about the apparent differences in public reaction between Ireland and Greece. As one of the P.I.G countries, (Portugal, Ireland, Greece) hit hardest by the recession, Greek public dissatisfaction took a different level of expression. The Irish media showed Greek protestors chanting in the street carrying matching T-shirts and banners: “This is Greece, not Ireland, we the workers will resist.” In a televised satirical programme about the economic crises by Irish stand-up comedian Keith Farnan, economist, author and political commentator Fintan O’Toole was asked why the Irish had not had mass riots and protests like the Greeks. The fact is, O’Toole explained, that a lot of people did get a lot of money, and many are embarrassed by what they borrowed, what they spent and what they are now unable to repay: “It is very difficult to get over the barricades, in a revolutionary sense, if you can’t quite come to terms with what you did.” (*Money, money, money* aired 15/12/2011 RTE Two)

Enda Kenny (Fine Gael) who became the next Taoiseach (prime minister) after the downfall of Fianna Fáil and former Taoiseach Brian Cowen, reassured the Irish public in his address to the nation in December 2011 that it was not the Irish people’s fault what had happened to the Irish economy. However, it was only a month later that he announced in an interview the World Economic Forum in

January the same year that in fact, it was because the people had gone on a ‘mad borrowing frenzy’ that the economy eventually crashed.

A few but symbolically significant acts of outrage have been directed at some Irish banks. In February of 2009 an unidentified man dressed up in a suit was spotted in Cork City at 11.30 am. throwing dozens of eggs at an Anglo Irish Bank (AIB) office building. ([www.rte.ie](http://www.rte.ie)) Though admired locally, this act did not exceed the impact of former property developer from Galway, Joe McNamara, who was shown on the evening News parking a cement mixer with the words “Toxic Bank” and “Anglo” in red letters painted on its sides outside the Government Building in September of 2010. This outrageous response towards the Irish Government and the banking sector is the one remembered marker in the public eye to date. In many places around the country what will be remembered as the signifying moments of the recession are the more silent protests of the many local men found hanging or drowned as jobs were lost and financial woes crippled the Irish people.

In the still ongoing cold shower, facing the fact that the prosperity the country had enjoyed until recently was an illusion and in itself part of the downfall, people are far from charmed by the now constantly exposed ‘Leprechaun’-politicians. ‘Everyman’ who Keohane and Kuhling refer to, or ‘the lads’ in my context, do not identify with their leaders’ far-from-‘down-to-earth’-flaws. Quite the contrary: in the revelations of their lavish expenditures, the lads consider themselves morally superior to the politicians who have completely lost touch with reality. The lads emphasise their principles on a regular basis, one important one being generosity before greed. One of the lads told me during one of many debacles over politicians’ travel expenses how his friend had met Enda Kenny (Fianna Gael party leader at the time, currently Taoiseach) at a Cork hurling match when he was trying to gather support before the European Parliamentary elections in 2009. His friend had refused to shake Kenny’s hand after he had learned that the party leader had arrived in a publically financed helicopter.

Perhaps we would all like to envision ourselves as true to our principles, and it might well be easier to do so in a more restricted position of opportunity where certain options are not on offer. Whatever answer we ultimately settle for, -whether this is the outcome of differing moral standards on a collision course or a case of moral



deterioration or a moral vacuum- none of them will sit comfortably with people who have seen great opportunities lost and even less for those who never got to see them materialise. My informants' subjectively perceived principles and the cultural codes of etiquette they follow and believe in are relevant to their behaviour and therefore relevant to this study. On a day-to-day basis the lads share whatever they have, be it cigarettes; 'cans' (beer), food or cannabis. Lending, borrowing and gifts go in all directions among peers. However small, all that they have they offer to share with their friends. The neo-liberalist ethos of the economic boom; materialistic ego-ideals and self-entitlement are in strict contradiction with the lads' favoured solidarity, self-surrender and egalitarianism. The reason the government and politicians in general are considered 'out of touch with reality' is that their behaviour in a very visible way, does not correlate with the moral codes of loyalty, self-surrender and generosity.

The most famous Corkonian vernacular is 'boy'. In fact, this is always mimicked when Cork is mentioned in other parts of the country. "How's it going boy?" "How are things boy?" and so on. As far as the lads are concerned this is a common phrasing. One of my initial observations in the field was not only how often 'boy' is used but how on some specific occasions the lads or 'boys' are elevated to 'man'. 'Sound man' or 'good man' carry highly esteemed and dignified symbolic implications. These terms are used almost exclusively when a subtle act of generosity is performed. Keohane and Kuhling suggest that: "(a)gainst this background we can see the importance of the gift relation in reconciling the practices of Irish consumerism with more traditional aspects of our collective representations." (2004:109-10) For some of the lads, this reproduction of reciprocal relations and social solidarity carries so much weight that it causes social isolation due to over-lending to friends or family. Those of my informants who have resorted to shoplifting and also gotten caught, did so in order to get gifts for family and friends when they had no way of buying them.

### 3.4 Rebels with a new cause?

The Irish case proves that the distinction between internalised and externalised blame is not as straight forward as it might first appear. Responsibility does not fall solely upon those who have made it their job to run the country but on all who think of the country as their own. Although the lads' idealism is strong, their civic responsibility and political awareness –also among those who identify with a strong Republican ethos – remains poor. The following chapter is an analysis of how this ambiguous idealism manifests itself amongst the lads and the Irish public at large.

On Saturday, January 22, 2011 one of the lads announced to me: “The fat pig is gone.” At 14.49 pm, RTE News Live online declared “LIVE - Brian Cowen steps down as FF [Fianna Fáil] leader”. The first comment was posted only moments later: “About time, BIFFO<sup>10</sup>. Good riddance. Pity there's not much better around, either in FF or in opposition.” [www.rte.ie/news](http://www.rte.ie/news) accessed on 22.01.2011

In the NSRF 2004 study (Begley et.al.), young men commented on a decline in religious practice in Ireland and that nowadays all the concentration was going somewhere else. However, there was a certain ambiguity in determining where that ‘somewhere else’ was (see discussion in 2.3). I would like to return to ‘one of the lad's’ reflections. On this occasion we had a discussion on whether religion nurtures the soul and was Ireland losing its religion?

F: Is Ireland losing its religion?

X. --- Yeah...

F: Do you think there is anything that could come in and do the job for the Church if it's gone?

X. (Deep sigh)... No. I don't see any option out there that could come in. If there is I'd be chanting it from the roof tops but ... You get out Fianna Fáil, you get in Fine Gael. They both have the same name... for starters... (laughs) You know? I'd like to see a radical right group get in to government!

F: Right? (I am surprised since he has told me that his now first vote will go to Sinn Féin.)

X: Left, is it?

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<sup>10</sup> B.I.F.F.O. is publically known as short for Big Ignorant Fucker From Offaly and has also been used in the Irish Press.

(Interview with one of the lads age 28, December 2010)

My fieldwork amongst the lads in the Rebel County of Cork could not have happened during a more eventful and politically compromising time. This offered me the opportunity to see what the lads thought and felt about their country -now in turmoil-, its leaders and their own civic responsibilities and rights. That the lads all see themselves as Republicans is as much a part of their identity as being working class or as being a Corkman. Irish Independence is not so much about freeing the last six counties in the North as it is about hating England in every international sporting tournament regardless of what sport is being played. As far as English soccer in its own right is concerned, the lads are all dedicated fans of Manchester United, -City, Leeds, Chelsea etc.

The political views of the majority of the young men lean to the political Left but as far as voting goes, the vast majority of them never voted at all. Those who had voted at the time of my arrival in 2008 had voted for the local Fianna Fáil (FF) councillor who had done something good for the immediate community or family members. Among the lads are also those who are more dedicated Republicans who vote for Sinn Féin always. The lads who had not voted before were now eager to vote for the first time and to get Fianna Fáil out of government. Those that had voted for FF before were now even more eager to show their anger and vote for whatever else that would get them out. The rather disoriented statement above reflects an interesting phenomenon whereby many of the lads felt 'where their hearts were' but lacked some important insights into national politics and ideological context to turn this awakening motivation into organised activism or sometimes, even words.

Here are only a few of the headlines out of a long line of very critical and angry articles published during the initial period of the recession. These were particularly intense leading up to the European and local elections in the spring of 2009. The public anger here is comparably evident in relation to the political climate and policies that in principle were the same as in pre-crash 2004 when Fianna Fáil was still going strong:

“Elite civil servants’ last bonus scheme cost the taxpayer €3m.” –The Irish Independent 23/04/2009

“Fury as funds for Cork roads spent elsewhere” – The Evening Echo 12/05/2009

“Candidates knock but doors don’t open” The Irish Examiner 21/05/2009

“Politician owes over €5,600 to Dáil [Government] restaurant”– The Irish Examiner 03/06/2009

“Day 30: Taoiseach finally meets a voter” 03/06/2009 – The Irish Examiner

“The voice of an angry nation’ and ‘Anger of voters is big story at counts”– The Evening Echo 08/06/2009

“€ 472 limo ride was ‘not lavish’” – The Evening Echo 24/08/09<sup>11</sup>

Overall, while this text was being produced, televised documentaries and debates were exposing the over expenditures and waste by the Irish government leading up to the present economic difficulties. At the same time, the sexual abuse committed toward institutionalised children in the care of religious orders around Ireland intensified the moral disassociation with the political institutions that had put children in their care. The lads blame the government and politicians in general for the extensive job losses in the area and were very outspoken in their aggression towards local politicians and their representatives. The lads’ anger became more intense as local political representatives were campaigning for the European Parliamentary elections in May of 2009. Going door to door in the vicinity one representative was met by verbal abuse by two of the lads who proudly admitted to the campaigner that: “I burnt down your posters and I’ll do it again!” The two lads then used the contact details on the leaflet to send abusive texts and emails to the

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<sup>11</sup> This last header refers to the Ceann Comhairle, the chairman of Dáil Éireann (the Irish parliament) and Fianna Fail TD John O’Donoghue. A limousine costing the taxpayer €472 was used to ferry Mr O’Donoghue from Terminal Three in London’s Heathrow Airport to Terminal One while he was minister. He was later forced to step down over his expenses which had amounted up to €200,000 over the two years prior. During the same week in July of 2009 Prime Time revealed to the Irish public that the total amount of expenses of TDs in 2008 had come to €11.7 million, an average of €70,481 per TD.

local candidate. One of them let me include his correspondence in this study: His email to the candidate was the following:

“Thanks for your flyer but dont ever send your crew round to my house to give me a letter of lies and deceit. Its endless lies and broken promises so i would like no more contact with you and your gangsters(fianna fail).  
Kind regards,  
Disgusted Irishman.”

In a very dignified response, the politician in question wrote that it was in fact his first time running for the party but that he had been a community activist for two decades and that if he would have left his constituency down, he would love to know. Finally he asked how many Community Association meetings his critic had attended in the last twelve months as this was ‘the engine room of activities’. He ended the email by saying that enthusiastic people like him were always welcome to get involved. He also invited the young man to help out with upcoming activities and thanked him for his comments. There would be no come-back to this.

Another one of the lads kept an imitation riffle by the door during the election period prepared for when Fianna Fail, according to him responsible for his recent pay cut, might call. At this times the local newspaper in Cork, The Evening Echo, published an article about how posters were disappearing throughout the county: “Cash reward offered as election posters mysteriously disappear” (18/05/2009) The Evening Echo later analysed the result of the vote in a special edition the day after the local and European elections, one of many articles under the header mentioned above, “The voice of an angry nation”:

“The outcome tells us a lot of things. It tells that people are hurting and furious over the lost jobs, 400,000 and rising, the atrocious management of the economy, the lax and reckless practices in the banks, the cutbacks in education, the income levies, cutbacks in the medical cards for old age pensioners and the debacle over the way the compensation issue was handled for those abused in the industrial schools over the last 40 years. But most of all it tells us about the type of government the people

want – and this is a message that applies to all parties. The want honest, straight-up government.” (The Evening Echo 08/06/2009)

Another article stated that: “the voters of county Cork have sent out a clear message which is not just anti-government but also anti the political establishment and the major parties.” (ibid.) So, had a new generation of Cork Rebels awoken?

As the very prototypes of ‘protest masculinities’ and the representations of ‘lad culture’ it seemed for a while that the lads were becoming Rebels with a cause: Sinn Féin announced in the Evening Echo in late November of 2010 that there was to be a March going through Cork City against the ‘treasonous deception of the government’. One of the lads informed me of this in the afternoon when he came to ask me if I had any markers for the banners they were making for the protest. There were seven of us (one of the lads steaming drunk) who went in to town that evening with two signs; one reading “Fuck Off Ye Cunts” (the last word in bright red) and the other saying “Ur Gone”, initially meant to say “Ur dead”. I had no idea what to expect as we headed into town and neither did the lads. In the car the expectations were high: ‘at least a few thousand should show up for this but then again it had only been a few hours notice’. Traffic was bad and everyone in the car is in a hurry to meet up with the rest of the protesters. The lads are beeping the horn in excitement and we get a few responses from other cars as we drive alongside the river Lee getting closer to the National Monument on the Grand Parade. One of the lads decides to put the Fuck Off-sign through the window for the other motorists to partake in the giddiness felt in the car. We get a response from a female driver: “Now there’s no need for that. That’s ridiculous!” The lads were a bit put off since they thought for a second that she was in support of the sign.

We first drove by the crowd of a shy 150 people at best and everyone was immediately embarrassed over the signs they had just been so proud over. Both signs were left in the car with the agreement that we at least go to get the “Ur Out” sign if things got a bit more radical later on. Instead tea candles were handed out in plastic cups but the lads simply refused to hold them (this would have been too ‘gay’). For a while, the lads seemed mortified by the pitiful turnout. However, once the lads, as self proclaimed ‘protest-virgins’, started marching and chanting through Cork City

there was a certain excitement in the air. By the very end of the protest, one man could not contain himself: “Bring back the IRA!” The lads vouched to come back in two days time for the next protest arranged by Sinn Féin for the pre-budget meeting to be held in City Hall.

One of the lads called to the house the following morning and I greeted him: “So how are we today you ol’ rebel?” He stopped for a minute: “Oh yeah... I had to think for a minute there. I didn’t even click on to what you were talking about first.” In the end deflated by what they had thought would be bigger and more engaging, they did not show up for the following March which to me, however messy it would have turned out, would have signalled something more inspiring, -indeed reflexive-, than ‘bushing’, drinking cans down by the factory or being chased by the Guards which will be the main themes as we approach ‘the lads’ den’ in following chapters.

### **3.5 Summary and conclusions**

Expectations of self-realisation and freedom from role and norm restrictions may be daunting as it demands a high degree of personal responsibility. It does however allow for the flexibility to change with the times and to strategise one’s life situation to accommodate new circumstances. For those who are knowingly ‘stuck’ in ‘old ways’ that no longer apply to a drastically changed reality, Bourdieu’s ‘hysteresis effect’ really does describe a real, lived condition. Breed identified the following traits as parts of a suicide syndrome (in Taylor 1982): “a firm *commitment* to a particular self concept; a *rigid* inflexibility to change; *failure*, especially in occupational roles for men and sex roles for women; the response of *shame* to the role failure and *isolation*, especially from the approval of others.’ (quoted in Taylor 1982:132 emphasis in original)

Basing a self concept on an unwillingness to accept new conditions and difference can easily be interpreted as an incapacitating trait. In the following chapters I will show how role inflexibility and role restriction is socially constructed and how it influences gender appropriate behaviours, coping mechanisms and skills amongst the lads. From the beginning of this thesis I made clear that to analyse the overrepresentation of suicide among young working class Irish males, I would investigate the life circumstances, restrictions and opportunities available to them. Barry's book argues that youth transitions are marked by age-related; social, institutional, and power (capital) imbalances. (Barry 2006:2) She also distinguishes three markers in the transition to adulthood. These are; the opportunities for *stable employment, adequate housing and social identity*.

In this section I looked at the imagined country that the political elite had envisioned when resources were widely available for a good decade and a half and, what in the end came of it in terms of quality of life for Ireland's young working classes. I examined social attitudes arguing that the ideal world –that which keeps us going– is an imagined place that precedes the real world. It is this pre-existing place that we can still feel good about when actual realities disappoint and that motivates us to make things better and not give up. I have emphasised that the well-being of a country cannot be measured by its wealth but that it is the distribution of society's riches; -its resources and opportunities- that must be evaluated to get a fair picture of how a society is doing. Recent research have established that maldistribution and misrecognition of specific groups in society results in depression, stress, alcohol and drug abuse, shorter life expectancy and suicide.

I have discussed how youth, especially those on lower or uncertain incomes, are at a disadvantage socially and economically. I have accounted for some of the most relevant changes to the traditional Irish family structure and how adolescence now extends into adulthood delaying autonomous, individuated living. Socioeconomic circumstances brought on by the Irish property bubble made independent living arrangements, now expected of young people, extremely difficult. The only viable options left to the young working class and often jobless men is to stay in the family home (often in to their thirties), move in with a partner to half the rent (although most of the lads are single) or, move in with other lads in a similar situation.



The lads see themselves as morally superior to the ‘Trickster politicians’ and the financial elites that made fortunes by selling off the sustainability and well-being of Irish society. Much like our ideal society, the moral codes and creeds we stand for and believe in (even though we do not always follow through on them) are also part of this analysis because they also shape our ‘outlook on life’. The lads’ codes of ethics, generosity before greed, loyalty towards peers and family, are difficult to reconcile with the new ego-ideals that marked the boom-years. As the lads try to articulate their fury and avail of their civic participatory rights it becomes clear that they lack previous experience and the social confidence to state their case. The current recession has brought on a new awareness amongst the marginalised classes but has done very little to raise the social esteem necessary to build a viable resistance and sense of control as circumstances become increasingly desperate.

Anger and a sense of moral superiority, but also a lack of reflexivity, social esteem or previous experience of civic participation constitute the ambiguous resistance amongst the lads. In the chapter “*Twenty-five years on: Old books, new times*” (2004) Paul Willis reflected on his 1977 ethnography *Learning to Labour* and asked: under what conditions might structural awareness turn into “outright political opposition and radical interruption of the reproduction of inherited structural relations?” (Willis in Dolby and Dimitriadis 2004:174) In part 4, I will discuss the need for social and cultural capital and how these skills can be acquired in school and through work. The lads are a self-reflexively weak group. Many of them are ill-equipped to put the problems they perceive into genuinely transformative efforts but also to participate in the very debates that most concern them. But when prompted and shown any interest the potentials become evident instantly. I return one more time to my conversation with one of the lads on the substitute to religion:

F: We were on about religion...

X: Yeah...

F: No other moral order?

X: Do you know what the closest thing to that is?

F: No. That’s what I’m asking.

X: A belief in your county football team! Sports is that big. I know that might sound like a weird thing to you but...

F: No I agree, the GAA is the only standing institution people still believe in when politics are out and religion is gone...

X: There's fellas born... they might not even be any good at the game!  
But like, all their lives they're like, doing something for the club, if it's  
not raising money, their selling tickets, that's their religion like!

F: they are producing something, community spirit.

X: Absolutely. And it's the only thing they'll ever have, that will never  
change!

(---)

X: Anything besides religious thinking is just smart thinking.

F: Translates education?

X: Not really. Anything above your head... anything beyond your  
control is either religious, and then, if it's not religious, you're just a  
very smart person. You get me?

F: Are you saying I have to trust in my own intelligence for guidance?  
Is that what you are saying to me?

X: Yeah.

F: So there's a lot of confidence there... there has to be...

X: Yeah. - Thinking outside the box.

I believe the most important question today is how to educate future generations of young lads who are looking at an utterly changed reality. Education will in the end determine how well or ill trained they will be in identifying and articulating this box -the outside world- their rights within it and responsibilities to it. But also, to open up the many spheres and opportunities that are currently thought of and felt to be inappropriate or irrelevant to boys, because they are boys.

#### 4. NEO-TRADITIONAL MASCULINITIES AND SOCIAL CHANGE

*“It may be that in today’s economic climate young men are no longer able to attain a recognizable masculinity through manual labour, so are seeking to authenticate this identity in postures of heterosexuality. More research is required to determine the exigency of these claims, although we may speculate on the continuing presence and practice of ‘lads’ in school, despite changes to the manufacturing base. If they are no longer ‘learning to labour’ then what exactly are they doing?”* (Kehily and Nayak quoted in McDowell 2003:135)

In 2010, the Fine Gael TD and president of the Irish Association of Suicidology Dan Neville addressed a UCD conference on suicide stating that “suicide is now the most common cause of death amongst young men in Ireland.” (The Irish Times 06-08-10) The last decades have seen signs of fundamental restructuring within the traditional gender order of Irish society. Conservative voices and neo-traditional, reactionary responses are important parts of these changes. Spellissy (*Suicide and the Irish* 1996) reflects on The New Woman and the New Man, “a couple seemingly incompatible in life and death.” He concludes: “New Man is hardly thriving. He is committing crimes, filling the prisons, killing himself, abusing drugs in ever increasing numbers. New man appears, in many ways, a more alienated creature than his predecessors.” (Kate Hill quoted in Spellissy 1996:46)

After examining: “*why low-income youth?*”, meaning, why young people are vulnerable to suicide and how quality of life is defined by age, I will now go into the specifics of answering: “*why young lads?*” I will also address the question posed above: “if the lads are no longer learning to labour, what exactly are they doing?” This further enquiry directs us not only towards specific age groups but to the intersections of gender and social class. In the following text I ask whether or not this neo-traditional, white, settled, Irish working-class masculinity has entered into a ‘crisis’. I will examine this by looking at the lads relationships to the three elementary activities of the human experience; what they produce, consume and ultimately destroy. I look at how many young men, carrying a social burden of representation, have “internalised certain negative or pathologising discourses about men and masculinity” (Ging 2005a:40). Dolby and Dimitriadis, like many others, have highlighted that: “Politicians since the 1990s have publicly declared laddism to

be the cause of male working-class educational failure and the reason for all boys' alleged underachievement" (2004:35). Further on in this chapter I discuss how these processes of internalisation and representation are shaped by social discourse and early socialisation. I will also show how curricular initiatives in the Irish school system were put in place to intervene and challenge these processes. In the final pages of the chapter I suggest how future educational initiatives would be better equipped to provide social learning to students whilst acknowledging that the educational system itself plays a fundamental part in social conservatism and the re-generation of 'laddism'.

#### **4.1 Gender paradoxes and masculinities in crises**

There is a gender paradox in that men tend to *complete* suicide and women *attempt* suicide (Cleary 2005a:156). Attempted suicide can be interpreted as a 'cry for help' which violates the expectations associated with 'male strength' as opposed to 'female weakness'. There has been a shift in how these traditional associations with male and female characteristics are read. Men's inability to disclose vulnerability is increasingly viewed as a weakness and an obstacle to men's well-being and coping mechanisms. Another gender paradox is emphasised in a Swedish study carrying the same title, *The Gender Paradox (Könsparadoxen)*: "*Why twice [in Ireland four times] as many men than women take their own lives when there are more women who are depressed.*" (Ringskog 2001 my translation). A similar contradiction is to be found in how women generally adopt healthier lifestyles and have longer life expectancy while men in most circumstances report better health than women. (Månsdotter 2009:7) The World Health Organisation stated, as late as 2009, that men were less likely than women to disclose mental health problems such as depression, a trend confirmed to be the same in Ireland (Doherty et.al. 2010:224). Doherty and colleagues show further in their Anglo-Irish study that men are less likely than

women to be diagnosed with depression even when the objective scores that measure depression are similar. (ibid.)

There have been some fundamental changes in the traditional gender order. Most notably, there has been an inversion of previously held dichotomies such as weakness/strength, delicacy/resilience, childlike/mature etc. Recent research on male vulnerability to suicide, (see Barnes 2007, Ging in Cleary 2005a, Clare 2000, Cleary 2005a, McCormack 2010) indicate that many men perceive emotional maturity, strength, and confidence to be female traits and benefits. Both the lads and the young women interviewed in this study perceive that women are “mentally stronger” than men.

Inverted ideas about men’s fragility and female strength have resulted in the resurging claim that masculinity is in crisis. A classic theme within early feminist theories on patriarchy is that men are in power and therefore, there should be little or no sympathy for any claims of distress from ‘aggrieved entitlement’. Aggrieved entitlement is a term coined by one of men’s studies leading men Michael Kimmell. Commenting on some of the issues in my MA thesis in 2008 which was the basis of this current field study Kimmell explained that: “These guys feel entitled, but they don't get what they expect, which leaves them humiliated, and that is the connection to masculinity.” One of Whitehead’s first arguments in his book *Masculinities* is that there is no valid claim to a ‘masculinity in crisis’:

“First, we should recognise the multiple ways of being a man and the multiple masculinities now available to men in this, the postmodern age. There can be no prevailing, singular masculinity in crisis. Second, the crisis of masculinity thesis can be used by some to inform a backlash against feminism and women’s interests. One outcome of such antifeminist feeling is that it stops many from coming to recognise that perhaps their traditional, blinkered ways of seeing the world are no longer tenable.” (Whitehead 2002:3)

Ging argued that this “may be overestimating individual agency by foreclosing analysis of the power structures within which most boys are, in reality, immersed.” (Ging 2005a:48) Or as Cleary would have it: there are indeed multiple masculinities,

however, “a unitary *notion* of masculinity underpin these discourses.” (Cleary 2005a:156 my emphasis) Whitehead’s conclusion contradicts his initial assumption: If there are indeed multiple masculinities, then there should also be culturally distinct responses among these towards actual and specific social change. Fear of a gender equality backlash does not hinder me from recognising that *some* masculinities, *some* groups of men, for the traditional cultural expectations of gender still held locally (*by women as well as men*) and changes that affect young working class men specifically, might in some contexts be subjectively experienced as a ‘crisis’. Some theorists suggest that deindustrialisation has created a crisis in white working-class forms of masculinity and that the “responses of the macho lads to the new ethos of schooling involves celebrating alternative sources of gender power.” (Dolby and Dimitriadis 2004:33) Should the issues concerning *some* masculinities be theoretically ignored or intellectually isolated because they are not “tenable” or constructive so not to disturb the progress of gender equality (or rather feminism)?

Anthropology *is about perceptions*, not least those of the people we wish to understand. Even though my findings might be simplified or misconstrued by others, any academic serious about gender studies or any of the social sciences should feel well equipped to argue against any ambition to uphold gender inequalities for the sake of any man or men in crises. Connell writes that:

“the biggest problem of all in the pop-psychology approach to masculinity is its nostalgia, a persistent belief that solutions to the problems of men can be found by looking backwards. --- We need new and more democratic patterns in gender relations, not re-runs of discredited patriarchies.” (Connell 2001:6)

Today’s problems can certainly not be solved by reversing the clock to satisfy conservative masculinities. Time-reversal is in effect impossible and, as this study have shown, the lads’ reactionary ethos are related to specific negative changes in their lives and not based on a nostalgic wish to reverse time. The cramping strong hold of laddism, its cultural resistance and self-restricting characteristics, are some of the factors that need to be considered and carefully reflected upon. These issues should never be ignored based on a fear of a backlash against feminism. It is of important theoretical value and practical interest for a group of men with commonly

held expectations of one version of a local, hegemonic masculinity that is currently inclined to self-destructive behaviours of alarming proportions. As we acknowledge the multiplicity of masculinities, it becomes evident that some groupings have more pronounced expectations and restrictions than others.

#### **4.2 Gendered segregation, equality and public health**

Irish women's attitudes towards their own gender roles have changed considerably and this is recognised by Irish men as well. The question is if men's *and* women's expectations of masculinity have become as liberal and plural as men's *and* women's expectations of femininity. One of my main focal points will be to distinguish, who is conservative towards whom?

Drawing figures from the 1988 and 1994 International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) on Family and Changing Gender Roles, O'Connell (2001) states that whereas Irish women hold more conservative views in general, towards the Church, State and business institutions, the 'post-traditional' views they do hold are about themselves as women and their roles in Irish society. And this is also where Irish men are the most conservative: "it is a smallish minority of women who cling to the idea of rigid and outdated sex roles, while a larger and significant minority of Irish men do." (2001:164) *Which* rigid and outdated sex roles are we talking about? Those of women, or those of men? O'Connell further explains:

"The more consistent finding is that men's attitudes persist in displaying greater amounts of social conservatism with regard to sex roles and equality. For example, when responding to items such as "what women really want is home and kids", "the household is a wife's job" and "housework satisfies as much as a paid job", the percentage of men in agreement or strong agreement is consistently greater than that of women. Typically, the difference is about ten per cent." (O'Connell 2001:163)

The ISSP's Family and Changing Gender Roles offers cross-sectional data on "changes in attitudes to women's employment over a key 14-year time period." (Hilliard et.al. 2007:135) The ISSP's next survey was planned for the spring of 2012 and the results were to be published until the following year. Unfortunately, the funding was not there to conduct the study. In my last attempt to contact the ISSP staff in Ireland I was informed that hopefully, the ISSP would field the study as part of a different survey in 2013, if finances allowed. (Communication with Iarfhlaith Watson November 2012) Based on O'Connell's analysis and with one extra census year to go by (2002) I can only confirm that the difference in agreement/strong agreement to "what women really want is home and kids" from 1988 is 9.5% between Irish men and women. In 1994 the difference is 7%. In 2002 however, the gender difference in agreement and strong agreement has fallen to 4.3%. The difference between the sexes in the next statement "the household is a wife's job", is 9.3, 11.4 and 8.6 per cent per respective census year.<sup>12</sup> Differences between Irish men and women showed a lot smaller in the last statement, "housework satisfies as much as a paid job"; 1.3, 3.9 and 1.5 per cent per respective year.

***Gender differences*** in agreement/strong agreement to statements:

|   | 1988                             | 1994                           | 2002                             |
|---|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| "what women really want is home and kids"   | 9.5%<br>men 61.9%<br>women 52.4% | 7%<br>men 54.6%<br>women 47.6% | 4.3%<br>men 42.9%<br>women 37.7% |
| "the household is a wife's job"             | 9.3%                             | 11.4%                          | 8.6%                             |
| "housework satisfies as much as a paid job" | 1.3%                             | 3.9%                           | 1.5%                             |

<sup>12</sup> The question was changed in 2002 to: "Men's job is work, women's job is household". Any such changes in surveys supposedly showing change over time is always unfortunate but a more nuanced picture had probably emerged if this question would have been the same in the previous surveys, focusing on the cultural expectations of women *and* men.



Reading into these figures, it is clear that men’s attitudes towards female labour force participation have remained consistently more conservative than those of women. According to these surveys from 1988, 1994 and 2002, the attitudes towards women’s traditional gender roles or rather *towards women’s employment and housework*, are changing among both men and women. Also, the decreasing agreements are more prominent between the two latter census years 1994 and 2002 showing an accelerating pace of this shift in attitudes.

Overall conservatism between census years:

| Agreement                                 | 1988                           | 1994   | 2002  |
|---|--------------------------------|--|---|
| “women really want home and kids”         | Males: 61.9%<br>Females: 52.4% | Males: 54.6% <b>-7.3%</b><br>Females: 47.6%<br><b>- 4.8%</b> | Males: 42.9% <b>-11.7%</b><br>Females: 37.7%<br><b>-9.9%</b>  |
| “the household is a wife’s job”           | Males: 46.6%<br>Females: 37.1% | Males: 40.4% <b>-6%</b><br>Females: 29%<br><b>-8.1%</b>      | Males: 23.5% <b>-16.9%</b><br>Females: 14.9%<br><b>-14.1%</b> |
| “housework satisfies/ much as a paid job” | Males: 66.8%<br>Females: 65.5% | Males: 63.3% <b>-3.5%</b><br>Females: 59.4%<br><b>-6.1%</b>  | Males: 50.9% <b>-12.4%</b><br>Females: 49.4%<br><b>-10%</b>   |

However, the differences in *how much* attitudes change between the sexes are not as dramatic but instead rather puzzling: Between most census years, women’s conservatism dropped less than men’s! Just to give one example: To the statement that “what women really want is home and kids”, the women in agreement (or strong agreement) had dropped by 4.8% from 1988 to 1994. The same drop for men was 7.3%. From 1994 to 2002 women’s agreement to this statement had fallen by an additional 9.9% and men’s agreement by 11.7%.

It is clear from measuring the degree to which both sexes change their position with regards to these three conservative views on *women’s* gender roles, that although men remain more conservative, men have also altered their views to the same or higher degree within a relatively shorter time period than women.

The crucial point is this: The statements supposedly reflecting each genders agreement or disagreement to “rigid and outdated sex roles” are only those of

women, -mainly women's gender roles in relation to household work, motherhood and income contribution. Only the 2002 survey, testing a total of 76 statements about social conservatism and gender, made one enquiry into the gendered positions on rigid and outdated *male* gender roles; "Men should do larger share of household work"<sup>13</sup> Whether the 'family suffers because men work too much' is only asked in 1994. All other questions, ranging from 60 statements in 1988 to 76 statements in 2002, centres around maternal employment and family life, marriage and sexual relations, divorce, childcare and family size (ISSP 1998, 1994, 2002). None of the surveys sufficiently address the crucial issues with regards to 'blinkered' or 'rigid' *male* gender roles and whatever potential damaging effects these gendered expectations (again, held by women and men) have on the male or indeed female subjective experience or society at large. The underlying presumption is thus, that if men's and women's values regarding women's role in society are changing, then the cultural expectations of men will have changed to the same degree. However: "dominant discourses of masculinity have not kept pace with recent changes in women's lives." (Mac an Ghail 1997:86)

It would be of considerable value to see what changes are accommodating each other and which ones are not! Since it is not possible to retract un-surveyed figures from passed years, and because the finances were not there to execute the surveys due after 2002, one can hope that further information on *both* gender roles and how they are changing in relation to one another will be available in a not too distant future. Another important issue concerning national and international surveys on changing gender roles is that men do not disclose vulnerabilities –even in anonymous surveys. In a 2002 ISSP survey we obtain data on the degree to which each gender finds job-, and family life stressful and how happy one feels generally in life. Unfortunately this might not be all that instructive if the conclusions about the gender paradox made by Begley *et.al.*, (2004) Ging and Cleary (2005) are anything to go by:

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<sup>13</sup> On the first statement, the women in agreement or strong agreement outnumbered men by 7.6% and males outnumbered women by 5.6% in disagreement and strong disagreement Females and males in agreement/strong agreement: 73.7% and 66.1% Females and males in disagreement/strong disagreement: 10.5% and 16.1% (ISSP 2002) The statement whether "Men should do larger share in childcare" is part of the survey but not in the Irish case study.

“Research into men and mental health issues has produced some worrying findings. For example, men have been found to be less likely to recognise a mental health problem than women, less likely to confide in family members about emotional matters, and much less likely to report a personal vulnerability to depression.” (Begley et.al. 2004:6)

The NSRF research team came across many difficulties in obtaining data on young men’s outlook on life. Their initial attempt to conduct the survey by post had a response rate of less than 20%. Their final survey was conducted by going door-to-door and had a response rate of 86% but even some of the most important details of the demographic profile proved to be hard to specify: “Employment status was not stated for over 30% of the men ---. It may be that unemployed respondents were less likely to respond to this question.” (Begley et.al. 2004:17) The late Dr. Anthony Clare (Medical Director of St Patrick’s Hospital, Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Trinity College Dublin and co-author of *Cultivating Suicide?* wrote:

“So controlled, unforthcoming and contained are most men that they are careful when completing surveys and questionnaires which, as a result, are difficult to interpret. The results of many self-report measures are questionable because men, particularly those who present themselves as ‘highly masculine’, grossly under-report their symptoms.” (Clare 2000:77)

Socioeconomic background also influences on how vulnerability is disclosed among men and consequently on men’s help seeking behaviours. Men on lower-income and with unskilled occupations are less likely to disclose their social category/income which makes it hard to investigate the relationship it might have to suicide. Research also show that lower socio-economic groups are less likely to be offered inpatient psychiatric care and aftercare. ”It is generally the case that suicide is higher in lower social classes and in areas of socioeconomic deprivation and socially deprived areas.” (Walsh 2008:53)

In my own efforts to conduct a survey with some of the same questions as those asked by the NSRF in 2004, one of the respondents admitted to have had serious personal, emotional, behavioural or mental health problem for which he felt he

needed professional help in the past year but he did not seek any help. On the specifics on why he did not he states that: “Yes I was a bit down coz I haven’t worked for 2 years. I suppose I just thought I don’t need to tell a doctor that.” When stating what coping mechanism was most useful, the by far most common response in the NSRF 2004 survey was “talk to someone” (69.1%) yet some ten per cent stated that they never did. (2004:20)

To examine the relationship between gender equality and public health I have also looked into updated research from Sweden where the struggle for gender equality has formed a fundamental part in public activism and political policy over the better half of a century. Dr Anna Månsdotter discusses the implications gender equality has for public health (2009). She writes about the radical changes during this last decade in Sweden where the number of men who now take advantage of paternity leave has doubled, currently reaching 23,7 per cent (Försäkringskassan 2012), and how half of the county councillors in Stockholm are women. <sup>14</sup>The report examines how these changes have impacted on women’s, men’s, and children’s health and whether the changes are overall positive or negative as well. “Is a diffusion, between women and men, based on respective genders’ relative benefits to life conditions possible and indeed desirable? And if so, how can efforts on a population basis promote such a convergence?” (Magnusson in Månsdotter 2009:3 my translation)

One of the main strategies in the Swedish struggle for gender equality has been to “increase men’s responsibility for home and children, and women’s stakes in power and resources in society.” (Månsdotter 2009:7 my translation) In fact, the most updated research on gender equality and public health in Sweden borrows their definition of gender equality from political scientist Susan Moller Okins: ”gender equality is defined as more or less similarity between women and men in every sphere of human life, including the private sphere.” (2007:1893) Current research, Månsdotter says, indicate that the initial steps towards an equal society (between the sexes) whereby women are guaranteed the same basic rights as men, are univocally positive for both adults and children. However, the process towards equality can also

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<sup>14</sup> In Ireland there is no paternity leave and the number of female members in local authorities is less than one fifth (CSO 2011).

have negative implications for public health. In the specific Swedish case research suggests that Swedish society might have reached a point where this equality is negative for both women and men based on how many sick-days are taken out and general life expectancy.

“This might be explained by the fact that women have taken on (*over*) domains traditionally seen as masculine before the reverse has happened for men which is now putting women at a disadvantage in terms of overburdening and continued subordination in society, and for men, in terms of continued risky life-styles and loss of previously held social privileges.” (2009:7)

A recent evaluation of the Celtic Tiger concerning gender in Ireland states that although there is a substantial difference to be found throughout Europe in the gender division of domestic work and gainful work, the extent of the difference in Ireland is higher than many European countries. (Fahey et.al. 2007:207) This is confirmed by that Central Statistics Office which states that in Ireland today, “the vast majority of those looking after home/family are women.” (CSO 2011:10) Over half a million of Irish women were looking after home and family in 2010 compared to some 7 500 men (CSO 2011:11). The Central Statistics Office report *Women and Men in Ireland 2010* (2011) also shows that Irish women have the highest fertility rate than any other EU country and that most of those who work within health and education are women.

In Ireland, the work load is highly segregated into domestic and public spheres and the care and upbringing of children is overall the work of women. In school, girls are taking more diversified subjects with higher numbers having English, Irish, French, Biology, Home Economics and Arts included as part of their Leaving Certificate while boys take on a higher proportion of technical subjects. In 2010, 84 per cent of third level students taking on Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction were male while 82 per cent of graduates who went onto Health and Welfare were female. (ibid. p.10) As was discussed in part 3.6, the manufacturing and building sectors have been the worst affected by the recession. The processes by which gender appropriate work and life spheres translates into differences in public health and well-being will be the focus throughout the following pages.

### 4.3 Aggrieved entitlement and actual loss

The idea of aggrieved entitlement should not undermine the subjective experience of actual loss. It is clear from the arguments presented in the NSRF's report that the majority of young men (60%) who say that "the lot of the average man is getting worse not better" (Begley et.al. 2004:21) is not unwarranted, at least not for those in traditional male sectors of employment whose identities and social expectations depends on this type of employment. The young men's interpretations in the NSRF report and in this study are based on strong evidence of decreasing availability of industrial, manufacturing work opportunities and a neo-liberalist over-emphasis on personal responsibility. Globalisation, deindustrialisation and the current economic recession have fundamentally restructured the European economy and labour markets. A recent Eurostat report on European unemployment trends shows how: "Historically, women have been more affected by unemployment than men. --- In recent years, most markedly since the first quarter of 2008, male and female unemployment rates in the EU-27 have converged and by the second quarter of 2009 the male unemployment rate was higher." (Eurostat June 2010)

Eurostat also confirms that although the unemployment rate for women remained higher than the male rate in the euro zone as a whole: "The gap between male and female unemployment rates varied from -6.3 percentage points in Greece to +7.2 percentage points in Ireland"( Eurostat June 2010), leaving Ireland with the highest male unemployment gender ratio within the euro-zone. In her British study McDowell depicts young men today as:

"probably the first generation of men in industrial economies to experience a downward intergenerational mobility. In service-dominated economies working class young men are faced by more restricted labour market opportunities than their fathers found in previous decades, whereas working class young women, in comparison with their mothers, seem to have greater job opportunities." (McDowell 2003:59)

I am not suggesting that young men are experiencing a legitimate aggrieved entitlement because young women are doing better. I am suggesting that a brighter

outlook and greater possibilities might explain why the young women *are* doing better than their male ‘counterparts’. The specific stressors in the sectors now dominated by women would, as suggested earlier, also explain specific expressions of stress and distress (increased demands on flexibility, role conflict and over-burdening because of a one-sided gender-role expansion etc.). The threats of market restructuring perceived by young men are, I believe, due more to decrease in working-class ‘male jobs’ (actual loss) than women’s advancement (aggrieved entitlement) into other expanding, often regarded as female, sectors. Drawing from my communication with the lads over the last four years I have heard their many laments over not finding work, the many failures of the State, their marginalisation and vulnerabilities as a group but not any explicit complaints about women who enjoy better job opportunities. The lads do not seem to compare the opportunities of their female peers to their mothers’ positions as carers of household and children as such a comparison is no longer viable or realistic.

A shift in work opportunities and upheavals in the traditional gender order but also the mere speed of these changes –from one generation to another – have various implications. Mac an Ghail (1996, 2007) recognises the contradictions between the continuing influence of the male breadwinner discourse and socioeconomic model and the actual, ever decreasing proportion of men who in reality are sole breadwinners. Fahey explains that in Ireland in as late as 1994, the single breadwinner model still predominated along with couples with dependent children. However by 2000, this model applied to only 38 per cent of Irish households. (Fahey et.al. 2007:201-2)

Dolby and Dimitriadis (2004) compare the socioeconomic reality of 2004 with Willis’s 1977 study of ‘laddism’ and working class culture. They describe how today, “economic restructuring and the contraction of manufacturing industry in the United Kingdom had the greatest impact on those boys whose fathers worked in the factory or other industrial jobs.” (2004:32) In the Irish case as well, the lads still hold their fathers labour positions as valid references even though the chances of obtaining such opportunities have been decimated. Not coincidentally I believe, is the fact that ‘[b]etween 1950 and 1998, suicide rates in England and Wales doubled in males under 45’. (Scourfield 2005:1) From my discussions with locals in the field

I conclude that the expectations of the occupational roles of women have fundamentally changed from previous generations. It is equally clear that the expectations of gender appropriate work for men have not changed significantly from previous generations although the demands and conditions of traditionally male labour sectors have.

In a meeting at the University of Limerick with Dr. Carmen Kuhling whose work is quoted in this study, we discussed to some extent the cultural expectations of gender and socioeconomic change in Ireland. As a gender theorist herself she made some important suggestions:

“And there is nowhere to go. If they [the lads] were to realise that it’s not their fault that they are in that situation... They are, and I don’t like to use that term, but the sacrificial victims of the Celtic Tiger, if they have a sense of what’s going on and just how little control they do have over all these things, meaning that they don’t have that many options, that wouldn’t actually alleviate the problems of depression and suicide. It might intensify them. That’s the problem.” (Conversation with dr. Kuhling Nov 2010)

Finding this hard to take, I in turn hoped that perhaps a sense of control could be re-established if the lads who I believe to be a reflexively weak group, understood the structures around them. Dr. Kuhling’s response was that perhaps that was a better way of looking at it. However, as my studies proceeded and I gathered more information and personal accounts on unemployment, training schemes and limited opportunities in living arrangements I felt rather pessimistic towards the overall negative overview. I found myself unwilling to share this information in my communication with the lads in fear that repeating this would further enhance any pessimistic outlook they might already have.



#### 4.4 The lads at work

*“In short, the evidence in relation to living and working conditions suggests that gender plays an important role in the higher mortality among men. Because work is much more closely tied with masculine gender roles, being unemployed offers particular benefits for men while unemployment is detrimental.”* (Payne 2008:32)

I believe that people's relations to what they produce, consume but also destroy, are telling facts about the very essence of *being*. There seems to be an important balance between these activities and how they play out in people's lives. There is a lot to be said about what people 'do' in life and how they accordingly 'become'.

Within the working-class context examined here there is an evident emphasis on the value of hard work as one of the most important blocks in gendered identity-building. This working class ethos says that 'hard graft' - the fulfilment of a meaningful role-, *is the goal* regardless of any specific level of income. The importance of earning ones keep if only for 'a few bob' is increasingly the primary means by which to preserve some dignity in a world where the traditionally valued roles are becoming obsolete. Many of the lads prioritise the traditional working class jobs that their fathers held before them within the manufacturing,- and building sectors that are winding down or that have simply disappeared. The contextually specific outcomes will therefore differ from those discussed by many criminologists and sociologists with regards to 'anomic values' or strain. The lads in my study carry relatively modest goals: feeling *useful* and fulfilling their social and gendered roles through paid labour and the occasional 'craic' (for many there is undoubtedly an over-emphasis on the latter). Whitehead explains in *Men and Masculinities* (2002):

“...paid work is more than merely a provider of some material or social comfort or an opportunity to exercise power; it is a primary vehicle for the otherwise contingent and unstable subject to achieve a sense of self, to become grounded and located in the social world. The discursive subject comes to be an individual, in part, through (paid) work.--- More specifically, paid work has historically been managed, organized and predominately engaged in by men, one consequence of which is that it has come to exercise a major influence on definitions and performances of masculinity.” (Whitehead 2002:124-5)

The money earned during the property boom when the lads were paid more generously than their fathers could ever have dreamt of in previous decades was well spent according to the lads. They live for the *craic* in both boom and bust. Dr. Kieran Keohane's reflections and personal experiences compliment my own. His comment to me was: "You're here at an extraordinary time, because, things have fallen apart." He told me a story of a young man he picked up hitch-hiking on his way from Limerick some years ago when the economy favoured young working class men in the building sector. This particular young man in his mid-twenties was on his way to a rehabilitation clinic. He was a plasterer making two-three thousand euro per week and was now addicted to some ten substances.

"He says: 'sure we were all at it'. He has a car but no house, describes going out every night, getting loaded and getting loaded and getting loaded. So, one can live like that for a while when there is casual, well paid work around, but sooner or later things become undone..." (Conversation with Dr. Keohane Nov 2010)

One of the lads with whom I shared the same household for two years was charged and full of anticipation before Christmas 2010. This was still during the time he had work as a promising apprentice. Money was spent on booze and weed every week and bigger funding was now required to take him through the main spending season when the many gifts for family and friends still did not compare to the financial requirement for the upcoming 'session' (of drink) that would last over the New Year. To fill the fridge from top to bottom with Carlsberg bottles and for the even larger stack of boxes of beer bottles in the corner of the kitchen that had to last over the holidays, he took out a bank loan of two thousand euros. The lads' ideal budget was always to have enough money in their pockets to have a good time and to share it with good friends. The financial benefits of work come secondary to the value of being a man who has work, to be a man who works hard and knows how to enjoy his free time with his friends.

One of the younger lads (18) who was fortunate enough to keep his job when the other young men in the family did not, said on one occasion in the presence of the rest of the lads: "When I come home now from work the old man pulls out the chair

for me. He asks me, did you go to work today? I say yes. He says: When are you working again? I say tomorrow. And he pulls out the chair for me. And you know how hard that is for him like.” The ‘old man’ is known locally for having worked hard all his life. Decades of hard graft had put much strain on his body and his bad knees now made it difficult for him to move around freely. Some months later, another one of the lads in the family found a new job and addressed the other lads over a few cans: “Guess who’s the golden boy now?”

I asked one of the lads in his mid-twenties to elaborate on the values attached to ‘hard graft’:

F. What’s was so great about working in construction/building things?

X. Cos you get to work with your hands you know, rather than studying, sitting at the desk... crap.

F. Thanks. (meaning my studies)

X. I know yeah but... when you’re plastering outside like and, it takes you about two hours to plaster, something like that, maybe more... Actually it takes the whole day to plaster the front of a house, eight o’clock in the morning until five o’clock in the afternoon. It takes you all that day to do the front of the house...

F. Would you say you’re proud of the results when you’re done?

X. Oh big time. Big time! Cos when I was in construction, I really, really enjoyed it like. Five years I was doing it. And there’s nothing around!

X. I don’t have anything else like. I left at, my Junior Cert... --- I don’t -- I don’t know...

F. But sure you...

X. Do you really need an education for a job like? You, know I don’t wanna be working in a bar or... Centra. (A local shop franchise)

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F. Compare after a work day at Centra and plastering: what’s the difference?

X. Eh, I know what you’re saying, there’s more satisfaction when you’re building something. You know? Way more satisfaction. ‘I done that. I done that with my hands.’ --- It’s good and strong work like. It toughens you up, toughens up your mind too like.

F. If you would be able to get a new job in construction again, would you be able to say then ‘I love my job?’

X. Oh definitely! Definitely! I love my job, when I was... building. It went on for five years like. Five years you know. That was brilliant. That was the best job I ever had. ----- But, what’s out there like?? What’s out there? There’s nothing out there. And you *know* that! --- We’re living in this place like. Where there’s lots of factories, and... There’s no jobs out there.

In the latest ISSP survey on gender equality from 2002, 61.7% of women agreed or strongly agreed that ‘work is best for women’s independence’. This only made a marginal difference from the level of agreement of men: 59.4%. The same question was not asked about how important work was for men (one can perhaps assume that the question was a given). However, it would probably have been an overwhelming agreement on both sides of the gender spectrum, that men need employment not only for their independence but to fill the social expectations of (at least working class-) masculinity.

I asked one of the lads (age 25) during one of our chats about what he saw as the reason behind the very frequent reports on suicides in the area in early 2009 and he answered: “That’s cos they were all out of work. That was when... people had no jobs left or nothing like.” Equally, when asked about how the reported suicides in the area seemed to level out for a while his explanation was: “I think... well mostly I thought it was... builders and all of them you know? People who dropped out at Junior Cert or something, you know? But eh... I think it stopped because it started to get back on track, to work.”

With a focus on narratives and ethnolinguistics, Lindquist (2004) conducted a study on working class values in a Chicago Neighbourhood Bar. In her context as for the most part in mine, “class remains implicit, unnameable”, it is not an organising metaphor:

“If an explicit theory of class is absent, however, its practice is everywhere. Precisely because so little is spoken about class per se, much is said. --- Yet even as *class* is sublimated into other social alignments and rhetorical domains, the identification with *working* is explicit.” (Lindquist 2004:299)

As in Lindquist’s study, whether the lads will or will not “tell you they are “working class”, they want you to know that they are *people who work*. Talk of work encodes dominant values of productivity, practical knowledge, proximity to and control over products of labor, sharing of social and economic resources.” (Lindquist 2004:299)

For the sake of the discussion outlined here I would like to address the values of productivity and practical knowledge so that I can show that which those who have lost their jobs, effectively lost as well. Just as valued as productivity and skills were when the lads were all in employment, so they have remained in unemployment. All my close informants still refer to what they used to be a part of, as workers and as valued contributors: When passing a newly constructed cement wall, one of the lads points out to me, “I did the plastering on that” or looking at an unfinished building job when it was not his own handiwork: “I used to make those, will I go see if they need any help?”. The same informant once offered to help me build a greenhouse: “I could lay the foundation if you want!” Another one of the lads (while he was still working) offered to weld me a piggy bank and a television table. Yet another one of the lads employed as a print finisher came back from work with a new note pad he had made. As he noticed some flyers that had been dropped through the mail box he proudly declared that “we printed those last week” as he explained the exact measurements used. On one very moving occasion, some of the lads had lost their friend and work colleague to a freak accident. All of them in construction, decided to finish a wall that the young man was in the process of building in honour of his passing.

I have yet to hear anyone of the lads talk about the loss of or the longing for the high salaries they enjoyed during the Celtic Tiger-years. The lads are still repeating and referring back to the skills they acquired and used during employment and indeed, the process of “learning to labour”. In this, I see the nostalgia but also bereavement of actual loss. The concentration on more negative activities of both consumption and destruction during extended periods of unemployment are structured by a liminal situation which is both age-, and gender-specific. Expectations of masculinity and gender-specific living conditions were also depicted in Gaetz’ Cork of the 1980’s: The following is an interesting observation with regards to production, consumption and last but certainly not least in this study: destruction. It relates back to the unanswered questions that remain regarding the lads who are no longer ‘producing’: If they are no longer ‘learning to labour’ then what exactly are they doing?” (Kehily and Nayak quoted in McDowell 2003:135)

Gaetz writes about the lads in 1980's Cork: "Police reported that the vast majority of the crimes were against property, which supports other research on youth crime in Ireland. Spray-painted walls, kicked-in fences, broken windows, fires, and damaged cars were a common site in Ballinaclasha." (Gaetz 1997:98) I have heard many testimonies about when the lads were younger and engaged in vandalism and stealing from the very factories that are, supposedly, their main source of employment. Unlike claims that the lads hold bitter resentment towards women's better work opportunities, this reasoning does not escape the logic of aggrieved entitlement. These 'spray-painted walls, kicked-in fences, broken windows and damaged cars' are also part of their 'line of production'.

The lads' commitment to the *craic*; binge and alcohol abuse is a familiar topic within public debate on lad culture. What is perhaps less evident than what they consume and destroy is what they produce and what it means to them as these opportunities are disappearing. The relationship between engagements of production, consumption and destruction are intrinsically linked and needs to be analysed as a whole: When fundamental changes occur in a sphere as valued as production –work and role fulfilment -they will undoubtedly have important consequences for how and what young men consume and destroy.

#### **4.5 Disavowal of dependence and the gift of worry**

*"It has been suggested by several authors that young people tend not to equate adulthood with rights per se but with personal responsibility."*  
(Barry 2006:141)

The following pages are a continuing discussion on subjective vulnerabilities based on age (youth) and gender (masculinity). I will now continue by examining how

gender appropriateness and the acquirement of skills is regenerated in Irish society – according to national and international research, and, my own ethnographic material.

Dolby and Dimitriadis (2004) suggest that the private experiences behind the lads' hard outer image, (their relations with parents, siblings, friends and girlfriends) and how they initially immerse into working-class culture outside the public sphere, is often ignored in research. According to the authors: “the internal dynamics of family life still tend not to be seen by social and cultural theorists as significant as economic factors in framing youth identities.” (Dolby and Dimitriadis 2004:29)

Gaetz wrote about how girls' participation in youth-, and street culture is structurally different from the lads'. He suggested further that this difference was rooted in the patriarchal structures of Irish society and that the Irish family, both as a structure and as a unit, was the main transmitter of the values that underlie this gender order.

(1997:92) Clare suggested that the gender stereotypes that children encounter within the family later determines how they see gendered social roles and how they apply these to themselves and others. (Clare 2000:67) Barnes (2007) discussed the ethnographic accounts of the boys in her classroom study and their views on house duties: “In general the boys tidy their rooms, empty and fill the dishwasher and do odd jobs like painting and lifting furniture. They do not cook meals, vacuum, clean or do grocery shopping apart from running to the local shop for milk or butter.” (Barnes 2007:199) The boys also said that they were sometimes ‘very reluctantly’, ‘made to’ take care, baby-sit younger siblings, nieces or nephews.

The gender order as it stands in many Irish working class family units, often clash with the cosmopolitan progressive values presented in public discourse. Writing specifically on the Irish context and his own experiences at the turn of the millennium, Prof. Anthony Clare suggested that something had happened in the last fifty years in Ireland as traditional gendered stereotypes “have been subjected to serious criticism”:

“As a man, I have inherited a model of the sexes in which masculinity is equated with psychological and physical strength and health, femininity with psychological and physical weakness and illness. --- As the new century begins, the state of

maleness is being portrayed by a variety of commentators as equivalent to a deviant state, a pathology. The very traits which once went to make us the men we think we are and would like to be –logical, disciplined, controlled, rational, aggressive – are now seen as the stigmata of deviance. The very traits that once marked out women as weak and inferior – emotional, spontaneous, intuitive, expressive, compassionate, empathetic – are increasingly being seen as the markers of *maturity and health*.” (Clare 2000:67-8 my emphasis)

During the course of my fieldwork it was suggested by the young lads and women interviewed that women were indeed “mentally stronger” than the lads. To be for example, ‘emotionally handicapped’, is a negative evaluation of someone’s character and refers to someone who is not in touch with, and/or cannot express, their emotions. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century being emotionally handicapped would have meant someone who *was* in touch with their feelings and, who consequently let them rule over reason (see discussion on female pathological hysteria in 2.4). In present day Ireland, marked by a new gendered hysteria, the stereotypical opposites have become inverted. Public concerns now lay with exaggerated masculinities and the defensive, -‘backward’- conservative and reactionary ethos of young working-class men who are increasingly depicted as ‘underperforming’, ‘psychologically vulnerable’, and too immature to mind others, themselves and their general well-being.

A prominent theme in my discussion with Dr. Carmen Kuhling (2004, 2007) was object relations theory. This theory explains the early subjective experiences and the process of the development of the mind as one becomes socialised by the care taking environment. The "objects" of the theory are both one's internalised images of others and real others in one's world. These early patterns will often continue to exert a strong influence throughout life. Much like Bourdieu’s habitus (see 2.4), these patterns are not fixed in any deterministic sense but can be altered, although not easily, at any stage in life. Following this line of reasoning, Kuhling explained how a *disavowal of dependence* became a public response to the Irish financial crisis:

“in times of individual/collective disempowerment, sometimes individuals will deny that relation of dependence, like in Ireland the



way people refused to see that the Celtic Tiger was dependent on, very much on American multinational investment --- as well as the housing bubble that created this illusion of unreality, and that's maybe why people are not reacting maybe in the way some people might think they should in terms of moving on to better, more productive solutions.” (conversation with Dr. Kuhling November 2010)

In his field study on lad culture in 1980's Cork (also during an economic recession) Gaetz described a similar scenario: He wrote that although the lads' experiences of unemployment were hardly pleasant they were “paradoxically caught up between the need to valorize their unemployment as being a matter of personal choice”. (Gaetz 1997:84-5) Kuhling argued along the same lines:

“It's about retaining some shred of self-respect in the context of continuous ‘chipping away’ of their own sense of identity which is tied up with their masculinity. That's understandable. That's resistance... to hang on to their sense of self” (Conversation with Dr. Kuhling Nov. 2010)

In my interview with Dr. Kuhling we discussed how the use of male chauvinistic jargon is often defended as humour. We addressed how sexist and homophobic comments are made up as jokes or used for chock value without completely losing a certain defensive undertone. Dr. Kuhling talks of “the media formula of the host and the side-kick females hostess ‘cutesy bickering’ over gender differences” and says that she does not remember this from 15 years ago and reckons it must be a response to recent transformation within the gender order.

In a long-running and in-depth conversation with some of the young women in the field about taking on everyday tasks and responsibilities they explain how “girls talking” translates “nagging” to the lads. The women interviewed know all the lads who are part of this study and did so for many years before I came on the scene. One of the girls (age 24) had this to say about this response as the lads are being told what to do or how to do things:

F. Is it the principle?

X. No. Rather than to make a fool out of himself and ask someone 'how do you do this and this and this?', he just hates it. It's easier.

F. I came across this before you know...

X. Yeah?

F. I came across this in Brazil. At uni I came across a concept called 'o não saber'. Not knowing. The shame of not knowing.  
 X. That's it. The shame of not knowing. That's what it is.  
 F. So, rather than... you get aggressive straight away like, stressed out about it.  
 X. Defensive yeah... And especially..., and especially when it's around here, the mentality is that, if it's a woman... comes in and tells ya 'this is what you have to do and this is how you do it' then, automatically taken as nagging. Nah, they don't want to listen to what you're saying at all. That's definitely how sexist they all are. Unbelievable!

The 'not knowing' (*o não saber*, Roberto da Matta 1997:196) explains that feeling of shame of not knowing the answer, of showing lack of knowledge or skills or as da Matta put it –to reveal ignorance (*revelar ignorancia*)<sup>15</sup>. This defensive response protects a sense of dignity that is perceived to be under threat and is not unrelated to the disavowal of dependence Kuhling speaks of. Barnes also puts the disavowal of 'nagging' into an interesting perspective in where power struggles emerge to compensate for a lack in both autonomy and sense of responsibility: "[The boys'] frustration at being permanently confined by the rules of home, school and work contributes to their defensive attitude and the ensuing reduction of situations and conversations to a context within which they have either won or lost." (Barnes 2007:225)

In a social world structured by gender appropriate spheres (and immediate sanctions when these are transgressed) the boys' and young men's stake in domestic responsibilities are all but non-existent and little or no value is attached to gender 'inappropriate' tasks or responsibilities. In this situation, the lads are merely 'reluctantly' 'made to' take part in and responsibility for it. In an extended interview with two more girls (X and Y) a month later, listening back on our conversation, two things come to the fore; how incapable the lads really seem to their female peers and, the unmistakable sound of nagging; - *furious, desperate 'nagging'*. We discuss some basic constraints to some of lads that, to their own admission would make it difficult for them to live 'on their own' or, with friends who are 'just the same'. "Y"

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<sup>15</sup> In a deeply stratified, hierarchical society such as Brazilian society, says da Matta, 'profound fear of ridicule and prank' are important regulatory mechanisms which keep people in their place. These, he continues, are the 'bitter indignities' that we try to masquerade but sometimes suffer 'when we lose for whatever reason, our sense of place'. (da Matta 1997:188-9 my translation)

here, has moved out of the family home but still helps out around the house when she visits. Her brothers had lived on their own in the past sharing a house with friends but had now moved back home again. She reflects on the time when she and her brothers still lived together on the family home. The following ‘rant’ develops:

X. So who’s gonna go out and buy dish washer tablets you know? No one. And who’s gonna...

F. And why aren’t they doing these simple things?

X. Because in this case it has been done for them for so long.

F. They bring the washing up to their mam’s don’t they?

Y. Let me tell you something that really really pisses me off. I go through the cupboards there, I pay rent to my mam and I go and do a shop every two weeks, she’ll do it one week and I’ll do it the next. If I’m on form I’ll do it two weeks but, not for a while now... (deep breath) What I do is, I go through the cupboards and I look, there’s an empty big bag of Taytos (crisps) in there, there are empty cartons of milk in the fridge, there’s empty, cos they don’t know what the fuck to do with them!!! So I come back, and I’m after buying all of that and they’re all empty and I’m like, and for years and years and years: ”please don’t put the empty stuff back in the cupboard!” ”Please don’t put the empty stuff back in the cupboard!” But for some fucking reason, imagine putting an empty carton of milk back in the fridge!!!

X. They don’t care if there is stuff on the counter, they didn’t clean it! They didn’t stock the fridge, why would they *care* if there’s stuff that is empty in there? You, know, they’re not going shopping, why would they care, if there is empty stuff inside there?

Dr. Kuhling’s suggested that the disavowal of dependence was that which happened “at the level of gender, particularly in those sorts of painful, vulnerable moments --- where that dependence of another, whether it be a boyfriend or a girlfriend, or the State, the nation, the job, is disavowed in that moment of pain or trauma...”

(Conversation with Dr. Kuhling Nov. 2010) - Is this what is happening in these moments of resentful gender squabbles? Are these young men rejecting the *nagging*, the imposed reminder of their dependence on their female social relations for basic everyday tasks? Although a very valid argument, I do not believe this to be the only part of the story. The lads do not refrain from these domestic tasks only because they are lazy and disinterested or even because they resent being asked or “nagged”. These tasks are considered by most people to be irrelevant or even inappropriate for males. If the interests in domestic, caring, culinary or esthetical activities are there, there are a long line of negative sanctions; ridicule and mocking attached. Again,

these testimonies reflect the same narratives presented from Gaetz's work from Cork in the 1980's:

“This begins at an early age and is intensified during the teenage years, when the girls are expected to perform many domestic tasks, both to ease the burden of their mothers and as a form of *apprenticeship* for their future roles. There are clearly different sets of expectations for teenage boys and girls in this regard. Virtually all the girls I spoke to who had brothers remarked that their own domestic responsibilities were greater, whether they were in school, working, or unemployed. Few teenage boys contradicted this.” (Gaetz 1997:93)

However, the disavowal of dependence is ironically hampering the young males that are most expected to be independent! Or perhaps that is a perfectly logical response, they are rejecting the very dependence that has shaped and ultimately restricted them (“it's been done for them so long”)! To me it signifies the incompatibility between expectations of immaturity and the contradictory but equally evident expectations of an autonomous self. Dr. Anthony Clare asserted from a psychological and I believe rather personal perspective: “the female fulfilment of adult male dependency is shameful, with its connotations of a return to infancy and helplessness.” (Clare 2000:201) The girls in this extract strongly emphasise what they see as the lads' low tolerance for 'pressure':

Y. Can I just say something? And this is not just for my mam, I love my mam, this is about every woman I know like. It is for a fact ok: For some reason, they are tougher on the girls than they are on the boys! My mam will fucking lift me and tell me what is what but when it comes to the boys she is so sensitive to their feelings cos she doesn't wanna hurt them. And when it comes to cleaning the house or picking up after themselves or washing their own bed clothes and washing their own clothes, she does that for them because she doesn't like to see them stressed out because, when they get stressed out they go way worse than we do, for some reason. Girls are able to handle it! Fellas are not. And now I know it shouldn't come down to washing your own bed clothes and stuff like that and that but in some cases it does.

X. Well that's where it starts 'cos you know, if they can't wash their own bed clothes then how the hell can they go and sign on the dole for themselves? (See discussion in part 2)

Perhaps of no surprise, this is the longest interview from my four-year fieldwork. What would surely be met by loud rejections and dismissal as ‘ranting’, ‘nagging’ or ‘bitching’ had the lads been invited, needs to be read as something deeper and theoretically significant. I believe that what the young women are presenting in these dialogues are not just reflective of a culturally specific gender order but their personal concern, annoyance and stressors in their relationships to their male peers and family relations. The three girls shared with me on this occasion, not only their own personal experiences but their most intimate and desperate feelings related to what they felt to be great stress factors both from their upbringing. More valuable still were their shared, clear and reflexive insights into how it all came to be, historically and in their own homes:

X. ”Eh, you know what, eh... you know if it was just my mam, she is a little bit easier going on him [the youngest and only brother].. Absolutely. Not, not.. she doesn’t do everything for him but... he still, he has to do jobs every day during the summer, he has to do the outside stuff you know, reeling, pick up the rubbish, he has to do all that stuff you know. I think, if it was up to my mam and we didn’t have a dad, he’d be useless. But my dad isn’t like that at all, my dad makes sure he has his list of jobs to do the same way the girls have theirs... No I don’t think my mam’s that bad actually cos, my mam had five brothers and her dad died when they were young and, not some much the older ones but there was a few around her age, my mother, she looked after them [her mother’s siblings]. It got up to the point now when she got up in the morning to milk the cows, put them out, went in, did the breakfasts, did the lunches, cycled to school, came home did the dinner, milked the cows again, went in, did the homework with the lads, did her own, went to bed. You know, that kind of thing.”

Barry writes: “There are subtle nuances in the meaning of the word ‘responsibility’. It can mean ‘having responsibility’ which suggests being accountable (to someone) for something; ‘acting responsibly’ where expectations are placed on the actor by others; or alternatively ‘*taking on responsibility*’ which suggests the *opportunity* of being *trusted* with something for someone.” (Barry 2006:141 my emphasis)

The lads are often quick and eager to refer to ‘gender inappropriate’ tasks as boring (or ‘gay’) and any request to perform these tasks as nagging. However, when it comes to what the lads deem to be appropriate work, it becomes evident that they

understand 'the right' responsibilities as a valuable award. Out of the three girls who participated this afternoon, the young woman quoted again below (age 24) saw her family setting as relatively equal and therefore exceptional. The family set up she describes was based on fairly collaborative roles among the family members, including the father and the younger and only son. She lays out a vital insight that this analysis really could not do without. It makes a fruitful development to Wiklund's concept of 'taking on responsibility' and its connotation of 'an opportunity of being trusted'. It is the idea of "*sharing worries*":

X. But do you know what, I'm not that bitter. And it's only since I got to know a bit more of everyone else's families that I came to realise how lucky I am. I really can't complain. And this isn't just boasting. I really can't believe how haunted [lucky] I am, at all! In my family my mam and dad are equal in their relationship, in cleaning, in worrying, in finances, in... how they treat us. And, in their eyes, they are the most important thing in their lives, I mean, they still, you know love us but they still look after each other so much it's ridiculous. My dad is one tough, strong man, and not physically but... he's a big man you know but, he doesn't fight, he doesn't argue. He only cares about his wife and his kids and he has the self-confidence and he doesn't need any other man to tell him that he's doing ok. He knows himself. I have the most respect for him out of any other man I know. And, I know I'm biased but I don't think it's just 'cos he's my dad. I see him... and he's a brilliant father and a brilliant husband to my mam.

F. I think that was interesting how you put that, the bit about being equal about... worrying, 'cos I think that also makes the lads really unskilled, untrained when it comes to 'carrying worries'.

Y. Well you've seen the lads. You know that they're... pathetic.  
(laughs)

X. (serious): My dad will come down to us and where back to school and he'll say to us that: "we have this, this, and this, this month so don't ask me for money." "If you can do this, can do this yourself?" or "You know mum's a bit stressed today can you make sure everything is perfect before she gets home." And we'll do it the four of us or whoever's at home...

F. Yeah that's what I mean with sharing the worrying...

X. Absolutely! And then my mam can turn around and say that "Look, dad's stressed over this, this and that so don't piss him off" or... "don't wind him up". And... they really look out for each other and... I just thought that was normal practice until I found out what goes on in other families.

F. Would that explain also, the basics of why I am doing this research, on how keeping the lads from sharing worrying, that when worries do come along... that must be like the end of the world.

X. Yeah. Must be.

The ‘feminization of health’ is discussed in some detail by Robertson in “Understanding Men and Health” (2007). I believe these inverted gender representations offer some valuable information into the dealings and copings of emotionality. Robertson argues that emotions emerge ‘*within socio-relational contexts*’ (2007:95 emphasis in orig.) and that it is in “men’s relationships, and through this the role of emotions in identity construction and management” (ibid.) that ultimately impact on health (and life) practices.

After X had presented her views and personal experiences, the other two young women still felt it necessary to underline that the segregation into gender appropriate spheres was in fact still a prominent feature in many homes today:

Y. I’m not even like, that bad but eh, if you go down to [a neighbouring town where she has family ties] right, I swear to God like, there’s two girls and seven fellas in the house, They’re all older than the girls, the girls come in, have the breakfast ready on the table, tea, they speak to them like they are grown women, you know like, expecting them to do... they don’t even have to be asked. They just do it.

F. ... So the women carry the household?

Y. Yeah.

X. The women carry that household and the men don’t do nothing.

Y. They don’t even have to worry about things. You know when things are bad, like, if something is gone wrong, the fellas they don’t talk about it, they don’t wanna hear about it, they don’t have to sort it out. It’s not like, if something...

F. Do they hide it from them?

Y. I wouldn’t! I say it but I get in trouble for it. My mam and my older sisters fight with me for saying it to them. But I think it should be different and I get pissed off ’cos there’s so many boys in the house you know? But I do like, I’ll be shouting about it, and I’ll be telling them that and like, it’s like it goes in one ear and out the other and they do not acknowledge it ’cos they don’t have to listen to me ’cos I shouldn’t be telling them this shit like that, and that’s what it’s like.

F. I think there are loads of ‘non-events’ in these fellas’ lives (X. yeah). You know what I mean, things that don’t happen, but they are there, they do happen.

X. And you know I only see it because I’m friends with [Y] but I’m also friends with the other lads as well so, I’ll be talking to [Y] one day, and she says ‘oh this is after happening in the house. It’s very stressful, I don’t know what to do, bla, bla, bla’. You know, just chatting, and then you come down to the house and there’s [Y’s brothers], sitting drinking away and laughing and talking about the most stupid things and just, like there’s nothing going on. And, I don’t

know is it just that they don't know it, or... but I think they do they just chose not to think about it.

Y. They know they don't have to deal with it.

X. Yeah, and just like you know, and it's only 'cos I'm friends with both sides you know, that I see what's going on and, I'm after losing a lot of respect for them over it to be honest...

Y. I'll tell you the God's honest truth right and to be honest, this actually gets me fierce depressed you know, it does. It's really hard to cope with: If I get stuck on them because the house is a tip... my mam sorts out everybody, she looks after everyone you know and she gets stressed out. And you know I think this is, for the girls...

The gender order of women perceiving significantly more demands with regards to taking on responsibility, being responsible and sharing burdens (big and small) is highlighted in both the Irish and Swedish contexts. In the recent Swedish study *Close to the Edge: Discursive, embodied and gendered stress in modern youth* (2002) Wiklund's speaks about a young woman whose parents were relatively laxed in their attitudes and expectations towards her brother who 'does his own thing' which seems to be 'a little more ok' as this is 'just the way he is.' (Wiklund 2010:50) It should however be noted that the situation the girls I have interviewed describe are not moderate measures of unequal demands and duties where what the lads refrain from "is *a little* more ok". Rather, the gender order depicted is much more emphasised. Wiklund's analysis on the perceived stressors among the male participants in her study is the following:

"Boys reported less perceived pressures and symptoms, which may indicate the creation of a form of masculinity, either because boys are expected to construct and perceive themselves as strong, and less emotional and vulnerable, or because boys actually perceive and/or have less pressure and demands on them." (Wiklund 2010:61)

I see no reason why any of these potential answers should go unexamined. The Swedish girls and young women in Wiklund's thesis mirror late modernity's demands on 'designing one's own autobiography', 'to make a self' (Wiklund 2010:66) and shaping one's own identity, personal and academic achievement and with whatever time is left, - to please and care for others. Highlighted throughout both Wiklund's study and my own, are the demands of gender-norms. Pressures of



initiation processes; destructiveness and recklessness, the policing of heterosexuality and emotional seclusion through homophobic bullying do not fit the gendered profiling in Wiklund's work. However, the internalisation of social discourse does, - in their distinct ways: What I have highlighted as male dependence and immaturity, the structures of incapacitating 'unburdening' of stressors and worries resonates with the results from Wiklund's study where the girls and young women experienced an *over-burdening* of personal independence and "pressures to manage alone" and a *longing for* "someone who cares and unburdens responsibility". (2010:39)

Social discourse both limits and facilitates understandings of one's abilities, strengths and weaknesses. It structures, on both group- and individual levels, what is talked, written and thought about. Social discourses of expected immaturity, the 'boys will be boys'-paradigm, and the generally discursive pressures to live *down* to gendered social expectations have devastating and disheartening effects on both boys and young men as well as their female peers. I asked the girls:

F. Would you say this is an equal country?

Z. No.

Y. No.

X. Yes. I think it's up to you and how you choose a man and then, raise your children. Now that is. I think before it was different.

Y. I'm sorry now but I just don't agree with ya! You're saying there now and, I love you now and I'm just telling you the honest truth now...

X. Yeah?

Y. You're saying there now that, because of how you were reared and stuff that, I don't know now are these the right words or not but, you expect a lot more. But you don't, you expect way much less than... a lot of people I know from fellas.

X. I know. I used to and... I see exactly what you mean but uhm... I'm over that. I expect the best now honestly.

After many anecdotes about incapable men the girls finally agree that 'the best' is what they hope to find for themselves in terms of future partners, and they will not accept any less from any man. Throughout these dialogues and as supported in other research presented here, there is strong evidence for an overwhelming imbalance in gendered expectations between the under-burdening of boys and over-burdening of girls, which favours no one. There are further harmful implications with regards to

some of the social expectations of so called ‘redundant masculinities’. Barnes draw the following conclusions from her classroom-ethnography on Irish lad culture:

“Changes are required in the ways they [boys and men] must see and understand themselves and their role as young working class white men in a social structure that **undervalues** their **contribution**, both current and potential. The assumed **inability** to handle **responsibility** results in an actual removal of **accountability** in terms of **expected** welfare dependency, single parenthood and unemployment.” (Barnes 2007:250 my highlights)

I have highlighted what I consider important key words in this quote as I reflect on what implications the *expected* lack of “responsibility”, “accountability” and “undervalued contribution” and an increasing focus on “inability” have on the emotional and personal development of young lads as they try to build social standing and dignity on these very markers of adulthood and an autonomous self. Barnes continues: “Young, white, working class men are expected, therefore, to be socially and economically unproductive.” (ibid.)

The girls’, and indeed society’s very low expectations of the lads, reflect my categorical distinctions between production, consumption and destruction: Expectations on economic production and contribution are lowered. The focus on (over)consumption and destruction is repeatedly over-emphasised. In the societal and political processes of ‘gendered neoliberalisation’ (Wiklund 2010:70) where autonomous and competitive individuals’ health, lifestyles and identity-making count as valuable social capital it quickly becomes evident that one cannot sell off social esteem and competence one has not acquired. Like me, Wiklund identified stressors that she argues were related to modernity, gender orders and youth. In *Close to the Edge*, the young women expressed how “they were living close to their limits of their capacity”. (Wiklund 2010:62) What may not be ill-meant but internalised all the same, discourses of male immaturity and low expectations leave the lads at a perhaps comfortable but incapacitating distance from the limits of their potential. Some of the young women’s embodied experiences of distress, distrust and disempowerment identified in Wiklund’s study were; restlessness, bodily discomfort

aches and pains, sleeping problems and fatigue, frustration and anger, worry, fear and occasionally panic, depressed mood, self-blame and self-harm.

”The existential dimension embraces experiences of *irresolution, uncertainty, doubt* and *powerlessness*, but also *existential dilemmas* and *conflicting values*. Feeling of *loss of meaning with life*, and occasionally *suicidal thoughts*, were expressed by the young women” (Wiklund 2010:51 my emphasis)

It is important to note that these embodied experiences (powerlessness, existential dilemmas, conflicting values, loss of meaning and suicidal thoughts) are detached from gender! However, the *causes* of and *conditions* are structured by social and cultural expectations of gender, age, sexuality, class and ethnicity. The ‘female trends’ with regards to self-harm and self-destruction is more often *expressed* by self-denial and self-deprivation while ‘the masculine thing to do’ is often related to direct and violent physical trials and recklessness. The structures behind these painful realities must be considered to reflect and encompass this reality. Because the “burdens of worry” are not shared and the stressors of pleasing and caring for others and being responsible is mostly spared and allocated to the girls, the lads are, as recognised by many of the lads themselves, ill-equipped and untrained for worry and the stressors of day-to-day responsibilities. As one of the girls put it, “when they get stressed out they go way worse than we do, for some reason. Girls are able to handle it! Fellas are not.” The lads are part of socialisation processes where they have been spared and re-directed towards spheres, skills and responsibilities deemed more appropriate for boys.

What could best be described as ‘survival tips’ for job seekers, a common feature on Ireland AM<sup>16</sup> since the recession, a psychologist offered some relevant thoughts on how ‘human beings need structure for survival’ and, the need for ‘the two most important words in the English vocabulary’ -the need to hear “thank you”. The meaning of structure, the fulfilment of a role and duties that carry meaning for oneself but also for others are some of the ideas developed throughout Barry’s work

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<sup>16</sup> Aired the morning of 11/07/2011 on TV3

*Youth Offending in Transition* (2006). She ends her book with a quote from an interview with one of the young offenders:

“‘Put faith in me. Give me another chance. Trust me.’ Such a plea, if heard, could go a long way to alleviating the problems for young people in transition, and in so doing, could well reduce the demands made on the youth and the criminal justice system.” (Barry 2006:169)

Feeling *capable of* and *confident in* taking on responsibility is also described in my chats with the lads as in this quote describing the satisfaction of construction and the opportunity to shine, to grow and acquire new skills:

X. there’s more satisfaction when you’re building something. You know? Way more satisfaction. ‘I done that. I done that with my hands.’ You know the way, I put a patio around there like, my last job, and, my boss would actually go away and leave me to do the job because... I think he was trying to teach me something like. I’d be there for the whole day like. It’s manual labour like! It’s, good like. It’s good and strong work like. It toughens you up, toughens up your mind too like.

Sports, mostly soccer but also hurling and Gaelic football, serve for many of the lads as the cornerstones of social protection, morale and self-esteem. The lads’ commitment to their local soccer team, weekly training and games, is for those involved in it, as significant as employment. For those who have lost their jobs, playing on their teams becomes the one remaining routine and focal point of responsibility in an otherwise structureless existence. One of the lads (late twenties) expressed how much sports actually matter in men’s lives:

“Sport plays a big part in men’s lives. Whether it’s playing it, coaching it, watching it in a pub, social life can be all around any sport.”

The legendary football player Roy Keane who was frequently used as a reference by the lads, expressed the sense of satisfaction that came from sporting achievement and hard training -a source similar to the work commitment described by one of the lads above:

“When the day’s work is done, I would feel the warm glow of pure satisfaction that lies on the other side of those mental barriers you push through. In those not-so-distant days when I’d lounged in bed until lunchtime, rising only for my daily episode of *Neighbours*, [soap opera] I’d experienced the alternative to hard graft. I’d nearly slipped under.” (Keane & Dunphy 2003:18)

Barry argues that “young people consider responsibility as a positive asset in terms of caring for others and learning new *skills*.” (Barry 2006:142 my emphasis) For the lads, the opportunity to be rewarded, trusted and deserving of responsibility was a prominent feature in manual labour and construction, some of the very narrow spheres earmarked as ‘male’. Barry’s main point is that youths offending in transition do so not to fight back at society, but that they are fighting for a place within it. The lads tend to exclude all forms of responsibility that is deemed feminine (and hence remaining unskilled in those tasks) but they are not alone in this. The gendered segregation of skills, abilities and stressors is not only emphasised and practiced by the lads but by all those who deem it appropriate to ‘spare them’ and instead entrust and thus over-burden the girls. This is a fundamental issue for the daily undertaking of life in general (“cos you know, if they can’t wash their own bed clothes then how the hell can they go and sign on the dole for themselves?”).

Sainsbury argued in his work, *The Social Relations of Suicide* (1972), that when men or women lack a useful function in society: “Their occupational and domestic responsibilities are diminished and consequently their lives have lost purpose and meaning.” (Sainsbury 1972:189, see discussion in 2.4) This argument explains the logic behind the above made statement about offending youths who fight, not against society, but for a place within it. It is a logic that goes against traditional analyses of subcultures (hipsters, mods, rockers etc.) that fought against previous moral orders and social organisation with corrective/prohibitive messages that said ‘don’t do that!’ These protest generations ended with the 1980’s-rock videos that shouted out to their parents: “We wanna rock!” Today’s generation of youths are not told what ‘not to do’. Instead, many young people today finds themselves in a prolonged juvenile state where they are not asked to do anything. The response is not a one of liberation and rebellious self-belief. The silence-treatment sends a different signal about the low status of young people whose contributions are not needed. In the EU, the

unemployment figures amongst the younger age groups rest at about 25 per cent. The countries worst affected by the euro-crisis have not reached youth unemployment figures of fifty per cent. The many outcomes of such low contributive value and forced idleness are very serious. This is, according to Sainsbury's conclusions, the generation that will self-destruct. So *is this* anomie/normlessness? I argue that this *is not* normlessness or the result of unsatisfied infinite desires. It is the lack of purpose and meaning, contributive value – a place in the world. The euro crisis is however the result of social and economic mismanagement (see full discussion in 2.2).

Within the groupings of young lads who are spared the daily undertaking of life and its many stressors, something more serious awaits. Personally, I would be both hurt and offended if my mother thought of me, as a grown woman, incapable of, or mentally too delicate to mind and carry out simple tasks on an everyday basis. Considering the downturn in the 'male sectors' where the young men did acquire their supposedly gender-appropriate life skills, any scenarios in which to hear the English vocabulary's most important words, "thank you", are becoming even less likely. Having lost so much; the opportunity to work on the skills he had been so proud of, the relationship with a boss who was 'trying to teach him something' and the feeling after completing a job well done, my interview with this young man in his mid-twenties ends:

X. Anyway, when you're plastering outside, it was brilliant. And I learnt carpentry, I learnt everything on a building site. Better than I did in school, it's all I'm saying.  
F. What are you qualified as right now?  
X. Nothing. (laughs) A drinker.

Now a 'qualified drinker' I wonder, had he taken up the 'feminine tasks' of caring for or minding himself or other people -even as a profession- made him feel more confident or more vulnerable and humiliated still? Learned helplessness and the gendered segregation of skills and abilities are, as Dr. Kuhling put it to me: "Deeply problematic, going to create trauma. Not too many people are talking about this. People prefer to talk about joyriding and vandalism." (Conversation with Dr. Carmen Kuhling November 2010)

#### 4.6 Policing and schooling gender appropriate behaviour

On April 5<sup>th</sup> 2011, RTÉ News reported two conflicting discourses in Irish collision culture: First, the making of history: the first same sex public civil partnership between two men in the Irish Republic was celebrated in Dublin. In the news segment the couple commented on the fact that as recently as 1993, their relationship was illegal. Second, we heard how a couple of Gardaí officers who in columnist Sinead Ryan's words:

“can only be described as gobshite-gardaí --- who, one truly hopes, are not representative of the force, were recorded discussing two women they had arrested at the Shell To Sea protests in Corrib. A confiscated video camera they couldn't even manage to switch off was in the car as the two or three men laughed and joked about raping the women they had arrested -- who had been carted off in separate cars. "Give me your name and address and I'll rape you," says one, detailing how he could have arrested her. Cue laughter. "I'll definitely rape you," says another.” (Sinead Ryan in the Evening Herald, 05.04.11)

To be very clear: the young officers were not joking about having raped, or about them going to rape the women they had arrested. What was displayed in the recorded conversation was the caricaturistic, exaggerated hyper masculine jargon (or ‘banter’) sometimes expressed within a ‘lad context’. Concerns about appalling levels of immaturity were further expressed as Sinead Ryan appeared on the all-female panel on TV3's Midday as they discussed the comments of these “juvenile Neanderthals” reflected also in her column the same day: “Just when we think we've entered the 21st-century, dragging our men kicking and screaming into maturity, you realise some of them are still the Neanderthals they'll always be.” (Evening Herald, 05.04.11) To frame this I would like to present one of my very first field notes from 2008:

“On yet another occasion sitting in the pub with the lads, somehow we get to talking about metrosexuals. One of them says: “I prefer to say gay. It's more insulting” He takes a round around the table pointing at the lads, one by one and calling each one ‘gay’. He skips only me and so I point to myself. “But that's not an insult. It's ok for women.” He says that it the worst thing you can call a man: “Messing up his manliness.” Masculinity in this context is ultimately determined by its relation or rather the restraint from any type of feminine or homosexual

domain. I have rarely been in any social engagement with a larger group of the lads without anyone using the word gay or some equivalent. For instance, waiting in a car park for the bus to come around to take us to a soccer match everyone gradually shows up and greet each other: “How are ye doing there girls?” “What are ye on about ye homos?””

Aspects of bigotry in the backwaters of lad culture is identified by Willis (1977) and repeated by Gaetz (1997) from his fieldwork set in Cork in the 1980’s. It is also a feature in Barnes’s more recent field study (2007) set in Cork in 2002-2004: “The worst insult that can be levelled at another boy in the classroom or hallway is that he is a ‘gayboy’, a ‘queer’ or a ‘fag’. (Barnes 2007:80) Is this homophobic bullying or just banter,- ‘boys-will-be-boys’-behaviour? A lot of attention has been directed towards these problematic behaviours as the play out in school. Research from the UK and Ireland suggest that young people do not have to be lesbian, gay or bisexual to experience homophobic bullying and that instead, “any young people who does not conform to gender norms current in their school may fall victim.” (Smalley et.al. 2005) McCormack confirms the same by stating:

“The term gay is frequently used to denote difference, with any boy who is different from the norm being labelled as such. Often the sexual orientation of the person (and even the sex) is irrelevant. As a result, boys do not need to be homosexual to be labelled gay, with any deviation from the hegemonic norm resulting in young men labelled as such.” (McCormack 2010:66)

In the sense that the lads use the words ‘gay’ or ‘homo’ in the examples mentioned above is not really referring to homosexuality or, a gay man. However, it should also be noted that many of the lads in this study have many times expressed strong feelings of disgust and hostility towards the very idea of homosexuality, and not in any humorous form of banter. On one occasion during my fieldwork I was watching day time television with one of the lads. A transgendered teenager was crying on an afternoon talk show about the angst of being born in the wrong body. Knowing that it would annoy me yet committing to the daily jargon discussed here he says to me: “*It* just didn’t get enough beatings growing up! Would you not disown your kid if it turned out like that?” Aware of his intentions but still out of some degree of frustration my reply was: “No but I’d disown my kid if he turned out a bigot.”



Intentionally politically incorrect and well aware of what my response would be, this situation with one of the lads tells the story of the unease with which the lads observe the transgression of gender boundaries. By now the general banter of 'gay'-calling also applied to me which I saw as a marker of inclusion but this particular repertoire went beyond this. This was particularly harsh and would normally not be brought up unless the other lads would have been there to greet the comments with the usual cheer and laughter. Knowing very well the focus of my studies, on a day with nothing better to do but ease into the boredom of unemployment we let the two conflicting discourses we represent clash, as if to check that they were still there.

It is rather puzzling however, that if one of the lads pays too much attention to his girlfriend instead of his mates in the pub or if he is showing affection towards her in public, he is 'gay'. Other things that might be included; using an umbrella when it rains, being too stylish, eating a salad or other healthy foods, "taking it handy with the drink" (drinking sensibly), addressing emotional difficulties and much, much more. These labels are also acknowledged in the works of Willis (1977), Mac an Ghail (1996, 2007) and Barnes: "An idea, a shop, a drink, anything that they disapprove of or don't understand or just don't like is instantly labelled 'gay' and is relegated immediately through mockery to isolation and disinterest." (Barnes 2007:157) Sensitivity and vulnerability are also markers that fall into the categorisation of 'gay' behaviour. I met up with two of the lads in Cork City in the spring of 2008 after my meeting with Derek Chambers (NSRF). He had given me some booklets on suicide and mental health encouraging readers to "Reach Out". One of the lads took one look at them and said immediately: "Great! That's just what I need. So the lads can mock me to death!!" (One of the lads, age 29)

In an interview with one of the girls in her mid-twenties she recognised along with the lads interviewed, that the lads are "mentally weaker" than the girls: "They are yeah. Not in general but around here. Absolutely." (interview Aug. 2010) She explained in further detail:

"X: And at the same time, we don't have to watch what we say all the time in case we... you know? They have to do that. And it's not just because of themselves like, they'd do it themselves like, if they're in the room and someone else says something weak then, 'oh you're gay!'

F: They're under surveillance all the time?

X: Yeah. Sure, they're all sitting there, and then one of them won't say something sensitive... because then they fear someone will judge them but if someone else says something they will judge them as well you know. Even if... even if they agree. They won't let on that they do."

Being 'a homo' or 'queer' is thus showing emotions, being soft, sensible or anything of a 'feminine nature' which is evident in McCormack's study as well:

"It was suggested that young men's poor communication skills develops out of fear of being labelled homosexual as those who are more open and honest about their feelings are easier targets for homophobic bullying. In this context young men tend to keep their feelings, emotions and concerns to themselves." (McCormack 2010:172)

This comes back to a fear of being different, to stand out and deviate from the hegemonic and heteronormative script. Looking at an aspect as important to the human experience as quality of life, masculinity is an ideal concept to investigate because of the very set assumptions and the presumed level of agreement as to what it is, means, and how it applies to half the human population even though it varies, historically, socially and culturally. How ideas of masculinity, *particularly when articulated as a singular notion*, are constructed socially and culturally affect our entire social worlds. This is an interesting logic since it is communicated daily as an inherently natural and essential property of males, yet it is strictly structured and regulated and increasingly depicted as 'under threat' or 'in crisis'. Feminist theorist Judith Butler describes effectively how gender is performed. When gender is performed badly the individual is punished. At the same time, she argues:

"performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all. That this reassurance is so easily displaced by anxiety, that culture so readily punishes or marginalizes those who fail to perform the illusion of gender essentialism should be sign enough that on some level there is social knowledge that the truth or falsity of gender is only socially compelled and in no sense ontologically necessitated." (Butler 1988:528)

Very indicative as well, are the inflammatory situations that occur when gender orders become inverted, when masculinity becomes associated with weakness and vulnerability and young men debated as 'the weaker sex'.

Hegemony is the ability to impose a particular definition of a concept, like masculinity, on other subordinated groupings: "a hegemonic form of masculinity is the most honoured and desired in a particular context." (Whitehead quoting Connell 2002:91) Cornwall and Lindisfarne (1994) argue that apart from simplistic categorisations like 'black men' and 'gay men', what is overlooked within both anthropology and men's studies are the contextual and cultural criteria by which men are differentiated from each other (1994:19). Emphasising this relational and situational hegemony, far richer than dichotomies such as white/non-white, gay/straight or male/female, the authors explain:

"as our discussions of the contemporary popularity of both macho men and new man shows, various hegemonic models can coexist. Rarely, if ever, will there be only one hegemonic masculinity operating in any cultural setting. Rather, in different contexts, different hegemonic masculinities are imposed by emphasizing certain attributes, such as physical prowess or emotionality, over others. And, of course, different hegemonic masculinities produce different subordinate variants: as we know from the feminist concern with women's 'invisibility', powerlessness in one arena does not preclude having considerable influence elsewhere." (1994:19-20)

As already mentioned, the perception of the here debated version of masculinity as outdated and backward does not go unrecognised by the lads themselves and is often communicated through humour and deliberate exaggeration. I also observed within the field, that if any of the young men 'moved on' and surpassed his own identity as 'one of the lads' that this separation and his supposed claim to superiority and maturity was perceived as threatening and as a betrayal by the lads who 'stayed with the script' so to speak.

Much like in my Venezuelan study (MA thesis, University of Stockholm 2006) on *malandros* (gangsters), different masculine identities are hegemonic within their own context and often become a gendered *communitas* in their own right and in their relation to society's wider postmodern ideals and discourses. In my previous field

study on urban gangsters in Caracas, a local defence lawyer tried to explain to me why the *malandro* reoffends with the explicit aim to go back to prison:

Paco: What happened is, that within those two months, he was in the street, no one gave him a job. Because he's excluded from society. Nobody wants to give him a job. No one wants him. No one... Then, he commits whatever crime to get back there. Because in there they **feel useful**. Because it's their way of life. But what then would be the ideal? That they rehabilitate them in prison and that they get out on the street being **useful**.

Felicia - Well but in jail then, they have power... But in society they don't.

Paco - Sure! That's another thing, see? The *malandro*, within his space, feels like a king.

Felicia - Within his space...

Paco - Within his space of course! But outside, no! Because imagine, anyone: "Well he's a friend of mine but... he's a *malandro*."

(Interview with Paco, Garcia 2006)

Marginalised, not because of his 'outdated ways' but based on their involvement in violent crime and drug trade, living in and associated with *el barrio* (the slums), they 'belong' in prison, there they are *useful*. In prison the *malandro* plays a *significant, meaningful role* and is rewarded for playing it well. The Barrio and the prisons are their territories. A cosmopolitan, middle-class masculinity is socially and culturally misplaced (and under direct threat) on his turf and vice versa. In my current field again, the concept of being "gay" (not to be taken as homosexual or effeminate), broadly translated as diverting from the *locally hegemonic* masculinity, is subordinated within the local reference group. Equally, within a cosmopolitan reference group it is the 'backward' and 'outdated' masculinities that harbour these attitudes that are subordinated.

Cleary found in her study on suicidal behaviour amongst young Irish men that "(t)hese themes of strength and normality were connected to the idea of difference, being abnormal, not a real man." (Cleary 2005b:43) Many of the lads are very reluctant and uncomfortable to part with the self-restricting criteria that define their masculinity, to transgress into the domains defined as feminine or to openly acknowledge other masculinities that do, as 'real men'. In this setting it is the cosmopolitan, 'post-modern' masculinities that are deviant. They are not just other, but lesser. In this particular context, *this is masculinity*, and the 'over-gendered'

subjects exist in relation to this *singular*. If postmodern or cosmopolitan masculinities recognise their own plurality than my target group is its counterpart. Barnes concluded after her two year classroom based field study in a Cork City all boys' school: "Broadmindedness is not an option within the structures of the defensive masculinity practiced by these boys." (2007:217) In *Men and Masculinities* (2002) Whitehead lists a range of contrasting masculinities and argues that none of them (from Boy George to Schwarzenegger, LA gang members, profeminist men or househusbands)

"is able to capture, in any absolute sense, modern masculinity. One important reason for this, this book suggests, is that no such thing as 'modern masculinity' exists, certainly not in any fixed or predetermined form as a definite standard for all males to follow" (2002:16).

In my field study amongst 'the lads' I did not meet an array of different masculinities in the field. Although some young men had the self-confidence and self-esteem to sometimes play with the margins, the lads live their lives guided by the idea and *hence*, the very real *perception* that there is one way to be male. Whitehead suggested further that:

"it is now more appropriate to talk of postmodern masculinities, a term that allows us to recognise the influence globalization is having upon ways of being a man, while also highlighting the contingency of masculinities and differences between men in terms of class, race, ethnicity, sexuality and so on." (Whitehead 2002:16-17)

This statement is true in several ways; it describes the developments within and promoted by gender studies and social sciences in general and it informs a lot of academic discourse. It is also a common perception among a range of emerging, 'liberated', or postmodern masculinities. More relevant here is the fact that it also informs the neo-traditional masculinities and subjects of this study who are well aware of the fact that, as discussed before: traditions, including the old gender roles "are called upon to defend themselves" (Beck quoted in part 3). Whitehead's recognised the fact that "(t)hose white heterosexual men who have aligned themselves with feminist agendas, appear, in the main, to be academics or men with

a particular cultural capital.” (Whitehead 2002:81) Whitehead thus advocates a plurality of masculinities while dismissing, not just singular but explicitly non-plural masculinities -by their own definition the only real masculinity- deeming them outdated to the point of surreal.

The regeneration and manifestation of gender appropriate spheres, behaviours and scripts are formed and internalised most effectively in the institutions most influential to children and adolescents – the family, the school -and among peers. The workings of gender within the family have been addressed. In what follows in the last pages of this segment I will outline some of the empirical evidence of how schooling contributes to these processes.

The consequences of ‘gender appropriate behaviours’ are again, very real. The most extensive study to date of the lives and ‘minority stress’ of LGBT people in Ireland (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered-) showed that over a third of those aged 25 or under had thought seriously about ending their lives and that this was linked to how these young people had been treated based on their sexuality. (Maycock et.al. 2009) A recent study on *Bully Victimization, Self Harm, and Associated Factors in Irish Adolescent Boys* (McMahon et.al. 2008) states that one in ten boys who have experienced bullying also reported self-harm, four times the occurrences than among boys who had not been bullied. Over a quarter of bullied boys had thought of self-harming themselves, a number three times higher compared to boys who had not reported being bullied. “Among bullied boys, the highest odds ratios were for problems with schoolwork, physical abuse, and worries about sexual orientation.” (McMahon et.al. 2008:1306)

*A Survey of Teachers on Homophobic Bullying in Irish Second-level Schools*

(Norman 2004) showed that 79% of teachers were aware of homophobic bullying in their schools whereby 30% of them had encountered this on ten or more occasions in the last school term. According to the teachers’ reports, homophobic bullying was most common in all boys’ schools (94%), followed by co-educational (82%) and last, all girls’ schools (55%). (Norman 2004:9) Based on the most prevalent findings in current research within gender, -and masculinity studies Norman concluded that the reason for this outcome whereby homophobic bullying occurred more within all

boys' - and mixed schools was that young men had been found "to develop negative attitudes toward homosexuality as a result of their perceptions of gender appropriate behaviour for males." (Norman 2004:14)

The main issues as acknowledged in the reports from teachers were clear; lack of adequate training (staff inexperience), 'lack of policy and guidelines' and fear of parental disapproval. Any further explanations into the causes behind such systematic gendered behavioural scripts; socioeconomic factors, historical or contemporary factors in relation to culture or social change, are not offered in the report. Nor are there any suggestions on how such knowledge could assist teachers in interpreting the prevalence of the problem, how best to approach pupils, change curriculum or overall school cultures. Strengthening the judicial protection for both pupils and teachers against "harassment related to sexual orientation" (2004:15) was one of the few things recommended.

A more thorough exploration into second level school ethos and cultures from 2006 (Norman and Galvin 2006) critically addressed how heteronormativity (the presumption that being heterosexual is the only way to exist in the world) and homophobia are "active partners" in the Irish secondary level educational experience. The authors put forward the five most dominant themes as reported by students, parents, pupils and principles in single-sex boys' and girls' schools and co-educational schools in the greater Dublin area. These were; heteronormativity (most prevalent in all boys' schools), fear, stereotyping (most prevalent in all girls' schools), pervasive terms and religious influence. The fear presented in the study was the students' fear *of* gays and lesbians and the fear of being *perceived as* being gay or lesbian. There was also a fear on behalf of parents that their children would be gay and how it then would affect them in school and life in general and also, a fear on behalf of teachers about how to address the issue of homosexuality (that it is another acceptable way of life) and homophobia. The students' fear of homosexuality was (reportedly) due to "lack of education and personal experience". (Norman and Galvin 2006:14) The fact that there should be any lack of education *in school* is of course a serious problem.

Pervasive terms were commonly explained and described as ‘name calling’ and ‘only messing’. A very descriptive account of the prevalence of the use of pervasive terms was offered by a male student from an all boys’ school (age 16): “I suppose if you were really gay it might affect you on a gay level... I would have heard someone being called gay four or five times today already.” (Norman and Galvin 2006:16) Norman and Galvin identify the Catholic Church as “a significant contributor to heteronormative and homophobic attitudes in schools” (2006:26). In those cases where there was a denominative board of trustees and overall Catholic ethos in the schools, teachers would be careful not to overtly address the issue of homosexuality (as a perfectly valid way of life for example) which goes against the teachings of the Church. On the issue of gay teachers the general assumption was that being openly gay and the subsequent values attached to this identity, would jeopardise their position within these schools and that “school management has adopted a *don’t ask, don’t tell* attitude on this issue.” (2006:19) Anxiety and silence created by the moral code and ethos of the schools thus worked to ‘put a lid on’ the dominant issues reported; heteronormativity, fear, stereotyping and pervasive terms.

It becomes clear from these studies how homophobic bullying and the policing of heterosexuality reinforce and cement stereotypical ‘gender appropriate’ behaviours which operate negatively to restrict and debilitate young people in their personal and social development. These fears have a deep impact on young people at a vulnerable, impressionable and transitional stage in their lives. It informs individuals and groups in their personal and social lives whether they identify themselves as gay or not. For those boys and girls (young men and women) who are gay it makes a difficult time and situation much harder and sometimes volatile. For the heterosexual males also, (the focus group of this study) this significant transitional phase in their lives, help socialise young lads into fixed and narrow, restricted gender “appropriate” spheres, identities and behaviours that will further shape a wide range of life perspectives and practical opportunities; (social development, career choices and restrictions), and coping mechanisms (intimacy, emotional expression etc.). It will influence risks predications and life expectancy, self-reporting of mental health issues and the likelihood of completed suicides. In the subsequent part I will link Irish reports on homophobic school cultures to Judith Butler and Pierre Bourdieu and how gender is



‘performed’ and ‘practiced’ but also how both power and the freedom of choice is in our thoughts and in our speech.

#### **4.7 Structure versus agency: constraint and possibility**

How much is up to young lads themselves, as individuals, to change their own behaviours and influence those of their peers? How much personal freedom is available to young Irish lads and to what degree are they restrained by structure (objective and internalised)? Can cultural codes and scripts really dictate so much in the lives of individuals that they can effectively damage their health and quality of life? In the previous segment I discussed how a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’- attitude maintained by the Catholic ethos in the Irish school system silenced alternative discourses that could challenge the rigid ideas about masculinity dominant in Irish school culture. I will now explore some of Foucault’s and Bourdieu’s ideas on power. In Foucauldian analysis “power is essentially discursive: its prohibitions are tied together with what one can say as much as what one can do; in this way restrictions on language should also function as restrictions upon reality and action” (Taylor 2011:18) Put together, the ideas of Foucault and Bourdieu suggest that power, as a discursive force field, is negotiated between individuals and groups. To Foucault power is not oppositional but mutually constitutive to freedom. Freedom of choice and action operate within the constraints of structure:

“Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. (Foucault1978:100-101)

What Foucault suggests here is that discourses, the ways in which things and people are thought of and talked about, can have very different results in terms of

oppression but also for resistance and change. It is all a constant struggle of how rules are imposed and how still; people are not all defined or fully restricted by cultural laws and scripts. With help from Foucault, Bourdieu but also Judith Butler I will analyse how within the lad-context studied here, power; constraint and possibility, is practiced and performed.

Feminist theorist Judith Butler has developed important theories of how the performance of gender opens up and closes opportunities for change. Like Foucault's ideas about how power is discursive, she contributes by looking at gender practices as performative and as "speech acts" (Butler 1988). To do this, her initial concern was how to problematize the dichotomy between gender (culture) and sex (nature): In *Gender Trouble* (1999 [1990]) Butler discussed the efforts made by anthropologists to locate "a sexed nature before the law" (1999:50). Included amongst the most fundamental cultural laws (such as kinship exchange, the incest taboo and the exchange of goods) she examined whether there was ever a pre-cultural moment when sex (nature) became gender (culture); -when culture first imposed meaning onto nature and when "the raw" was in effect "cooked." Butler opposes the binary opposition of sex and gender arguing that the "foundational categories of identity—the binary of sex, gender, and the body—can be shown as *productions that create* the effect of the natural, the original, and the inevitable" (Butler 1999[1990]:xxxix my emphasis). Gender is essentially produced by the ways in which we speak about gender and how we perform it. Butler developed the notion of performativity, -that it is not a matter of 'being gender' but 'doing gender'. Like Butler, a long line of social theorists have tried to consolidate and bridge the opposition between nature and nurture, between rule and choice, structure and agency:

"the argument between these opposing traditions revolved around two fundamentally distinct views of human action. On the one hand, the anthropological tradition undertook to establish the social *rules* that determined how individuals behaved. For example, there were rules concerning who one could and could not marry – the incest taboo – as well as cultural prescriptions involving what was considered sacred and profane. On the other hand, the existentialist tradition foregrounded individual

choice and decision-making as an ultimate act of personal freedom.” (Grenfell 2008:44)

The constructionist perspective came to be the solution to biological determinism. If gender was a construct, then it could no doubt, be constructed in different ways. Hence, we suppose that biology is not destiny and agency and change can be realised through construction and reconstruction. Butler asks however: How arbitrary is the constructiveness of gender?

“If gender is constructed, could it be constructed differently, or does its constructedness imply some form of social determinism, foreclosing the possibility of agency and transformation? Does “construction” suggest that certain laws generate gender differences along universal axes of sexual difference? (Butler 1990:10-11)

The efforts, rightly criticised by Butler, to locate a moment in history when the laws of culture were imposed on nature are futile. Why would an excavation of human history be more informative than the impositions and dictations made by culture today, not upon ‘human nature’ but upon health and the subjective experience of quality of life? I am not encouraging an idea of ‘social determinism’ or that bodies ought to be understood, “as passive recipients of an inexorable cultural law” (Butler 1990:11). The forcefulness and explicit character of cultural scripts and norms vary greatly between contexts. And, in those contexts - amongst groups of people that find themselves restricted by exaggerated norms (whether they be rules about honour and marriage, group loyalties or gender boundaries), people develop strategies for adaptation, protest, and coping. My observations amongst the lads suggest that when norms are expressed as explicit rules, with verbal guidelines and sanctions, the ‘rules of the game’ can become more deterministic than any constructivist would like to think. Butler writes:

“When the relevant “culture” that “constructs” gender is understood in terms of such a law or set of laws, then it seems that gender is as determined and fixed as it was

under the biology-is-destiny formulation. In such a case, not biology, but culture, becomes destiny.” (1990:11)

Although Butler (from a philosophical perspective) would disagree, I argue (from an anthropological perspective) that the current case study is such a case. However, what is clearly also the case here, is that the rules that apply to the lads do not apply to their female peers. Through a set of over-emphasised *rules* practised amongst ‘the lads’, ‘gender-appropriateness’ becomes destiny –a matter of fact. While the girls’ non-restrictive ethos opens up the possibilities for a constructionist world view and space for extended thought and action, the lads’ cultural *rules* have formed a belief that biology-is-destiny. To ‘be’ or ‘do’ gender differently would result in effeminisation. Whether the binary opposition of sex and gender is “true” or not, or, whether it is in itself a construction, becomes relatively irrelevant when my task is to map out the world of ideas shared *amongst the lads*. The emic perspective does not grant us any universal truths but allows us to look at the available *spaces* for thought and action that are in effect available to *the people we study*. To simplify the different stances between Butler’s philosophy and the current study: Butler asks whether the binary opposition of sex and gender is true while I ask, how does this work for and amongst the lads?

This leads us back to Pierre Bourdieu who is one of the primary contributors within the social sciences in that he attempted (and many would say succeeded) in bridging the divide between the theoretical oppositions of structure and agency, society and individual, rule and choice. He developed the notion of strategy, or, “practice”. He argued that individuals are always positioned within a social “field” and that they develop strategies to maximise resources and capital within this field (or structure). “Capital” is not reducible to economic capital but also includes social, cultural and symbolic capital (see part 2.4). Bourdieu maintained that practice takes place between objective structures and internalised structures – that which happens beyond the individual yet has become part of the individual. This in turn becomes what Bourdieu called “habitus”. Habitus is made up by perceptions, appreciations and practices that have become ‘second nature’ to us from early socialisation. However, habitus is not a predetermined or fixed way of acting. It is under constant development and continuously formed by new experiences. Bourdieu explains the

creative nature of habitus and how they become second nature by using the analogy of a “game”, -a game that we come to master with time and experience. This analogy was, as recommended by Bourdieu, to be used with some caution since rules in real life are not always made explicit or explained to the players:

“You can use the analogy of the game in order to say that a set of people take part in a rule-bound activity, an activity which, without necessarily being the product of obedience to rules, *obeys certain regularities* . . . Should one talk of a rule? Yes and no. You can do so on condition that you distinguish clearly between *rule* and *regularity*. The social game is regulated, it is the locus of certain regularities. (Bourdieu The Logic of Practice 1990: 64) In Grenfell 2008:54)

On a broader level for example, habitus serves to explain behavioural *patterns* and apparent *tendencies* that exist even when there is not an explicit, imposed rule. Habitus has become one of the most used analytical tools within the social sciences and is summarised here by Karl Maton:

“In other words, while individuals were not free to act simply in accordance with their own personal will and conscience, the notion of *rules* implied both an explicit respect and conscious application that were *rarely realized in practice*. Rather, individual action emerged from– albeit an unconscious calculation of profit symbolic (in the first instance at least) – and a strategic positioning within a social space to maximize individual holdings with respect to their *availability*.” (Maton in Grenfell 2008:44 my emphasis)

My observations amongst the lads have confirmed that there are spaces in which rules *are* realised in practice and as a consequence decreases availability and restricts spaces for thought and action. My interest for Bourdieu’s thinking tools, -habitus and practice- falls upon the distinction between regulation and rules, between common tendencies and imposed social ‘laws’. I am also interested in the framing of how individuals calculate and strategise action and behaviour according to *availability*.

- Is there a defining moment when habitus becomes rule? Can a firm and continuous imposition of rules become habitus? I use the distinction between habitus and rule to

try to explain the unease, unfamiliarity and discomfort the lads feel within emerging structures even though they consider these to be beneficial to their quality of life and vulnerability to suicide. Linking (cultural and social) *rules* with gender structures helps explain what is ‘doable’ and ‘thinkable’ to the lads and why the structures of possibility and availability are different for their female peers. The explicit rules and sanctioning discussed in this lad-context must be read as *rules*, rules that have been ingrained to a degree that the rules have become a habitus. In other words, the rigidity and regularity in which rules are imposed amongst young lads (in school, among peers and in the home) have made the rules a habitus (tastes, preferences, likes and dislikes developed through, in this case, *strict* socialisation).

A stricter definition of habitus (read as tendencies and regularities) can also be seen on a macro level where habitus frames and explains the gender differences in cultural reproduction and social mobility. Bourdieu explains that because habitus – the structuring of preferences, tastes and practices – are so deeply incorporated in ourselves and the social fabric in which we orient ourselves, cultural habits and social dispositions are not easily changed and are likely to reproduce. In fact, Bourdieu suggested that this was particularly true amongst society’s most subordinated groupings. To redirect these arguments towards the intersection of gender and class I will try to show how (assumed desired) upward mobility becomes both difficult and problematic for the lads.

The ‘desired’ upward mobility in this case is the modification of conservative/neo-traditional masculinity or a solution to the ‘masculinity problem’ (really meaning working class masculinity). To the lads who have already perceived this current in public debate and perhaps also been subjected to some of the strategic implementations the state has had to offer (see 4.8), the neo-traditional, defensive response becomes all the more acute. As the lads’ frame of reference still divides different spheres of life into an appropriate and ‘true’ masculine and feminine sphere the modification attempts emphasised in public discourse are read as effeminisation-attempts. Upward mobility is then also effeminised and seems to be reaffirmed by the lads’ female peers who are categorically entering into structural possibilities inaccessible to the lads by loyalties, inward mobilisation and intimidation.

The inward mobilisation I refer to here is a logic presented by Barry who expands on Bourdieu's notion of social capital: Even though "social capital within the peer group is a crucial source of support and recognition for young people in transition" different forms of social capital can have adverse effects (Barry 2006:36). Barry distinguishes between *bonding* social capital (inward-looking group identities) and *bridging* social capital (outward-looking). Barry suggests that bonding social capital is often the glue that holds together young marginalised groups. It fills the intimate functions of a support system but it can also entrap, exclude, constrain and further marginalise individuals in the group. The stronger the isolation/marginalisation of the group the stronger the social bond becomes between its members and ultimately the stronger the normative restrictions within the group. Meanwhile 'the girls' (the lads' female peers) distance themselves by criticising and exposing the lads' defence mechanisms as weakness further extending the gap between a feminised space of expansion and a masculine space of restriction.

As I have addressed earlier, the lads do not suffer from a lack of cultural or social norms. Instead, they are suffering from actively imposed normative *rules* that dictate male-appropriate behaviour that have adverse effects on coping mechanisms and quality of life. Not only does the definition of habitus preclude a mere 'common tendency' or 'feel for the game'. Instead, the normative violence within lad culture, the strict and explicit sanctioning practiced by the lads, seem to regulate the innate transformability (the altering of life experiences and options) of habitus. The exposure to alternative life-styles that have presented themselves during the lads' life span (alternative masculinities, and, even to the lads themselves –more beneficial life-choices) have failed to open up new pathways. It is safe to say, that upward social mobility and alternative life-paths are not necessarily comfortable or desired.

In lad culture, the rules of the game, are dictated to the extent that we can no longer be satisfied with tendencies or habitus. Nor is it doxa, a practice that goes without saying and that does not compete with other discourses for legitimacy. I want to emphasise yet again however, that the restrictive nature of gender-appropriateness, as it applies to the lads, does not necessarily indicate any absolute determinism. It does not remove agency or cement destiny –not unless the lads believe it to be so. Herein lays the paradox. Change and possibility is negotiated through careful

consideration of the maximisation of possibility; -of what is more beneficial and what is more acute. The bonding capital (Barry 2006), loyalties and social support provided amongst the lads fulfil more acute needs than the alternative options have yet to promise. Re-identification will have to wait until healthier discourses can guarantee more than long-term change as opposed to the immediate social support and alleviation that lad culture now provides for its members. The current set of *rules* is still preferable to vague alternatives and empty promises:

“Agents shape their aspirations according to concrete indices of the accessible and the inaccessible, of what is and is not ‘for us’, a division as fundamental and as fundamentally recognized as that between the sacred and the profane.” (Bourdieu 1990:64)

According to Bourdieu’s thinking, the lads’ rules –the glue that holds, binds and restricts them – does not take away their agency. It is, by definition of *habitus*, a set of preferences and practices, a maximisation of capital (above described as “an unconscious calculation of profit”). The *rules* –in other words the glue that frames and binds masculinity , loyalty and ladhood together- entraps and restricts the lads from expanding their horizons and adopting healthier life styles. These rules of male-appropriate behaviour are based on the conviction and very real perception that self-restriction is the only way to be a proper male.



#### 4.8 The lads' constraints and social support

I have accounted for the theoretical “tools” that help explain how constraint and possibility are dependent and produced through discursive practices. On a micro level I described that the normative scripts that dictate what is said and what is censored are explicit *rules*. On a macro level, habitus explained how social mobility differed between the girls and the lads, between a feminised space of expansion and a male space of restriction. The following segment is an account of the lads' support system which is the result of constant surveillance and strict policing of gender appropriate behaviour for males. With the help of the lads interviewed but even more so from the girls' in-depth descriptions, I will contrast how the social support systems differ between the lads and the girls. My findings do not suggest, as it first might seem, that the lads do not have any sources of comfort or relief. Nor do they indicate that the lads rely on good friends. Instead, the lads seem to have developed alternative means for coping. It seems that even though these means sometimes are counter-productive, resulting in momentary relief and self-destruction rather improving mental health, it is of great value to the lads. Most likely because the most effective coping mechanism, (according to the lads as well as the girls) –talking- is not available to the lads. It is obvious from the interviews with both the lads and the girls, that they all have a good understanding of each other's alternative support systems and most certainly, that they are ‘other’ and vastly different from one another. These differences are also mirrored in the different interviewing techniques I had to use depending on the gender of my informants.

The lads that I interviewed always insisted that our interviews be conducted one-on-one. It was important to them that the other lads (their friends) never found out about what had been said. Some of them expressed concerns about anyone finding out that the interview had even taken place. On one occasion however, a spontaneous conversation was sparked between myself and two of the lads as we were having a few drinks in our back garden. The lads came up with a variety of factors that, according to them, would explain the high numbers of male suicides in the area. They were both aware that this was the topic of my study and agreed to let me use their opinions in the thesis. Both of the lads had lost many friends (all male) to

suicide. Unlike the three or four hour-chats I had with the girls this was to be the shortest interview I did during the fieldwork:

F. Why are young fellas overrepresented in the statistics?

X. Well I tell you why; for one thing it's gay fellas and the second is fucking... the drugs.

Y. I was thinking out of work.

X. Well they're the older fellas like. It's the younger fellas that... a lot of gay fellas topping themselves and a lot of people that are on drugs that are topping themselves. Older fellas then is because they are out of work, they don't have money to pay the mortgage, whatever...

F. How come only fellas, why not women?

X. They have friends to talk to, women talk, fellas don't.

The three factors behind local male suicides identified by the two lads were 'being gay', drugs (for young men in particular) and finally debt and financial worries for older men. This interview was interrupted by another one of the lads who became curious about the conversation that was going on out in the back garden on this sunny day. Somewhat annoyed and concerned that this conversation would spoil a lovely day it ended rather stereotypically as he said: "Enough about that shit now alright!"

There are gender-specific hurdles and obstacles in the development of coping mechanisms. Although none of the lads in my study have testified explicitly that 'masculinity is in crisis', the lads do recognise that their prospects and labour opportunities have become significantly worse and that both pressures and difficulties to perform and live successful autonomous lives have steadily increased. The lads also admit to their limited coping abilities in dealing with personal difficulties. In an interview with one of the lads in his early twenties, who had spent the first part of our chat listing the many recent male suicides in the area, I asked him if he knew of any female suicides as well:

X- No. I never heard of a woman doing it, ever.

F - Why do you think that is?

X- I don't know... Cos they are stronger... mentally I'd say...

F - Do you think it's because they do talk about, when they are depressed a lot more?

X- Yeah women actually talk about it all the time!

F – About how depressed they are??  
 X– No like... you know how women, how they chat and all...? You wouldn't see fellas doing that like.  
 F – And why is that?  
 X–You know masculinity...? Like, you wrote it down! (He refers to my note book in the kitchen that he was looking at before the interview.)  
 F – But what does that mean to you like? You know being a man, what you can and cannot do...?  
 X– Like you wouldn't wanna be crying in front of your buddies but then you see women crying on each other's shoulders and all this.  
 F - Do you wish... men were more like that?  
 X– No. You wouldn't.  
 F – You would feel weird?  
 X– I'd feel very weird.

The young lad interviewed here considered this to be a particularly male characteristic but did not know of any solution to the problem of how men could not, and would not, open up about their problems. In the end, he saw a more aggressive confrontation on behalf of both health professionals and volunteers groups (emphasising that it would have to be a stranger) was the only way. Without persistent confrontation, literally forcing men to open up, the situation as he saw it was unchangeable.

Dr. Anne Cleary's empirical findings of young men on the margins were that: "Respondents were aware of varying societal expectations around gender and behaviour and how this was organised in much more rigid ways for men" (2005b:35). She continues: "While they were somewhat envious of women's greater capacity for, as well as channels of, communication, they were unwilling or unable to adopt this." (ibid) The views of one of the lads just cited reflect a recognition that the lads' coping abilities, including his own, were lower than that of young women. It is also clear from this and other informants' testimonies, that the idea of masculinity is far from an open-ended concept and that traditional manhood as a single narrative, is still dominant in this context. A female contributor in McCormacks study on young Irish boys and men, claimed that there was a link:

"between young men's poor communication skills and the 'alarmingly high' number of young men dying by suicide. For example: 'in my county six male suicides have

occurred in the past week- aged 15-72. Men are poor talkers and don't ask for help' - --- and 'keeping issues to themselves, because they are considered a sissy if they don't, leads to depression, self-doubt and lack of confidence.'" (McCormack 2010:174)

One night when all the lads had gathered in the house to drink cans I exchanged a few quick words with one of them as we were both getting a can out of the fridge. He looked distressed and I asked him how he was doing. He told me that somebody he knew had just killed himself. This was yet another young man in a long line of local lads who in early 2009 had decided that this life just was not worth living. When I conducted my first one-on-one interview with this young lad who had so quickly dropped this report without elaboration, I reminded him of our little encounter by the fridge:

F – Well, eh... at the time I asked you how you were doing and you told me what had happened. Then I asked you how you were feeling and you didn't want to talk about that.

X– Cos you suck it up like. You hold it inside and you shouldn't be doing that.

F – You don't feel comfortable talking about that?

X– No. --- Nobody does.

F – Nobody does?

X– Not a chance.

F – Are you talking about only fellas or girls to?

X– I'd say a lot of fellas don't want to talk about it. You're holding it in like. And it's really hard to talk about it like. You can't even look at someone when you talk about it. You're feeling really uncomfortable about it like. You know?

The lads and the young women that I have interviewed all confirm that 'girls talk, fellas don't'. That is: fellas do not talk about their feelings or their problems.

Another topic that the lads really do not want to touch is suicide -even when the very frequent suicides affect them so deeply. Both the girls and the boys interviewed agree that although the lads remain silent on the issue "you shouldn't be doing that." In other words, all participants in the study see this strategy of not talking as harmful and they all agree that to talk and 'open up' would be beneficial for the lads' well-being. However the lads' inexperience in addressing these tough issues has left them "really uncomfortable". A crucial issue that is often overlooked but is suggested in

McCormack's study is that many young men are not only uncomfortable to talk about sensitive, personal or intimate issues but they also feel that nobody 'would listen'(2010:174-5). The lads in this study also felt that even the more intimate family and friends would 'just blank it out as well' (interview with one of the lads 2010). A female interviewee in McCormack's study suggested that the male stereotype itself "dissuades most men from talking *and listening* to emotional and sensitive topics". (McCormack 2010:175 my emphasis) On the other hand, in my interview with the girls they admitted that they "worried too much". The girls felt that they often over-analysed their problems and, to a certain degree, they appreciated the lads' non-articulate, care free attitudes. One of the girls talks about one of the lads specifically:

X. What I think is the best thing about X for example is that if I'm, when I'm really, really, really stressed out and worried over something you know, and it's hard to deal with, and if I start talking to X about it, -now-, sometimes I want to talk to him about it, and sometimes he just says, "well why are you worried about it?", and then I think about it and he goes "Yeah, why do you care about that?" I goes 'yeah'.

"Alright so do you wanna go do this or something?" you know...

Y. Ya, that's how they are there for each other!

F. Keeping your mind off it rather than going on about it?

X. And they don't do it like "let's go get drunk and pretend it didn't happen, -let's just go... (both girls simultaneously) and not talk about it!

X: And that's good sometimes, to go away and not talk about it for a while. I think it's really important to at least have someone who will sometimes go, "what are you worrying for?"

(Group conversation between myself and three of the girls September 2010)

Almost immediately however, the girls pointed out that despite the relief of the occasional de-dramatisation, the lads "do it too much!" They give the same lad as an example again and tell me that even though he may not be willing to talk about things but how he has on occasion admitted to worrying about his friends and family and that when he does he prayed for their well-being at night. The girls also told me about one occasion when one the girls had been very upset in our house after a fight had broken out. One of the lads had been drunk and extremely threatening towards her and the young man from the previous example had acknowledged her crying.

After the situation had calmed down he had given her a hug and a kiss and sat down to calm her down with 'a smoke' (a joint). She explained about this lad: "When something really bad happens he will turn around and go, "Come here" and give you a hug and a kiss." The other girls steps in to the conversation:

Y: They'll do that for a female, but if a fella came in crying in front of 'em they *would not* walk up to him and say: "Are you ok?", cos that would be... kinda... degrading for the person who was crying. Gay... (to the others' agreement) Exactly like! You know what I mean? They wouldn't like!

F. So when push comes to shove, in a panic situation when someone is falling apart in front of you, are they really there for each other?

Y. No.

X. No.

F. Is that pressure as well then?

X. I think, you know the way (another one of the lads) is now?

Everyone sees it but no one owns up to it. And you know how (another one of the lads) is? Everyone sees it but no one owns up to it. No one will take on that situation.

(ibid.)

The lads they mentioned both had problems with drink, drugs and appeared to be suffering from severe depression yet none of their friends were willing or able to 'take on their situation'. The girls addressed these rather destructive interpretations of group loyalties in where necessary confrontation with a person who is on a self-destructive path would be taken as a form of betrayal. One of the girls says that even between friends, when it comes to someone 'going off the rails', on cocaine for example, when someone is in obvious distress and showing signs of self-destruction:

Y. The last things that the boys would do is call them on it, confront them about it, you know that kind a way, -confrontation. Which would be needed you know? Because then they're going against each other but they don't understand that that's what they need to do sometimes, not always encourage each other if they're doing the wrong thing you know?

X. They leave it go so far, they do. They leave it go that long, before they do anything.

(ibid.)

The majority of the lads do not lack friendships or even close relationships (in terms of frequent, immediate, loyal and warm social interaction). The lacking element of

friendship between the lads is intimacy. Even in situations where there was some level of emotional transparency between friends, it was difficult for the lads to take the initial and transgressive step to open up a conversation that would, as Mac Ghiolla Bhain put it, “reek of homosexuality” (Mac Ghiolla Bhain 2008:179). Dr. Anthony Clare (writing specifically on Irish men) asked and subsequently answered:

“What about the warmth and camaraderie that many young men share, the ‘laddishness’, that mixture of drinking, brawling, bravado, sexual posturing and social misbehaving in which young men indulge and find friendship and affection? The problem is that intimacy, the letting down of emotional barriers and the expression of innermost thoughts and feelings, is inimical to such bonding.” (Clare 2000:87)

Inglis, who also wrote about his own cultural context emphasise the self-surrender to the group, to community and God: “Attainment of social acceptance and respect in Ireland involves avoiding conflict, especially through argument, and surrendering individual interests by engaging in practices which help others.” (Inglis 1998:71) The drink offers an opportunity of momentary relief. To talk with alcohol as mediator or, as some would prefer, to alleviate pain through avoidance, distraction and oblivion, is offered by the lads’ social support system and the ‘good friend’. Avoidance and oblivion as a coping strategy was not exclusive to the lads however. One young woman’s story tells of this familiar logic as it was the advice of a local health professional. After months of persistence she had managed to convince her then boyfriend to go see the local doctor about a very severe depression. After the young man had admitted to suffering from depression to his doctor -to much personal cost and with difficulty- he was given the advice to “go on the piss”. To date this man has made two suicide attempts.

The girls did however hold a clear understanding for the lads’ means of coping and to them, alternative ways of “being there for each other”:

X. (about the lads) “They have kind hearts and they do care about people.”

Y. “They think the things we think are important are trivial. But then, they bring (X) out drinking out of the goodness of their hearts. To show him a good time and stuff. And that’s what they think is important. But what’s important is that, he should have went for counselling and stuff, whatever they didn’t go. What they should do is to sit down and... , it would be too much pressure for them to sit down and say: “Right X, what’s happening?” You know? (ibid.)

The young women recognised that there was a difference in both trust and sharing between male and female friendships but there were also more serious issues than this. The girls made the point that the lads we were talking about were not the worst off at all. They gave a few examples of those who ‘really have no one’. “They don’t have any one to talk to. And that’s why they act the way they do.”

Dr. Anthony Clare wrote that not only did Irish men find it difficult to express their feelings and ask for help, they were also significantly more isolated than women, psychologically and socially. He argued that there was a lack of research covering the social constructions of male friendships and their impact on health: “They have fewer close personal supports than women do and this lack of an emotional network, when they do reach out, has significant and measurable health implications.” (Clare 2000:85) This is what the girls in these interviews reckoned their own social support system involved:

Y. But you know when something is on your mind, and it’s a hundred times worse? And it’s all like, mixed up and it’s something that’s really bothering ya and you can’t think straight and you feel sick to your stomach, isn’t that a horrible feeling? And then for me I just go to X, X or X (all girls) and I just say: “Lads...” And I just get their opinion and I sort it out and it’s ok! But imagine never being able to do that!! Imagine then having that feeling building up on top of the next thing that happens and the next thing happens! I would kill myself!!!  
X. “It all comes back to the macho-thing: If you don’t talk then you’re a man. If you do talk you’re gay.”

The use of “Lads” here is significant. It means something different as it is directed only to her female friends but it still refers to a vital component of the group dynamics and shared support among the lads. Referring to her female friends as ‘lads’ she dislocates the term from gender and relocates it to a stronger emphasis on; loyalty, familiarity and friendship. These are aspects not commonly discussed within



discourse on 'problematic' and 'anti-social' male behaviour but they are essential to the affects within the group dynamics of lad culture and support system among marginalised young men. Keohane and Kuhling argued that

“(p)art of the tragedy of the development in the magical/terrible Faustian world of contemporary Ireland is that innocent victims are swept away, along with old values, inherited traditions, cultures, landscapes, ways of life, crushed under the wheels of progress.” (2004:172)

But how innocent are the lads, - 'the prototypes of collision culture'? The authors suggest that traffic accidents can be understood in terms of a literal representation of an Irish society in collision with its 'new self'. They illustrated this by showing how three parallel rules are 'running the roads' in Ireland; the traditional agrarian, the universalistic commuter and the selfish and dangerous 'gambler' (2004:11). What makes this analogy relevant to this study is that the mounting numbers of traffic accidents are caused by young male drivers, the ultimate prototype of collision culture within a continuum of accidents, gambles, recklessness and suicides. Inglis states that “(i)t is estimated that young men between the ages of 17 and 24 are seven times more likely to be killed in a car crash compared to the general population.” (Inglis 2008:178) This would perhaps explain the Road Safety Authority's campaign poster from 2008 informing women on what young men do in order to impress both women and each other: “He'll drive and she'll die” ([www.rsa.ie](http://www.rsa.ie)). The leading man within masculinity studies Connell explained:

“When a group of young men in a car drink, drive and crash, they are not being driven to it by uncontrollable hormones, or even an uncontrollable male role. They are acting that way in order to be masculine. The dangerous driving is a resource for their making of masculinity. Here the active construction of masculinity is a key to the risk-taking behaviour, and to the strategies of prevention.” (Connell 2000:185)

Walker (2008:24) showed in her research how processes of acculturation and 'cultural stress' (cultural devaluation and deregulation) were often emphasised in explaining the relatively higher suicide rates among certain indigenous populations in different part of the world. Contrary to other cultural minority groups, 'the lads' -

meaning *young, white, settled, working class males* do not make a popular or valid category for victimisation. The lads are not seen as an ethnic, cultural nor ‘gendered’ minority (they are not female and ‘gendered’ is most likely to be read as ‘female’). Instead they are seen as collective representations of a discredited masculinity that is associated with oppression against women and minorities (racist, sexist, ‘backward’ etc.). Any cultural and sociodemographic disadvantages become ‘unclaimable’ even where processes of acculturation are clearly noticeable. Unlike women (as a gendered category) and for example Travellers (as a separate cultural category) the lads, although they are the carriers of ‘lad *culture*’, are not considered a cultural category.

If the lads were free, without social repercussions to select other ‘post-modern alternatives’ to this masculinity and avoid collision, most of them certainly would. White working-class men are often considered by both women (who are increasingly represented as a separate social class even when they share the same socioeconomic backgrounds) and other hegemonic urban middle-class masculinities as ‘backward’, homophobic, sexist and racist. As a collective representation, contemporary ladhood is very much misplaced within the discourse of multiculturalism and post-modernism. The lads are often restricted from not only service sector employment opportunities but are also overlooked by policy makers. They are clearly disadvantaged in the postmodern blame game and subject to interrogation. As my interviews with the local young women clearly indicate, the lads’ traditional gender identity, an important cultural buffer to the subjects themselves, is losing its place and value from both without and within its own base. As a response, these ‘protest masculinities’ put an exaggerated emphasis on traditional gendered distinctions that restrict their own social support system and coping mechanisms.

The gendered imbalances here described by the lads and the lads’ female peers is a division in where girls report “worrying too much” and lads worrying too little, instead dissuading attention away from problems to pursue other means of coping; avoidance or oblivion. To confront a friend who is on a destructive path is taken as a form of betrayal against loyalties towards the good friend who should by definition offer distraction. The girls have a clear view of the lads’ coping strategies and the lads are also well aware of the girls’ social support system. In the following chapter I

will look at an educational reform-programme that was put in place in selected all-boys schools around Ireland to tackle the ‘masculinity problem’. Its primary aim was to explore healthier and more constructive ways of being male. In the end, this attempt that was interpreted as an effeminisation- attempt, not only by young lads but by a large section of the Irish public.

#### **4.9 Exploring Masculinities**

Up until now, part 4 of this thesis has been a discussion on the two earliest and most fundamental social institutions to shape the individual as well as collective minds of people -the family and the school. It has also been an analysis of friendship, loyalty and male group identity. I have accounted for how skills, resources and responsibilities are divided into male and female spheres and how this has resulted in vast imbalances in life skills and opportunity between young Irish working class men and women. In the following pages I will take a closer look at one controversial and groundbreaking State attempt to correct the problem of negative masculinity and to promote civic responsibility and cosmopolitan values amongst Irish young lads in school. This was the Irish State’s first and only attempt to address issues of homophobia, bullying and suicide as an educational curriculum amongst young Irish boys specifically. To discuss this curricular initiative, its aims and outcome, I set my analysis within a Foucauldian notion of governmentality. The idea of governmentality (a broader term than state government) helps us understand how Ireland’s collision culture, in light of its new ‘self’, targeted a demographic of male youths who seemed to be slipping away in terms of life skills, opportunity and ideal citizenship. According to Foucault’s logic:

“the term “government” generally refers to the conduct of conduct – that is, to all those more or less calculated and systematic ways of thinking and acting that aim to shape, regulate, or manage the comportment of others, whether these be workers in a

factory, inmates in a prison, wards in a mental hospital, the inhabitants of a territory, or the members of a population.” (Inda 2005:2)

Governmentality can be understood as two things here: the “technics” by which the Irish State, very unsure of itself in its attempt, tried to tackle the ‘masculinity problem’ by the means of the Exploring Masculinity programme (EM). It could also be read in its more ‘organic’ form, as when the lads’ counter-culture worked to contest State and public discourse by reformulating and re-emphasising what is proper, relevant and appropriate for them. Governmentality is essentially the management and regulation of the comportment of others. This applies to both the Irish State’s attempt to reform negative forms of young masculinities in school and, the social rules and scripts that dictate gender appropriate behaviours amongst the lads and hampers reform and the breaking away from group identities.

“All told, then, governmentality draws attention to all those strategies, tactics, and authorities – state and nonstate alike – that seek to mold conduct individually and collectively in order to safeguard the welfare of each and of all.” (Inda 2005:6)

In this case, authority (the State) sought to shape, regulate and manage the comportment of a specific group and identity –lads, and laddishness. Lad culture in turn, is by definition in opposition to state authority and cosmopolitan values. Foucault’s analysis of governmentality has been used by many anthropologists of modern cultures (Inda 2005) to grasp how power is practiced and contested through opposing understandings of reality. I will highlight some of the programme’s most important flaws but also its initial prospects. I will argue that the lads’ reality gained, not the most, but the *least* possible attention in the educational project discussed in the following pages. To understand the setting in which EM was meant to be implemented I will discuss the Irish educational system in general, priorities made within it and give special attention to social capital (see part 2.4) and Social Learning. The following quote from the Irish Times makes a good opening to the controversy that was the Exploring Masculinities programme:

*“Our leading article in this paper last Friday said it all. Tension has escalated. A grave deterioration in relationships has taken place. Popular feelings on both sides have been stoked up to fever pitch. There is a complete lack of trust. The fallout on*

*many fronts is immense, costly and far-reaching, giving us all a sharp reminder that the world still has a common interest in stability and peace. Full-scale war now seems almost inevitable. The Middle East? No, the war between men and women.*

*On the same day that the leader about the Middle East appeared, the second-longest letter on the page was to do with the so-called "Exploring Masculinities" programme now being taught in second-level boys' schools." (Brendan Glacken, The Irish Times 16/10/2000)*

What follows is not ‘cutesy bickering’ over gender differences but a long lasting debate that ultimately put an end to the Exploring Masculinities programme (EM) after some years of unease and controversy. Homophobic bullying, the most common strategy of the policing of gender appropriate behaviour, was one of the problems to which EM could have been a possible solution as suggested by Norman (2004:15). Piloted between 1997 and 1999 in nineteen all boys’ schools after “a lot of work and persuasion” (McCormack citing Gleeson 2010:5), the specific aims were as follows:

- Explore different perceptions and experiences of masculinity
- Promote understanding and respect for diversity
- Promote equality between the sexes
- Provide opportunities for young men to develop enhanced interpersonal and social skills
- Promote healthy lifestyles
- Raise awareness of life choices, changing roles in society, work (paid and unpaid), relationships, health and sexuality, violence against women, men and children and sport.
- Help boys realise their worth as individuals
- Explore concepts of masculinity that encourages a positive and meaningful understanding of male roles.

This was a project that sought to promote agency and civic responsibility amongst young Irish males yet it was implemented by the same State that incapacitate young people by structurally cutting off the resources and spaces where such developments might otherwise grow (adequate housing for young people, work opportunities discussed in part 3). Perhaps an even greater paradox is that this disruption to

‘gender appropriateness’ and negative masculinity was to be implemented in a school system where both structure and curricula was defined and segregated by gender. The programme was also ineffective in how best to approach the constraints and restrictions specific to young lads. For example, in my conversations with the different authors who had analysed the implementation and outcome of EM, I suggested that the name of the programme (indicating young lads sitting together to explore their masculinities) might have been ill-considered and inappropriate given the prominent references and scripts used amongst Irish fifteen year-old boys. I received a unanimous agreement.

Here are some relevant questions about what knowledge the Irish State had about those who were to be governed (male working class youth). - What insights did the Department of Education have about lad culture to appreciate the already established scripts and rules amongst young lads? - What forms of conduct are expected of young lads in school? - How are certain aspects of conduct problematized? - How are they then to be reformed? (These formulations have been drawn and reapplied from Inda 2005:10)

To investigate the development and reception of EM I met with Dr. Orla McCormack in 2010. She had recently written about media, parental- and public responses to EM in her thesis *Exploring Masculinities – The Sequel*. Earlier the same year I also met with Dr. Paul Conway who was one of the co-authors of the first evaluation of EM entitled *Gender Politics and Exploring Masculinities in Irish Education* (Mac an Ghail et.al. 2002). I also met with Dr. Cliona Barnes who did an extensive field study over a two year period in a classroom-setting in Cork with a class of 16-year-old lads who sat the scheduled EM hours. The following discussion on the programme is based on their research and my conversations with these authors in relation to the curriculum itself, its reception by the public, parents and students and how this reflects on changing gender orders and expectations of gender roles and youth in Irish society.

EM was developed out of consideration for the curricular initiatives addressing social, personal and health education which was already in place in single-sex girls and mixed schools and to meet concerns ‘about the *hidden* curriculum of schools.’

(Conversation with Dr. Paul Conway from March 2010.) Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) already benefitted pupils of all girls' and mixed schools and ran under names such as; Futures (Girls into Technology) project (1992), Gender Matters (1996) and Balance (1997). EM was a continuation of this type of Social Learning and would now be available to all boys' schools where the unofficial school cultures were reinforcing harmful gender stereotypes. McCormack writes in her study on EM that in the culture of all boys' schools:

“There is often strong pressure on students to conform to prevailing hegemonic masculinity that exists within the school, which can be based on power and heterosexuality with high prejudice shown to males who are gay and weaker. It was found that boys in single sex schools paid little attention to issues of gender equality and hold more gender stereotyped views than students in other school types.”  
(McCormack 2010:45-6)

Some critics have also suggested that poor academic results could be a side-effect of the school cultures in single-sex schools. One article in the Irish Independent suggested in 2007: “Single-sex schooling could be the main reason why so many Irish boys are doing badly in education. --- The gender gap is wider in Ireland than other countries with more girls staying on in education, getting better results and taking more of the high-points courses in college. ” (The Irish Independent 03/09/2007) EM specifically targeted 15-16 year old boys in single sex schools. The Department of Education stated in 2003 that the majority of European countries (16 out of 26 where data was available) did not have single-sex schools for 15-year olds and that in the 10 countries where there were single-sex education only a very small portion of 15 year-olds were educated in such schools. In fact, only in Ireland, Luxembourg and Belgium were more than 5 percent of pupils in such schools. (The Department of Education and Science 2003) Figures from 2009 state that out of 3165 schools in Ireland, 490 (15.5%) are single sex schools<sup>17</sup>. In the same year, out of the 249,745 male pupils in Ireland, 50,997 (just over 20%) went to all boys' schools. (Department of Education and Skills 2009-10)

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<sup>17</sup> Out of these 490 single-sex schools; 20 single-sex junior schools, 121 single-sex senior schools, 242 single-sex all-through schools and 107 single-sex with mixed infants

The ideas behind EM came from a concern not only from low performance of boys but also from boys' and young men's overrepresentations in crime statistics, anti-social behaviour and the rising numbers in male suicide. EM was taken up by a number of single-sex boys' schools around Ireland during Transition Year (TY). TY is currently offered in 75% of Irish schools and takes place after the Juniors Certificate and before the two-year Leaving Certificate. Students are then 15-16 years of age. Barnes's (2007) classroom-study was fielded in Cork between the academic years 2002-03. Hence, many of the lads in my current study were in the 'same-year generation' as the boys in Barnes' work. In other words, many of lads that are part of my study would have been at the age where they would have been in Transition Year and could have sat the EM curriculum within that same time frame.

The lads in my study were schooled in three different localities in Cork's metropolitan area. Approximately two thirds of the lads went to mixed schools and one third to all boys' schools. When I asked some of the lads about EM and Transition Year in general some fundamental reference points became clear: According to my enquiries into the field, none of the lads had ever heard of EM (if they had at the time they did not remember anything at present). As I investigated the matter further it soon became clear that the counter-school culture, as the lads lived it and still referred to it, kept the lads out of Transition Year. This was because, for the most part in their cases, this extra school year was optional. It is up to the schools themselves whether TY is optional or compulsory.

The aims and purpose of TY is to provide a broader holistic curriculum that will promote maturity and greater responsibility, social awareness and active citizenship. A wide range of teaching methodologies are used and, "there are no formal public examinations associated with the programme." (Jeffers 2011:62) In other words is meant to promote aspects lacking in mainstream education such as social and cultural capital, well-being and social development (as discussed in part 2.5 - Education). This year is also meant to introduce students to further studies, to explore adult and working life and to prepare them, for lack of a better word: life. According to Jeffers, these aims are often met:



“A consistent pattern through the emerging data is that students are more mature as a result of the TY experience. Young people’s confidence grows, student-teacher relationships are enhanced and opportunities to explore adult and working life are seen as distinct benefits“ (Jeffers 2008:1).

However, Jeffers’ study also reveals that the uptake of TY is greater among girls and in schools that are located in relatively better off areas while participation was lower among boys, “particularly those from family backgrounds with low levels of formal schooling, and in small and rural VEC (Vocational Education Committee) schools.” (Jeffers 2011:64) The vast majority of the lads from my fieldwork had not taken TY. At the same time, they expressed a great amount of dissatisfaction with school’s failure to deliver what they considered to be one of the main purposes of education; to get you ‘set up for life’ and to ‘be about more than just a Leaving Cert’ (See discussion 2.5). The official aims set up for TY seem to match the lads’ desire for a more holistic form of education yet, the lads who had not taken TY seemed hostile towards the very thought of an extra year in school. They also expressed intolerance towards those who would have considered taking TY, i.e. an extra year of voluntary studies.

I got back responses from 30 out of the 40 lads on this issue. 28 of these confirmed that they had not gone through TY and that they had attended schools where this year was optional. Two confirmed that they did Transition Year because it was mandatory in their schools. One of the lads said that he did not remember anyone from his school ‘doing it’. When asked why not, he claimed that “only nerds do it”. He explained how Transition Year, when optional, was seen as taking an extra year in school and where you would lose your friends who were guaranteed not to take it if you went at it alone: “If you hate school it’s a no brainer.” Another one of the lads said laughingly when asked if anyone of them had taken Transition Year: “I wouldn’t know them anyway, I wouldn’t talk to them.”

One of the ‘atypical lads’ interviewed had a distinct opinion on TY and the anti-school attitudes among his peers. He had advanced academically and spoke about his ambiguous distance from the typical laddish behaviours among the friends he had grown up with. Now a teacher, he regarded himself as part of the group but he also

considered himself to be an outsider. As a young pupil in school he was sent off to a different school than the rest of his friends. He describes this school as a “higher-achieving” school and he believed this early academic route had set him aside in his way of thinking and would probably have resulted in the other lads thinking he was a bore. He believed that the differences in levels of maturity between boys and girls were a class issue. He was not sure how girls and boys from the same background and many times the same families had come to develop such different attitudes towards education and different levels of maturity. His wrote to me about his views on TY:

Regarding transition year, it was a requirement in my school and I do agree that it does in general help kids to make more informed decisions, more educated decisions. Even kids that I would have had for Leaving Cert applied last year who wouldn't do a tap, and didn't care about school or college are now back in our school doing FETAC (Level 5 & 6) course through adult education because they seem to now grasp how competitive an education/jobs market is out there now. So in that sense an extra year at school is crucial. (Not really one of the lads, age 29)

He spoke of the young lads in the school where he now worked as a Second Level teacher and said that many of the “young males were either oblivious to the academic side of school, borderline dropping out, or drop-outs with no work”:

Ultimately I think it's about "socialization" "upbringing" etc that guides a person morally/ethically and allows them to make informed decisions. Perhaps it's the socio-economic deficit prevalent in large sections of Irish society that prevent people "maturing" earlier. (ibid.)

Again, it transpired that young boys and girls had come to represent different social classes –possibly through socialisation. The Exploring Masculinities programme failed, according to its many critics, to acknowledge and address the issue of class and marginalisation: i.e. how certain expressions of an exaggerated form of masculinity is regenerated as a response to ‘the socio-economic deficit prevalent of Irish society.’ The public anger and concern against EM, and ultimately its discontinuation, also reflect the rigidity of the cultural definitions of masculinity prominent in Irish culture. Project Director of EM Jim Gleeson commented on the fact that similar programmes were in effect for some years in all girls’ schools and mixed schools without stirring such public concern: “Morning Ireland, an editorial in

the Irish Times, the Pat Kenny radio programme... I could never get publicity like this for the various gender projects I directed in relation to girls issues.” (Jim Gleeson quoted in McCormack 2010:9)

Going back through the archives of the Irish Times searching for the key words “Exploring Masculinities” I gathered articles of different kinds. When copied into a single document these filled a total of 110 pages dated from the height of the controversy, mainly between 1999-2000. The inflammatory nature of EM was both the cause and effect of a lot of secrecy about the development of the programme. EM’s material and even its assessment came under deep criticism from some of the authors referred to in this study: “the Department's refusal to publish or make available the findings of an independent review of the programme to interested parties is totally unacceptable and speaks to its lack of commitment to the programme.” (Caroline Smyth and Malcolm MacLachlan in the Irish Times 25/07/2003)

Orla McCormack’s personal opinion on why it was so hard to get a hold of the EM material from the Gender Equality Unit was that they were afraid that making it more accessible to public and the media would cause more controversy. (Conversation with Dr. McCormack in March 2011) Loud and persistent resistance to ‘touchy feely talk’ with an ‘overemphasis on homosexuality’ and a ‘hidden feminist agenda’ crippled the curricular initiative and EM was withdrawn in 2002. Elements of it are however being incorporated into other school programmes such as SPHE (Social, Personal and Health Education). “It was argued that EM was anti-male, designed by feminists to make boys more feminine” (McCormack 2010:10) In our interview McCormack said that the topics in the material had been too simplified for her liking, undermining intelligent teenagers with caricature-like images of violent men, for example:

“A lot of the arguments were... extremely obvious in what they were trying to do. You could see the boys saying like, “Oh c’mon!” “All teenagers, even younger, are intelligent so, let’s not patronise them or think that they can’t figure out how complex these issues are. I would much prefer a broad discussion on domestic violence rather than saying “men are violent. Here’s an example of a man who is violent. Here’s a female victim.” (Conversation with Dr. McCormack March 2011)

The problems with masculinity she argued, with men and how we need to ‘fix it’ were continuously highlighted but not the positive aspects of being male. Similar programmes for girls would be very affirmative and encouraging: “We’re great, we can do it.” Barnes explained how the video material amounted to some 90 minutes of footage whereby only twelve of those minutes featured young people. Ten minutes were taken up by interviews with teenage girls and two were left for an interview with teenage boys:

“[t]he girls are all extremely articulate, confident, well-dressed, evidently middle-class and from urban backgrounds. They speak clearly and directly to the camera, making eye contact with the viewer. Comparatively, the adolescent boys are scruffy and inarticulate. They seem intimidated by the camera and are obviously rural and from a working class background.” (Barnes 2007:189)

The EM programme addressed gender power imbalances in a class room full of young disempowered lads and expected them to grasp and appreciate their oppressive roles as part of a patriarchy yet for the most part, young boys often feel that their female peers have greater influence and opportunities than they do. EM did highlight discrimination and the negative effects it has on people on the basis of sexuality, ethnicity and disabilities. According to the relevant research presented here and much of public opinion at the time however, the programme failed to address marginalisation based on social class. Hence many of the issues discussed in the class did not reflect the realities of working class masculinities and the boys which the programme had targeted. Instead it reinforced many of the negative gender stereotypes it set out to defeat and instead placed a blind spot to recent socioeconomic changes and how the students might feel affected by them, as young men, as a social class, or as individuals. The portrayal of young women as representing another social category than the boys whilst focusing almost exclusively on the negative features of men and masculinity was very problematic and did according to Barnes determine the boys’ ultimate rejection of the messages and goals of EM.

Barnes looked at EM as part of a discursive middle-class anxiety (moral concern or panic) and highlighted “the reluctance of the majority of commentators, programme writers and contributors to engage with the taboo issue of social class” (2007:21). This was also reflected in how the programme (much like TY) was taken up almost exclusively by schools in disadvantaged areas whilst interest “among private, fee-paying schools was extremely low”. (Barnes 2007:19) The concern for and about these young working class boys then, seemed to centre on their “inability to ‘fit in’ with what is presumed to be the rest of normal society due to their failure to relinquish traditional forms of male identity”. (2007:41) Defensive responses among the lads, as predicted in the Teacher Notes which were part of the material, and as confirmed by Barnes’s and McCormack’s texts, were based on their feelings of being ‘got at’ and being under threat. Similar criticism is also found internationally:

“What is understood in Willis’s analysis to be a class cultural response to the conditions of material existence of the working classes and the nature of schooling within capitalism is now being represented as a characteristic of masculinity itself, irrespective of social class.” (Dolby and Dimitriadis 2004:35)

McCormack’s view was that a more interactional pedagogy must be adopted to incorporate the students’ own reflections:

F: A local fifteen year-old working-class lad is not going to identify himself as someone who’s in a power position.  
McCormack: Exactly! He is being taught, “you have all the power!”  
What power are you talking about?? And, so I remember one of the activities was looking at this idea of a patriarchal in society, and it basically taught you, this is the way it is, instead of saying: “is this? Let’s try and find examples and questions... end it with a question mark. (Conversation with Dr. McCormack March 2011)

This is affirmed in Barnes testimonies: “[i]nstead of seeing themselves as powerful or threatening to others, the Hillside boys see themselves as relatively powerless against an adult world of sanctions and refusals.” (Barnes 2007:152) In agreement with both authors I question whether there can and should be a text book for something like EM? According to its critics EM had a very narrow definition of what manliness was. In developing reflexivity or as the many debaters put it ‘critical self-

reflection', the boys should have been *the main collaborators* in defining what masculinity was. The imagined polarised blocks of a gender order divided into male and female ignores the hierarchical orders among males that are structured by significant social and cultural markers such as age, class, ethnicity and sexuality and so on. This reinforced the arguments behind the most critical voices expressed in Irish Times:

“Having seen the contents, I can assure your readers that it will not make boys feel good about themselves, given the way that it falsely portrays men as violent and abusive and women as victims of an oppressive male patriarchy. Its dominant theme is that men are powerful, violent and irresponsible while women are passive and powerless.” (Mary T. Cleary, Co-ordinator, Amen (support group for abused men and their children), in The Irish Times 8/12/2000)

McCormack concluded in her study that ultimately, most parents were in favour of EM, mainly because it addressed with issues like homophobic bullying. The concerns expressed by parents were commonly in relation to whether or not the messages conveyed by the programme went against catholic values and whether teachers addressing these sensitive issues with their children would have undergone adequate training to do so and finally, if “*young men were mature enough to deal with these issues at senior cycle.*” McCormack 2010:ii my emphasis) This latter concern is warranted as I have emphasised in the previous section but then again, *that would also explain the initial need for such a programme.* More importantly perhaps: the young lads should not stand alone accused of being immature. As suggested by Barnes whose two year field study was set in the classroom with the boys during EM, the giggles received in class would have been the same in a room with men in their thirties. (Conversation with Dr. Barnes March 2011) McCormack reported further that many parents experienced difficulties in addressing sensitive issues such as homosexuality at home. She also pointed to “the reluctance of male teachers to become involved in affective education.” (McCormack 2010:87) The most indicative concern being: “messages communicated widely about gender norms and the sense that breaking these norms would attract negative reaction from colleagues”. (McCormack 2010:94: citing Geary and Mannix MacNamara) In our interview, McCormack recalled one incident in a school where the principle she had

contacted was unaware that the programme was in the school because the teacher had wanted to keep it quiet. The teacher was apparently “afraid to talk to other people about it in case it would be slagged off or that they’d make fun of it.” (Conversation with Dr. McCormack from March 2011) Part of the problem as McCormack described it was that the challenge to negative elements of masculinity was introduced too late and that this must start sooner than just senior cycle: “You can’t just encourage boys to start talking when they’re 16.” Taking into account the very context and ‘school culture’ in which EM was meant to be implemented McCormack explained:

“The issues that were explored within EM, it’s not just enough to explore it within one classroom. It’s like looking at sexuality, you can’t just look at an issue like homophobic bullying or sexuality within one class and then everything else in the school contradicts what they’ve been learning.” (Conversation with Dr. McCormack March 2011)

Norman (2004) focused extensively on homophobic bullying and the broader implementation of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) which had been standardised for Irish schools since 2000. He also called for more holistic strategies for equality and social learning in education *and* school environment. (2004:5) Barnes wrote about how ‘feminine’ subjects like cooking, home economics, music, or other forms of ‘social learning’ like SPHE (Social, Personal and Health Education) was not offered in most boys’ schools (2007:202). She explained how the formal school curriculum and structure was not only compatible with the highly stereotyped, negative masculine ethos but actively plaid a fundamental part in structuring this ethos. In a sense then, EM (or SPHE for that matter) was a very limited disruption and challenge to what the schools otherwise enforce.

In addition to these researchers in the fields of Education (McCormack); Sociology (Barnes), the late Dr. Anthony Clare who co-authored *Cultivating Suicide?* (2003) argued equally that “[w]e need to introduce our children to an understanding of the ways their minds as well as their bodies work far earlier than we do.” (Clare 2000:217-18) McCormack argues that a curriculum really reflects the concern, not only with what subjects are taught, but “the story we tell our children about the good

life” (2010:103). Priorities and selections have to be made as to what messages should be transmitted to new generations but ultimately these will be the aspects of our culture that we deem invaluable and “*essential* for our children to have.” (McCormack 2010:104) Clare continues:

“Not surprisingly, when it is suggested – usually in response to some crises, real or imaginary – that a course or series of lectures be given on a controversial topic, such as homosexuality or AIDS or drug dependence, there is anxiety and dissent. What is needed is proper, systematic and co-ordinated introduction to human psychology – the psychology of personality, the psychology of behaviour, the psychology of feelings, the psychology of individuals and groups, the psychology of memory and will and impulse control, the psychology of sexuality.--- We teach our children the intricacies of the human body, but little of the functioning (and malfunctioning) of the human mind.” (Clare 2000:218)

As a part of human psychology, I want to stress the need for self-, and structural reflexivity. This includes self-confrontation and adequate knowledge about the worlds in which we live. The social and cultural aspects of ourselves will teach us vital lessons about our own behaviours and feelings. For any of this to materialise and benefit coming generations both within the school curriculum and unofficial school cultures, the educational system as a whole must acknowledge and incorporate what is happening in all of society. Economist and social commentator David McWilliams rightly criticises how the Irish educational system has failed to accommodate its teachings to the recent and fundamental changes in Irish society. He says in a televised interview about the economic recession in Keith Farnan’s “Money, Money, Money”: “The way you teach kids not to make the same bloody mistakes as their mums and dads is you teach them that the world works in a different way. Do you think our Leaving Cert’s economic course has changed in the last five years? –It hasn’t. What’s that about?!” (*Money, money, money* aired 15/12/2011 RTE Two) In a similar vein, Smalley (*et al.*) argued:

“Of all aspects of the social context of youth suicide, one of the most significant and also one of the most obviously gendered is the effect of unemployment. --- The social meanings attached to work and the association between hegemonic



masculinity and working is particularly important. These should be addressed when educating boys, and during social work with vulnerable boys and young men.”

(Smalley, et.al. 2005:149)

Exploring Masculinities was an attempt to tackle and modify negative masculinity in a segregated school system where fear and hesitation, insecurity and immaturity towards gender issues were already widespread. It was questioned whether “*young men were mature enough to deal with these issues at senior cycle.*” McCormack 2010:ii my emphasis) It was more likely the case that neither parents, teachers nor the Department of Education were mature and secure enough in their convictions to make a whole hearted attempt at ‘tackling the masculinity problem’. The defensive responses amongst the lads who sat the programme with feelings of being ‘got at’ and being under threat, was already predicted by the developers of the material and teachers. It turned out to be very problematic to teach fifteen year-old lads about patriarchy without the lads’ own definition of masculinity and the specific challenges of their time and place in the world. It is clear from a Foucauldian perspective that power is indeed as a discursive force field. It is also evident in the discussions surrounding EM that when both the object to be governed and the overall aims we envision are unclear, that not much will come of the technics used to reform people – even when they are aimed at fifteen year-old boys who see themselves as relatively powerless and who are already used to an adult world of sanctions and disciplinary interventions.

Curricular development at large fits the frame of Bourdieu’s governmentality. Priorities and selections about what subjects should be taught, or as McCormack put it “the story we tell our children about the good life” (2010:103) are continuously being negotiated and contested. This, she argues, reflects our concerns for those aspects of our culture that we deem invaluable and “*essential* for our children to have.” It is important for students –male and female- to address and debate how they have come to know what they know. At least some part of our curriculum must address what and how we are taught, how life lessons become internalised into fundamental life spheres (in the home, peer groups, communities, work etc.) and of course – how this is fundamentally gendered. The most vital influences on the social and economic realities that structure young working class boys’ lives were not

addressed in the EM programme or in the public controversy that followed. Insufficient consultation from the very small group who had any part in developing the programme resulted in the perception of a top-down, exclusive and one-sided approach. Because so few people were invited or consulted in developing the programme, very few rallied up to defend it in the debate. The underestimation of young lads' comprehension, abilities and contributive potentials go unchallenged while research in Ireland point to the many possibilities lost: Curriculum and discourse remain as the potential vehicles by which we can open up opportunities to talk and think about the new order of things.

#### **4.10 Summary and conclusions**

Gender segregation and 'gender appropriateness' is deeply emphasised in Irish society. (Fahey et.al. 2007:207) This is confirmed by figures from the Central Statistics Office but also by other authors who have focused specifically on Ireland and Cork; Barnes (2010) and Gaetz (1997). My overall argument is that 'gender appropriate' comfort zones are incapacitating young men while putting an over-proportionate amount of stress, worry and responsibility on young women who in the end are left better equipped to manage and resolve the stressors of everyday life.

I started this chapter by examining the different ways in which data is obtained to evaluate the social attitudes, behaviours and well-being of Irish men today. I have argued that the social surveys available on changing gender roles focus almost exclusively on women's gender roles indicating that gender equality still remains a 'women's issue'. I have also discussed how surveys on the quality of life of men are undermined by men's under-reporting of mental health issues and other practical worries such as unemployment because many men feel uncomfortable disclosing (also to themselves) what could be interpreted as personal failures and weaknesses.

I have also suggested that the lads' social conservatism was not as clear-cut as is often alleged. The majority of the lads interviewed in the NSRF anomie study did not want to reverse to a time when "everyone knew how they were expected to act" (60% to 40%) (Begley et.al. 2004:21) The ISSP social attitude survey on women's changing gender roles showed that although men held more conservative views than women, men had also altered their views to the same or higher degree within a relatively shorter time period than women.

A considerable amount of participant observation is necessary to reveal the workings of coping and self-destruction amongst the lads. It is also important to investigate and gather information on the lads' social relations. It has been suggested in similar research efforts (Dolby and Dimitriadis 2004) that family relations and the private experiences behind the lads' hard outer image must become part of our analyses of how the lads immerse into working-class culture outside the public sphere. I have let the ethnographic accounts of 'the girls' tell the stories of how upbringing, schooling and the workings of gender and gender appropriate behaviours shape young women and men. The young women interviewed had much to share on these matters. I have argued that structural gender segregation leads to different skills, opportunities and life styles. In the dialogues presented in this chapter the girls eagerly and thoroughly account for these differences and the perceived injustices they link to the imbalances in responsibility between boys and girls. Overall, the girls seemed to adhere to a different social discourse than the lads. The girls generally made a distinction between local lads and men 'in general' while social constructionism seemed irrelevant or absent from the lads' worldview. The lads addressed masculinity as a unavoidable and therefore unchangeable problem, but a problem nonetheless, in that it inhibited men from talking and sharing worries. They argued that this had been the main cause behind the recent local –and all male- suicides.

I have argued that the value many men put on 'strength' and self-reliance ultimately makes for poor coping skills and relative vulnerability. As an example I put forward the historical re-reading of being 'emotionally handicapped'; where displays of emotion have gone from being a sign of weakness (a female pathology), to a situation where the inability to express one's feelings is seen as the pathological, debilitating characteristic of males.

The lads preferred to talk about their experiences of work and the loss of work, which they also linked to the rising suicide figures among men. There was considerable evidence of the lads' awareness of their own disadvantages in developing the social-esteem, confidence, trust, intimacy and coping mechanisms that they recognise in their female peers. The lads acknowledged that this was a gendered issue and an obstacle in their lives. They believed like the majority of the men in the NSRF study (Begley *et.al.* 2004), that "talking" was the solution but that 'lads talking' would be "too weird".

I have addressed the idea of aggrieved entitlement, the argument that suggests that men who feel entitled to a certain social position resent losing this position. My main observations have been that of actual loss, -the loss of work and the many functions the workplace fills for the lads. I have discussed how the downturn in the building and manufacturing sectors (regarded as male work) has all but decimated employment opportunities for the lads. I have argued here, that the lads' loss of work, but also important processes of identity formation, acquirement of skills, self-confidence and social esteem, is not to be interpreted as solely a matter of aggrieved entitlement. The roles and opportunities available to their fathers' generation have become scarce and uncertain. -They have not been overtaken by women. As I put forward in chapter 3, the lads attributed the blame for their limited work opportunities to the country's leaders and the mismanagement of the economy, not women and their relative advancement.

I suggested that the lads' goals were not beyond norms and constraint but were in fact quite modest: feeling *useful* and fulfilling their social and gendered roles through paid labour and the occasional 'craic'. Marginalised young men's group loyalties and identity formation also serve an important function to the lads as a support system (often the only one available) which receives little or no attention in public debate. The "backward" and conservative social attitudes displayed by Irish young working class males also include values based on solidarity, generosity and hard work.

The social sciences have had a long struggle trying to pin point the limits to structure and constraint and possibilities for freedom of choice and agency. With the help of

some important theorists, mainly Foucault, Bourdieu and Butler, I have tried to look at this balance between human action and constraint. I have emphasised how power –understood as hegemonic discourses- battle for legitimacy as neo-traditional male identities face Ireland’s ‘new self’ and a fundamental restructuring of ‘male work’. In light of recent and dramatic changes that have negatively affected the lads’ lives I have described how a lag in assuming new dispositions has resulted in social suffering where the lads become ‘stuck’ and are aware that this is so. I have used Butler’s understanding of gender as something that is not in opposition to sex, or, as a cultural veneer on nature. Instead gender is seen as an identity formation that is produced through discursive practices; speech acts and performances. (This last idea introduced in this chapter will be developed further in chapter five where ceremonial drinking is performed amongst the lads.)

Using Bourdieu’s distinction between *rules* and regulative *tendencies* I have argued that the rigidity and systematic regularity of gender appropriate codes and scripts (with aggressive sanctioning for deviation) should be read as *rules*. The reason for this categorisation is the explicit and repetitive fashion in which normative violence is imposed upon young lads. The ‘rules of the game’ are not only made explicit, but they are enforced continuously within all social institutions where young lads find themselves (home, school and peer groups). Based on my informants testimonies, but also years of my own observations, I conclude that the lads are under strict surveillance and that freedom of expression is hampered by intimidation and ridicule. On a more intimate level, certain feelings are self-regulated as many of the lads “suck it up” and “hold it inside” despite their shared view that “you shouldn’t be doing that” (interview with one of the lads). The main reason, I believe, why talking becomes ‘too weird’ for the lads is explained by Butlers speech act theory and the idea that gendered subjects are produced through performative speech. According to Butler, the self does not exist outside the scripts and linguistics but is a product of it:

“Butler builds on the Foucauldian notion that subjectivity is discursively produced and that this does not involve the notion of a preexisting subject *on* whom power and discourses act, but rather that subjects are formed *through* their discursively constituted identity.” (Jagger 2008:3)

Butler also noted that these performative acts must be repeated again and again in order to shape the subject. In this chapter I have discussed in some detail how gender boundaries are policed and how speech and expression is regulated through repetition. I have argued that the lads are “under surveillance all the time” (in school, among peers and in the home) and that “pervasive terms” (name calling) is repeated every day. Homophobic bullying is often downplayed in a humoristic fashion as ‘banter’ and ‘only messing’. The school is probably the most powerful regenerator of these normative scripts but school also provides an ideal space for the development of reflexivity and alternative discourses. Foucault suggests that discourses –the way we think, talk about and see things: “can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (1978:100-101). The segregating and heteronormative ethos regenerated within the Irish school system is but one possible function. It could also foster alternative spaces and possibilities for resistance and change. The ideas offered by Foucault, Bourdieu and Butler explain how both habitus and reflexivity help shape but also challenge our choices in life:

“This range of choices depends on our current context (the position we occupy in a particular social field), but at the same time which of these choices are visible to us and which we do not see as possible are the result of our past journey, for our experiences have helped shape our vision.” (Maton in Grenfell 2008:52)

Some critical and possibly eye-opening curricular initiatives have entered the Irish educational scene with varying effects. Foucault’s notion of governmentality helps us understand the processes by which power is practiced and how agents and agencies aim to govern over the behaviours of others. Through these processes; curricular implementations (EM) and rules (lad culture), people are shaped, regulated and modified. Outcomes vary from (as cited above) hindrance and stumbling-blocks to potentially, -a point of departure for resistance and change. Social discourse both limits and facilitate understandings of one’s abilities, strengths and weaknesses and this bears a strong influence on boys’ expected immaturity. I have argued that this in turn has devastating and disheartening effects on boys, young men as well as their female peers. The homophobic bullying prevalent in Irish schools is a social

mechanism that serves to control difference and restrict young boys from deviating from prevalent norms and gender appropriate behaviour.

I discussed the two main curricular initiatives that were put in place in Irish schools to address students' social skills and well-being: Transition Year (TY) was implemented in 1974 and still exists in 75% of Irish schools. For boys in particular, the Exploring Masculinities programme (EM) was first piloted in nineteen all boys' schools in 1997 and was discontinued in 2002. TY was initiated with the aims to prepare 15-16 year-old students (male and female) for adult life: to provide a broader holistic curriculum that would promote maturity and greater responsibility, social awareness and active citizenship. EM also tried to tackle the harmful stereotypical masculine behaviours that contributed to boy's low educational performance, homophobic bullying, anti-social behaviour, violence and suicide.

The discussion on EM was based on my conversations with the authors of the most relevant studies regarding the curriculum itself. The main focus was on EM's reception by the public, by parents and students and how the controversy reflected changing expectations of gender roles and youth in Irish society. I argued that the aims set out by the developers of EM were very relevant but that a weekly class proved to be an inadequate challenge to what goes on during every other hour in the school day. Heteronormativity and homophobic bullying extend beyond the student bodies into the teachers' lounges, peer groups and people's homes. How the topics of EM were addressed was ultimately flawed. Even though the programme dealt with issues associated with disadvantaged populations such as ethnic and sexual minorities, it failed to address the socioeconomic marginalisation of those it wished to target, -white working class boys.

The lads in this study had no experience or knowledge of EM which was a weekly 90 minute-class offered in a limited number of all-boys schools during Transitional Year. This extra year is optional in most schools and as I put forward here, the anti-school attitudes that govern lad culture make TY an unattractive alternative. It would have negative consequences for the lads in terms of losing friendships and social networks and it would potentially expose them to bullying once they have left their peer groups who they know would not take the Transition Year. Here the lads' *rules*

*of resistance and loyalties* became a stumbling block for EM and crippled its outreach, uptake and reception.

In this chapter I discussed whether masculinity is ‘in crisis’. I concluded that there are multiple masculinities and that some groupings, some male identities, have been negatively affected by recent developments in Irish society and that these particular groupings lack important life skills and coping mechanisms to tackle the adverse effects some of these changes have on them. I have also argued that young Irish, white, settled, working class men are not thought of as a cultural category. Yet they are collectively going through an acculturation process. Previously held references and expectations are becoming unsustainable and obsolete. In this regard these forms of masculinity can also be seen as being ‘in crisis’.

I also addressed the responding concerns against a gender equity backlash. This argument suggests that the masculinity-in-crisis paradigm can have undesirable effects on the well-being of women and the progress of feminism. The research presented here does not suggest that women should accommodate the ill-being of any men. It does however argue for the benefits of social constructionism which offers individual *open-ended* alternatives to the restrictive structures that define masculinity for many men in Irish society today.

My argument *is not* that individuals be steered away from the genuinely gender appropriate and towards the, ‘inverted’, ‘androgynous’ or ‘feminine’. We are far from a situation where life opportunities and personal development are based on individual choice. Instead boys and girls, women and men, *are* steered and segregated; structurally and systematically, practically and symbolically into their ‘gender appropriate spheres’. My concerns for the lads, based on empirical evidence, are; 1) that these spheres apply to the most intimate levels of management of feeling and expression of self and 2) that deviation into what is acknowledged *by the individuals themselves* to be more beneficial choices for the lads’ general well-being are still made inaccessible due to fear, intimidation, unfamiliarity and embarrassment. People *are*, but *should not* be steered in any direction that limits their development, skills or opportunities. Instead, we might want to consider *stopping* before spending valuable resources on the implementation of intervention



programmes and crisis-courses targeting negative representations of male behaviours that are but logical outcomes in a society which in its fundamental structures is set up to regenerate these spheres. If 'boys will be boys' than so they will continue to be even when they are 'left to it', -to maximise their skills and well-being through personal choice and reflection and without restrictions made up by fear, awkwardness and embarrassment. This too must be achieved on a structural level for it is not by stopping individual acts that we transform the order of things. Butler argues rightly: "The transformation of social relations becomes a matter, then, of transforming hegemonic social conditions rather than the individual acts that are spawned by those conditions." (Butler 1988:525)

This research argues that masculinity is anchored in cultural norms which dictate how men are supposed to be and act. Constructionism does not suggest that masculinity is a pathology. Nor does it propose that boys or men should 'become like girls or women'. It does not imply or over-emphasise negative stereotypes of gender which was one of the main criticism against EM. Rather, the idea of social constructionism is to create a space where it becomes possible to reconsider behavioural patterns and to lay the epistemological framework for critical reflexivity. It became particularly evident in the controversy surrounding EM that the idea that gender is a social construct is still debated within many circles in Ireland.

It must be stressed however, that ideas of social constructionism rest on the long legacy of feminist theory. Women, Mac an Ghaill and Haywood argue, "are repositioned as reflexive winners, as agency is freed from the inherited ascriptions of institutional structures" (2007:28). It is clear today that while women have expanded their social roles, leading lives no other women ever led before them, many men have yet to do the same. For over a century feminism has been an intellectual revolution that has built up an ideological armoury that re-imagined and reorganised the world. If not 'hitting back' at immigration and multiculturalism or lashing out through exaggerated versions of heterosexuality, what types of organised resistance and change could and *should* young working class males coordinate themselves towards? Based on the socio-historic contexts of various populations of women across the world, there is a strong case for the resistance against structural

oppression. As stated by the main contributors in Dolby and Dimitriadis (2004), - 'class did not disappear'.

During the summer of 2010 and my annual home-visit to Stockholm I came across a series on masculinity in Sweden's leading newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* (DN). The articles discussed different views of social constructionism; historical relativity, family relations and childhood. The series, entitled "Men: winners or losers?" ran from June 6 until June 30 and included responses from readers. One of these articles argued that:

"Even though many men are getting interested in their own health, it has not meant that men *in general* have become any better in taking care of themselves says Ralph Peeker. What he sees instead are increasing gaps between social classes. –Sweden is falling apart. Certain groups of men are becoming more health conscious, whilst other groups are increasingly misbehaving –they over-eat, drink too much, abuse drugs. I am personally convinced that this is caused by the increasing economic inequalities in society." (DN Series: Mannen: vinnare eller förlorare? 2011-06-10 my translation and emphasis)

Without the scope and perspective of social class the generality of 'masculinity in crisis' becomes fruitless. Focusing on the Irish context Barnes (2007) suggested that: "[t]he educational performance of middle and upper class boys is still good. They continue to dominate male participation at the top universities while working class boys are now understood as receiving little or no benefit from the education system." (Barnes 2007:162)

The other alternative option for male resistance (that 'worked for women') is the Men's Movement, indeed as scattered and conflicted as the feminist and post-feminist projects ever were. The *ideal* platform, based on its inclusiveness and mandatory participation, from which to build organised reflexive resistance against class oppression and coercive and restrictive formations of gender, is the school system. Therein lays an opportunity to challenge gender appropriate life-spheres; to

address men's loss of traditional employment and, to broaden opportunities for acquiring skills, personal growth and self-worth.

## 5. CONSUMING THE CRAIC<sup>18</sup>, DESTROYING THE BODY

*“One could argue that consuming pleasure has become central to youth cultural forms at the turn of the century.”* (Maycock in MacLachlan and Smyth 2003:121)

*“Culture is important. Most evidence indicates that it is the collection of beliefs, attitudes and norms which surround alcohol, rather than absolute consumption levels themselves, that are very powerful in either causing or preventing alcohol-related problems.”* (Brophy in MacLachlan and Smyth 2004:72)

Dr Tony Holohan, chief medical officer at the Department of Health made a comment on RTE's Six One News that might not be news-worthy nationally or internationally: “Irish consume too much alcohol.” (RTE News broadcasted 07-02-2012) He described “the nature of the problem” and the effects that alcohol consumption has on Irish society. He explained further how, at a cost to the state of 1.2 billion euro every year, “90 people per month suffer avoidable deaths as a consequence of consumption of alcohol” (ibid.). He added that “alcohol is implicated in half of all suicides” and that “approximately 2000 hospital beds each night are occupied by people whose illness is related directly or indirectly to alcohol misuse” (ibid.). Dr Holohan's concluding message was that we need to face up to the problems caused by alcohol yet he also recognised the value alcohol has in Irish society: “It is not to say that alcohol is a universal harm or is universally negative. But the way in which we use alcohol in Irish society is the problem which we are seeking to tackle” (ibid.).

Early in my research I once asked a few of the lads: If you add up all the money you have spent on alcohol, from when you had your first drink until today, and you were offered that full amount for the promise that you will never drink... I was immediately interrupted “No!” I meant you can never have another drink again...? Again, I received a unanimous -“No!”

In this chapter I will discuss the dangers of the over-consumption of pleasure, coping and relief. I will look at alcohol as a social and cultural practice, here under the Irish

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<sup>18</sup> Here translated as alcohol/music related fun/enjoyment See full definition below. (<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=craic>) Accessed on 07.03.2011

term ‘the *craic*’ by focusing on the intersections of time; social class, age and gender. This part of the analysis will draw upon previous discussions on how time is spent and structured in a context of limited work opportunities, in a ‘drinking culture’ and, within the set expectations of Irish working class masculinity.

Based on ethnographic accounts from Blackpool, England, Robertson (2007) discusses the link between masculinity, alcohol and health practices. Among a group of men who are far less radical about the importance they have attached to ‘the drink’, Robertson concludes all the same that: “[t]he importance of this process, drinking with friends to ‘escape’, should not be underestimated and was highlighted in many of the interviews as being beneficial, in terms of mental well-being, and yet potentially detrimental to physical health.” (2007:109-10) It is vital to understand and explain drinking patterns and their outcomes (intended and not) through an *emic* perspective (the perspective of the individuals who are drinking). This ethnography suggests that the lads do not binge to feel worse, even when this turns out to be the case. They drink to feel better.

In this section I will look into Irish research on Irish drinking culture. The work of MacLachlan and Smyth (and Dr. Anthony Clare) *Cultivating Suicide? Destruction of self in a changing Ireland* 2003 and *Binge Drinking – Alternative Perspectives* 2004) as well as the public reception of these volumes will be addressed in some detail. Like Dr. Holohan they recognise the various detrimental effects of alcohol. They also call for a much needed discussion on the social constructions of alcohol consumption habits “as a means for having fun” (2003:11) and, “*from the perspective of those actually doing it.*” (2003:9 my emphasis) As opposed to the ready-made assumption that alcohol is bad and those engaging in its consumption are ‘problematic’, I strongly suggest that if any incentives are to be planned and implemented for prevention or regulation, it has to be based on some understanding of why some groups of people drink in certain ways. Despite generally accepted facts of the damaging effects of over-consumption, some groups of people still do it to excess, and, for their own articulated reasons. Drinking is an intricate part of lad culture and the lads have attached irrefutable value to it. Insight is not only needed on behalf of policy makers and lobbyists but for those many active over-consumers themselves to self-reflexively and critically assess their own behaviours. Some much

needed self-regulation can come from a more introspective understanding of drinking as a cultural practice.

In what follows I will address the cultural concept of the *craic*; -alcohol and drug consumption and the continuums of pleasure and relief, pain, recklessness and risk. I will to reconnect this discussion to the intrinsic relationship of three basic human activities; production, consumption and destruction. As I have emphasised previously, these elements put together make some very useful analytical tools for the study of cultural values and human behaviour. Second, I shall explain how the latter two activities are important factors in the liminal states of *anti-structure* and *communitas*.

Anthropology has a long legacy of looking at 'traditional', small-scale, kinship-based societies where the liminal phases of the rites of passage were analysed as a transition from one social status to another, -most commonly from childhood into adulthood. Many anthropologists would argue that these concepts are still of great help in organising our observations. I will apply these ideas as I enter into the discussion on the last two of the fundamentals of human activity; consumption and destruction.

## **5.1 The Craic**

A broadly accepted definition of the Irish word *craic* as offered by Urban Dictionary is fun/enjoyment: "when mixed with alcohol and/or music": 'Bhi craic agus ceol againn' : We had fun and music." ([www.urbandictionary.com](http://www.urbandictionary.com)). As with all cultural concepts, the actual meanings expand a lot further:

"Fun doesn't really cut it though. General banter, good times had by all. Also, a person who is good fun/great company. It was great craic. She's great craic when she gets going. He's great craic when he has a few pints in him." (ibid.)

In Maycock's ethnographic account of 15-23 year old youths in an inner-city Dublin community she stated that "(f)or the majority of young people, consuming alcohol was central to having a good time –most commonly expressed as "having the craic" – in a variety of social settings." (Maycock in MacLachlan and Smyth 2003:129) An important aspect of the *craic* is that it is a temporal mode that can only be consumed. It is non-recoverable and easily done to excess. (The definition of excess and 'binge' to be used here is discussed below.) 'The good times to be had', -the *craic*- also has another component which relates to the culture of mocking. It includes quick and witty commentary, 'banter', taking the piss' and having the good humour (even manners) of having 'the piss taking out of you'. Inglis elaborates:

"It is a surrender of the self to the wider group. It is this peculiar form of self-repression and surrender that is at the centre of Irish "*craic*" (fun) which revolves around witty conversation, banter and repartee, laughing at life, drowning sorrows but, most of all, a relentless ruthless teasing and making fun of oneself and others." ...."the tongue-lashing could be a social death worse than flaying." (Inglis 2008:5)

This repertoire also serves as effective social surveillance, control and the regulation of social norms. Not recognising 'a bit of banter' as harmless fun or 'taking it on the chin' is taken, by those who master it, as a lack of social skills. It reflects a lack of humour and, -with the emphasis placed on self-surrender to the group-, showing a lack of generosity of one's self. Billig's *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a social critique of humour* (2005) is about the problematic, disciplinary aspects of humour and ridicule. In this volume he makes the argument that to understand humour one must understand the seriousness of social life. The argument goes: -if comedy is about the world reversed, one must know about the world being reversed.

Considering the current context, I would suggest that if comedy is about regulating the trespassing of boundaries and norms, we must know about the boundaries that are otherwise dominant. Ultimately, "the world of humour cannot stand apart from the world of seriousness." (Billig 2005:4) Entertaining these very valid ideas humour in itself can be understood as a social critique. As with the Durkheimian understanding of suicide, our responses to, and copings with the world are surely a reflection of how the world actually works!

Many social theorists have had problems explaining just “how social life maintains its hold over social actors.” (Billig 2005:8) Sociologist Ervin Goffman suggested that social embarrassment was one such regulatory social force. However, Billig argues that Goffman failed to explain “from where the fear of embarrassment derives its power”: “It is suggested that it comes from ridicule, both socially and developmentally. Consequently, ridicule lies at the heart of social life.” (Billig 2005:8) Billig’s aim is not to evaluate humour’s role in particular cultures but rather to “explore why humour is to be found universally in all cultures.” (Billig 2005:8) Since my analysis is contextually specific I will venture into the particular with the theoretical questions raised by Billig: “Ideological positivists assume that humour is both intrinsically positive and also that it fulfils positive functions. The negatives are seen as unfortunate side-effects.” (2005:125) Seeing humour as an essentially serious matter, Billig argues instead that humour and ridicule have “a cold cruelty at its core.” (2005:125) The always present seriousness behind the lads’ banter’ is evident throughout their inputs included in this thesis. But banter and humour –also as it transgresses into mocking and ridicule – is one of the lads’ few ways of establishing some form of social connectiveness. And, although the use of mockery fills functions of control and regulation, to the actors, the main purpose is to laugh at life and one another. This tongue-lashing is very much a double-ended sword: while ridicule regulates, sharing jokes and being generous amongst friends also builds lasting social bonds between the lads. ‘Gender appropriateness’ and heterosexuality is policed in this way.

In their study on homophobic bullying in schools, Norman and Galvin (2006) let a 16 year old boy explain the always potential seriousness underlying ‘homophobic banter’: “There is name calling...when we use the gay word it is really only messing, suppose if you were really gay it might affect you on a gay level...” (Norman and Galvin 2006:16) Again, this resonates well with Butler’s notion of performativity and that gender is produced, and with that the subject itself, through acts of repetition (chapter 4). This always present repertoire of mockery runs the risk of inflicting genuine hurt and humiliation, not only for someone who is indeed gay, but for all those who must be a good sport and accept ‘a bit of banter’. Alcohol, mocking and banter are two very important aspects of the *Craic* and the social fabric of lad culture. I will try to show here, how the drinking session provides a temporary space



where otherwise ‘gender inappropriate’ behaviours are excused or ‘played with’ and how this can be read as a social commentary.

## 5.2 Binge and culture

‘Binge’, as defined in the Oxford Reference Dictionary is “a period of uncontrolled eating, drinking etc” (2004:4). Smyth and MacLachlan argue that this is a rather misleading image of the act and actor himself as haphazard, meaningless and uncontrollable. Rather than being uncontrolled the authors insist, binge “may be planned, coordinated and keenly anticipated.” (ibid.) A common measurement of a binge drinking session is an occasion where five or more alcoholic drinks are consumed in one sitting (four or more for women). Others would argue that the term ‘binge’ “should only be used to describe an extended bout of drinking or other substance use (often operationalized as at least two days) in which the person neglects other activities in order to drink.” (The Journal of Studies on Alcohol quoted by MacLachlan and Smyth 2004:25) Individual, social and cultural relativity complicates the matter of ‘excess’ as the lines for, and definition of excess are subjective and any interpretation is as valid as the next. As I take on a behavioural approach on the (over) consumption of the *craic*, where the measurement of drinking units is secondary to *drinking-style and purpose*, I will use the term binge in reference to this latter definition. Brophy (in MacLachlan and Smyth 2004) wrote about Irish drinking habits and how the Irish and the British out-binge the rest of Europe:

“48 per cent of men at least once a week and 16 per cent among women – rates three or four times higher than those of other countries. --- binge drinking is thus the norm among men and occurs in about a third of the drinking occasions of women.”  
(Brophy in MacLachlan and Smyth 2004:72)

The gender ratio presented here largely represents the drinking sessions and general *craic* had in the lads' 'gaf' (house) where I resided for two years. The functions of binge and the *craic*, is a controversial and sensitive topic. For the lads however (or perhaps lad culture more generally) this is far from the case. In fact, apart from soccer and other sports, among many of the lads, the experience of intoxication is a much cherished topic of conversation. Anecdotes of past drunken behaviours and related incidents are often told and re-told as a form amusement. Some stories have been repeated and laughed at for many years in an almost nostalgic fashion. These stories serve to build, maintain and to re-establish characters, typical and expected behaviours, but also to solidify bonds within the peer group. When not occupied by work or sporting commitments, the *Craic*, 'going on the lash' is a celebrated pastime amongst the lads. With few, if any exceptions, the two-day drinking bouts (defined here as binge) was a natural and indeed keenly anticipated part of the weekend. During bank holidays or any time off work at all, the lads would drink every day. When I first arrived in Cork in early 2008 most of the drinking was enjoyed in the local pub and sometimes in the city pubs. As the recession hit and many of the lads lost their jobs we retrieved into the front room of our semi-detached house in the suburbs. This house was shared by three of the lads, one of the girls and me.

I remember one afternoon in early June during a bank holiday when a few of the lads were sitting in the back garden drinking cans and vodka in the sun. Two of the Polish neighbours who had just moved in came out to ask about a lawn mower but were immediately invited over for a few drinks. They politely declined to which they were asked: "Why not? Are ye working?" They said no and quickly had some more serious questions to answer: "Ye're not drinking and ye don't work till Thursday? What's wrong wit ye boy? Ye can't be sober if ye're not working!"

In the Lemon Tree Pub, as we called the house shared over two years, Friday was the day that carried higher anticipation than any other day of the week. If one of the lads was unemployed and had stayed home all day, it was usually very difficult to wait until four or five o'clock for the others to get off work to start off the Friday-'session'. Being patient up until lunch time, someone would often interrupt my work by telling me to "put away my gay laptop and come get some cans". More often than not, another trip to the shop would be required during the night, especially when

there would not be any weed around. I would often repeat the same joke: “Are we building a fort?”, as the lads entered the house with their characteristically generous selection of cans. One by one the lads would arrive carrying up to 16 cans each and set up for the weekly two, but mostly three-day binge. As a co-habitant I was sometimes greeted entering the estate after a visit to the local shop by one of the lads mooning me from the window. Moments later I would meet the familiar odour of the lads’ open gym bags that were always left at the door. This setting then provided an incessant three day haze of ceremonial binge. On a Sunday (Monday if it was a bank holiday), our oversized kitchen counter was no longer visible under the layers of empty cans. This was mainly because it was impossible to keep up with crushing the cans and fill our 240 litres wheelie-bin at the drinking pace set in the house over the weekends. If the empty cans were disposed of without first being crushed we would fill up to five bin bags instead of one. ‘Crushing cans’ was a tedious and tiring chore to which everybody was held to account.

A contrastive study (Ramstedt and Hope 2005) looking at the adverse effects of Irish drinking patterns in relation to those of Finland, Sweden, Germany, UK, France and Italy showed that Irish men reported strikingly higher rates of social problems and ‘unwanted incidences’<sup>19</sup> that were directly related to high-risk ‘binge’ (defined in the study as four pints in one sitting). However, the Irish men who reported “feeling a need to cut down” still corresponded to the other countries. Reports of associated health problems among the Irish were even lower than the other six countries examined in the study. Paradoxically then, Irish men reported more binge-related problems and ‘incidences’ but less concerns about breaking the habits that caused them. This resonates well with the lads’ overwhelming agreements about keeping their drinking habits rather than reclaiming the money spent on them. Ramstedt and Hope offer some interpretation in their analysis but conclude that “[c]ross-country comparisons can be problematic because various cultural idiosyncrasies are difficult to control.” (2005:282) From my own experiences I have come to conclude that

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<sup>19</sup> These were phrased as “having regretted things said or done after drinking” (32%), “got into a fight” (11.5%), “been in an accident” (6.3%) and adverse consequences with work/studies (12.4%), friendships (9.6%) and homelife (7.8%).” (Ramstedt and Hope 2005:279)

‘unwanted incidences’, once they have occurred, still become funny and celebrated anecdotes repeated during following drinking sessions.

One explanation suggested in Smyth and MacLachlan’s *Binge Drinking* (2004) was that “young people unused to alcohol *or indeed healthy drinking habits* may easily be pressured into unhealthy drinking patterns.” (Furnham in Smyth and MacLachlan 2004:27 my emphasis) Studies show that the situation in Southern Europe differs from that of their Northern European and American counterparts. Young people still drink, and the levels of consumption may even be as high, -“but the pattern of their drinking behaviours differ”. (Smyth and MacLachlan 2004:27) As discussed in many other contexts, the authors suggested that through socialisation and adults leading by example, teenagers and young adults in countries like Italy are ‘shamed into’ drinking responsibly. Alcoholic beverages -usually wine- are considered mainly as food supplements and “parents present a constant example of moderate drinking”. (O’Connor 1978 quoted in MacLachlan and Smyth 2004:39) To abuse alcohol while dining out or attending a dinner party, the most common venues for Italian alcohol consumption, would be considered inappropriate and embarrassing. The overall argument is thus that “culture and identity have as much to do with the acceptance of drinking as they do with its avoidance.” (Wilson 2005:21)

Within a group of young lads, the policing of appropriate ‘male’, ‘heterosexual’ behaviour serves to speed up drinking pace and extend drinking sessions, often over several days. MacLachlan and Smyth list some factors that would inhibit binge and I will recount some of the ones I believe to be most important ;

- “no moral importance is attached to drinking” (but misbehaving under the influence is),
- “drinking is not viewed as a proof of adulthood or virility” (but social, responsible drinking is),
- excessive drinking is not socially acceptable: “It is not considered stylish, comical or tolerable.” (O’Connor 1978 quoted in MacLachlan and Smyth 2004:39)

An inverted value system has been constructed amongst the lads where irresponsibility is revered and responsibility has become a sign of effeminate

behaviour but also a sign of disloyalty towards the group and ones responsibilities as a good friend. The connectedness created and felt within the group through intoxication, not to mention the sense of release and relief from strain, everyday boredom and distress, all require a code of ethics that must be adhered to by the group as a whole to allow for this experience. Within the lad group I have studied for over four years, ‘falling in the door’, falling asleep in the local pubs, starting arguments and even fights is not only accepted, it is considered amusing a long time after the fact. The argument thus needs to be stressed here: that it is the lads themselves who govern over drinking standards, levels, behaviours and scripts. The importance of alcohol as an expression of culturally accepted forms of masculinity but also, as a temporary allowance of otherwise unaccepted behaviours, is the driving force behind the lads’ drinking sessions. The attraction and needs for alcohol are informed by culture; gender, age and class. Brophy argues: “Another social necessity, intimacy, is documented as a difficulty, particularly but not exclusively for young Irish males. Could it be this that makes men so enjoy it – the gift of unguarded (if boozy) moments of mutual acceptability? (Brophy in MacLachlan and Smyth 2004:77) The beneficial functions of alcohol consumption are not accomplished by drinking in moderation, by ‘sipping away’ one a single glass of crispy Chardonnay with a nicely cooked meal where surplus wine would be wastefully added to the sauce. These effects are obtained by binge and let us not beat around the bush, -the lads drink to get drunk.

O’Brien analysis suggests that ‘simple’ kinship-based societies and also Mediterranean societies such as Italy, Spain and Greece have been traditionally immune to alcohol related problems: “The answer is quite simple” says O’Brien (2009), “it is the integration of drinking into ritual, which provides guidance, judgement and structure. Through ritual alcohol is bound.” (O’Brien 2009:226) I argue however, that the *content, meaning and purpose* of the ritual (how and why it is used and performed) dictate whether it becomes problematic or not. The fact that it takes the form of a ritual does not necessarily make consumption or over-consumption unproblematic or less harmful. O’Brien also asserts that the problematic feature of the ‘modern’ setting is that, unlike kinship-based societies, there is no *master of ceremonies*: The masters of ceremonies are the guardians of order within the staged liminal situation. It becomes clear from my own experience,

that there are several masters of ceremonies involved in the lads' drinking sessions. Ceremonial drinking is at the core of lad culture and is not determined by anything the calendar dictates, especially not for those with nothing to fill their days. Lack of money is the only obstacle that would lower the levels of consumption. The ceremonial masters of the *craic* or 'the session' could be anyone of the lads and there are normally quite a few lads who are willing and eager to work towards the common goal of 'getting locked' (blindly drunk). What they instruct to one another is that the session is kept going. The lads control the pace, endurance the self-surrender to the group and keep level-headedness at bay. By surrendering to excessive drinking and recklessness together, solidarity and egalitarian bonds are upheld and a space for relative intimacy is created.

Good friendships are established and proven in this way; the good friend will get you cans or buy you a few pints when you are short on cash. He will 'sort you out' so that you are not left without, behind or alone. When you are sick from drink and try to go to bed however, you will have to make a very discrete exit because your friends will be there to make sure that you are having fun and get the most out of your session. If they discover that you 'snuck off to bed' they are very likely to drag you out of bed, down the stairs and put another can in your hand. Your friends are also the ones who will cheer you on as you 'top up' again (take a recovery-drink) and gag at the first few attempts. If you are feeling low or lonely, this will distract you, test you and, -for lack of a better word- lighten up and warm up your heart. As the girls pointed out in chapter four, there are some young men who do not even have this support, and those are the lads of serious concern. The lads' support system requires, as noted by Inglis, self-surrender and cooperation. The lads would just call it friendship.

### **5.3 Drinking amongst the Lads: a coping performance**

I will now build on some of my arguments on Irish traditional and contemporary drinking habits. I will analyse how a dedicated engagement in alcohol consumption can be understood, not only as a coping mechanism and as support, but also as identity formation and performance. Judith Butler maintains that “what is called gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo” (Butler 1988:520) We begin the discussion with how the Irish drinking scene and its functions have changed over time and how this change has been theorised in Ireland. This brings us back to ‘anomie’ and issues of immorality which is, again, attributed to the lads and disconnected from the mismanagement of drinking laws, regulations and financial profit. This will lead us to my concluding arguments, based on observation and experience, on how a rebellious ethos; drinking anecdotes and storytelling, help solidify bonds and affirm and celebrate character and identity amongst the lads.

To better understand how drinking became harmful in modern society some researchers have attempted to apply the theoretical models of synnomie and anomie to the analysis of different types of alcohol consumption (see discussion in 2.4). Ideally, synnomie (a socially cohesive society) is associated with ‘simple’, kinship-based societies where drinking formed vital parts of rites of passage and gift-relations. The qualitative functions of the ritual process as they are applied to drinking patterns involve egalitarianism, homogeneity and self-surrender to the group. The experience of intoxication as a trial in itself also meant testing limitations and, “even sharing in the common suffering of a hangover.” (O’Brien 2009:223) In fact, O’Brien suggests, “drinking is the social act per excellence, with solitary drinking being considered in many cultures as deviant, dangerous, and somewhat sad”. (O’Brien 2009:223) According to this line of reasoning, in modern societies, the social functions of alcohol have become warped and problematic. Contemporary drinking, the argument goes, now has more to do with emotional management and dealing with the strain and stressors of modern life. (O’Brien 2009:222)

In ‘anomic’ modern society “the egoistic and secular nature of culture increases drinking’s importance as a marker of integration while providing looser social

controls.” (O’Brien 2009:221) Kuhling and Keohane also describe “Ireland’s epidemic of binge drinking” as “abnormal” and “pathological” and as a sign of anomie: “This change in Irish drinking coincides with the decline of community and the decomposition of traditional institutions.” (2007:131) In her sociological approach to Irish drinking O’Connor (1978) used a modified anomie scale to analyse the relationship between Irish and British alcohol consumption with what she defined as a state of “moral emptiness”. (McMahon 2008:16) Her line of reasoning centred on the idea that the anomic individual lacked the guidance and structures of society’s norms.

Considering the current context, I can safely say that loosened social controls are not an exclusive requirement for increased drinking. The lads do not binge because social norms have become “impaired” (McMahon 2008:16). To the contrary, binge is socially dictated. Adhering to the strict norms within the group, the lads drink more, not less.

From a historical perspective it becomes evident that the patterns and volumes of the consumption of alcohol in Ireland have indeed changed. From 1968 to 2000 alcohol expenditure in Ireland had more than doubled. (Lucey et.al. 2005:91) There are also vast differences between the social dramaturgy, functions and codes of etiquette in the traditional Irish pubs and the so called the post-traditional ‘Super-Pubs’. Kuhling and Keohane show in their analysis how the regulars and the publican had reciprocal roles in the dramaturgy of the traditional Irish pub:

“(t)he publican put his own stamp on his pub, a house style, a unique and characteristic ambiance. More important than décor, regulars are bearers and representatives of that ambiance, and a pub’s character and its regulars are in fact synonymous – regulars are characters.” (Kuhling and Keohane 2007:135)

According to the authors, the pub “was the locus of communication, of discussion of news and events, politics and business” (ibid:132). Other than the local sport’s pitch or the stadium, the pub is still often the place to gather around sporting events whether it be racing, soccer, boxing, football or hurling. In the traditional pub, the publican could often rely on the regulars to fill the regulatory functions of the pub. The familiarity made it possible for the different parties to know each other’s



tendencies, typical behaviours and even ongoing personal issues and to foresee and appropriately react to any hostile or violent over-intoxicated situations. Traditionally, a lot of socialisation between the generations went on in the pub where the older clientele would supervise and safe-guard younger drinkers:

“Only very rarely does an experienced publican have to resort to the formal legal sanction of the bar, and when a customer is barred, temporarily or ‘for life’ it is a powerful sanction as it invokes the collective power of the normalising gaze of the community.” (Kuhling and Keohane 2007:135)

Kuhling and Keohane go on to explain the sociological consequences of the transformation of the public house into ‘the super-pub’, - from family business to business corporation. They describe in detail how neoliberal licensing policies have transformed traditional dramaturgy of the pub to maximise profit. The familial publican has been exchanged for the professional bar manager and bar staff that do not interact with the clientele. The super-pub plays music at a high volume making it difficult to communicate on the premises. Chairs and tables are removed leaving little space to place the glasses which also makes people drink more and faster. However, the super-pub is far from the only aspect that has had a dramatic effect on Irish drinking habits. Society at large has undergone important changes and local traditional family run pubs are competing with the new franchises which means that the former have to adapt to similar compromising strategies. Like in many super-pubs, the local, family-run pubs that my informants frequently went to before the recession also began to over-serve in order to fill the till. The customer, then ‘off his head’, was then thrown out and often barred for days, weeks or months if he tried to resist. In this sense, the impersonal exclusion by the bouncer in town or the familial local publican did not make much difference for the misbehaving lads walking home. Brophy describes how the number of extensions of opening hours increased nine-fold for the years 1967 and 1994 which allowed for an increase in public binge drinking:

“These were all judicially sanctioned. This change in judicial attitude and practice is as inexcusable as it is difficult to understand. However the same judiciary were still obligingly available at the next court sitting to prosecute the drunken casualties, in

ever-increasing numbers, dispensing varieties of mercy or admonition with all the inconsistencies that refract our own peculiar national social mores on drunkenness.” (Brophy in MacLachlan and Smyth 2004:87)

This form of social mismanagement and hypocrisy has serious consequences for Irish drinking habits as well as the morale amongst the lads. The publicans only start to get strict after first over-serving the customers. The lads are thrown out and barred putting the staff at the risk of violent abuse since the lads perceive this as morally unjustified and hypocritical. Quite different from Kuhling and Keohane’s statement about being barred as a ‘powerful sanction’ and the ‘normalizing gaze of the community’, I saw in my local context the high status of the barred ‘rebel’ within the peer group itself. Most of my informants had at one point or another been barred from both local pubs and pubs in Cork City Centre. Some were barred from several pubs at the time and one of the lads was even barred (legally restricted) from Cork City after midnight for an entire year. This is, as opposed to Kuhling and Keohane’s statement, not a cause for shame but an important part of midweek storytelling and amusing anecdotes.

On one occasion, the Gards (police) were called by the staff in one local bar after a bartender had first served one of the lads (who was by then very drunk) only to take the pint off him after he had already paid for it. Safe to say, the young man was at this point eager to take on the entire bar staff. The particular disadvantage and exclusion directed towards young lads is a common complaint amongst the lads themselves. This was also presented in Gaetz’s findings in the 1980’s where:

“[t]he lads themselves were hardly unaware of the degree to which they were marginalized in their own neighbourhood. Because they weren’t in school and didn’t have jobs, and because they didn’t feel welcome in local clubs, their social world was very small.” (Gaetz 1997:ix)

Since the dramaturgy in many pubs seem designed to have the lads thrown out, - combined with the fact that living conditions only allows for working-class young lads to share house with other lads-, it is more hassle-free (and economical) to “call down to someone’s house for cans”. With a group of eager-to-drink lads coming

together like this, 'staying on the drink' for the entire weekend without having to sober up is not only possible: It is encouraged to a degree that makes it rather difficult to refrain from it. For those who still live in the family home and who are not invited to a house party over the weekend (which sometimes happens), one can always go 'bushing': -'drinking down by the strand' or 'the factories' where they are sometimes chased by the Gards. This in turn is another means of rebellion and again a source for amusing stories to be told and retold. It is hardly a deterrent that is going to put off a group of thirsty lads with no better alternative.

The gender appropriateness of Irish drinking also has its particular socio-historical context. Inglis discussed the functions of the traditional male drinking group that originated in the mid-nineteenth century. A predominantly female emigration wave meant prolonged marriage or permanent celibacy for the remaining farmer son(s) who formed particular drinking groups. (For full discussion on the historical circumstances on land inheritance and mass emigration see Inglis 1998 and Scheper-Hughes 1979) Drinking was a social exercise in how to maintain control over the body, (being able to 'hold the drink') passion (constraint) and to uphold group solidarity. (Inglis 1998:172) In the traditional segregation of gender appropriate spheres women exercised the power in the home and left the field and the pub to the men where men could escape the moral supervision of the Church and that of women. In the traditional 'old men's pubs' remaining in Ireland it is still usual to have tinted windows to protect these 'male sanctuaries' from wives looking in. (Any respectable woman would also have been reluctant to be seen going in.) The bachelor drinking group's existence was maintained through loyalty, social surveillance and mocking. The control over members included that they did not 'go off with women' and not get 'high-and-mighty' (Inglis 1998:172) thus declaring independence from the group. Surrender to the group and upholding the egalitarian ethos within it was sustained by structured, scripted and ritualistic 'put-down'. As discussed above, many aspects and scripts are still part of the craic and the banter had amongst the lads.

Even though a lot of drinking now takes place in the homes of house-sharing lads, homosociality and a strong emphasis on male camaraderie still remain today. The social support within the group could possibly hold even more importance than

previously. Instead of social prestige gained by the control of body and passions, the functionality of ritualistic male drinking patterns seems to have been substituted by relief, escapism and bravado. Rather than escaping the moral supervision of clergy and women, the oblivion sought by ‘going on the lash’ or ‘a proper session’ is more often an escape from reality as a whole. The control and prestige of ‘holding the drink’ and emotional containment has been de-emphasised and instead allows for emotional relief and temporary escape.

Another important aspect is the formation and reaffirmation of character through expected behaviour and storytelling: There is X who always drops his pants (to the detriment of his poor mother), Y who always gets into trouble with his boring old girlfriend (who always seems to find him when he least wants to be found), or Z who after the required amounts of bongo drums (double order of Beamish stout which looks like a pair of bongos) hits himself over the chest roaring at the top of his lungs that this is “the best time of his life” or simply: “I’m alive!!!!” This was always followed by a big smile and a dance. We will never forget how X attacked Y because Y had promised to go to KFC later (Kentucky Fried Chicken) but was too drunk to get up. Or, what about X who got barred from the local pub –again- after putting a beer bottle under the wheels of the van that belonged to the band that was playing for the night. When asked why he simply asserted that “that [the music played] was just not what I felt like that night”. The serious flip side to these stories that are told time and time again, are the lads who drove off [crashed] their cars on pills or came home from a session and were found hanging the next day. These stories are either told with unavoidable and appropriate seriousness or not told at all. In fact, these stories are often avoided due to their inescapable seriousness. To the lads, there is not much point in telling serious stories. Stories are meant to be amusing, not depressing.

Like Foucault, Judith Butler maintains that subjectivity is discursively produced. She developed “speech act theory” - the idea that individuals are linguistically constituted. This means that language is a regulatory framework through which we constitute our identities by exclusion and repudiation. In Butler’s view gender is a performative act (see 4.7) but not in a theatrical sense. Gender, she argues, is a linguistic enactment:

“In what senses, then, is gender an act? As anthropologist Victor Turner suggests in his studies of ritual social drama, social action requires a performance which is repeated. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation” (Butler 1988:526).

The *rules* (see discussion on Bourdieu in part. 4.8) of gender performance, Butler argues, are stricter and the violation of these rules more dangerous than theatrical performances. To perform gender wrong in a non-theatrical context is a dangerous mistake that puts individuals and the entire order of things at risk:

“although theatrical performances can meet with political censorship and scathing criticism, gender performances in non-theatrical contexts are governed by more clearly punitive and regulatory social conventions. Indeed, the sight of a transvestite onstage can compel pleasure and applause while the sight of the same transvestite on the seat next to us on the bus can compel fear, rage, even violence.” (Butler 1988:527)

The lads’ rituals are a repetitive matrix where the same stories, the same banter, the same jokes are played out over and over and over. To the lads however, there is some comfort in the repetitive and unchanging nature of the game. Social and personal continuity is safe and the lads’ immediate universe, at least, is still intact. Butler explains: “Performing one’s gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all.” (Butler 1988:528) The repetitive scripts played out amongst the lads is often criticised and scrutinised amongst their female peers who see them; “sitting there drinking”, “talking about the same stupid things”. In fact, from my conversations with the girls but also some of the lads, it is the tedious repetitiveness that ultimately offers a challenge to this life-style. At some point the nature of the game becomes tiresome and exhausting. This will be addressed more in detail in the following segment.

I have shown throughout the various segments of this text how gender appropriateness is regenerated amongst the lads through explicit rules. Understood as

a performance it becomes clear that gender is something we ‘do’, and that by ‘doing’ gender the gendered subject is in effect produced. This process must, according to Butler, be repeated time and time again. In this way the lads have developed stylised drinking patterns that reaffirm identities and provide regularity and comfort. In the following segment I will discuss how despite its beneficial functions, the drink sometimes becomes a gateway to suicide.

#### **5.4 Connecting alcohol to suicide *and the craic*?**

*“In trying then to fully understand why we are so enduringly fond of it (binge), despite its risks, I finally must allow what I regard the pivotal but most oblique cultural function of alcohol. It serves not just to introduce us to our “divine” as well as our “shadow” or dark sides, but paradoxically to force us to return to and gain respect and mastery over our human limitations, despite having introduced us to these wondrous creative and destructive potentialities. Because it mainly only reveals the more arrogant and dismal aspect of our psychic range, we are increasingly forced to face the personal obligation for restraint and control. Part of the bargain is that we have to learn how to “hold our drink”, usually by bitter and typically repeated experience. Information and warnings are signposts, but no substitute for the hard personal schoolroom of reverence and regret. This is perhaps why alcohol accompanies so many of our rites of passage.” (Brophy in Smyth and MacLachlan 2004:80)*

The collective experiences of binge and bravado in the lads’ house were often hazy and repetitive. In the end, the thrills and even the *craic* became predictable and exhausting. O’Brien described drinking as an essentially social act and solitary drinking as deviant, dangerous and somewhat sad (2009:223). I will argue here, that for those young lads who self-medicate alone, drinking does indeed become hazardous and highly unpredictable. In the introduction, I mentioned that Midleton in county Cork had by 2004 been nominated the second suicide capital of the world. Much national and international debate followed in the light of these figures: “The biggest puzzle is why? Why here in Midleton?” “Several theories have been advanced, including Ireland’s status as the heaviest-drinking nation in Europe.” (<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/article444292.ece>)

In what follows I will continue our discussion on how the functions and purposes behind alcohol use has changed over time. As concerns rise with suicide statistics and their increasingly debated association with alcohol, media commentators repeat the same observations: that there is ‘a shift in *how* young people drink’ and that it is different from ‘only one generation ago’ (Brophy in MacLachlan and Smyth 2004:81). One of the hosts on the morning television show Ireland AM put it eloquently as he interviewed a bereaved father who had lost his son to suicide after a drunken night at a house party: “something has changed with them [our sons]. The culture has changed”. (Ireland AM aired 08-11-2011) Looking at the long-term impact on suicide, alcohol consumption has proven to have a much larger influence on the male suicide rate than unemployment and fluctuations in the economy which, according to Walsh and Walsh (2010) tend to get immediate response but to level out as time goes on: “In particular, the rapid rise in alcohol consumption when unemployment was still high in the 1990’s was associated with a sharp rise in the male suicide rate.” (2011:44) I believe that there is a strong triangular association between unemployment, alcohol consumption and suicide whereby unemployment may lead to changes in drinking patterns (brought on by depression, boredom and self-doubt) which may further lead to self-destruction and suicide. Drinking reorders the structure of everyday experience during times of unemployment when daily lives become de-structured and routines become disassembled. The weekend binge re-draws the lines of engagement, exhaustion and recuperation. It re-structures this cyclical order by reordering the weekly working experience from Monday (engagement) to Friday (exhaustion) and weekend (recuperation) into a new order where Friday becomes the main engagement of the week and where exhaustion and recuperation falls on Sundays and Mondays. For those who are unemployed among the employed, Monday to Friday is the real challenge. It is in this context of boredom and complete lack of structure that the lads’ insatiable search for thrills makes sense:

I cannot account for all the thrill-seeking activities that have gone on in the around me as I often sat glued to my laptop for hours on end -for which the lads never showed the slightest bit of interest but I will give one rather telling example. On one occasion when I was hard at work in the kitchen I heard some very odd noises from

the living room right behind me. I opened the door only to find two of the lads on the sofa who were taking turns to stuff their faces with what looked like dirt from inside a wrinkled up Centra bag. (Centra is the local convenient store.) Apparently the two of them, both unemployed, had gone out for the day looking for ‘magic mushrooms’. Not sure whether or not they had found the right ones or whether they would ‘get a bang off them’ (get high), they were unable to separate the tiny mashed-up mushrooms from the dirt. They were not going to be bothered to clean them and said that they were filthy tasting anyway. The two lads sat there swallowing and gawking after every bite until the bag was empty. They then sat and waited but unfortunately nothing was to come of it. I found myself to be rather disappointed for their sake. It was a weekday and they had no money for drink.

There was a striking difference between the weekend house party and the weekday gloom in the same house. From Friday to Sunday the ceiling was lifted by the cheer, exuberance and good humour built up by the lads’ togetherness and light-heartedness. During the rest of the week the house was occupied by whoever was unemployed who would remain in bed for as long as they could to make the day go by. House sharing for the unemployed is another difficult situation for the lads who would do anything to avoid the sympathetic gaze of their peers. It is an excruciating scenario for the unemployed who after a day of boredom has to face the other lads coming home from work in the evening. A joke, seemingly inappropriate or even cruel, would sometimes alleviate the otherwise unspoken awkwardness when peers came home after a day of work to the unemployed who had nowhere to go during the day. This was done by greeting the unemployed with a quick commentary; ‘how’s my employee doing sitting on his ass all day?’ (Meaning that the worker is practically employing the unemployed who is taking the dole through his taxes.) Banter and mockery, again, helps alleviate the seriousness of the situation and the depressing reality of life.

There is a well-established knowledge base today which concludes that unemployment and employment uncertainty (fears of ‘being next in line’ to lose one’s job) are highly influential factors on mental ill-health and suicide, particularly for men. (IPH 2011) A web-based survey among organisations dedicated to suicide prevention that were all in direct contact with unemployed men was conducted by



the Institute for Public Health (IPH) in both the Republic and Northern Ireland in 2011. All 72 participating agencies were asked to rate the prevalence of different mental health stressors. A remarkable 93 per cent of mental health stressors were considered to be directly related to unemployment or the recession in general. Three out of six health related challenges were categorised as; high levels of stress and anxiety, isolation including the difficulty in sharing or communication problems and, dependency on or over-consumption of alcohol/other drugs. (IPH 2011:16-17)<sup>20</sup> High levels of stress and anxiety were classed as the most significant factors followed by isolation and communication difficulties. “Problems associated with alcohol and drug dependencies were ranked lower in relative terms, but most respondents did rate these as ‘important’ issues for men with health problems linked to unemployment.” (2011:17) More importantly I believe, is the fact that alcohol is *used to ease* the highest ranked self-reported problems; stress and anxiety *and* to facilitate isolation and communication difficulties. Alcohol problems can thus be understood as the lesser evil because alcohol serves as the main alleviator of what the IPH study deemed to be the highest-ranking challenges; ‘stress and anxiety, isolation and difficulties in sharing problems’.

The relationship between alcohol, the human body and the social world is ambiguous and contradictory. As we continue to outline the many contradictions of alcohol as a source of relief and self-destruction, I want to mention some of the links already made by some of the most prominent Irish researchers within this battle-field: MacLachlan and Smyth (2004) point out, “alcohol (in moderation) confers health benefits, while on the other, excessive alcohol drinking may facilitate a path to suicide.” (2004:5) Also referring to alcohol as a ‘social lubricant’, Spellissy (1996:47) recognised the links between alcohol and drug consumption habits, mental (and physical) well-being and the frequently impulsive character of suicides and ‘gambles’. Many suicides and suicide attempts are semi-motivated through a dubious haze made up by a compilation of acute depression fuelled by alcohol and/or drugs and the spontaneous mindset they invoke. Since I have heard quite a few testimonies of this behaviour in the field I asked one of the lads about the differences between

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<sup>20</sup> The remaining challenges identified were; deterioration in physical health, development of conflict in family or close relationships and, a reluctance to approach services or seek help.

the clear-minded intentionality of suicide and desperate, apathetic or depressive impulses fuelled by intoxication and whether he thought these actions counted as suicide:

F - Could that be also... getting in the car locked, knowing that you might die... or is it actually... do you have to be of sober mind, maybe hang yourself and know what you're doing?

X- Well it's a two-way thing alright like. Go in to the car when locked like, and you say 'fuck this, I don't care like, if I die like, you know? But eh, but then, when you're sober... it's really meaningful when you're sober...

(One of the lads, age 25)

Brophy wrote about alcohol's psychological desirable functions:

“When we need to ‘touch base’ with our deeper selves from time to time, alcohol is a popular and ‘permitted’ mediating agent. Alcohol intoxication can engender powerful personal experiences and introspections that seem otherwise inaccessible.-- in this sometimes distorting and shaming mirror of truth, the possibility of suicide is sometimes reflected and enacted” (Brophy in MacLachlan and Smyth 2004:76,77)

Spellissy argued equally that:

“Alcohol has a depressing effect, reducing inhibitions and self-control. It releases aggressive homicidal and suicidal impulses, and is often consumed by people before they attempt or commit suicide. In some instances an overindulgence in alcohol could almost be described as suicide by stealth.” (Spellissy 1996:116)

Stealth is defined as a movement that is quiet and careful in order not to be seen or heard. Leaving motivation unclear, ‘binge’ can be a means for having fun, it can serve as a release or alleviation, or, as a means to deliberately self-harm. (For definition of self-harm and self-destruction see chapter 1) Binge, also when done as a means for fun or relief, may in a prolonged state of anti-structure lead to unintended self-destruction. Not unproblematically, the drink is often dressed up as the cheerful consumption of the *craic*. Categorised as the *craic* binge surpasses as something far more positive (and fun) than it in reality is for many people. Cleary also revealed that

the subjects of her study, “in attempting to appear emotionally controlled, adopted an exaggerated presentation of cheerfulness which was in contrast to their ‘true’ self.” (Cleary 2005a:162) In my own study I noticed how humour played a similar role. Humour (jokes and laddish jargon in general), is a very effective concealment from underlying emotional turmoil. Any serious undertone is quickly silenced with laughter as the lads ‘get locked’, stumble, and fall, fight or get sick. Used well humour makes the tragic seem better. Used poorly, it makes the tragic obvious and unbearable. The lads prefer to laugh rather than to read unhealthy drinking as an indicator of depression.

The gendered aspects of coping, self-destruction and suicide is an under-researched area. Clare argued that more research was needed: “Women cry out. Men lash out. Suicide in men is strongly associated with depression, alcohol abuse, and drug abuse. The link with alcohol abuse in young men is important, but the nature of the link remains to be clarified.” (Clare 2000:83) There is evidence that suggests that the connection between suicide and ‘the drink’ is stronger among men than women. Smalley (*et.al.*) claimed that “(t)he differences found between suicidal men and suicidal women tend to suggest that suicidal women suffer more from anxiety disorders and panic disorders than do suicidal men. Suicidal men tend to show higher rates of addictive disorders.” (Smalley *et.al.* 2005:140) From a gendered perspective this is explained by the functions of drugs and alcohol in helping to repress and anaesthetise negative feelings and personal problems. This however, delays the early signs of depression to be picked up by others. There are also cultural differences between contexts that make detection even more problematic. A possibly distressed individual can easily go undetected in social settings where over-consumption is highly valued or even endorsed. In a context where drinking excessively is considered a problematic behaviour, the heavy drinker is more likely to be understood to be in some sort of distress.

For a lot of young lads, the discipline and self-monitoring required by gender appropriate rules make alcohol attractive, or even, an acutely necessary means for relief. In McCormack’s analysis on young Irish working class masculinity she suggests that individuals play out different masculinities in different social situations: “For example, the way in which a young man may construct his

masculinity within his peer group may differ from the way he constructs it within a family setting and so on.” McCormack 2010:60-1) I suggest however that in contexts where there is a strong unanimous agreement on ‘gender appropriateness’ in a variety of settings (within family settings, peer groups, school culture, popular culture etc.), it is likely to be very few spaces that are undefined or ‘ungoverned’ by restrictive norms and expectations. From observations and testimonies in the field it is obvious to me that any lax, intimate or sensitive masculine role was absent from all domains except for perhaps intimate relationships with girlfriends. The jokeish, laddish social code was otherwise upheld amongst friends, often within the family setting, and most certainly within the school and the workplace. Cleary (2005a) found in her study on young men that constant performativity, as opposed to this situational role playing discussed by McCormack, was a serious problem for men. Cleary revealed that the performance of strength and self-sufficiency was directed at family, friends and work colleagues and even partners. This resonates with what Dr. Kuhling emphasised in her interview with me as well: of how presumed multiple masculinities are not fully available to play off one another from one situation to another because in many contexts, masculinity is too fixed a concept. (see discussion in 2.6) These ‘hyper-performances’, Cleary continues, were “required to project an image of strength to conceal growing levels of stress.” (2005a:155) As we have seen from the testimonies of the lads in this study, the greater success in concealment the greater the danger and the actual outcome for the person in distress.

“The effort involved in projecting self-sufficiency while simultaneously coping with the underlying distress often required the use of alcohol and or drugs. The result was then a spiral of concealment and denial with increasing substance misuse which compounded the initial problem. The outcome could be a toxic mix of pent up emotion and growing fear and anxiety.” (Cleary 2005a:163)

The many ambiguous and contradictory aspects of binge are still being avoided with the exceptions of a handful of theorists. It is actively excluded from conversation among the most affected groups. The lads will talk repeatedly –and exhaustively- about the fun they had ‘being locked’ or how amusing such and such incidences were. They will not share thoughts and concerns about anyone’s over-drinking being harmful or problematic or admit to using the drink to cope because if they admit that

there is a link between the drink and depression they will immediately rob the *craic* of its invaluable function as a joyous, carefree relief. Seriousness kills the *craic*.

In a one-on-one discussion about suicide with one of the lads I managed to get a serious and genuine analysis of the suicide problem in the area. He believed unemployment to be the most important and immediate cause for depression and suicide. He saw the drink but also weed as the temporary cure for depression *and* as the major factors in suicide.

X– The drink is the biggest drug of them all like you know and... people just go out having a few cans just to get rid of their pain or something and, you're sorted for a little while and then... go back to the world or something you know? Your mind and then...

F – So what the drink protects you from it or...? what are you --- is that why you drink in the first place?

X– The drink is protecting you for a while---

F – So what is it, what happens when you... when it brings you to the other level where you actually consider these things?

X– ...If you... think that if someone's depressed then you just wanna leave him for himself for a while... and... you have to be the first one to say it to them like... 'I know you're depressed like.' You just fucking talk about it you know? That... you have to talk to someone (them), if someone's not going to talk about it."

He had listed seven friends and acquaintances between the ages of 18-35, lads that he used to hang around with, 'have a smoke with', that had fallen victims to suicide in the last year. His main concern was that they had been alone and intoxicated by either drugs (did not specified which) or alcohol. This resonates well with O'Brien's argument about the change in the functions and meanings of drink from a social integrative medium of a group to the private emotional management of strain and stress. The young man interviewed believed that without the distraction and entertainment offered amongst friends, one is easily left to one's own dark thoughts and overwhelmed by the negative feelings that had made you 'go on the lash' in the first place. This would perhaps also explain the unpredictable nature that seems to be a feature in most reported suicides in the area:

X - ---when they were around their friends like, when I was talking to your man, one of the fellas who done it you know... God rest... When I was talking to him like, he was grand and everything like you know,

but then, like two weeks later like, he's after hanging himself in the woods...

F – What did you think that second when you heard about it? Did you think that 'I saw it coming' or... you didn't?

X – I thought eh... I didn't see it coming but eh... If only I knew. I could talk to him you know? Anybody would have done the same.

According to the same young man, drugs functioned as an escape from reality and as a way to add to the 'good times' when out with friends. Just like with too much drink, he says it is dangerous once the person is alone:

Like, some people do actually take drugs just to... get away. And then they'll be all happy and happy around their friends, but when they're by themselves, you probably go in to a room and start crying and... don't tell anyone, you know and... that's what it is.

MacLachlan and Smyth stated: "we are also acutely aware that the greatest contention regarding binge drinking arises not so much from dispute about the "facts" per se, but about *what they mean* to the various groups and, more broadly, their implications for society." (2004:5 my emphasis) *Binge Drinking* (2004) and *Cultivating Suicide* (2003) are two invaluable inputs to this thesis and two very extraordinary contributions to an otherwise silenced debate. As I was gathering relevant literature for my research I had some difficulties getting a hold of *Binge Drinking* and finally decided to contact the publisher (Liffey Press) in Dublin to see if I could order it from them directly. I was then advised that it had been taken out of print. I eventually managed to order a library copy over the internet which was then dispatched from Atlanta, Georgia in the U.S. In a later interview with co-author and editor Dr. Malcolm MacLachlan I was eager to find out what had happened to this very important contribution to the debates on binge and self-destruction. I found out that there had been some very powerful forces with vested interests in this publication that in the end had very little input into the book's focus on both the functions and effects of alcohol and binge. The initiative was based on a conference which was organised as part of an outreach for Diageo, the world's leading drink manufacturer. There were talks of potential co-authors from the Irish Catholic Church where there were concerns as to what went into the book. In the end, MacLachlan's aim was to be honest and not to let any one-sided force determine the

book's trajectory. The book was to be a proper analysis of the complex issues of binge and suicide specific to the Irish context. MacLachlan explained:

“Now I thought to be honest when we did this that it would sort of get the ball rolling and there wasn't that much up-take of them, there wasn't that much interest. And with this book, (*Cultivating Suicide*) when this came out there was really nothing else along those lines in Ireland so, I thought it was quite different. And, it (*Binge Drinking*) really sank like a led balloon you know (laughs) and I think that, in itself was interesting. If you're saying that it is the culture, of the country, that is facilitating things that the country says it's very worried about then surely that's... I mean surely people are a bit reflective... I mean, maybe it's not news-worthy but in terms of an academic forum but... nothing really came of it.” (Interview with Dr. MacLachlan May 2011)

A culturally introspective and self-examining approach to the ambiguity and complexities of these issues has yet to make a genuine leap into public consciousness in Ireland. By highlighting what binge drinkers themselves see as the beneficial functions of 'the drink' it is perhaps feared that it would then validate, justify or trivialise its detrimental effects on individual lives and society. Yet without any proper understanding of how and why people drink, despite all efforts and initiatives already set in place, they still will not (and do not) have the desired effects. Brophy writes in *Binge Drinking*:

“I would suggest that perhaps a broader approach to the problem might be fruitful. In particular, I think there are communal and cultural responses possible which tap a deeper level of our unconscious and release imaginative and creative solutions to this question. Perhaps first, we need a change of heart to enable us to confront our denial of the problem.” (Brophy in MacLachlan and Smyth 2004:97)

One major problem with 'the drink' is that it *has* benefits, and, that it *means* something to the people who consume it. If it did not, alcohol would not be consumed and hence, would not be a problem.

## 5.5 Liminality and anti-Structure

A fresh way of looking at binge and lad culture, rather than to focus on states of 'normlessness', is to analyse the living, breathing moment of the lads' ceremonial drinking sessions. This means looking at the consumption of the *craic* as "a ritual world removed from everyday notions of time and space" (Abrahams in Turner 2008:ix). The following segment will treat the *craic* and bonding between the lads as such a ritual, liminal moment. The understanding of transitional phases in Western industrialised societies is different from traditional rituals in pre-modern societies. Youth transitions have taken on a secular character and it has also come to our attention that youth has extended "over considerable periods of time rather than being concentrated into ritual moments." (James and Prout cited in Barry 2006:25) Based on empirical evidence I disagree with this move away from ritual-bound moments. It appears to me that a focus on ritual bound moments becomes even more relevant when liminal phases in life are extended into adulthood such as it does in this case. I will look at binge as a frequently recurring ritual practice, extending further and further into adulthood. I will discuss the applicability of the three phases of the ritual process; separation, liminality and reintegration to the processes of ceremonial drinking detailed up until now.

*The Ritual Process* and the analysis of its three stages were introduced by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in 1909. In the 1960's the concept of liminality was picked up again and developed by Victor Turner. Over a hundred years after its appearance, liminality is "now considered by some to be a master concept in the social and political sciences writ large." (Thomassen 2009:5) Sceptical about certain usage of scientific positivism van Gennep emphasised "the importance of direct observation" and, "paid an almost manic attention" to ethnographic *living facts* over 'dead' or abstract ones. (Thomassen 2009:9) Turner writes: "Van Gennep himself defined *rites de passage* as "rites which accompany every change of place, *state*, social position and age." (van Gennep cited in Turner 2008:94) Turner sees a



‘state’<sup>21</sup> as “a more inclusive concept than ‘status’ or ‘office’, and refers to any type of stable or recurrent *condition* that is culturally recognised.” (Turner 2008:94 my emphasis)

**Separation:** “The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behaviour signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a “state”), or from both.” (Turner 2008:94).

*Social structure* is here read as work but also unemployment and stressors of life in general (for a discussion on how the drink reorders ordinary experience, see 5.4). *Cultural conditions* (often a set of responses to social structure) is best understood here as the normative rules and regulations tied to gender and masculinity in particular (also in 5.4). As I have stressed earlier, the definition of binge used here says that a binge session is a period of continued over-consumption and intoxication in which one neglects other activities in order to drink. After a week of ‘grafting’ or boredom from unemployment, the weekend comes with a shift from a responsible mode to the freedom to enjoy the craic. The weekend *craic* is indeed a different social, psychological and physiological *state*. The main states are; the brief and recurring freedom from civic responsibility (work) or, an even more needed relief from the hopelessness of unemployment. The weekend session comes with the freedom to attain an intoxicated state of mind (having the *craic*). Through this mediating agent one is momentarily ‘excused’ from otherwise stringent social norms. Though social surveillance (mocking’ and ‘banter’) is rarely absent, an overly intoxicated state may offer a reprieve from any serious sanctions even if a new, sensitive and more serious side of a person has been revealed. For example, if one of the lads has been ‘over-friendly’ and open about feelings or concerns, his friends will grant this behaviour if he was drunk at the time.

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<sup>21</sup> One interesting observation to be made here is that the word ‘state’ is often used by the lads to point out or recall someone’s intoxicated state. This refers to ‘the state’ of someone who has over-indulged by extreme proportions, who appears ‘locked’ or appears to be ‘sick from the drink’: “Look at the state of him!” or “He was in some state last night!”

**Liminality:** “During the intervening “liminal” period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the “passenger”) are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state.” (Turner 2008:94)

Some of the lads have developed nicknames for these alternate state-personae. It is during this collective experience of anti-structure that *communitas* is created.

*Communitas* is a spontaneously formed community. It is based on a mutual transitive experience and shared social relationships of egalitarianism which creates an intense feeling of togetherness. Anti-structure can be read as the deliberate temporary restructuring or altering of ordinary experience. Abrahams describes the altered *states* or “flow experiences” created through *communitas* and anti-structure as an experience where acts simultaneously elevates and inverts social positions. In this realm of anti-structure, which applies to all confrontative activities, people tend to refashion the self “through masking, costuming, acting in a predictably disorderly fashion.” (Abrahams R. D. in Turner 2008:ix-x)

Through ritualistic relief, what binge accomplishes for the lads is rather different. Instead of “masking” the individual, the shared experiences of intoxication and what is anticipated is the allowance to unmask one’s feelings and possibly even personal problems. It is an occasion for exceptional emotional displays otherwise deemed inappropriate and experienced as awkward or uncomfortable (moments that would otherwise ‘reek of homosexuality’). The drink can assist in confronting an underlying issue by providing courage, emotionality, spontaneity and togetherness. It can also, for a limited time, obliterate the mind that carries unresolved or irresolvable burdens. Having a laff, ‘a bit of banter’ plays a major part of the *craic*. The exception to the rules tells us about the rigidity of expectations of masculinity and inadvertently, of the lads. Justin Brophy (Smyth et.al. 2004) wrote about the thrills and hazards of ritualistic and collective experiences drinking occasions:

“Enduring and powerful social conjunction is achieved or preserved by shared drunken taboo violations, typically but not always with socially dysfunctional elements of the community. The thrill of the rampage, the freedom from constraint, the settling of scores are enacted and fêted every weekend.” (Brophy in Smyth et.al. 2004:78)

As those with the experience know, alcohol (and drugs) takes us to a perilous and dark place that both excites and horrifies. This is the ambiguous nature of an experience situated in the intersection of consumption and destruction. It either provides the desired effects or it swallows us up entirely.

**Reintegration** (normally Monday): “In the third phase (reaggregation or reincorporation), the passage is consummated. The ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a relatively stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations vis-à-vis others of a clearly defined and “structural” type; he is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such positions.” (Turner 2008:94-5)

Rather than re-entering the usual obligations to social norms and expectations (or taking on a new social status), the main purpose of binge and escape is *liminality* – not reintegration. Also, reintegration into the everyday norms of conduct can in this case be a rather hazardous moment as well. After a ‘mad binge’ and ‘unwanted incidences’ an individual sometimes runs the risk of ‘going too far’ and transgressing into completely unaccepted behaviours. Waking up the next day with what is locally referred to as ‘the Fear’ one may have to make the awkward telephone calls for ‘damage check’ with shameful enquiries into what potential damage our liminal state has done to ordinary experience and expectations. Brophy describes the dangers of conflict and potential outcomes of the liminal state:

“Worse perhaps, alcohol also catapults the unwary to this experience of the anti-heroic. In this respect it is a singularly powerful agent. One becomes irreversibly reduced overnight. Cumulatively, or less often precipitously, this experience of self-loathing leads, in some, to initiate depression and suicide.” (Brophy in Smyth et.al. 2004:79)

There is much appeal in being part of a *communitas* however: These destructive group constellations are an important source of social security and support for its members. In a combination of field notes and retrospective memoirs from our ‘little

commune' that was dispersed after the lads had lived there together for five years, I wrote the following about life amongst the lads:

“A while ago I heard a song on the telly (Bulletproof by La Roux) and what is obviously a deep-lying part of my emotional register took me back to a place and time of absolute laid-backness, confidence and togetherness, -our own front room only a year ago. I was not all too surprised that I would feel nostalgic looking back but it was rather interesting how I suddenly feared that I would never get that back. Whatever tensions were dormant but many times present in our household, there was nothing but pure enjoyment and closeness when we were drinking or smoking together with the music channels in the background, taking turns with the remote, or watching Family Guy in a haze of smoke. Anyone who did not smoke weed would get severely ‘hot-boxed’ just by sitting in the room with us for half an hour. “Happy days” as we always used to say. Towards the end of the night dedicated to our weekend activities (mainly drinking), someone would try to sneak off to bed after ‘pulling a whitey’ [getting sick from weed/white in the face] or simply after too much drink. No matter how well an attempt, they would almost always be noticed stumbling over table or couch and into the wall as they try to head for the door: “Eh, where do you think you’re going???”

Turner tells us that: “Spontaneous communitas is richly charged with affects, mainly pleasurable ones. Life in “structure” is filled with objective difficulties: decisions have to be made, inclinations sacrificed to the wishes of the group, and physical and social obstacles overcome at some personal cost. Spontaneous communitas has something “magical” about it.” (Turner 2008:139 [1969])

Yet any liminal state, the structure on which a communitas is built, is difficult to maintain long term. The lads have youth on their side. It is still possible to go in to work after only a couple of hours sleep (or no sleep at all) and be able to put the hours in. Irish drinking culture is also on their side. Irish culture is not one where traditionally male work places condemn the worker who comes in with a hangover (or still drunk as the case may be sometimes). A young and healthy body may endure three, four, sometimes more consecutive nights of continuous drinking and drug-taking. But for how long is this pleasurable, just ‘a laff’, and at what stage does one

in reality –get tired? Dr. Kieran Keohane made the following suggestions to my observations:

“It can be looked at, that in the terms of the excitement of *communitas*, in that situation, but when it is extended and extended and extended, the extremity of the risk behaviour can be read in a different way. It’s like this desperate search for, something that puts a stop to this. It is the most uncomfortable situation to be in... Ok, that moment of liminality has its pleasures as far as a feeling of belonging, but it has in its terror, that it’s a painful situation and it’s frightening.” (Interview with Dr. Keohane Nov. 2010)

Considerable value must be acquired to certain behaviours within a group of people for those behaviours to become a norm. Not many can pull off extended binge sessions time and time again and most people would not even want to. Yet this is a common and regular feature within lad culture. Humour and bravado divert concern and criticism for the underlying seriousness of its effects. Seeing someone collapse does normally not raise the alarm among those that often *do*. Early on in my fieldwork a young teenage girl attended one of many all-night house parties where one of the lads had what could best be described as a seizure after he had taken a large amount of pills (ecstasy). His arms and legs flung uncontrollably around the place and he was held down by the lads in an armchair. The girl looked increasingly nervous and she was now close to tears. Her worries were put to rest by the lads who knew him. It was laughed off and explained to the young girl that he does this all the time, -it is just his typical quirky way. Another one of the lads collapsed on top of the stairs in front of his devastated mother after a heavy drinking session. This is another funny anecdote.

Binge, -the *craic*, as I outlined the argument in the beginning, is a temporal mode that can only be consumed, that it is non-recoverable and easily done to excess. Its excess, I believe, is determined by those occasions when it extends into what body and mind cannot endure, when it becomes self-defeating rather than self-expanding. Turner explains further:

“Subjectively there is in it [communitas] the feeling of endless power. But this power untransformed cannot readily be applied to the organizational details of social existence. It is no substitute for lucid thought and sustained will. On the other hand, structural action swiftly becomes arid and mechanical if those involved in it are not periodically immersed in the regenerative abyss of communitas. Wisdom is always to find the appropriate relationship between structure and communitas under the *given* circumstances of time and place, to accept each modality when it is paramount without rejecting the other, and not to cling to one when its present impetus is spent.” (Turner 2008:139 [1969] emphasis in original)

Barry (2006:30) points out one other aspect which distinguishes the ‘kinship-based societies’ from this context (hers being Scotland and mine Ireland): The liminal phases of transition are not structured in any uniform, predetermined or predictable way and there are very few support structures along the way. Turner affirms:

“Just as in preliterate society the social and individual developmental cycles are punctuated by more or less prolonged instants of ritually guarded and stimulated liminality, each with its core of potential communitas, so the phase structure of social life in complex societies is also punctuated, but without institutionalized provocations and safeguards, by innumerable instants of spontaneous communitas.” (Turner 2008:137 [1969])

There is a support system in place consisting of the lads themselves. Their drinking rituals are guarded but not safe-guarded. The emphasis on excess is paramount and for the most part uncontested. This is not lack of structure but anti-structure, meaning, a practice put in place to de-structure ordinary experience. The purposes behind the lads’ ceremonial drinking contradict the traditional theoretical model of a ritual process where the goal is reintegration. The desired state amongst the lads is liminality. The aim amongst the lads is not to ‘hold the drink’ or make it in to work the next morning after a heavy nights drinking. It is a far better success story if he didn’t make it to work, if he showed up drunk or, if he drove off his car instead. Brophy says in Binge Drinking:

“In most traditional societies, elders guide, shape and interpret the passage through initiation rituals, guard and regulate access to the sacramental intoxicant. However here in Ireland, we no longer bring our parents to the pub, the priests and until recently the alcohol industry have fallen silent on the dangers. Diageo [global drink manufacturer] have recently taken up the baton with their responsible drinking advertising campaign, but many regard this as a cynical ploy to avert greater regulation. Meanwhile, a whole generation has learned that alcohol excess is normal, and we reap or dread the bitter harvest.” (Brophy in Smyth and MacLachlan 2004:81)

As I discussed in previous chapters, categories such as ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ societies do not reflect reality. The assumption that the former is static and ‘synommic’ and the latter rapidly changing and ‘anomic’ has also been addressed in previous sections of the thesis. The theory of the ritual process and liminality was however based on these two theoretical models of human societies and as Turner predicted, they are still useful and applicable to contemporary contexts. My main argument here is that all ritual processes do not reflect a more ‘synnomic’ model of social practice. Nor are the lads’ ritual drinking practices ‘normless’. The lads who have grown up together offer each other the most accessible support system available. For as long as they are ‘lads’, before they enter into a committed relationship that translates into a permanent partnership, they do share their time, the appropriate activities and distractions and many times accommodation with their life-long friends. Because this support system leaves many aspects of the individual’s emotional needs untapped it sometimes fails to rescue those who get sick and tired of this perilous journey as it extends for many years into adulthood. More interestingly perhaps is that for the majority of the lads, for as long as this liminal phase lasts, and despite the hazardous consequences of over-consumption, it does make these drag-on-years more bearable. The majority of the lads do in the end go through them with friends.

Although the lads’ social bonds lack the form of intimacy available to the girls, lad culture, and friendships based on “laddishness” have many warm, bonding features. “Much of what passes for young male bonding is better described as a process of mutual initiation, a rite of passage in which boys and adolescent males, individually

and in a group, slowly negotiate a passage to manhood.” (Clare 2000:87) The fear of deviating or failing the test of ‘appropriate manhood’ is a much bigger preoccupation amongst the lads than sharing intimate problems. The main difficulty as I see it, is that this liminal passage into adulthood extends far beyond the “impetus is spent”, beyond what is enjoyable and sometimes, even bearable. Early on in chapter 3 I argued that it was the length of the stay in the Lads’ House that ultimately affected how much the consistency of parties and the maintaining of the *craic* would be enjoyed, tolerated or suffered. In other words, even though *communitas* is an enjoyable collective state for a limited time, liminality extended becomes a painful experience.

The behaviours studied here are governed by group loyalties and class- and gender identities within the group. The lads owe each other not to remove themselves from the group, practically or symbolically. Barry distinguished between bonding and bridging social capital (see discussion on Bourdieu in 4.7). She suggested that bridging (outward looking) social capital created opportunities to develop ties that extended beyond the immediate environment. Bonding social capital (inward looking) was often the glue that held together young marginalised groups and filled the intimate functions of a support system. It could however also entrap, exclude, constrain and further marginalise individuals in the group. The glue, is not only the togetherness created by the drink. It seems that it is also the size and relative isolation of the group which becomes a major indicator of group dynamics and the rigidity of social rules within the group. Barry suggests that “disempowered individuals and groups are likely to focus on their immediate group for the development of identity and reputation” (Barry 2006:2)

One of the young women (age 24) who participated in this study and who shared house with the lads for over a year took particular interest in the topics addressed in my study. She had herself taken a semester in Sociology at University College Cork some years before. She had lived in Australia for a year and was now back in Cork where she was studying to become a Montessori pre-school teacher and had developed an interest for psychology. After a few interviews with me where we had discussed topics on masculinity and lad culture she took it upon herself to investigate further into the lads’ values and group dynamics. She had moved into a house with



two female friends in a Cork City neighbourhood and had since come into contact with a different group of lads in the city. “By the way”, she said to me on one of her visits to see me, “I asked the lads we hang out with now the same question you did before. You know if they could get all their drink money back would they promise not to drink again?” She had received the same unanimous and immediate “NO!”

“Well that’s what I noticed anyway that when they’re drinking together and in groups it’s like the highlight of their lives, that sort of thing you know, they have great fun. But the other thing is that when they are on their own they’re a bit quieter, like they’re different, they’re quieter you know and, they’re definitely more confident. They have you know, more ‘get go’. (we had previously discussed the lads’ reluctance towards ‘official business’ like going in to town to ‘sign on’ (the social welfare) or going on a job interview.) Like they can go and do their stuff and, in town and... come back and get drunk all together. Now I wouldn’t say that’s very functional... our men in society but, they’re much better than down here (in the suburbs).

She spoke about how the two groups were different and explained how the suburban, smaller group of lads were fairly confident in a group but added: “But in the city there are lots of big groups and the bigger your group is the less threatened you feel going out.” Her conclusions were that the more extended the social networks of the group, the better the lads became in building confidence. She also thought that the inner city group talked more individually, “definitely about their feelings anyway”:

“I definitely think they’re more isolated down here (suburbs) and that this has an effect also. As well I think that when you grow up in the city it’s probably easier for you to mix and make your way and make it your business cos you know that area whereas if you’re from here, you have to go into it and figure it all out from here.”

One of the lads in his mid-twenties described how smoking weed -a very common pastime when the lads are unemployed- increased this insecurity and made a testing and difficult trip into the Dole Office in the city (centre) even more off-putting: “I was on the dole and... I was on the weed, obviously eh... and I was too paranoid to go in and sort it all out...” (one of the lads age 25)

The young woman, acting as co-analyst, had the impression that the small groups of lads in smaller communities did not have the same confidence as the inner city lads and that their groups became more about excluding the world than facing it. The local lads in the suburbs were also less prone to integrate with and accept new people into their groups. Instead she suggested that it becomes a big thing both when new people come in and even more so when someone leaves. In Barry's words, the larger group of lads in inner city had greater bridging social capital whereas the smaller and relatively isolated groups in smaller communities became increasingly marginalised.

## **5.6 Summary and conclusions**

In The end of chapter 4 I referred to Dr. Cliona Barnes (2007) in a discussion on the Exploring Masculinities programme. Barnes called "for an emphasis on understanding and engaging fully with the negatively traditional elements of boy culture" (Barnes 2007:317). Through discussion and debate she says, we will be able to dislodge and challenge these behaviours typified by young Irish lads. I have equally argued that any initiative for change must accommodate boys' and young men's already established views and sentiments about being a disadvantaged demographic in terms of class, age *and gender*. The main principle of Barnes' argument is thus, that without a full understanding of, and engagement with "that which we are trying to shift or neutralise" (2007:324) the challenge will go unanswered and change will not be accomplished. What needs to be addressed now is: knowing the many negative effects (and having more experience of these than most), why do the lads binge anyway?

The drink is essentially a social activity. It is so important in many of the contexts investigated by anthropologists that a refusal to engage in it, or underestimating its values, is to fail as a researcher –methodologically and theoretically. Wilson rightfully suggests:

“drink is one of the most noticeable, emotional and important ways in which people express and discuss their identities and cultures. Alcohol is one of the ingredients in social cement, but also one of the means to remove such adhesion. As a result, it is a tool of our profession, and one of the key metaphors and practices of the cultures we seek to explicate.” (Wilson 2005:7)

The *craic* is a cultural concept defined as fun, amusement, drink, humour, banter and a generally a ‘good time’. Self-surrender and loyalty to the group through witty mockery and ‘ritualistic put down’, but also, playing with strict norms and gender boundaries, are part of a repertoire that goes far back in Irish traditional male drinking culture. I have suggested that if comedy is about regulating the trespassing of boundaries and norms, we must know about the boundaries being trespassed. A repetitive over-emphasis (some would say obsessive emphasis) on the markers of masculinity and policing of heterosexuality are part of the repartee of banter and humour and reflects the rigidity and intense concern about gender boundaries and ‘gender appropriateness’ in Irish society at large.

The characteristic ambiance of the Irish traditional pub has been re-located to the lads’ front room. As they dwell where they so frequently drink the lines previously drawn between home and pub become blurred and a repetitious and seemingly endless ‘session’ becomes part of ordinary experience. Rigid gender norms make ‘taking care of’, or ‘interest in’ sensible healthy alternatives and well-being an unrewarding and negatively sanctioned commitment. Marginalisation helps solidify the bonds within peer groups and puts increasing demands on group loyalties resulting in the lad’s social world becoming “very small” (Gaetz 1997:ix). Within the more isolated groupings the normative scripts become increasingly strict.

Time and stressors are equally abundant during long periods of unemployment. Binge not only strengthens group dynamics, it alleviates boredom, allows for intimacy and expression and it offers short term relief from angst, stress and gloom. To go out for drinks or ‘call to someone for cans’ or, explicitly ‘go on the piss for the day’ is literally offered by good friends to help alleviate the stressors and pains of peers. However, like the young women have expressed, (part 4.7) their main fear and

concern lie with those young lads who do not even have this social support to rely on.

Risk-taking and immaturity have become important themes with regards to the 'feminization of health (Robertson 2007:140). Traditional stereotypes and gendered representations of men has "become associated with irrational, emotional, (projected as childish) responses and women with a dominant, rational, active self." (Robertson 2007:47) This is a complete inversion of the days of hysterical paralysis when women were regarded 'the weaker sex'; childlike, irrational and frail (see 2.6). For the lads, today's bachelor drinking groups, their female peers are seen as the 'moral guardians'. Their stressors and worries are dismissed as female concerns and advice and instructions are taken as 'nagging' (see 4.5).

The association between men's suicide risk and high levels of alcohol consumption is stronger than that of women. According to the research presented here this is explained by alcohol's qualitative functions as a social lubricant that carries benefits within otherwise strict expectations of masculinity. When liminality becomes extended and finally exhausted, this hazardous moment/state runs the risk of going to excess, lead to self-destruction and in some cases suicide.

A more controversial stance perhaps is the call to include, in this type of social analysis, both the positive and the negative elements of over-consumption and binge. This is a fiery debate compared to the more common one-sided focus on the damages and harm caused by alcohol and drugs. I firmly believe that an alternative approach to binge and drug abuse where an acknowledgement of both self-destruction and the desired properties of 'the drink' must be addressed. Kept separately, (or by simply denying the latter), as reality is keen to show us, 'fun' is sometimes used to mask depression and self-destruction or as was discussed here, 'suicide by stealth.' (Spellissy 1996:116)

The main theorists referred to in this chapter are; Judith Butler, Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner. I have also referred to a range of Irish research that has made important contributions to the analysis of Irish drinking culture. 'The drink' is the term preferred to 'alcohol consumption'. It is a colloquial term which reflects the

functions and purposes of intoxication and it frames binge as a cultural practice. From a gender-perspective I have painted a picture of how ceremonial drinking amongst the lads plays an important role in the making of masculinity. Butler argues that the 'self' is not outside gender. The gendered subject is *produced* through the repetition of scripts and performances.

I have described the ritual drinking in the lads' house and in the pubs. The main arguments presented here are; that the liminal state of spontaneous communitas carries many affective qualities to the people involved. Secondly, I have described from my experience; observations and testimonies, just how repetitive and hazardous these 'years of drinking' become. In other words, the *craic* and 'binge' are consumable and spendable activities that involve many pleasurable elements but to 'cling on when the impetus is spent' is an un-sustainable commitment and a hazardous experience. "Spontaneous communitas is a phase, a moment, not a permanent condition." (Turner 2008:140 [1969])

Seen as a transitional phase from boy-hood to adulthood, the laddish behaviours examined here are part of a liminal experience of collective ritual practices that work to, as Dr. Keohane put it, 'structure our experiences'. This does not occur in a moral vacuum and the lads do not suffer from 'normlessness'. To the contrary, this liminal *life-style* is structured by strict norms which instruct some very specific, 'gender-appropriate' behaviours. The group- and gender identities informed by these norms are narrowly defined and they are both symbolically and practically restrictive. Seeing gender as performance Butler asserts:

"There are temporal and collective dimensions to these actions, and their public nature is not inconsequential; indeed, the performance is effected with the strategic aim of maintaining gender within its binary frame. Understood in pedagogical terms, the performance renders social laws explicit" (Butler 1988:526).

Turner has described this activity as 'the realm of anti-structure'. In this ritual setting he says, people are given the opportunity to 'refashion the self 'through masking, costuming, acting in a predictably disorderly fashion.' (Abrahams R. D. In Turner 2008:ix-x). Done to the extreme one may also have the opportunity to 'un-mask'

and, with the excuse of ‘being lagers’, undo for a moment the self-restrictive scripts that make intimacy and the unbarring of problems awkward and openly ridiculed.

In the cultural setting examined here, neither social or economic structures nor cultural expectations of masculinity facilitate the transition from ladhood to manhood! The lads are governed by exaggeratedly gendered norms that blatantly influence drinking-, and suicidal behaviours yet most predominant social analyses suggest they suffer from a lack of social or cultural norms! The ritualistic relief enacted by the lads are coping mechanisms, and, a way to re-establish a collective identity that has become problematic and dangerously vulnerable.

## 6. CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

This is an ethnographic study about Irish working-class masculinity; unsustainable life-styles and the workings of self-destruction against the backdrop of a societal crisis. My findings are based on a four-year field study amongst a group of young working class men in Cork. ‘The lads’, as they define themselves and as they are represented in public debate, are more prone to suicide and other self-destructive behaviours than their female counterparts. ‘Lad culture’ and ‘laddish’ behaviours are mostly associated with working class cultures that place much emphasis on ‘masculine labour’, male strength and heterosexuality. In this final segment I will frame and conclude what official data and relevant research reveal about Irish male suicide, what the ethnographic material in this study suggests, and, what conclusions and recommendations can be drawn from this.

This concluding chapter starts with an overall summary (6). I try to stay true to the chronological order while maintaining a logic and a flow that brings forward the most essential arguments. This is followed by two segments that discuss in more detail two burning issues that I have distinguished as fundamental. First I will discuss what I identify as the main links between suicide, self-destruction and lad culture (6.1). The next segment (6.2) is dedicated to the platform that, I argue, carries the most potential in dissolving the structures and hegemonic discourses that regenerate cultural expectations of masculinity (and femininity) in Irish society. The last pages of the thesis (6.3) are a set of in-depth, personal reflections on existential challenges that apply to the lads and to the human condition in general.

As the overall approach in this thesis I have analysed suicide by looking at life. I started from a very broad approach of situating the lads, their worlds and current circumstances; historically, theoretically and socially. I have then ‘phased in’ on the more intimate workings and processes of ‘lad culture’. I have investigated suicide *as* a sociological problem *through* anthropological methods. My discussion has been carefully balanced between the abstract theoretical models that are used within social theory and suicide research in Ireland, and the actual realities presented by my informants; the lads and the girls. Three major themes will frame this short

summary; gender appropriateness, social change, and last, coping and self-destruction amongst the lads.

Using the three most basic elements of human activity; production, consumption and destruction to frame everyday existence, I have highlighted how a slowdown in production (work commitment) which is not substituted by alternative forms of responsibility, has shifted the lads towards an increased commitment to over-consumption and self-destruction.

The geographical field is rather extended. It is based on social networks that include several communities in and around Cork City. Most of 'the lads' live in so called 'rurban areas' which are described as "no longer a village, but also not part of the city" (Keohane and Kuhling 2004:64). This 'betwixt and between' field is in social theory associated with anomie and suicide. Built as part of a property boom during the so called Celtic Tiger years, many social theorists predicted the un-sustainability and 'anomic trends' that would follow as the Irish property bubble burst in 2008.

In the light of the recession, the gender difference in unemployment for 20-24 year-olds rose from 0.1 per cent (5.3% for men and 5.4% for women) in the year 2000 to 14.2% (32.9% for men and 18.7% for women) in 2010 (CSO 2011:10,24). A wide range of research referred to in this study conclude that the loss or lack of jobs is detrimental to men's psychological and physiological health because of the strong association between men's sense of self-worth, their identities as men and employment. I have argued that because of the strong and rigid demarcation between what skills and activities are deemed appropriate and inappropriate for males, many alternative resources for self-worth and social esteem go untapped when 'appropriate' work disappears. In my interviews with the lads it quickly became apparent what work meant to them. Much more than an income, the lads valued and took pride in the skills they acquired, the responsibility with which they were entrusted and the appreciation showed by superiors and colleagues. They also valued the structure of everyday working life.

Suicide figures reached a record high of 527 in Ireland in 2009. Official figures in the two subsequent years counted 525 such suicides in 2011 and 507 in 2012. I have



highlighted how suicide has remained prominent among young Irish men during both “boom” (as in 2004 when Midleton in Cork was proclaimed the ‘second suicide capital of the world’) and “bust” (2008 onwards). I have investigated what social, cultural and economical aspects have remained during and between these periods and which have changed. I have concluded that for the target group investigated here, many important circumstances have remained the same between these periods. Underlying cultural and social factors (in relation to gender in particular); expectations of masculinity, marginalisation and social isolation, internalisation of discredited forms of masculinity were the same during Ireland’s economic expansion and recession. What has changed specifically for working class young men in Ireland are work opportunities. The traditionally male types of employment -like construction and manufacturing-, are those sectors that have been most affected by both the so called Celtic Tiger and the bursting of the property bubble that had inflated the Irish economy. The jobs that are expected and ‘appropriate’ for young working class males went from accessible and over-rewarding to inaccessible -where there are now thousands of applicants per job, significant pay-cuts and often insufficient working hours.

The difficulties in setting up the requirements for adulthood such as independent living arrangements have for lower-income youth remained the same during ‘boom’ and ‘bust’; first because of a property bubble that caused inflated house prices and rental costs and during the downturn because of considerable job losses and income insecurity. Not being able to afford independent living (i.e. not moving in with peers or not remaining in the family home) was one of the major stressors for the lads in this field study. The vast majority of the lads would have to remain in the family home past their teens and twenties and sometimes well into their thirties. The next affordable option for the many young men who were single was to set up house with their friends. The life-style created and maintained when the lads set up home together sets the frame for what is commonly associated with ‘lad culture’.

Gender-appropriateness is the main theme in this study. The lads’ stereotypical conservatism (or as I prefer, neo-traditionalism) has created a situation where the lads and young women who share the same communities and backgrounds come to represent different social categories. The lads and young women are expected to, and

do perform different tasks, obtain different skills and prospects. While working class young women today have entered into and, increasingly identify with tasks, skills and prospects traditionally deemed masculine, young working class men have refrained from spheres and activities that are considered feminine. In this study gender equality is defined as "more or less similarity between women and men in every sphere of human life, including the private sphere." (Backans *et.al.* 2007:1893) In this thesis I discuss gender equality and gender appropriateness at a structural level (family, school and peer groups) but also on a more intimate level (self-expression, coping mechanisms etc.). Increased role flexibility and role conflict has become a female predicament and this is expressed through symbolic acts of self-destruction. Self-mutilation, eating disorders and over usage of prescribed medication are some of the issues most commonly linked to women. Role inflexibility and role restriction are some of the burning issues for many men today. This is also expressed through symbolic acts of self-destruction deemed appropriate for males.

The girls interviewed in this study accounted for how upbringing and family structure helped shape gender appropriate behaviours. They explained how they felt over-burdened with responsibility and how they had over-compensated in all areas where the lads did not have to care nor worry. They made the point, in relation to their male family members and peers, that 'the lads' are exempt from early childhood from the same responsibilities and from carrying the same *worries* as the girls. This, they felt could explain how untrained their male peers were in stressful situations that they see themselves better equipped to deal with.

'The lads' interviewed were more keen to talk about their experiences of work and the loss of work yet they also showed considerable awareness of their own disadvantages in developing social-esteem, confidence, trust, intimacy and coping mechanisms. Instead they recognised these strengths to be the benefits of women and the nature of female social bonds. Like the girls, the lads also acknowledged that this was a gendered issue but could still not imagine a situation where this could be any different.

Parts of this thesis have been dedicated to Judith Butler and the idea that gender is a performative act. Butler adopts the ideas of Victor Turner suggesting that ritual social dramas require “a performance which is repeated. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation.” (Butler 1988:526) The lads’ rituals are a repetitive matrix where the same stories, the same banter, the same jokes are played out over and over. Indeed, the girls interviewed discuss how the lads, unlike themselves, are under constant surveillance and that their language and their actions are persistently controlled within the group. To the lads however, there is some comfort in the repetitive and unchanging nature of the game. It offers social and personal continuity in a world where things have otherwise become undone or rearranged. Performing one’s gender well, according to Butler, reassures the actors “that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all.” (Butler 1988:528) The social drama that the lads repeat on a daily basis, I would suggest, would explain why the lads speak of the ‘nature’ of women and men while the girls generally distinguish between local masculinities (i.e. the lads) and men in general.

I have argued that by looking at the use of humour it becomes possible to expose and analyse what the social cluster of young lads take most seriously. In this case it meant looking at how humour and ridicule is used to police the transgression over ‘gender-appropriate’ boundaries. I have argued further that this ‘play’ with fixed ideas about gender and boundaries can be read as a social commentary about how Irish society is structured, symbolically and in practice.

Discussed in terms ‘gendered histories’, a concept borrowed from the historical condition known as hysterical paralysis, I have accounted for some of the ways gendered distress have been expressed in different ways over time and in different cultural contexts. Many social theorists now argue that the ‘genderisation’ of idealised opposites like strength and weakness, maturity and immaturity etc. have become inverted (Clare, 2000, Robertson, 2007). Risk-taking and immaturity have become important themes within the inverted gender orders and the ‘feminization of health’ (Robertson 2007:140) where traditional stereotypes and representations of men have “become associated with irrational, emotional, (projected as childish) responses and women with a dominant, rational, active self.” (Robertson, 2007:47)

Wiklund (2010) suggested that health can be understood as a resource and that health is something that can be gained through one's ability to control and manage one's life situation: "Moreover, health can be defined in terms of wellbeing, the ability to accomplish vital goals in life, and experiences of meaning and sense of coherence" (Wiklund 2010:24). This holistic definition of health and well-being resonates with the argument made within Irish research on suicide and young men's outlook on life: The 2004 NSRF study argued that a sense of control was indicative of suicidality and that a reassurance and belief in one's ability to change and manage the circumstances of one's life carried important health benefits. (Begley *et.al.* 2004:22).

Breed on the other hand, distinguished a set number of indicators of suicidality. He argued that a firm commitment to a particular self concept and a rigid inflexibility to change led to certain vulnerabilities for men (failure and shame in occupational roles and *isolation* from the approval of others). This ultimately made up what he called a suicide syndrome (quoted in Taylor 1982:132). Increasing amounts of research now points to the ways that "some young working class males are inventing themselves as "new workers" and to the fact that others, particularly those who subscribe to working-class "macho masculinities," are not (Kenway and Kraack in Dolby and Dimitriadis 2004:98).

The ethnographic material presented here indicates that the lads carried the same values and opinions as their fathers about what kind of work was suitable for men and that the downturn in the manufacturing- and building sectors had not shifted sentiments of what gender appropriate work entailed. In other words, the lads' preferences and practices (*habitus*) had not accommodated the restructuring of the labour market. Bourdieu calls this lag of adjustment or, dislocation of *habitus*, the "hysteresis effect". He argued that there is often a lag in how people adapt and cope with sudden and significant changes in society. When previous experiences and references no longer apply to the new reality that has presented itself, social suffering occurs. Suddenly there is an acute need for new pathways for thought and action. Bourdieu's practice theory explains the strategies people adopt as they, depending on their different dispositions, effectively 'pick themselves up', repositions themselves and refigure their resources but also when they fail to do so.

When former capital (whether it is economic, social or cultural) is devalued within new field structures some people become “stuck” and are aware that this is so. (Grenfell 2008:141) For many young lads, alternative notions of masculinity, ‘new work’, and healthier life choices are not readily available and ‘the drink’ becomes a much more reliable option for distraction and comfort.

Walsh and Walsh (2010) suggested that alcohol consumption has proven to have a larger influence on the male suicide rate than unemployment and fluctuations in the economy which tend to get immediate response and correlate strongly for a period but to level out over time. I have argued that there is a triangular association between male unemployment, drinking habits and suicide: The de-structuring of daily and weekly routines, boredom, frustration and often hopelessness make reliance on alcohol and binge for comfort, distraction or oblivion more likely. This is particularly evident in so called ‘drinking cultures’ where alcohol consumption carries significant values as a marker of ‘a good time’. I have also discussed how alcohol becomes a coping mechanism when otherwise recognised coping strategies (like emotionality and ‘talking’) are negatively sanctioned within a peer group.

There is a cruel paradox working here in that alcohol is implicated in half of all Irish suicides (The Irish Times 20/02/2012). The lads interviewed have suggested that what serves as relief and distraction -as part of the *craic* and accompanied with good friends- can quickly turn into a dark and unbearable place once the person is left on his own. I have argued that this could explain the regular anecdotes from bereaved friends and family members of having met the deceased shortly before a completed suicide reporting that he seemed to be in ‘good form’. Intoxication from alcohol and/or drugs has also been reported to increase impulsivity and further magnify whatever feelings are stirring which would also explain the unpredictable nature of these suicides.

I have included professional and organisational attempts to tackle the Irish ‘masculinity problem’ and the lads’ experiences of these attempts. I have discussed in some detail just why the lads were unfamiliar with the Exploring Masculinities programme. Through the ethnographic material I also discussed how the lads’ strict norms, controlled through humour and mocking, do not allow them to “Reach Out”

(NSRG, 2005), like some suicide prevention booklets implore them to do. I have discussed the lads' and the girls' views on how masculinity (as it is defined locally) is an obstacle to men's well-being and coping mechanisms. Even though the lads are unfamiliar with programs such as EM, they know that working class masculinity is a contested and problematic issue in Irish society, something their fathers did not have to face. The lads have taken part of the discourses that suggest that disclosing problems and talking is 'the solution' and they have accepted (however unwilling or unable to change) that "masculinity" -as one of the lads explicitly said -is part of the problem of male suicide.

To summarise the thesis I will try to answer the questions set in the beginning: whether increased gender equality would result in a convergence in men's and women's health and quality of life and whether it would make young working class men in particular, less vulnerable to suicide and other self-destructive behaviours. I will also suggest where changes to boys and young men's outlook on life can be made and where, on a societal scale, we must begin. The last sections will thus conclude my work by elaborating on the findings discussed so far.

## 6.1 Ritualistic relief from anomic structures and normative violence

Leading contemporary social research on suicide prevention in Ireland is based on the idea of anomie; the theory that modernity and social change has led to normative confusion and loosened social control. According to a long ongoing tradition within the social sciences, Irish society is suffering from normative confusion that has sprung from social changes that go back several generations. This loosened social control or ‘normlessness’ is presumably the cause behind rising suicide figures in Ireland, in the past as well as today. From a strictly sociological perspective, I have argued that suffering and suicide within marginalised groups does not come from a changing society. It comes from a socially mismanaged society.

If we look at the specific hurdles and life conditions relevant to young Irish people on lower incomes today, it becomes clear that to establish an autonomous, fulfilling and contributing life is for today’s marginalised youth a perilous, testing, humiliating and for many a heart-breaking enterprise. Furthermore, the lads are governed by exaggeratedly gendered norms that blatantly influence suicidal behaviours.

Paradoxically, much of the most influential research on young male suicide today argue that the causes behind these rising numbers in suicide in Ireland today is *loosened* social/normative control or ‘anomie’. This research suggests that, as these discredited or ‘redundant masculinities’ become internalised by young lads, the violence of regulatory norms become more rigorous and restrictive, not loosened. With regards to excessive alcohol consumption, I have also argued that the lads do not binge because social norms are impaired. Binge is socially dictated. Adhering to the strict norms within marginalised group constellations, the lads drink more, not less.

I call the lads’ reactionary responses ‘neo-traditional’. I base this on the fact that the new generations of young lads’ responses to social change are not traditional. These ‘protest masculinities’ are new responses to new –and to the lads worsening– circumstances. The lads walk a fine line between extreme norm regulation and escapism making the best and worst out of available coping mechanisms. Walker points out: “coping strategies that may be adaptive in one dimension, may be maladaptive in another, for example drinking”. (Walker 2008:50) The ritualistic

relief enacted by the lads is a coping mechanism and a way to re-establish a collective identity understood to be under threat. The *meanings* and *purposes* behind ritualistic processes of binge are more illuminating than whether or not individuals are guided by cultural norms (*-they are*).

Anthropologist Victor Turner is considered to be the main elaborator on van Gennep's Ritual Process (his 1969 book carries this title) and its categorical stages. The Ritual Process is divided into three phases; Separation, the Liminal Phase, and Reintegration (see full discussion in chapter 5). Particular interest for this study falls on the intermediate phase of Liminality where a group or individual go through a life-stage, state or social status to another. Unlike anomie, "[t]o accusations that concepts like "liminality" and *communitas* were too general and abstract, he [Victor Turner] replied that the ideas assisted many other ethnographers to organize their observations." (Thomassen 2009:8) In the centennial celebration of van Gennep's *Rites de Passage*, Thomassen (2009) sharply criticises Durkheim's schematic and 'ready-to-use theoretical approach' pointing to the fact that: "Durkheim was not an ethnographer, and his own insistence upon using "facts" and "observable social phenomena" for theory building was grossly violated" (ibid.).

In the beginning of this thesis I asked the question: As a concept built on abstract generalities, is *anomie* applicable to the specifics of culture and ultimately *real lives*? The problem with the over-usage or 'theoretical name-dropping' of anomie is that our satisfaction with the authoritative position of this grand theory keeps us from looking for more useful conceptual tools or equally lamentable -its original meaning and purpose. It is often a distraction from a much needed closer look. But again, as suggested by Meštrović and Brown (see 2.2), read as a *qualitative state* rather than a *quantitative model*, a closer look would be required! I believe that there is very little reward in applying anomie theory to the painful reality of suicide unless we use it in a way that brings forward how, and why reality has become so painful for a particular demographic.

Like van Gennep (see part 5.5) Bourdieu was a strong advocate for a scientific practice grounded in social action in the "life-world" and was critical against "the self-fulfilling, self-legitimizing abstractions of autonomous discourses of



objectivity” (Grenfell 2008:33) In a 2005 special edition on Masculinity in the Irish Journal of Sociology Anne Cleary calls for small-scale qualitative studies that can overcome the obstacles of young men and their “inscrutability and their fears of emotional transparency”(2005a:174). The most appropriate research method to go beyond what actors reluctantly address in conversation or what they choose to admit in surveys is, to put it bluntly, to observe and listen as lived processes unfold.

When the lads would not or could not describe what or how they felt I was still in a position where I could observe and participate in processes of coping and relief from a reality marked by the loss of jobs, friendships and lives. I was still in this participatory position as many of the young men in my host community and the surrounding areas chose to leave that life. The fact that the pains of this reality were not easily shared is part of the analysis and the widely known fact that this is not how young men ‘deal’. The lads deal and cope through ‘the drink’; by trying to forget or laugh at everything that falls out of the boundaries of the gender norms that inform their social and emotional lives.

The functions of ‘binge’ -whether it is over-consumption of food, alcohol or anything else- are many and open to interpretation. The psychologist curious of these functions asks: “what is it a substitute for?” “So you compensate by...”, “You self-medicate with...” Durkheim went as far as to say “collective psychology is sociology, quite simply.” (Durkheim quoted in Bellah 1973:xxi) In a social grouping, a cultural setting we must ask: “what is alcohol allowing us to do or feel?” (asking also: what is not otherwise allowed?), “what is it relieving us from?” (also asking: what are the subjective strains, stressors, torments?) and, “what is it (over)compensating for?” (asking also: what is the perceived lack?) The female participants in this study entered into a very honest conversation where they ask, what happens when:

you can’t think straight and you feel sick to your stomach, isn’t that a horrible feeling? And then for me I just go to X, X or X (all female friends) and I just say: “Lads...” And I just get their opinion and I sort it out and it’s ok! But imagine never being able to do that!! Imagine then having that feeling building up on top of the next thing that happens and the next thing happens! I would kill myself!!!

This young woman's friend concluded this argument in full accordance with the lads' many statements: "If you don't talk then you're a man. If you do talk you're gay." In the setting examined here, the drink temporarily erases or numbs an otherwise painful and stressful reality. Alternatively it gives young lads the opportunity to express their concerns and to be a bit more intimate in their relations and friendships.

I have argued that the serious and committed anthropologist stays in the field until she or he 'gets the joke'. I have laughed at stumbling, falling, and collapsing, - including my own! I have found myself in the middle of scraps and drunken brawls with the bruises to show and experienced many other self-destructive down sides of the *craic*. I could be challenged and criticised on theoretical and perhaps even on moral grounds for my involvement in local, intimate and dangerous processes of over-indulgence and binge. However I still insist that if I had not shared these experiences with the lads I would not understand the values or functions of the *Craic*, binge nor its proximity to self-destruction. In this regard my experiences and gained understanding of 'lad culture' and 'drinking culture' are not far removed from my informants'. This has made it necessary to be as frank as possible about my participation in the behaviours I study and to even include my self-admitted appreciation for 'the drink' in the analysis (see chapter 1). In this sense and unlike Barnes, I did not perceive an enormous gulf between the lads' experiences and situations and my own (2007:111) even though I was of a different gender and in many ways an outsider.

The age gap between the majority of the lads and my age varied between ten to five years down to the very same age. I was 27 when I entered the field and I am 32 as I now conclude this thesis. It should be said however, that during sessions with the explicit aim of 'getting locked', age becomes quite literally a number rather than any indicator of behaviour. Being female is however a strong indicator of a relatively level-headed 'session' lacking the bravado and flirtation with risk, extreme excess, recklessness and more desperate and acute forms of violent self-destruction. The 'consumption of the *craic* and the destruction of self' is not gender specific in any absolute sense but for the most part it is enacted in gendered stereotypical ways by

the manner and degree to which it is done. On these ritual-type occasions girls are often involved but in minority. Girls are not encouraged or ‘pushed’, in the same ways as the lads and the functions of ‘relief’ and ‘sanctioned emotionality’ does not play as vital a part as it does to the lads. As described by both the lads and the young women, the female social networks and friendships already have many levels of intimacy. Emotionality is not negatively sanctioned between female peers but was instead emphasised as something of major importance to maintain these bonds over time and for their general well-being.

In part 1.5 I wrote about how “I have been made to feel with everyone else around me over the last few years what a local atmosphere becomes after so many losses of young lives”. The ethnographic experience within real, lived structures, could not be described more appropriately than with Durkheim’s own words, moral derangement (*dérèglement*), - disillusion and disappointment. Drawn from my observations and discussions with the lads about the importance of fulfilling their social roles through the acquisition of skills, hard labour and a decent wage, I did not identify the signs of over-excited ambitions for financial gain and infinite desires spun out of all control. One of the lads in his late twenties expressed the current gloom as follows:

“There is a dark cloud hanging over the country. Every time the News is on they’re saying it will take twenty or thirty years to get out of this mess, or there is no way out, or our grandchildren will pay for this mess. The young lads on the dole queue didn’t cause this mess but are left to suffer the consequences and pay for it!”

Ascribing instead *dérèglement* as synonym to anomie, the lads are caught up in socioeconomic structures that are fundamentally anomic, -in a *socially mismanaged* society. The lads are not without norms. Quite the contrary, the violence of regulatory norms is often so prevalent that it restricts what by current research and the lads themselves are confirmed to be the most efficient coping mechanisms to manage the many difficulties in their lives. I have also argued that the seemingly destructive group constellations are at closer inspection the main source of social security available to young marginalised working class men whose social networks are relatively isolated.

Communitas, which refers to the group that goes through the ritual stages together: “is of the now; structure is rooted in the past and extends into the future through language, law, and custom.” (Turner 2008[1969]:113) Herein lays my particular interest in liminality as a shared, temporal state. Thomassen (2009) argues that Durkheim’s positivism cannot compete with data obtained from the lived ethnographic account. Ultimately, Durkheim was not an ethnographer, nor was he trying to explain how gender, social class and age informed the life conditions behind rising numbers in suicide.

Social constructions of gender and class, in direct response towards dramatic changes in Irish society, are behind the normative violence that is exercised within the identity work of Irish young lads. The defensive coping mechanisms the lads use within these structures, the alternative means for dignity, social security and relief, walk dangerously close to self-destruction.

I am deeply critical of the structures and discourses that reinforce gender oppositions by over-depicting the images of the incapability, ‘immature nature’ and emotional fragility presumed to be inherent in young, working class males and how this is internalised by so many young lads today. Social policy and initiatives for gender equality have for decades worked to empower young girls. The failure to empower boys and young men in our efforts for a more equitable society is as damaging to self-confidence, self-image, social-, and life skills for boys and young men as it is for those young females who are now over-burdened by their responsibility for themselves and others. I have shown in this thesis, that the lads’ own efforts to empower and support one another, sometimes have self-destructive consequences. I have also concluded that suicide sometimes becomes a tragic outcome when this support system and alternative forms of coping mechanisms lapse.

## 6.2 'All points to education'

*"If it is true that the principle of the perpetuation of this relationship of [male]domination does not truly reside (or, at least, not principally) in one of the most visible sites in which it is exercised – in other words, within the domestic sphere, on which some feminist debate has concentrated its attention – but in agencies such as the school or the state, sites where principles of domination that go on to be exercised and imposed, then a vast field of action is opened up for the feminist struggles, which are thus called upon to take a distinctive and decisive place within political struggles against all forms of domination"* (Bourdieu 2001:4)

The structural obstacles in the lads' lives are objective and internalised.

Socioeconomic factors determine the possibilities for accommodation, work opportunities and job loss. Internalised discourses –the expectations of working class masculinity – hinder the lads' on a more intimate level in developing life skills and coping mechanisms.

Bourdieu urges us to focus on, not just the domestic sphere where men are absent but on the institutions that still teach boys where boys *should not be* and where boys do not belong. Butler's understanding of gender as a performative and linguistic act leaves open the possibility for reconsideration and positive change. She explains that "what is called gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo. In its very character as performative resides the possibility of contesting its reified status." (1988:520) Change must happen, she argues, not on the individual level but within the hegemonic order of things.

Generations of Irish industrial working class men have earned social standing and respect by acquiring skills, performing a job well and by working hard even for meagre compensation. The relatively recent move into a service economy where the demand for 'feminine traits'; empathetic, caring, flexible, co-operative etc. is often seen as a move into feminised labour which threatens to destabilise this uniform notion of masculinity. The dualism of traditional gender divisions and exaggerated heterosexuality are also forms of social class resistance. To conform to school norms or to place high emphasis on academic achievement is according to Dolby and Dimitriadis (2004) and Willis (1977) also an emasculating experience as hard manual labour becomes a social signifier for masculinity whilst "mental labour" is read as feminine. These authors argue that young working class men "invert the

mental-manual hierarchy and transpose it into the gender dualism and male-female hierarchy.” (Dolby and Dimitriadis 2004:26) In the disavowal of dependence (see 4.5) of a capitalist system now favouring service over production the lads in my study are reconfiguring gender divisions into new, over-emphasised categories of gender-appropriate forms of employment and skills. Transgression over idealised gender boundaries of masculine and feminine work is thus seen as undermining class loyalties as well. This becomes increasingly problematic as ‘the lads’ work’ disappears.

Gender segregation and ‘gender appropriate behaviours’ are not upheld by ‘the lads’ or any other isolated demographic in society. It is structured and sustained by society as a whole. In *Moral Monopoly* (1998), under the header ‘*Motherhood as Learnt in the School*’, Inglis describes how historically, “[a] major aspect of the civilising process was the segregation of the sexes, first into separate beds, then into separate bedrooms and finally into separate lifestyles” (1998:190). In chapter 4 I took a closer look at the two earliest and most influential social institutions –the family and the school- and how they work to regenerate gendered spheres and behaviours. I have highlighted some of the devastating consequences this has for gays, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people but also for *anybody* who deviate from these regulatory norms. I argued in chapter 5 that this regulatory mechanism is maintained through mocking, ridicule and more problematically in terms of how to address it, -through the use of humour. In the specific context examined in this study, gender appropriateness has become internalised by the lads. It informs how they feel and how they live and express themselves. With time, inexperience and unfamiliarity, certain spheres of their lives; their behaviours, thoughts and feelings become awkward or as one of the lads put it –“too weird”. –They have in effect become inappropriate!

In the first pages of this thesis I argued against Mac Ghiolla Bhain’s essentialism and said that there was nothing “hardwired” –*biologically or even socially*- about calling a sensitive or an expressive man ‘gay’. Or, to use pervasive names for a man who holds his girlfriend’s hand in public, one who cries, one who likes to eat healthy or “take it handy with the drink”. If it was hardwired into the brain we would not, as Butler suggests, have to impose rules and sanctions to control these matters. On one

level, I have thus discussed gender as a social construct, promoting the idea that masculinity (and femininity) is historically, socially and culturally shaped and re-shaped. The evidence to support this are the different ways in which masculinity and femininity actually are interpreted and experienced in different parts of the world and over time. On yet another level, as expressed by my male informants in particular, I have discussed gender and masculinity as something more fixed- as a ‘natural’ characteristic. There is a curious truth in this view as well: If we hold it to be true that certain characteristics, manners and behaviours are the only legitimate properties of a specific sex then these behaviours will become a genuine part of who we are. As a result, alternative feelings; thought and actions will become inaccessible, unthinkable and un-practiced. As Butler reminds us, culture/gender is not a veneer upon nature/sex. It is through gender appropriate scripts and sanctions that we come to be.

I have persistently argued that a potential space to create a ‘moment of critique’ and reflexivity is the classroom. This is supported by the various sources presented here; Barnes (2007), McCormack (2010), Willis (1977), Dolby and Dimitriadis (2004) Clare (2000), Wiklund (2010), Barry (2006), Smalley (*et.al.* 2005) and Inglis (2008). Neo-liberal economic policy, its exclusively capitalist logic and emphasis on human capital (see part 2:7) and the legacy of the Catholic Church (parts 2.3, 4.6) both demote the development of social capital and social constructionism in schools.

Reports tell us how “gender is a critical determinant of mental health.” (Courtenay cited in Doherty *et.al.* 2010:214) It has been suggested throughout this thesis that young working class men are particularly vulnerable to mental ill health, suicide, alcohol and drug related problems. They have poor help-seeking abilities, coping mechanisms and relatively weak social support. Doherty *et.al.* suggest that further education and personal development could alter a person’s difficulty in help-seeking behaviour by ‘broadening cultural norms’ (2010:226). Smalley (*et.al.* 2005) insist that “education in schools and communities *could* aim to offer wider conceptions of appropriate roles for young men, including roles outside the formal labour market (such as caring for children and adult relatives.” (2005:137 my emphasis) The caring, - and service sectors are two examples of alternative forms of responsibility

that would provide self-, and social esteem when previous work commitments become unavailable.

There is a long historic tradition in Ireland of ideas concerning boys' and girls' distinct and separate curricular needs. Barnes writes about how 'feminine' subjects like cooking, home economics, music, or other forms of 'social learning' like SPHE (Social, Personal and Health Education) is not offered in most boys' schools (2007:202). She explains how the formal school curriculum is not only compatible with the highly stereotyped, negative masculine ethos but play a fundamental part in its structuring and maintenance. In this sense, the Exploring Masculinities programme discussed in chapter 4 was a very limited disruption and challenge to what the school otherwise enforces. What is clearly covered in the literature on EM is that single boys' school culture is not only in conflict with the aims set out in EM but that change in general is strongly resisted. Barnes (2007), McCormack (2010), Inglis (2008) and others have argued that this is very much due to the strong influence that the Catholic Church still holds over Irish schools. The main criticism against the programme was that a class that emphasised only the negative elements of being male enforced rather than interrupted the internalisation of an already pathological discourse. I have argued that the implementation of gender sensitive classes is a rather meagre attempt to counterbalance an already segregated school structure and curriculum. Gender sensitive interventions have up until now been the only approach taken to contest negative forms of masculinity in schools. A thorough examination of the "gender-appropriate" behaviours that are already well established in schools are still missing. If the rigid gender segregation adhered to today and the stereotypical polarisations of gender 'appropriate' behaviours, spheres and scripts were disentangled into individually based, gender neutral, social development there would be less need to disrupt these actively and vigorously *taught* behaviours at a later stage.

As a Swede I contrast my informants' testimonies and the abundance of research on these educational issues with my own background and memories from school in Stockholm. There are no single-sex schools in Sweden. I remember home economics where cooking, cleaning and child rearing were taught to the whole class. I can also recall sowing and textile classes as well as woodwork. Our class of some



30 pupils was divided into two groups as we took one of these subjects per semester and then swapped the following term. The pupils were not divided by gender but by the alphabetical order of their surnames. Gender neutrality and the structure of mandatory participation in all subjects is still taken for granted in the Swedish school system and there is no urgent need for compensatory teachings. There are however programmes similar to EM in place. *Machofabriken*, (the Macho Factory) is a popular educational material developed by Men For Gender Equality (*Män För Jämställdhet*) and two of Sweden's national women's organisations. The programme was launched in 2011 with a tour that was brought to Sweden's three major cities including the capital where the venue was booked out within days. McCormack told me in our interview that the interest for EM had been so low before the launch that it had been difficult to get people to turn up at all. McCormack writes that "Irish teachers were less likely than teachers in other OECD countries to hold constructivist beliefs on teaching and learning." (2010:31)

After consolidating with the researchers who had studied the EM programme it appeared that the concepts and ideas covered by the programme should not be *taught* in a traditional sense the word, but that they be *addressed by teachers* and *reflected upon by students*. This, McCormack concluded, would empower students through "critical thinking and independence of mind." (2010:89) The role and functions of the school itself should also be a topic in the interactional dialogue and reflexive training within the classroom. In his updated reflections in 2004 Willis argued that schools:

"should run curricular and extracurricular provision for exploring collective logics, programs that deal with social justice, not least exposing schooling's role in the reproduction of deepening class divisions in capitalist societies. ---*systematic teaching of systematic critical perspectives may fare better among those who really need it than does the main stream curriculum.*" (Willis in Dolby and Dimitriadis 2004:193 my emphasis)

Barnes argued that despite the negative publicity EM received, it was in fact a "genuinely groundbreaking pedagogical development, setting a new tone for personal and social development initiatives in Ireland. In terms of what it sets out to

do, it is indeed a new departure, putting major emphasis on the importance of the non-academic side of education.” (Barnes 2007:59)

Social Education, -including the aims and topics of EM- however selective or flawed, do not fall outside the scope of academia. The issues raised on social change and historical context, discrimination, sexuality and gender, social class and marginalisation (See discussion in part 4:8) do not fall on a ‘non-academic side of education’. Social development is part of a vast knowledge base within the Social Sciences and Humanities. It is taught and researched at some thirty or more departments, schools and centres around Ireland’s major universities. The fact that Social Education is still regarded as ‘touchy-feely-talk’, ‘whimsy’, ‘feminine’, is part of the problem and would also explain the reluctance and/or ambiguous reception these subjects and programmes encounter, especially when targeting boys. Barnes explained how compensatory measures were taken to make EM’s new pedagogical approach seem less ‘lax’, ‘soft’ or ‘whimsy’: “Perhaps cognisant of the likely (negative) reception to a proposal in which boys simply sit and talk, the programme was designed to resemble a traditional class syllabus.” (2007:59) What might be provided in the form of traditional teaching is social and historical context. Where in history and society the students are now situated, how this relates to them personally and as a group are thoughts and sentiments that have to be developed by the students themselves! Again Barnes suggests:

“When ( ) the culturally and socially acquired competencies and literacies of the boys are appealed to and engaged with, their enthusiasm, attitudes and general demeanour become strikingly different and shift away from the heavy pall of sarcasm, defensiveness, and offensiveness, which normally hangs over the classroom.” (Barnes 2007:320)

Barnes commented on the media’s remarkable disinterest in the boys’ responses to, or experiences of the programme and how the lads’ input was also absent from the EM material: “This lack of engagement with their voices and experiences seems to me to be a continuation of the understanding that the majority of young men have little to contribute, even when the topic at hand relates directly to them.” (2007:54)

The programme was discontinued and the “calls for change to male education remain unanswered” says McCormack (2010:20). At its most negative, what was scrapped were some scheduled hours in which masculinity was negatively and stereotypically portrayed and ultimately rejected by the young male students. What was also lost was a new student-focused, interactional pedagogy of social, reflexive training which probably bore more potential in its structure than thematic emphasis and flawed approach. **What was wrongly reduced to ‘simply sit down and talk’ was in fact a chance to reflect upon and express issues that boys and young men rarely get to articulate.** Barnes’ classroom ethnography, based on her own observations, described a class which:

“encourage[d] students to speak their minds, to contradict and to interrupt and to leave their seats for role-play and for experiments in language and debate. These changes are huge – both for the teacher and the students – in the context of the typical Irish boys’ schools which does not have a tradition in social education”. (Barnes 2007:168-9)

The lads would certainly not avoid an early death by participating in Home Economics-classes and perhaps not even by an effective syllabus of Social Learning. The lads in this study did not suggest a re-run or a re-make of the Exploring Masculinities programme. They did not know it had existed. They did however recognise the same problems relevant and specific to boys and young men that had formed the basis and the expressed need for the programme.

Let us be clear on this point: a narrowly defined masculinity does not kill people. It keeps many men from managing their well-being and from seeking help when they need it. Allow me to go back to the beginning here: the focal point –the linking key-between locally held expectations of gender and suicide is *coping*; well-being and quality of *life*. This includes even the most mundane life skills like washing bed clothes or ‘signing on the dole’ (social welfare) as emphasised by some of the female informants in this thesis. It also concerns more serious reconsiderations like ‘gender appropriate’ work, emotional seclusion, and the many regulatory norms examined in this text. Reflexive training should start in school. Current ‘gender-appropriate’ skills and curricula as they are structured in Irish schools today must be

reconsidered. Managing day-to-day life and its many stressors is important for all. I have suggested that a curricular interruption course (EM) to the 'problem with masculinity' is *not* the answer. In fact I argue that it is a futile attempt that cannot compete with the overall structure which segregates the sexes in the homes and in the schools into a strong/reflexive and a vulnerable/immature gender. I am calling for a discussion of what EM missed, and what swirled around the program in the form of controversy and upset. These very structures I conclude, must become part of a long needed discussion about *who needs what*, and more importantly, to contest what young boys and men are considered *not* to need or *not* need to develop, such as 'simply sit down and talk'.

### 6.3 Final thoughts and conclusions

My conclusions from this fieldwork are; that ‘gender-appropriate behaviour’, -the social and cultural expectations of masculinity, -does harm to the well-being of many Irish men. They make the coping mechanisms and strategies for well-being that are available to women inaccessible to young Irish lads. The lads’ strict cultural codes of gender-appropriate behaviour reward behaviours that lead to ill-health and negatively sanction behaviours with health-promoting benefits. This is controlled by mocking, ridicule, homophobic jargon and bullying.

*This thesis asks: Would increased gender equality lead to a convergence of health outcomes for men and women? Would it lead to a convergence in young people’s development of life- social skills and coping mechanisms and would it lessen young men’s vulnerability to self-destructive behaviours and suicide in Ireland?*

In Ireland, gender segregation and gender-appropriateness is rigorously pronounced in the public and domestic sphere. Sweden, which is ranked as one of the most equitable societies in the world (in terms of gender anyway), is an interesting reference point. Swedish research (Månsdotter 2009) suggests that the initial steps towards an equitable society whereby women are guaranteed the same basic rights as men are univocally positive for both adults and children. However Månsdotter also argues that Swedish society might have reached a point where ‘equality’ is negative for both women and men based on how many sick-days are taken out and general life expectancy:

“This might be explained by the fact that women have taken on (*over*) domains traditionally seen as masculine before the reverse has happened for men which is now putting women at a disadvantage in terms of overburdening and continued subordination in society, and for men, in terms of continued risky life-styles and loss of previously held social privileges.” (2009:7)

Throughout the ethnographic material and research presented here, there is strong evidence for an overwhelming imbalance between the under-burdening of boys and over-burdening of girls. This imbalance means that certain skills and opportunities

are encouraged for women and discouraged for men, which essentially favours no one. This unfortunate development does not reflect increased gender equality but would be best described as one-sided role expansion for women. In the local Cork context examined here, I have discussed how working class young lads in particular adhere to strongly emphasised norms and scripts that are determined by a narrowly defined masculinity. While Irish women have expanded their social roles and functions, some 'protest masculinities' have further retracted and restricted theirs. This reactionary response is fuelled by public discourse where young working class masculinities are depicted as 'redundant', 'backward' and 'inherently immature'.

Gender equity is the idea that men and women should have equal shares in the different domains of society and that they share equal levels of influence and responsibilities within different aspects of life, public and private. If we read our 'progress to date' as 'increased gender equality' then we would have to admit that this has not led to a convergence in health benefits or quality of life for men and women but rather the opposite. I suggest that the gendered imbalance in Irish society whereby women expand their roles while so many men are doing the opposite is not a sign of increased gender equality at all. The stage Ireland has reached where women have assumed roles and entered domains previously deemed inappropriate or even forbidden should be seen as just that: women progressing into spheres previously reserved for men. "Gender" does not mean "women" and "gender equality" is not a women's affair.

A situation where men can uninhibitedly manage their well-being and develop skills within the 'mundane' tasks now predominantly managed by women (as discussed by the young women in this study), co-caring and the equal sharing of children (which has proven to have great benefits for men's health and value of life), would have important consequences for men's quality of life. Equally beneficial, one can only assume, would be that the equal shares in responsibility for and contribution to both public and domestic life would lead to better health for women as well. The Swedish research presented here does suggest that if increased gender equality in its true sense -meaning that men expand their roles by taking equal shares in spheres and responsibilities that many men still deem to be feminine-, then the outcome in terms of public health and quality of life *would* increase for all.

The *expected* lack of responsibility, accountability and undervalued contribution and an increasing focus on “inability” have devastating implications for the emotional and personal development of young lads as they try to build social standing and dignity on these very markers of adulthood and an autonomous self. Discourses of male immaturity and low expectations of men’s contribution to society leave these young men at a perhaps comfortable but incapacitating distance from their own potential. Although the lads recognise the many benefits within new discourses that promote the idea of multiple masculinities, they lack sufficient practice and many of them still do not feel comfortable within them. The coping mechanisms *recognised by the lads themselves* (expressing emotions, addressing problems and disclosing vulnerability) are deemed too inappropriate for males. Herein lays an unfortunate factor which is that the lads –as a social category- are seen as upholding an anti-feminist and oppressing ideology when in fact, the very building blocks of Irish society regenerates gender-appropriateness and imbalances in health, social resources and quality of life.

Epistemology is the theory about the limits to human knowledge. Presumably there is a gap between what we do know about ourselves and the world and what we are capable of knowing. The epistemological nature of humankind is implied in the name of our species, *homo sapien sapien*, “the ape who knows that she knows”. Fintan O’Toole spoke at NUI Maynooth in December of 2009 after the release of his book *Ship of Fools: How Stupidity and Corruption Sank the Celtic Tiger*. In O’Toole’s interpretation of the rise and fall of the Celtic Tiger he discussed some important underlying epistemological issues within Irish culture and “how we understood ourselves”: He said: We have a strange relationship to our own reality.” The unknown was known, -“we didn’t know, but we knew”.

As O’Toole criticised public morality, the lack of social ambition and the ‘inability of our own society to grasp our own reality’, I just had to ask him: “If this was an epistemological problem, how did he suggest we encourage reflexivity on a massive scale to raise public morality? O’Toole’s answer to me was that the starting point was to look at: Where does morality operate? He brought up the strong hold the Catholic Church traditionally held over the Irish public: “We outsourced morality. It was external. The clergy had that.” Inglis wrote about traditional Catholic values

where “[t]he way to salvation is a complete trust in the Church’s definition of moral conduct” (Inglis 1998:34) Today it is increasingly up to people themselves to define their morals and values and the lads seem to have welcomed this new responsibility. The pressures of understanding themselves and the worlds they produce, consume and destroy could not have come at a more complex time.

Keeping guard against gender equity backlashes, *as we shall*, I would still suggest that one of the most harmful effects of our current situation is that the confidence of young lads is being undermined and opportunities like ‘the sharing of worry’ and ‘taking on responsibility’ which translate into general life skills, are being lost. And, in so doing, many young people –boys especially- are being debilitated as they are assumed (all well meant and presumably in their own defence) to be much more “immature”, “delicate” and “incapable” than they really are. It is vital as we now can determine in retrospect what really happened to the Exploring Masculinities programme, that any future curricular initiative that attempt to promote social constructionism and reflexivity in school, does not undermine young men’s confidence or intelligence. Better yet would be to disentangle the gender appropriate structures that divide Irish society, starting with young children, into two groups and two distinct life-styles.

Walker argues through her commitment to suicide prevention among the Traveller community that “[f]or an approach towards suicide prevention to be successful, it must involve building on the *strengths* within the Traveller community”. (2008:xiv my emphasis) She lists these particular strengths as “strong family and kinship ties, religious beliefs and a high tolerance for troubled members” (ibid.) and suggests that these sociocultural resources can be built on to protect those at particular risk. McCormack made the important observation that girl’s social learning in school strongly emphasises strength and abilities and that similar programmes for boys must do the same.

I have argued that the ‘dysfunctional’ dynamics of lad culture serve some very functional purposes and that group loyalties often are the main source of social security available to them. In this thesis I have highlighted the lads’ values and priorities such as light-heartedness and solidarity, humility and straightforwardness,



self-surrender and generosity. I have also discussed the values attached to hard work, the acquirement of skills and the importance of contributing, being trusted and ‘put to good use’ -to hear the two most important words in the English vocabulary – “thank you”. What resonates through the lads’ testimonies is the importance of being valued and trusted, seen and understood as people who can bear their weight and that of others. Barnes (2007) and others have highlighted how little society expects of working class young men in terms of social, cultural and economic contributions even when to most young lads, that is what they are most desperate to do. The lads feel the pressures that they ought to lead responsible, contributing lives but there are also those negative expectations that cynically predict that they won’t.

It is suggested that in the postmodern age, the new ego-ideals are capable (or rather mature enough) of unprecedented levels of self-reflexivity, that *homo sapien sapien* –the ape who knows that she knows- has taken on the biggest epistemological challenge yet. This study focuses on a grouping in Irish society that are not considered mature enough to deal with their own problems or the new requirements of their own reality -some of whom would ironically get stuck on the word “homo” and would not stop to ponder just how we come to know what we know. If *society* had truly reached a more reflexive point, we would not limit people -male or female- to that. Young working class males in Ireland and elsewhere need to re-imagine their worlds and their places within it because right now, many of them cannot imagine this place.

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Interviews with authors:

Dr. Cliona Barnes, Dep. Of Sociology, University of Limerick March 2011

Mr. Derek Chambers, the National Suicide Research Foundation (NSRF), Cork, May 2008

Dr. Paul Conway, School of Education, University College Cork, May 2010

Dr. Kieran Keohane, Dep. Of Sociology, University College Cork, November 2010

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