

## 'Teenage traumas'

The discursive construction of young people as a 'problem' in an Irish radio documentary

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### **Abstract**

Previous research has shown that media representations of young people consistently portray them as in one way or another 'problematic', but little such research has focused specifically on the medium of radio. This article contains a detailed case study of a radio documentary series broadcast in Ireland called *The Teenage Years*. It explores the editorial, rhetorical and narrative devices used to construct and sustain a mainstream clinical-psychological discourse of adolescence, one which effectively 'pathologizes' the teenage years. It also 'homogenizes' them, privileging age as an explanatory factor in shaping identity and development and thereby systematically ignoring other aspects of social inequality and stratification. It is argued that this is an important ideological dimension of the discourse expressed and enacted by the series.

### **Keywords**

adolescence, discourse, ideology, media studies, representations of youth

It has long been recognized that media representations of young people tend to adhere to a number of relatively fixed and predictable patterns. Research to date has tended to concentrate on the print media, and over a number of decades researchers have shown how news reporting of youth issues frequently both *reflects* and *amplifies* a sense of moral panic or crisis (e.g. Acland, 1995; Bessant, 1995; Cohen, 1980). It has also been suggested that this pattern has a history as old as the press itself (Pearson, 1983). Quantitative content analysis of newspaper coverage reveals a strikingly polarized or dichotomous representation of young people, whereby they are most likely to be portrayed as either deviant or criminal on the one hand or vulnerable victims on the other (Devlin, 2000; Falchikov, 1986; Porteous and Colston, 1980). In fact it has been suggested that this pattern pervades all prominent public representations of young people, not just in the media but also in academia and in public policy making:

One of the key features of academic (and non-academic) representations of youth is the widespread construction of youth in general, and specific groups of young people in particular, as 'problems'. This problem status may involve being seen as the *source* of a particular focus of adult concern (such as football hooliganism), or as being 'at risk' of getting into difficulty of some kind (such as 'teenage pregnancy'). Young people are frequently presented as either actively 'deviant' or passively 'at risk', and sometimes as both simultaneously. In general, young men are more likely to be presented as actively 'deviant', especially in aggressive forms, and especially if they are working class and/or black. Young women, however, are more likely to be constructed as passively 'at risk'. (Griffin, 1997: 17-8)

This article presents a detailed case study of this representational pattern whereby young people are discursively constructed as being in one way or another 'problematic'. It focuses on a 16-part documentary series called *The Teenage Years*, broadcast in Ireland on RTE Radio 1 between September and December 1997. RTE, Rádío Telefís Éireann, is Ireland's publicly-owned national broadcasting station, and Radio 1 is the 'mainstream', adult-oriented channel; there is also a youth-oriented music channel and an Irish-language channel. It is important to stress that this is a case study of one radio series, and does not *in itself* provide the basis for generalized conclusions about radio or about media representations of young people. It is also important to point out that - notwithstanding the views of Griffin and others - the discursive construction of young people as problematic is only one of a number of prevalent discourses of youth. Others most notably include 'youth as fun' (Hebdige, 1983).

There are a number of reasons for doing a case study of radio, and specifically of this radio series. Firstly, radio is an entirely verbal/aural medium, and a study such as this enables us to isolate the linguistic/non-visual elements of discourse on youth. The visual dimension of such discourse - as represented for instance in styles of photography - has been a subject of study for at least two decades; an early example was Hebdige, 1983. Secondly, many media representations of young people - in film, on TV, the internet and so on - are aimed at young people themselves, or at a mixed audience of young people and adults. This documentary series provides a clear instance of a media representation of young people constructed *by* adults *for* adult consumption: the radio series had a 'tie-in' with a paperback book of the same title published about the same time and explicitly described as 'a guidebook for parents of teenagers' (Murray and Keane, 1997). (For evidence that media messages and imagery may vary depending on whether the projected audience primarily consists

of young people or adults, and a suggestion that this discrepancy is itself a reflection of differential power relations, see Devlin, 2000.) Thirdly, the series in question was unusual in that such extensive coverage (almost five hours of broadcasting) is not commonly devoted specifically to the teenage years in the documentary and features media, as opposed to fictional programming, films, TV 'soaps' and so on. It is also of particular interest in that its format and content give special prominence to psychological expertise, and it therefore represents a coming together of academic and non-academic (media) personnel in the construction of a particular image of the teenage years. Overall, therefore, this series might tentatively be regarded as a good exemplar of certain common ideas and assumptions about young people in contemporary Irish society, and other similar societies.

Socially, culturally and economically, the Republic of Ireland has much in common with its European neighbours. It has been described as 'an interesting example of a small, European, post-colonial, liberal-democratic, capitalist state, attempting to solve political problems of a kind common to other such countries, but in the light of its own particular conditions' (Collins and Cradden, 1997: 1). Such 'particular conditions' include the continuing challenge of attempting to resolve the political difficulties associated with the conflict in Northern Ireland. In addition, the Republic of Ireland industrialized and urbanized later, and faster, than most countries in western and northern Europe; although once the process had decisively begun, in the late 1950s, 'the dynamic elements in the society's social structure were those characteristic of the advanced capitalist societies' (Breen et al., 1990: 7). In the 1990s a period of dramatic economic growth led to the common use of the term 'Celtic Tiger' (drawing on the well-worn economic catchphrase 'Asian Tiger'), a notion that came to be associated not just with economic buoyancy but with cultural dynamism and confidence. Young people's spending power increased considerably and conspicuous manifestations of youth cultural activity became more common. All told, therefore, the analysis which follows is likely to have relevance beyond the specific Irish context.

## DISCOURSE AND IDEOLOGY

Reference has already been made to the concept of discourse. This is a term 'widely and sometimes confusingly used in various disciplines' (Fairclough, 1995: 18). As used in this article, and in keeping with much contemporary social constructionist theory, a discourse is a way of 'referring to or constructing knowledge about a particular topic or practice: a cluster or *formation* of ideas, images and practices, which provide ways of thinking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with, a particular topic [or] social activity' (Hall, 1997: 6). Along very similar lines, Norman Fairclough (1995: 94) defines discourses as 'constructions or significations of some domain of social practice from a particular perspective'. Both these definitions make it clear that discourses consist not just of *ideas* but of social and institutional *practices* associated with those ideas. From this perspective, the radio documentary under consideration can be seen not only as an electronic text consisting of words and sounds, but as in itself a form of social practice involving media and psychological professionals, complementing and reinforcing other related social and institutional practices (e.g. therapeutic intervention in the lives of young people) and in itself not just expressing but actively helping to construct and sustain (to 'constitute') certain ideas about 'the teenage years'.

A concept closely related to that of discourse is ideology. This, too, can be used in a variety of ways: as Terry Eagleton (1994: 14) has observed, 'it is hardly an exaggeration to claim that there are almost as many theories . . . as theorists'. The present analysis adopts the definition of ideology proposed by John B. Thompson (1984, 1990) and subsequently taken up by a number of prominent theorists and analysts of media discourse, including Fairclough (1995). Here, ideology is 'meaning in the service of power'; it refers to 'the ways in which meaning serves, in particular circumstances, to establish and sustain relations of power which are systematically asymmetrical' (Thompson, 1990: 7). Such meaning may frequently be tacit or 'understood':

Ideological representations are generally implicit rather than explicit in texts, and are embedded in ways of using language which are naturalized and commonsensical for reporters, audiences and various categories of third parties – presuppositions and taken-for-granted assumptions upon which the coherence of the discourse depends . . . A useful methodological principle is that the analyst should always ask of any text whether and how it is working ideologically, but expect answers to vary: ideology is more of an issue for some texts than for others. (Fairclough, 1995: 44–5)

The rest of this article attempts to show that the documentary series *The Teenage Years* does indeed work ideologically, in the sense outlined by Thompson and by Fairclough. While Fairclough (1995: 45) finds it helpful to distinguish between ideological (tacit or unspoken) aspects of discourse and 'persuasive' aspects such as rhetorical and narrative devices, he regards both as 'political aspects which problematize the idea of the media simply "giving information"'. I would suggest that we might regard these ideological and persuasive dimensions as 'discursively symbiotic'. A narrative, for instance, might be presented against a background of unspoken assumptions, in this case about adolescence and the teenage years, the authority and expertise of professionals in psychology and the media, and so on; while the narrative, and the rhetorical devices used in its construction, may itself then reinforce those very assumptions through the act of treating them as 'needless to say'. The typical rhetorical features and narrative structure of the programmes in *The Teenage Years* are described below, after a brief overview of the series. Subsequent sections address ideological dimensions of the series under a number of thematic headings.

## OVERVIEW OF THE SERIES

Each programme in the radio series *The Teenage Years* lasted approximately 18 minutes, and the format adopted is remarkably uniform: a young person is heard speaking briefly about some problem or difficulty; the theme music begins and the presenter (who is also the producer) introduces the programme, beginning in all sixteen cases with the words 'On today's Teenage Years . . .' and using very similar formulations throughout. Reference is frequently made at the outset to research studies or statistical data on the extent of this week's problem at national level or among young people as a whole (numbers in square parentheses after quotations indicate which programme is the source; a full list is given later in this section):

On Today's *Teenage Years* the effect on one teenager of the death of a parent. According to research studies such a loss can cause complicated grief reactions and

great difficulties for the teenager and can generate significant psychological problems in later life. [6]

On today's *Teenage Years* the study of a young boy's decline into drug addiction. According to surveys approximately one in five young people will try some form of drug and approximately one in seven will use cannabis. [8]

In terms of 'modality' (Fairclough, 1995; Fowler, 1991) these references to research findings might be seen as enhancing the veracity and reliability of the series as a whole: 'The opening parts of a documentary need to establish for the audience a reality, a world, which carries conviction as authentic' (Fairclough, 1995: 107). In most cases the presenter then says something like 'What you are about to hear is the story of [name of interviewee and indication of problem or difficulty]'. For the following 12 minutes or so we hear the young person's first-person account of what happened, interspersed with comments by the presenter, which are primarily narrative 'links':

The following day was the second day of the festival . . . .[1]

In the following months Patricia received counselling and therapy . . . .[4]

In time, Doris did a course in secretarial work, she lost weight, gained confidence . . . . [13]

This stage of the programme ends with some bridging remarks by the presenter 'wrapping up' the narrative, commonly beginning with the word 'today' and in all cases ending with the words 'Psychologist, Marie Murray', which introduces the next stage of the programme:

Today, Sarah's weight is back at eight stone and overall she's gained sixteen or seventeen pounds since the height of her problems. She returns to the hospital for a monthly check-up and she's once again healthy. Psychologist, Marie Murray. [11]

Today, Patricia is aged 19 and still in therapy recovering from a family trauma and coping with the symptoms of a chronic depression. She's still needing help but she's made lots of progress. Psychologist, Marie Murray. [12]

The remainder of the programme consists of comments from the psychologist on the problem or issue being discussed, often reflections on what parents can do or how the problem can be avoided or ameliorated, with further contributions from the young person and with links from the presenter, who then brings the programme to a close. The full list of themes covered during the sixteen weeks is as follows ('f' or 'm' indicates whether the interviewee is female or male):

- 1 Bullying (f)
- 2 Relationships/sexuality (f)
- 3 Gangs (m)
- 4 Panic attacks and phobia (f)
- 5 Alcohol abuse (m)
- 6 Trauma of bereavement (f)
- 7 Depression (m)
- 8 Drug addiction (m)
- 9 Exam pressure (f)
- 10 Self-esteem (f)

- 11 Anorexia Nervosa (f)
- 12 Separation (impact on teenagers) (f)
- 13 Shyness and bullying (f)
- 14 Stealing (m)
- 15 Trauma of an accident (m)
- 16 Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (m)

It is clear from the list that the emphasis is overwhelmingly on the teenage years as traumatized and disordered, whether by virtue of personality dysfunction (shyness, depression, anorexia nervosa, obsessive-compulsive disorder, phobia), deviant behaviour (addiction to drugs or alcohol, stealing, gang membership), or the impact of an external pressure or event (accident, exams, separation, bereavement, bullying). Only two programmes in the series do not fit this pattern: the one on relationships and sexuality and the one on self-esteem. Overall, it is difficult to imagine a more 'problematic' representation of the teenage years.

The remainder of this article will explore the discursive construction of this representation. It is very important to stress that in the remarks which follow no judgement is being made or implied regarding the individual stories and experiences recounted by the participants. At a personal level, this listener found many of the contributions deeply moving, and was impressed by the apparent strength and integrity of the contributors, many of whom had survived with great dignity what appear to have been appallingly difficult periods in their lives. The point here is rather to analyse the series as a *composite representation* of the 'teenage years', the final shape of which was determined by professionals in the media industry and in clinical psychology.

## NARRATIVE AND RHETORIC

*The Teenage Years* series is constructed using an unusually consistent – even formulaic – form of narrative. All but one of the 16 programmes (the exception being the one on self-esteem) involve retrospection and the 'telling of a story' by an interviewee (or in the case of the programme on relationships, two interviewees: a mother and daughter). Narratives of one kind or another are used in a 'substantial proportion of media output' (Fairclough, 1995: 90), and narrative as a genre (or 'pre-genre': Swales, 1990) is particularly well-suited to rhetorical construction. Indeed the very act of constructing a narrative – creating a 'story' and thereby 'making sense' (and a *particular, chosen* sense) of disparate information – can be rhetorical in itself. Narratives as a rule consist both of 'event-line' (story) elements concerned with recounting what has happened and 'non-event-line' elements which relate to 'presentation, the managing of the discursive event as a bounded whole, or to its reception by the audience' (Fairclough, 1995: 91–2). The narratives of the programmes under consideration can be seen to conform closely to the generic structure of narrative as identified by William Labov and Joshua Waletzky (1967) and summarized by Pertti Alasuutari (1995: 82–4). This structure has five key sections: orientation, complication, evaluation, resolution, and coda.

The *orientation* in *The Teenage Years* consists of two parts: the opening 'scene-setting' words of the young person which precede the theme music and are designed

to catch the attention of the listener and give a hint of the nature of the story to follow; and the music itself, which, as it becomes familiar to the listener, also serves to orientate. The music is overlaid with the voice of the presenter, informing us of the content of this week's programme. The format of this latter part has already been described briefly above ('What you are about to hear . . .'). Examples of the opening 'scene-setters' include:

I couldn't be left out. I didn't want to be left out because otherwise I would've had no friends. And that's the way it was. It was either group friendship or it was no friendship so you had to deal with that. [3]

Every day when I'd get up I'd tune into the weather forecast, em, listen to it to see if there was going to be any thunder and lightning. If there was I'd run upstairs, hide under the bed and have a radio beside me. And this is my phobia. [4]

The *complication* section of the narrative is where the 'story' proper is told, and in this case refers to that part of the programme (the greater part, in terms of time) where the young person recounts his or her experience, with narrative links by the presenter. It is very important to remember that as well as the event-line elements of the young person's account, this section of the narrative is significantly – perhaps decisively – shaped by non-event-line elements. As Fairclough (1995: 92) says: 'The salience of non-event-line elements in media narratives is a measure of the degree to which stories are mediated by presenters'. Most obviously in the present context, what the presenter says, and *how* it is said, will colour the listener's perception of what the young person says, or has just said. For instance, in the following 'link', the presenter's remarks strongly convey the sense of *development of a problem over time*, of things going from bad to worse, and this is then likely to be the spirit in which the listener interprets the young person's account ('what I'm hearing now is an illustration of things being worse than they were'):

From the very beginning Brian's gang was involved in juvenile delinquent behaviour, digging holes in the local golf club, robbing apples, being chased by the local landlord, but by the age of 14 the group's pattern of behaviour took on a more serious role. [3]

At least as important, however, is the fact that the young people's own contributions are edited from *interviews*, and therefore not only are we hearing an edited version of what they said, but we are *not hearing* the questions to which they were responding, and therefore are not in a position to assess the extent to which they were guided or directed in what they said. This element is *hidden* by the format used (first person accounts with presenter's narrative links). There is evidence, nonetheless, that it was an important part of the construction of the series. The fact that on occasion the remarks from the contributors begin with utterances such as 'Oh God, yeah. . .' [4], 'God, I can't really remember . . .' [2], 'I did, I did. . .' [13] remind the attentive listener that what we are hearing is not a spontaneously-voiced account of an experience or a problem but a set of *answers* to specific *questions*, which we are *not hearing*. For instance, in the third example just given – 'I did, I did . . .' – the context, and preceding remarks by the presenter, suggest that the young woman has just been asked some such question as: 'Did you sometimes cry yourself to sleep at night?', or heard some prompt such as: 'You must have cried yourself to sleep at night'.

The *evaluation* and *resolution* elements of narrative structure are more 'positionally flexible' (Fairclough, 1995: 92) than some of the others, and in *The Teenage Years*

the resolution seems to be ‘wrapped around’ the evaluation. The first instalment of the resolution is that part which ‘resolves’ the chronological narrative, or brings it to a close, and it consists of the bridging remarks of which examples were given above. These begin with a comment on the current ‘state of play’ and end with the introduction of the psychologist to make ‘expert’ comment:

... Darragh ... remains one of the 200,000 sufferers from acute depression in Ireland today, a problem confined not just to adults but also featured in the teenage years.  
Psychologist, Marie Murray. [7]

The second part of the resolution comes *after* the evaluation, when the *problem* itself (rather than the narrative) is ‘resolved’. This takes the form of a closing remark from the young person (which, we should remember, is a remark *chosen* during the editing/production process). Not uncommonly it has the character of an arrival or a return from an undesirable place or state. This, added to the fact that in the majority of cases the participants are looking back and are no longer speaking as ‘troubled teenagers’ themselves, might be said to add to the sense of the ‘Otherness’ of the teenage years which the series conveys.

The education has allowed me to come out and be myself, and not be influenced by what others do or say, you know, and that really has changed my life. [8]

I just live every day as it comes and I just thank God that I don’t suffer from these problems any more because they really are the worst thing you could ever suffer from and I never ever want to see them again. [16]

Between these two parts of the resolution is the *evaluation*, which opens, after the words ‘Psychologist, Marie Murray’ with an evaluative comment by the psychologist, and continues with an interleaving of her remarks with further contributions from the interviewees. The *expertise* of the psychologist is clearly central to the construction of these programmes. The simple three words ‘Psychologist, Marie Murray’, used so consistently after the short ‘state-of-play’ remark by the presenter, seem to play on a set of assumptions shared by programme-maker and audience alike about the authority of what is to follow (‘We have been listening to the first-hand account from the young person him/herself, now a psychologist will explain it and put it in context for us’). Certain remarks by the psychologist herself also imply a hierarchical relationship, a difference in the capacity to select what is most crucial or critical, between her own insights and those of the interviewees.

There are many points made there by Áine regarding self-esteem, and indeed many are highly relevant and germane to the idea of self-esteem, but the critical one is what we do as parents and really this goes back to childhood, how we nurture and how we respond to our children ... [10]

Finally (after the second part of the resolution), the *coda* takes the form of a standard valediction from the presenter, where he thanks the interviewee and the psychologist, mentioning the psychologist’s professional affiliations and the book that ‘ties in’ with the radio series. Alasuutari (1995: 83) notes that ‘coda is often expressed by *deixis* – by using the words “that”, “there”, or “those” as opposed to “this”, “here” or “these” – and in that way pointing to the end of the narrative, identifying it as a remote point in the past: “And that was that”’. This is precisely how the coda for *The Teenage Years* is constructed:



And with that, we've come to the end of the programme for this week. My thanks to [name of young person] and to Marie Murray, co-author of the book *The Teenage Years* and Principal Psychologist at St Vincent's Psychiatric Hospital, Dublin and St Joseph's Adolescent Services, Dublin. Until next week, goodbye.

It has already been suggested that narrative is particularly well-suited to the use of rhetoric – may even in itself be rhetorical – and many of the devices and strategies of representation mentioned above are clearly examples of rhetoric: the use of a standard framework which comes to have (like any established 'institution') its own authority; the selecting of appropriate excerpts for effect; the juxtaposition of complementary points of view expressed in different ways by 'ordinary' young people and by a professional psychologist; the invocation of professional expertise. A further rhetorical device used with striking regularity in the series is that of 'repetition and variation', where similar or related things are listed one after the other, to 'hammer home' the message.

From the very beginning Darragh was a timid boy, quiet, shy, low in confidence, not a good mixer, short of friends. He was fearful, fretful and he worried a lot . . . [7]

For Bob, who was now in his teens, the thought of robbing or stealing had become like a drug, a compulsion, an obsession, an addiction, an act done for the rush or the kicks. [14]

Rhetoric has been defined as being 'most centrally, perhaps, about persuasion . . . [R]hetoric is the form that discourse takes when it goes public; that is, when it has been geared to an audience' (Simon, 1989: 2). The discourse which is 'going public' in this instance might be termed – following Fairclough's (1995: 94) recommendation that discourses be identified by specifying 'both domain and perspective' – a mainstream clinical-psychological discourse of adolescence. The remainder of this article attempts to elucidate further features of such discourse.

## 'A CASE FOR TREATMENT'

Overall, I would argue that the cumulative effect of the rhetorical and thematic content of *The Teenage Years* is to suggest that these years are a case for medical (psychiatric) or therapeutic *treatment*. It seems reasonable to suppose that the investment of such a lot of time and energy in a series *specifically about* the teenage years and explicitly titled as such is intended to result in a picture in the listener's mind of what these years are typically like. Otherwise, surely it should be brought to the listener's attention in magazine listings and in the programmes themselves that the series focuses on aberrant or exceptional problems or circumstances. But if the latter is intended to be the case, the question arises: why focus on teenagers, since these problems (alcohol, drugs, personality disorders, over-conformity, stealing, bereavement, accidents) affect people of all ages? It is for this reason that I suggest that the overall thrust of the series – whatever the intentions of the professionals involved, since as Stuart Hall (1990: 20) says it is 'not the personal inclinations of its members' which 'define how the media function' – is to represent the teenage years as *inherently* problematic, and profoundly so.

Some specific examples from the programmes bear out this point. The following excerpt comes from the programme on depression (the psychologist is talking):

Well the real problem with depression in the teenage years is that it is quite honestly very difficult to spot and very difficult to identify, and in particular it's just sometimes impossible to differentiate between what are normal teenage moods and behaviour on the one hand and on the other hand symptoms of black dark depression. But first off it is important for parents to recognize that depression is very much a feature of the teenage years . . . .[7]

In the programme on stealing, the presenter's introductory remarks as part of the 'orientation' of the narrative confirm this broad view of the teenage years as problematic, and reinforce it by citing expert evidence and opinion (a further example of the 'modality of truth' already mentioned):

On today's *Teenage Years*, the disturbed behaviour of one adolescent who turned to stealing at home and from shops. According to clinical evidence, transient emotional and behavioural problems are common in the teenage years with some signs and symptoms becoming more pronounced, others disappearing over time. [14]

This reference to 'signs and symptoms' is typical of the terminology used throughout the series, most commonly in the contributions from the psychologist:

So it is important to recognize the early warning symptoms of a problem like this . . . [14]

I think there are many symptoms parents could look out for to detect if their teenager is being bullied. [1]

I think the next piece of information that parents need to arm themselves with includes the signs and the symptoms of drug abuse. [8]

Not surprisingly, given the emphasis on problems with symptoms, and the use of a narrative form which recounts in most cases a bad experience which the young person has come through, there is frequent reference to the process which enabled or assisted them to come through it: i.e. the therapeutic process or treatment itself.

Today Patricia is aged 19, still in therapy recovering from a family trauma and coping well with the symptoms of a chronic depression. She's still needing help but she's made lots of progress. [12]

In the following months and years Michael received treatment for his substance abuse and he returned to school eventually receiving high honours in his Leaving Certificate. [5]

Related to the focus on symptoms and treatments, there appears to be an unquestioning acceptance in the series (specifically in programmes 3, 5 and 8) of a 'medical model' of problems such as alcoholism and drug abuse, and of what might be colloquially termed the 'slippery slope' view of young people's involvement with these substances; as well a suggestion that young people are almost entirely lacking in agency, choice or responsibility in the face of overwhelming peer pressure:

. . . and I mean it progresses steadily from there you've your drink and then you've your drugs and you've hash and you hear about things like acid and you hear about mushrooms and you hear, you know, all these other things and because you've heard about it and these people that told you first they were your great mates, you looked up to them so you, they've told you about acid so you decide I'll move on I'll try this yeah, they say it's good and they're cool guys I better try that as well. [5]

Elsewhere, the psychologist comments that 'the essence of any gang or any grouping

of teenagers is exactly that kind of compromising of your independence to the rules that are set by the members of the group or indeed by their leaders' (emphasis added). She acknowledges the positive side of membership of such 'groupings' ('it can be a preparation for adulthood and for learning group behaviour'), but her comments are on balance negative.

I think that many parents are afraid of gangs because they conjure up all the images of delinquent behaviour, not to mention the fact that I suppose every parent feels that while their own lad [*sic*] is fine that every other gang member is a bad influence. And indeed experience tells us that sometimes they're right (. . .) Probably as we speak there are thousands if not tens of thousands of teenagers who are in gangs and unhappy to be there and who would actually prefer to be off on their own or just part of different circumstances if they had a choice. [3]

This latter remark is heavily-laden with assumptions – or what Fairclough (1995) calls 'presuppositions' – which are not questioned either by the psychologist herself or, it seems, by the interviewer. The decision was taken to explore the teenage years largely by *indsight*, whereby people look back on a time (in most cases) of trouble or difficulty. This means that we do not hear the voices of young people who are *currently* in 'gangs' and other 'groupings of teenagers', or their assessment of the psychologist's view that they are 'unhappy to be there' and would not be there at all if they had a choice. Scarcely any space is created within this particular construction of the teenage years for an acknowledgement of the benign aspects of young people's exuberant, communal and collective behaviour, or the positive role it might have to play for society as a whole.

The factors just discussed, and indeed the unremitting use of the term 'the teenage years' itself, which I would suggest has a kind of reifying effect, contribute to a pervading quality of *essentialism* in the series as a whole. This essentialism is quite explicitly spelt out in the book of the series, which informs the reader that 'while public beliefs shift and change, adolescents remain essentially the same from one generation to the next, and differences in behaviour depend on how they are educated, what they are taught, and the relationship we have with them when we try to guide them' (Murray and Keane, 1997: 30). The only substantial challenge in the radio series to such essentialist and problem-centred representations of the teenage years and the issues associated with them appears, perhaps not surprisingly, in one of the only two programmes which do *not* focus on trauma or disorder and which feature young people still in the middle of their teens. In the programme on 'self-esteem', the interviewee is a young woman identified as 'sixteen-year-old Áine'. Her comments include the following:

. . . Parents have to understand that teenagers, a lot of them aren't stupid, you know, we do know what's going on, we do know that drugs are bad for us, a lot of us just wouldn't take them, and parents just have to sit down and talk to their teenagers and see what their views are (. . .)

You just have all these years and years of teachers and parents and older people and everything just saying no, you're small, you're wrong, you have no brain, you're a teenager, and just going on and on like that . . . [10]

Concomitant with the essentialist model of the teenage years is a complete absence of any form of structural analysis that might contextualize some of the personal problems and issues we are hearing about. Time and time again, 'resolutions' (and proposed

'solutions') are at the level of the qualities of interpersonal relationships (trust, respect) and individual personalities (most notably confidence and self-esteem). The constant repetition of these terms throughout the series has itself, I would argue, a reifying effect as well as rhetorical impact.

... So in many respects these two words are intertwined, respect and trust, because in return for the trust that you give teenagers they really have to respect and live up to that trust ... What this is really all about ... is self-esteem. [10]

... And I think she started to lose all of her self-esteem and her self-respect and all of her sense of self and that really was pivotal to the way her problem developed. [13]

Reification has been identified by Thompson (1990) as one of the 'general modes of operation' of ideology. It can be used to represent certain key characteristics of social actors and social relations as 'inevitable and ahistorical' (or, as I have just suggested, lacking any 'structural' dimension). Thompson suggests that reification often works through a symbolic strategy of naturalization ('that's just the way things are'), and this certainly seems to apply in the case of the essentialist representation of young people, and of adolescence, in this series. Such a representation, like all media discourse, involves the exercise of *choice*, or, as Fairclough (1995: 18) says, 'the selection of options from within the meaning potential - how to represent a particular event or state of affairs, how to relate to whoever the text is directed at, what identities to project'. He therefore encourages analysts to be 'sensitive to absences from the texts - the choices that were not made but might have been - as well as presences in it'. The following section suggests that social class is one such absence, or, more accurately, an 'unspoken presence', in *The Teenage Years*.

### **CLASS: AN 'UNSPOKEN PRESENCE'**

While social class is not explicitly mentioned at all in the series, it is present in subtly significant ways. In certain cases accent, style and 'orality' (including utterances such as 'em, 'eh', 'like', 'you know') act as markers to the class background of the interviewees. Three notable examples of this are in the programmes on alcohol, drugs and stealing, all of which feature young men whose accents are immediately recognizable as Dublin working-class (the writer verified this by playing the tapes to classes of students, including many Dubliners). Of course it is significant that working-class young men were selected in these three particular cases. The fact that they developed the problems they did is highly likely, from a sociological point of view, to bear *some* relationship (however complex and however different in each case) to their class situation, but the programmes do not explicitly advert to this possibility.

In the programme on stealing, we are told that the young man was stealing from home as well as elsewhere. His home situation is not described, except for references to the difficulties his stealing created for his parents, 'by all accounts two kind, considerate people'. In the programme on drugs, we hear that Peter, who was 'lacking in confidence, low in self-esteem', was 'living in a family with troubles and problems all of its own'. Peter himself says that his troubles were many:

... other things, the money problems in the house, my ma and my stepfather split up, you know, living on soup, having to sew holes in my runners, you know it was hard. [8]

The presenter continues: 'From that family background, Peter grew up lacking in self-confidence, constantly believing he couldn't succeed . . .'. There is no reference, however, to class or to poverty by name, either by the presenter or the psychologist, and the latter's conclusion, in keeping with other instances cited above, is simply that 'the greatest protection we can give a teenager to resist drugs is to develop their self-esteem and their self-confidence'.

In contrast with these cases, two examples will serve to illustrate how class is a presence – but again not acknowledged as such – in very different ways in other programmes. In the programme on exam pressure, the interviewee is a young woman whom the presenter describes as 'a first-class student, a high achiever, a hard worker, a teacher's dream'. At the time of broadcast she is about to start 'her fourth and final year of college, bringing to a close her primary college degree'. The issue of exam pressure is therefore explored in a context of considerable academic *success* in the formal educational system, with the potential for more to come ('her *primary* college degree'). Questions – class-related questions – to do with educational disadvantage and alienation in the teenage years, and the particular kinds of 'exam pressures' that go along with these, are not acknowledged at all, never mind explored.

Somewhat similarly, in the programme on self-esteem, the young woman being interviewed sounds assured and confident and, when giving examples of how parents should allow children to make decisions for themselves, does so in a way that takes for granted educational opportunity and the likelihood of educational success (and indeed professional success):

Well if parents try and make the decisions for their children all the way up the line . . . like you're going to run to your parents, and your parents are going to go, yes well I think you should do law and I think you should do medicine, and you could want to be, like, an accountant or something, you know . . . [10]

Later, the presenter mentions 'the environment at home' as one of the factors influencing a young person's development, but in the psychological evaluation the only aspects of the home environment explored are those which have to do with interpersonal relationships ('encouragement and positive support . . . and trust and respect'), as is overwhelmingly the case throughout this series. It therefore shares with many representations of young people in other media, and in other contexts, a 'complete neglect of underlying social problems . . . or discussion of underlying socio-economic factors' (Lumley, 1998: 2). It appears to be assumed, or in Fairclough's term 'presupposed', that class is irrelevant in understanding matters of identity and personal development; a standpoint which might clearly be regarded as serving an ideological function.

## GENDER AND SEXUALITY

The absence of structural analysis in the series extends also to the treatment of issues relating to gender and sexuality. Some aspects of the representation of gender will already be clear from the discussion in previous sections, including the last one where attention was drawn to the fact that certain types of issue are, significantly, explored through interviews with young working-class males. The list presented towards the beginning of the article indicates which programmes were based on interviews with

males and which with females (in total, seven with males, nine with females). It was suggested that the programmes (except in two cases) fall into three categories, all relating to some type of trauma or disorder: deviant behaviour (four programmes), personality dysfunction (five programmes) and external pressure (five programmes). All four programmes in the first category are based on interviews with young males. As is already evident, this category is also the one which is most clearly patterned by class: *all four* young men appear to be from working class backgrounds.

Of the five programmes in the second category (personality dysfunction), three are based on interviews with young women (panic attacks, shyness, anorexia nervosa) and two with young men (depression and obsessive-compulsive disorder). In the third category (external pressures) only one involves a young man (accident), the other four (bullying, bereavement, examinations, separation) involving young women. Overall, therefore, there is a clear gender pattern in the representation of young people in this series, most obviously in relation to certain kinds of deviant behaviour but also in relation to the impact of various types of pressure. It is a pattern which very closely corresponds to the representational regime identified by Christine Griffin (1997) and cited at the outset of this article.

In keeping with this, gender and gender-related behaviour is not problematized at all in *The Teenage Years*. While several remarks are made by participants that either state or imply certain assumptions about masculinity and femininity and the differences between males and females, these are simply left for the listener to take at face value, without any suggestion by the presenter or psychologist that they merit further interrogation or explanation. These include a young male's recollection of his desire 'to be a man . . . to be out as a man in the world and school wasn't important' [5]; or a young woman's comment that she sees lots of examples of 'girls going around, going out with loads and loads of guys, and doing whatever they say to them, and it's because they don't have enough self-esteem just to say no' [10]. Even the programme on the theme of 'relationships/sexuality' fails to address matters such as cultural assumptions about masculinity and femininity and the pressures they can cause for young men and women, or the 'double standard' relating to sexual and other gender-related behaviour. Instead, it focuses almost entirely on the tension between a mother and daughter over the daughter's choice of boyfriend.

Furthermore, the possibility of young people not being heterosexual is not so much as mentioned in the entire series. This is also true of the accompanying book. While (limited) aspects of the double standard for young women and young men *are* recognized in the book (Murray and Keane, 1997: 26, 29) homosexuality is not, except as something teenagers might 'worry about'. The section on 'Teenage Confusion About Sexuality' gives a list of the feelings that teenagers might experience, arising from a 'lack of information, misinformation, negative information and conflicting messages'. One item on the list reads: 'Worrying about homosexuality, and wondering if the closeness of same-sex friendships means that you are "gay"'. The introductory section of the same chapter describes the 'struggle with sexual awakenings and . . . the pain of learning about relationships and about how to form rewarding opposite-sex attachments' (Murray and Keane, 1997: 19). As in the case of social class, already described, the representation of matters relating to gender and sexuality in *The Teenage Years* rests heavily on assumptions and presuppositions which might be regarded as ideological, in that they leave unequal social relations unquestioned and unchallenged.

## CONCLUSION

I have argued that the series *The Teenage Years* rests overwhelmingly on an essentialist, 'psychologistic' reading of the nature of these years, and that there are as a result some striking absences, some 'not-saids' (Foucault, 1972: 35) or 'might-have-beens' (Jenks, 1995: 13). In addition to those already mentioned, other absences include physical or mental disability, and how these might interact with, and impact upon, young people's experience of some of the issues raised (self-esteem, peer pressure and teenage 'groupings', relationships and sexuality). Questions of culture and ethnicity are entirely ignored: there is no consideration, for instance, of whether experience of the teenage years, or conceptions of 'youth' more broadly, are any different in the Traveller community or in other cultural groups, and in general the programme content assumes, and reinforces, a taken-for-granted notion of what it means to be a teenager in contemporary Ireland. Of course, it might be argued in response to these points that no single programme, or even any one series of programmes, can be expected to encompass a consideration of every conceivable dimension of the teenage years or of any other social phenomenon. I completely accept such a view; however, I would argue that the absences just noted are striking, and significant, in the context of a series – and accompanying book – which explicitly aim to 'help Irish parents understand the problems and the difficulties experienced by adolescents' (Murray and Keane, 1997).

In attempting to explain the significance of these absences, it is instructive to draw on Teun A. Van Dijk's (1991: 114) analysis of media discourse:

The analysis of the 'unsaid' is sometimes more revealing than the study of what is actually expressed in the text . . . Many ideological implications follow not only because too little is being said, but also because too many irrelevant things are being said about news actors. The well-known example in news reports about minorities is the use of ethnic or racial labels in crime stories.

I would suggest that many media representations of young people, including the radio series *The Teenage Years*, might similarly be regarded as saying 'too many irrelevant things' about the *age* of the actors in question (and the personal qualities and attributes perceived as being age-related), at the expense of a consideration of other social and cultural factors which systematically shape their lives and circumstances. The mainstream clinical-psychological discourse of adolescence, which the series both expresses and enacts, 'homogenizes' the teenage years, and fails to acknowledge the many forms of social stratification and inequality which affect people *of all ages*. This in itself is an ideological aspect of the discourse.

It is ideological in another, closely related sense. Ideology was defined earlier as 'meaning in the service of power' (Thompson 1984, 1990). A similar definition was Peter Berger's (1963): an idea or set of ideas which 'serve a vested interest'. The representation of young people in *The Teenage Years* is ideological insofar as it is clearly compatible with certain vested interests and reinforces the power and status of certain professions, notably the medical/psychiatric and clinical-psychological, but more broadly the 'therapeutic'. This ideology pervades the entire series: the selection of topics, the nature of the professional expertise consulted, the selection of interviewees (so many of whom have experienced, and can 'testify to', the transformative power of therapy), the interview process, and the scripting and editing of the programmes themselves.

As pointed out at the beginning of this article, the discourse of 'young people as problem' is not the only prominent discourse of youth. Youth is frequently discursively constructed in other ways (as 'fun', as particularly idealistic or energetic, and so on). This is true of radio as much as of other media. The precise nature of the discourse may vary according to context (for example, according to whether the target audience is envisaged as comprising adults or young people). 'Young people as problem' is, however, undoubtedly a prominent and pervasive discourse, and what has been attempted here is a detailed analysis of how it is constructed in a particular instance. Overall, the teenage years are represented in this radio series as a 'perilous ordeal' (Newton, 1995) to be negotiated with the utmost care, for which parents need advice, guidance and support from the professionals. It is a view not very far removed from that of G. Stanley Hall, one of the pioneers of child and adolescent psychology, who pronounced in 1904 that 'every step of the upward way [to adulthood] is strewn with the wreckage of body, mind and morals' and that adolescence is a time of 'repressed insanity that is nevertheless normal at this period' (Hall, 1904, vol. 1: xiii; vol. 2: 75).

The introductory chapter in the book accompanying the radio series of *The Teenage Years* concludes as follows:

As parents look back on the few short years of adolescence, they often wonder what the fear and drama was about. They remind themselves that living with teenagers was not a terminal illness, that adolescence was not a disease, and that time quickly resolved the problems.

That, however, is when the process is over and done. For us, in this book, the problems, the traumas, the intensity and the conflicts of adolescence are only about to begin. (Murray and Keane, 1997: 18)

The clear implication here is that living with teenagers is *like* a terminal illness, that adolescence is *like* a disease. This radio series and book about the teenage years are therefore examples of what has been termed an 'obsession with the dark side of adolescence' in mainstream psychology. After surveying 2084 articles published over a decade in six human development journals, two writers who are themselves psychologists conclude: 'it would appear that the field's dedication or obsession is clearly towards breakdowns and turmoil' (Ayman-Nolley and Taira, 2000: 43). Representations of young people such as those analysed in this article serve ultimately not only to 'psychologize' but also, arguably, to 'pathologize' adolescence and the teenage years. They therefore serve, at least potentially, to disempower young people. Moreover, the analysis presented above would suggest that they also potentially disempower all those, of whatever age, affected by the social and structural conditions from which such representations distract attention.

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