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Authors	O'Connor, Pat;Haynes, Amanda;Kane, Ciara
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‘Relational discourses: Social Ties with Family and Friends’

Childhood, Global Journal of Child Research, Vol 11 (3): 361-382 by Pat O’Connor,

Amanda Haynes and Ciara Kane

Abstract:

This article presents quantitative and qualitative accounts of relational discourses in a random sample of approx 4,100 texts written by Irish young people (aged 10-12 and 14-17 years). The existence of such discourses is indicated by references to family and friends. It shows that although the majority refer to such ties in their texts, less than one third mention best friends. It also shows that references to such relational discourses was affected by age and gender. A continuum of relatedness can be identified: with 10-12 year old girls being at one end of the continuum and 14-17 year old boys being at the other end. The implications of such trends are briefly discussed.

Key words: Family; friends; age; gender; single-sex schools

Introduction

Children’s relationships with family members have attracted relatively little attention, although attention has been paid to their friendships (Brannen et al, 2001; Griffin, 1985; Hey, 1997; Blatchford, 1998; Pahl, 2000; Brooks, 2002). However, Brooks (2002) noted that such studies tended to be characterised by functionalist thinking. Thus, as in the case of studies of adults’ family and friendship ties, they have looked at the way in which such relationships have facilitated the attainment of developmental tasks; have provided social support in particular situations or constitute some kind of social capital (see Pahl, 2000; Morgan, 1996; Becker et al, 2001; O’Connor, 1992). In particular, friendships have been seen as a type of relationship that is uniquely suited to post or late modern societies characterised by high levels of disembedding of structural relationships derived from work or family (Giddens, 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Pahl, 2000). Such a perspective is also ultimately functionalist.

In this article we are not concerned with what young people's relationships 'do'. Rather our focus is on these young people's texts as narratives. In this context we will look at age and gender variation in the existence and nature of relational discourses (Gilligan 1995; Phoenix, 1997). Thus we will look particularly at age and gender variation in connectedness with family and friends (Brannen et al, 2001) as depicted in these narratives. It will be suggested that such relational discourses can be located on a continuum defined by age and gender: with 10-12 year old girls being most embedded and 14-17 year old boys being at the opposite end of the continuum.

It is important to recognise that these texts may not constitute descriptions of these young people's lives but rather may ultimately reflect normative ideas about the appropriateness of particular kinds of connectedness in boys and girls childhood and adolescence. As such they provide insights into age based concepts of relatedness as well as those related to masculinity and femininity (Connell, 1995 a and b).

Methodology and description of sample

It has been suggested that: 'Children are the best resource for understanding childhood' (Corsaro, 1997: 103). All the children in Ireland in Fifth Grade in First Level, and in Transition Year in Second Level were invited to write a page about themselves, their hopes for the future and their vision of Ireland both in the present and in the New Millennium*. Half (51%) of the 3,658 schools in Ireland returned a total of 33, 828 texts. A stratified random one in 10 sample of these texts was selected, providing a total of 4,100 individual pieces of text.

The majority (84%) of these texts were produced by children in Fifth Grade in First Level (typically aged 10-12 years). Texts written by girls accounted for roughly half (56%) of all the sample texts-with the gender difference being greatest amongst the Transition Year students. INSERT TABLE 1 HERE.

The vast majority (92%) were attending Roman Catholic schools. Over three fifths were attending co-educational schools; with 25% attending single sex girls', and 14% single sex boys,' schools. The schools were fairly evenly spread between rural areas, towns and cities –including suburbia. It was not possible to assess the class position of these young people. However, based on the Department of Education criteria, 15% of the schools were assessed as disadvantaged. INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

The method of analysis was both quantitative and qualitative. A preliminary selection of sheets was used to identify the main themes to be explored and to form the basis of the coding frame which assessed the absence/presence of a number of themes including family; friends; school; hobbies/activities etc. A 10% sample of the first 700 texts were double coded so as to assess the adequacy of the coding scheme and the reliability of the main coder. In addition, a thematic qualitative analysis was also undertaken of a random selection of 600 sheets each by two of the other researchers. Working initially in the context of the categories identified in the quantitative analysis, themes and sub-themes were identified.

This paper focuses on a sub-set of this material, relating to family and friendship ties. It suggests that these ties can usefully be located in the context of a relational discourse. Burr (1995: 48) has suggested that : 'A discourse refers to a set of

meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way produce a particular version of events'. A relational discourse is a particularly female discourse, within a society where concepts of femininity involve caring and service (Gilligan, 1995; Phoenix, 1997; O'Connor, 1998a). Since children are particularly likely to be embedded in a predominantly female world of mothers and female teachers, a relational discourse might be expected to exist in their narratives. Accounts of their connectedness with parents and friends are the basis on which the absence/presence of relational discourse is assessed.

The ethical issues of conducting research with or on children have begun to be given the attention they deserve in recent years (Alderson 1995; Denscombe and Aubrook 1992; James et al, 1998; Morrow, 1998). This material came from an initiative aimed at involving young people in Millennium celebrations and providing an account of their lives for future generations: a reference to the use of such data for research purposes being included in the material sent to schools. Permission to use the data was obtained from those who had initiated the collection of the data although the specific permission of the young people involved was not sought. This raises issues of informed consent (James et al, 1998). These considerations led to the decision not to use identifying information, local or school referents in the case of individual quotations (with pseudonyms being used in the case of such quotations). Given an increasing awareness of the importance of children's perspectives both politically (Government Publications, 2000) and in the wider sociological context (Cleary et al, 2001; Lynch, 1999; James and Prout, 1990; Brannen and O'Brien, 1996), the data set was seen as providing a unique opportunity. It was also one which was compatible

with the impetus behind the initial compilation of the data (viz the compilation of an informative public document).

Relational Discourse: family and friendship ties

Family and school are institutionalised areas for children's social ties. We will look first at references to family relationships and then at friendships ties - focusing particularly on the perceived content and quality of these relationships, briefly locating these in a wider institutional context.

The importance and meaning of family ties

Family was a very frequently mentioned element in the texts. Thus, 82% of the texts made some reference to family. It was also striking in this study that the word 'love' was used much more frequently by both boys and girls refer to their own feelings about aspects of their life style (I love football/music etc) rather than to refer to their own experience of family relationships, although such references did occasionally occur. Thus, girls who described themselves as having a loving family saw themselves as being 'lucky': *'I have realised how lucky I am to have a loving family who will care for me and love me'* (Diana, Fifth Grade, First Level).

The younger children were more likely than the older ones to refer to family (87% versus 56%). One might speculate that this reflects the greater relevance of relational discourses to the lives of the younger children There was little gender difference amongst the 10-12 year olds. INSERT TABLE 3.

However, descriptions of behaviour that could be seen as indicating the importance of family were generally more developed in the girls' texts than in the boys'. Thus the girls referred to their family's emotional contribution or more tangibly, to their provision of clothes, food, education, care when sick etc:

'My family are very important to me. They will always be there for me. They will provide food and clothes for me and see I get a good education'
(Louise, Fifth Grade, First Level)

Such statements may reflect girls' linguistic ability, their awareness of emotions in general, and/or of the emotional labour involved in family life in particular (Lynch, 1989a; Lynch and McLaughlin, 1995). In contrast, boys tended not to explain why family was important to them, but simply saw this as self-evident:

'My family are very important' (Mike, Fifth Grade, First Level).

'My family are important to me. I just don't know what I would do without them' (Derek, Fifth Grade, First Level)

It has been widely noted (Brannen et al, 2001; Mayall, 2001; Becker et al, 2001) that children are not simply recipients of care, but are also active contributors to care in their families. Thus, children's help in the home has been seen as related to an ethic of care, reflecting their response to others' needs. In this study, boys were particularly likely to link their own help in the home to the love and tending they received: *'I love my Mom a lot. I help my Mom a lot in exchange that she is so kind'* (Adam Fifth Grade, First Level); *'I help my father wash the car and still I help my mother with the dishes. Just to repay them'*. (Ian, Fifth Grade, First Level). Implicit in these statements is the idea that in some way parental love and tending could be repaid: raising issues related to a sense of entitlement to such care (Lewis, 2002).

Gender differences were much greater amongst the 14-17 year olds. Thus these girls' texts were considerably more likely than their male counterparts to refer to family (64% versus 42%). One might speculate that amongst these respondents a discourse of femininity/masculinity was reflected in these relational discourses. There was indirect support for this insofar as variation also existed depending on the gender intake of the school. Thus a discourse where there were fewer references to family was more likely to exist in single sex boys' schools than in single sex girls' or co-educational schools (75% versus 83- 84% respectively).

Views as to what constitutes a family have been shown to vary: from those referring to nuclear family only (i.e. parents and/or siblings); to those including a wider range of relatives and even animals (Brannen et al 2,001; Levin, 1996). Hence, a relational discourse can also be seen as reflected in the kind of family referred to in the text. As one might expect, the 10-12 year olds were more likely than the older ones to refer to nuclear (58% versus 38% respectively) and to extended family (25% versus 10% respectively). Such trends were broadly similar to those emerging in Levin's study (1996). INSERT TABLE 4

There was little gender difference amongst the 10-12 year olds as regards references to the nuclear family. However, the 14-17 year old girls were more likely than boys of the same age to refer to it (42% versus 32%). Thus, as in the case of the overall references to family, although a relational discourse was more common amongst the younger respondents, it was only differentiated by gender amongst the 14-17 year olds.

Overall, a surprisingly small minority, roughly a quarter of the total sample, referred to members of their extended family (particularly grandparents, but also aunts, uncles, cousins etc). The 10-12 year olds were more likely than the 14-17 year olds to do this (25% versus 10%): *'I have quite a big family my Granny had 14 children which leaves me with a lot of Aunts and Uncles'* (Jennifer, Fifth Grade, First Level). They referred to staying overnight with grandparents; being fed by a grandmother after school; helping out with farming chores; spending Sundays with them; getting pocket money; and seeing them as sources of care and fun. Both boys and girls referred to themselves as 'lucky' because they had not experienced a grandparents' death. Although only 10% of the 14-17 year olds referred to an extended family, the older girls were more likely than their male counterparts to do so (13% versus 5%). Thus, quite clearly a gendered discourse comes into play in the case of extended family ties amongst the 14-17 year olds. The gendered intake of the school was associated with variation in references to the extended but not the nuclear family. Thus, those in single sex boys' schools were least likely to refer to extended family (16% versus 23%-25% in single sex girls' and co-educational schools respectively). INSERT TABLE 5

Sibling relationships were not included in the quantitative analysis. In the qualitative analysis, it was clear that such relationships were, as in other studies (Brannen et al, 2001; O'Connor, 1992; Allan, 1989) sometimes characterised by ambivalence: *' I have one sister. I walsy (sic) fight with her but if anything happened to her I would be devastated' (sic)* (Eoin, Fifth Grade, First Level). However, there were also references to supportive, caring relationships, which were pseudo-parental in character, with both sisters and brothers providing that care:

'My brothers are very good to me when my mam and dad are gone out. They help me in my homework or if I am hungry they will give me money to go to the shop or they will cook something for me'(Lorraine, Fifth Grade, First Level)

' my brother... is always ready to give me advice for whatever problems I have' (Peter, Transition Year, Second Level).

Only a tiny minority (2%) referred to pets as part of the family (see Frost et al, 2002; Levin, 1996): *'I'm an only child but I have a dog that I call my sister her name is Carol she is three years old'* (Steve, Fifth Grade, First Level). However, the proportion of the young people who referred to pets in their texts was slightly larger than the proportion referring to extended family (30% versus 23% respectively); with 19% naming these pets. As one might expect, the 10-12 year olds were more likely than the 14-17 year olds to refer to pets (33% versus 8%) and to name them (21% versus 4%). INSERT TABLE 6 However, within both age groups, girls were more likely than the boys to do these things-thus reinforcing the picture of the relational discourse in their texts. Once again those in single sex boys' schools were least likely to refer to pets or to name them. INSERT TABLE 7

It was striking that despite the traditional strength of the image of the Irish mother, and her emotional importance in the family (see O'Connor, 1998a) these young people for the most part did not differentiate between their mother and father in their texts. These trends contrast with those emerging in Mayall's (2002) work. In her studies of children aged 5-13 years in socially and ethnically mixed areas in London, there was a very clear differentiation between mothers and fathers. However, in

Brannen et al's study (2001:97) the 11-14 year olds 'were clearly anxious to be 'fair' to each parent' and emphasised their similar potential as parents, although they recognised that in practise they played different roles. Thus, mothers in that study were described as giving them support, and being someone who understood and cheered them up; fathers being a link to the outside world: taking them to football; or doing things with them that exemplified his special abilities.

In the present study, on the rare occasions when these young people did differentiate between parents, broadly similar sorts of trends emerged: *'My Mom helps me when I am sick. My father talks to me when I want to know some things'* (Alan, *Fifth Grade, First Level*). The mother's importance as a listener emerged almost in asides: *'A school tour is somewhere you go with your class on a day out and come back and tell your mam all about it'*. (Kerri, *Fifth Grade, First Level*). The lack of differentiation between mothers and fathers in the present study (in contrast to Mayall's) may reflect differences in ethnic composition of the samples and/or the Irish children's concern to recognise their similar potential as parents. Men's family roles in Irish society are not clear cut (Kiely, 2001 and 1995) and there is a good deal of cultural anxiety surrounding men's decline in authority and status in the family consequent on wider social changes (Clare, 2000; Rattansi and Phoenix, 1997). The desire to protect the father by stressing his potential as a parent, rather than focusing on his actual performance, may be at least part of the explanation for the different trends to emerge in the present study and in Mayalls. (Such protective attitudes have also been reflected in wives exaggeration of their husband's performance of domestic work: see O'Connor, 1998a).

The young people mostly referred to their father in terms of his occupation (as a builder; teacher, pharmacist etc) typically without any emotional tone whatsoever. They also wrote of doing things with him—surfing the net, playing computer games, going fishing, helping him with various farm tasks. Very occasionally there were warm references to their special relationship with him: *‘I don’t want to sound soppy but I think he is the best’* (Ian, Fifth Grade, First Level); *‘I get on best with my Dad’* (Aisling, Transition Year, Second Level); or to him as a role model: *‘My role model would be my dad because without my dad we would not have as much money as we do because my mum does not work’* (Ciara, Fifth Grade, First Level). In Frost et al’s (2002) study of 11-14 year old boys, complaints about the fathers’ ‘emotional unavailability’ were very common revealing what they saw as ‘an incapacity to listen or to hold on to and manage distress.’ In this study, possibly because of emotional protectiveness (or because of the status of the texts as potentially public documents) there were very few negative statements about fathers. Even where the father was no longer living with them, this was simply stated as a fact:

‘When I was four my Dad moved out, now I do not really remember him so it doesn’t bother me’. (John, Transition Year, Second Level)

References to their mothers tended to be typically emotionally warm:

‘I would like to be my mam. She is funny. She is good to talk with... My role model is my mam.’ (Nicola, Fifth Grade, First Level)

‘She’s a really great mother. She’s the best mother that ever walked on the earth – well that’s what we all say about our mother’ (John, Fifth Grade, First Level).

The absence of clear differentiations between parents, and the scarcity of references to love at a relational level in these texts was striking. However, the majority of these young people did refer to family in their texts. The discourses of the 10-12 year olds were more relational in the sense that they were more likely than the 14-17 year olds to refer to family in general, and specifically to both nuclear and extended family. Gender differentiated trends in relational discourses existed in both age groups, although they were strongest amongst the 14-17 year old girls. Thus family in general, as well as references to nuclear and extended family, were more likely to be made by the 14-17 year old girls than boys. The texts of those in single sex boys' schools were least likely to be characterised by a relational discourse: and might have been reflected in and reinforced by the school gender intake. It will be shown that somewhat similar trends emerged as regards friendship ties.

The importance and meaning of friendship ties

There has been very little Irish research on friendship. In traditional accounts of children's socialisation, friendships are seen as the site of deviant peer sub-cultures, although the absence of friendship ties is also seen as problematic (James et al, 1998). This societal ambivalence about friendship ties is also reflected in the limited time and space available for such friendships (Lynch 1989a). In US research (mainly on college students) female friendships are typically depicted as 'face to face' (i.e. characterised by high levels of intimate confiding) whereas relationships between young men are depicted as 'side by side' (i.e. characterised by high levels of shared interests and non-verbal activity: see O'Connor, 1992 and 1998). Frost et al (2002: 13) suggested that amongst their 11-14 year old boys, friendships were typically with other boys with whom 'they could not talk freely about their emotions for fear of

ridicule. But also, paradoxically, as people with whom they could have a laugh and feel free'. In Griffin's (1985) classic work on working class British adolescent girls, relationships with best friends were intimate and long-lasting. However, Griffin also found that these friendships were embedded in a loose network of other friendships, which were a source of resistance to the wider structures of school and paid work. Blatchford's (1998) work suggested that the existence of such networks of female friends occurred amongst the 8-9 year olds in his study. These latter kinds of friendships between girls have tended to be ignored- arguably reflecting the tendency to define femininity in terms of the ability to confide (Cancian, 1986; O'Connor, 1998b)

There has been a good deal of discussion about the nature of friendship ties and the ways of identifying friends (see O'Connor, 1992; Pahl, 2000; Blatchford, 1998). In this study anyone who was seen by the young people themselves as a friend was included. Some of the children, particularly in the very small rural schools, saw all of the children in their grade as friends. Similar patterns also emerged in Blatchford's (1998) study and were seen as reflecting a reluctance to develop more intense friendships because of anticipated jealousies in other relationships and/or a mistrust of close friendships. At any rate, as in Mayall's (2001) and Mizen et al's (2001) studies, the qualitative data suggested that, for girls, friendships was one of the principal reasons for coming to school: *'I think school is not that bad because.... you meet all your friends'* (Laurie, *Fifth Grade, First Level*); *'It hasn't been too bad as I have two of my best friends in the class with me'* (Karen, *Transition Year, Second Level*). Such a focus might well be associated with girls' greater acceptance of, and performance in the school context (Smyth and Hannan, 2000; O'Connor, 1998a and 2000; Lynch,

1999). Such ties both increase their enjoyment of the school experience, and constitute alternative foci of emotional cathexis and identity. Amongst boys, where the main focus is on competence and hierarchy, the situation is potentially more fraught in the case of those who are not high achievers.

Since Granovetter's (1973) very early work, it has been recognised that weak ties can be useful as sources of information: the sheer number of friends identified, regardless of the quality of these ties providing a crude indication of such weak ties (O'Connor, 1992; Pahl, 2000). Constraints operating in children's lives, which are not of their own creation, can affect the existence of friendships; as can family moves, illness and death. In more than half of the texts (55%) it was impossible to assess how many friends they had. Where it was possible to assess this, the distribution was fairly evenly spread between those who referred to one friend (25%); two or three friends (28%); four or five friends (19%) and six or more (28%). This varied little by age although the 10-12 year olds were more likely to refer to at least six friends in their texts. Amongst the 10-12 year olds, there was little gender difference in these patterns. However, amongst the 14-17 year olds, boys were more likely than the girls to mention just one friend (62% as compared with 28% respectively). This contradicts the idea that boys are embedded in a wide network of friends—although given that information on numbers of friends was only available in half of the texts, this conclusion is tentative. Thus, purely in these numerical terms, and recognising the methodological caveats, it does appear that girls aged 14-17 years were much more likely than the boys of that age to refer to two or more friends (72% of them doing so as compared with 39% of the boys). INSERT TABLE 8

Overall, friends were referred to in roughly two thirds of the texts. The younger children were much more likely to refer to friends than the older ones: 67% of those aged 10-12 years doing this as compared with 44% of the 14-17 year olds. The possibility that this trend may simply reflect the greater variation in the content of the older groups' texts cannot be eliminated. However, gender variation in a relational discourse existed in both age groups: with girls being most likely to refer to friends in their texts in both age groups. The gender difference was largest amongst the 14-17 year olds: 56% of the girls of this age as compared with 26% of the boys. INSERT TABLE 9

It is possible that these gender differences reflect a relational discourse that is related to a culturally constructed concept of femininity. This suggestion was underlined by the fact that the schools gender intake was associated with references to friendships in the texts. Thus, 56% of those in single sex boys' schools referred to friends as compared with 71% of those in single sex girls' schools (those in co-educational schools being in an intermediate position: 63%). INSERT TABLE 10.

These young people also varied as regards the extent to which they actually mentioned their friends' names in their texts. Thus whereas almost two thirds referred to friends, 45% of all the texts referred to named friends. The 10-12 year olds were much more likely than the older respondents to refer to named friends (51% versus 13%: see Table 9). This may reflect greater concerns about privacy amongst the older respondents. Gender differences existed in both age groups- with 17% of the 14-17 year old girls referring to their friends by name, as compared with 6% of the boys of this age. Mentioning friends by name was least common in single sex boys' schools

(38% of the boys doing it as compared with 46%-49% of those in co-educational schools and single sex girls' schools respectively). Such trends possibly reflect an anxiety about being seen to have such friends- a kind of male homophobia (Cancian, 1986; Helgeson et al, 1987; O'Connor, 1992; Frost et al, 2002). In any case where individual names were mentioned, it was clear that friendships were overwhelmingly same sex, reflecting the well-established tendency for young people to be embedded in same sex universes (Blatchford, 1998, Pahl, 2000). Amongst the older age group, the proportion who referred to friends by name was very similar to the proportion referring to best friends- reflecting the fact that it was best friends who were named, particularly amongst the 14-17 year olds:

'Janice, my best friend, no-one could be as nice and trustworthy and funny as Janice. She was very good to me with my uncle's death and I love her for that. Pauline and Kate are two [other] wonderful people. They always listen to me, help me and make me laugh'. (Sinead, Transition Year, Second Level)

'My best friend is david (sic) we have been palying (sic) together for 9 years' (Gary, Fifth Grade, First Level)

We tend to assume that all young people have best friends. However, only 29% of the young people in this study identified such best friends in their texts (See Table 9). Once again, such an indicator of a relational discourse was more common in the narratives of the 10-12 year olds than the 14-17 year olds. Thus, 33% of the 10-12 year olds as compared with 12% of the 14-17 year olds referred to them. The low proportion of best friends mentioned by this age group is particularly striking in view of what is known about the importance of friends as sources of support in their lives. Thus, half of the young men and women in one study (NYCI, 1998) said that the first

place they would go if they had a serious problem, such as stress, anxiety or depression, would be to friends. The low proportion (12%) of the 14-17 year olds in this study referring to best friends also contrasts with the pattern in Blatchford's (1998) study of 16 year olds, where 46% said that they had best friend(s). It is difficult to interpret this.

However, as in Blatchford's study, girls were more likely than boys to identify best friends. Thus, 36% of the girls in the present study referred to best friend(s) as compared with 22% of the boys. Gender differences were particularly marked amongst the 14-17 year olds. Thus, 17% of the girls of this age referred to best friend(s), as compared with 4% of the boys. Friendships were clearly extremely important to these teenage girls:

'I need my friends, we stick together. There is no separating us. We try our best to do everything together, friends are all that really matter now to me, without them you will get nowhere in life. Friends forever' (Sharon, Transition Year, Second Level)

Nevertheless since less than one in five (17%) of the girls referred to them quite clearly, the discourses of these young women suggest that they are less connected than one might expect. The discourses of adolescent boys suggested that they were even less likely to be connected in these terms- with only 4% referring to best friends. Similar trends as regards the paucity of best or close friends amongst adolescent boys have emerged in other studies (see Phoenix, 1997; Blatchford, 1998). Once again, boys in single sex schools were least likely to refer to best friends (24% of them doing so as compared with 37% of those in single sex girls schools; with those in co-educational schools being in an intermediate position: 29%: see table 10).

Overall then, a relational discourse, insofar as references to friends were concerned, was affected by age and gender. This relational discourse could be seen as a continuum: with 10-12 year old girls being at one end of the continuum, and 14-17 year old boys being at the other.

Brannen et al (2001) differentiated between 'having friends' which they noted provided a sense of social identity and inclusion, and 'being friends', which provided an opportunity to confide and to receive emotional support. The qualitative material in the present study certainly suggested that girls' best friendships were particularly likely to be characterised by intimate confiding about their fears, sadness, vulnerabilities etc:

'I have two really good friends that I could talk to about anything, they know my deepest darkest secrets and know instantly if there is something wrong with me' (Caroline, Transition Year, Second Level)

Confiding about fears and inadequacies was sometimes implicit: *'My two best friends are Claire and Jo and they have encouraged me to do a lot of things' (Melissa, Fifth Grade, First Level)*. References were sometimes made –particularly by the girls- to the perceived importance of the relationship to their friends: *'I mean a lot to my friends, especially my best friend June Jones' (Karen, Fifth Grade, First Level)*. Some of the best friendships were clearly long-standing- the intensity these accounts being reminiscent of Hey's (1997) and Blatchford's (1998) work:

'a friend is someone you can trust, rely on, talk to. My best friends name is Ann Murphy we have been friends for four years it all started in first year when I first saw her there was something about her that was so shining it was warm, so happy. She was allways (sic) smiling and talking to

others'.....All I know is that she can turn to me any time she likes and I can turn to her any time aswell (sic) to talk to. She is the greatest friend I ever will have and nothing or nobody will replace her (Linda, Transition Year, Second Level).

Amongst the boys, not only were best friends less common, but even where they existed, they were typically less likely to be characterised by intimacy (a pattern that has been documented in other studies-such as Frost et al, 2002):

'My best friend is Ger Hannan. I like him he is lots of fun we always go to each others houses a lot and go to the cinema. We have been best friends' sens (sic) the start of school....We are going to the same secondary. And I hope we be best friends forever'. (Cathal, Fifth Grade, First Level)

The girls friendships were more differentiated than the boys ones. Thus, as well as having confiding intimate friendships, the girls also had fun, 'shared activity' type friendships (the kind that boys tended to have, if they had any at all):

'I have two other very good friends Aine and Elaine. I like them a lot. We always have a good laugh." (Orla, Fifth Grade, First Level)

' in my spare time I hang around with my friends. We dont do much - but we always have a laugh when we're together. We go to disco's (sic) play football, other sports and sometimes go to the Collesium a leisure plex'. (Aileen, Transition Year, Second Level)

Boys' friendships marked out group boundaries, and insofar as they provided support, did so on the basis of their group membership-whether as members of a football team; their school class group; or simply as boys:

'I have lots of friends that stick by me. And I stick by them.' (Ian, Fifth Grade, First Level).

In summary then, roughly two thirds of these young people referred to friends in their texts. In a society where the importance of friends in young people's lives is taken for granted, it was surprising that less one third of the whole sample referred to best friends. The texts of the 10-12 year olds were more likely than the 14-17 year olds to reflect relational discourses insofar as they referred to friends, named friends and identified best friends. Thus, 67% of them referred to friends, as compared with 44% of the older respondents; 51% of the younger ones referred to their friends by name as compared with 13% of the 14-17 year olds; and 33% of them referred to best friends, as compared with 12% of the older respondents.

In both age groups, and on each of these indicators, girls' discourses were more relational, in the sense that they presented themselves as much more emotionally connected than boys. The gender differences were particularly striking in the 14-17 year age group. Thus only 4% of the boys referred to a best friend, as compared with 17% of the girls. Furthermore, there was no suggestion that boys had wider networks of friends. Thus, where it was possible to assess this, 72% of the girls of this age as compared with 39% of the boys referred to two or more friends.

Thus in terms of friendship it is clear that relational discourses are affected by age and gender- with gender being particularly important in the older age groups.

Hierarchical aspect of Relational Discourse

Young people locate themselves not only in terms of a social space defined by the identification of personal ties with family and friends (see Morrow, 2000; O'Connor et al, 2002). We now look at the hierarchical dimension of such relational discourses. The evidence as regards these young people's awareness of such a dimension was limited and not fully consistent. However it will be shown, that in contrast to, for example, Mayall's (2002) studies, a hierarchical element was little in evidence. This may be related to the fact that Irish society has been undergoing very rapid change, with a variety of authoritative institutional structures being weakened by a series of scandals over the past ten years (O'Connor, 1998a and 1995).

Thus it was striking that typically the majority of the young people referred initially to 'family', rather than 'parents', 'Mam and Dad' etc. It seems possible to suggest that in this way they avoided the generational positioning that is implicit in the very concept of parent (and so hence the concept of themselves as subordinate). In the qualitative study, the structural positioning of parents and child in terms of authority was only occasionally reflected in a perception of childhood as a time of apprenticeship in the sense of learning skills and values (Mayall, 2001): *'My parents help me to learn manners and what's right and wrong'. (Marian, Fifth Grade, First Level)*. This was a much stronger theme in Mayall's study- something which may reflect the very different ethnic backgrounds of the children in that study. As one might expect, references to limits (which were not quantified) were more common in the qualitative data amongst the 14-17 year olds than the younger children. Nevertheless, references to the issue of parental control, insofar as they occurred at all were typically indirect:

'They always bye (sic) what I want.' (Cathal, Fifth Grade, First Level)

'There is a brilliant teenage disco in Heatlow which is 1 hours bus drive away. I am currently very annoyed with my mother because she says I can't go again. Ever. She thinks it is unsupervised and that there is drink and drugs there. I keep trying to tell her that if I wanted drink or drugs I wouldn't be going all the way to and spending up to £15. She sometimes fails to understand the concept of "FUN".' (Claire, Transition Year, Second Level)

References to parents by their first names can be seen as indicative of the absence of hierarchy. In this context it was surprising that only 30% referred to their parents by such first names. Younger children were more likely than 14-17 year olds to do this (33% versus 10%). This may reflect the fact that the younger ones referred to their parents' names and occupations in a fairly standard way in their texts. Alternatively, it is possible that there is a cohort effect and that the younger children are least aware of the hierarchical dimension of parent/child relationships. Those in single sex boys' schools were least likely to refer to their parents by name (24%: as compared with 30%-32% in co-educational and single sex girls' schools respectively). Hence, one might suggest that hierarchy was most likely to be endorsed in single sex boys schools- a pattern which is consistent with the stress on hierarchy in concepts of masculinity (Connell 1995 a and b). As one might expect then girls of both ages were (marginally) more likely than their male counterparts to refer to their parents by name.

INSERT TABLE 11

In the school setting, the teachers' authority is an ultimate reality, but this was also only occasionally indirectly referred to, for example, in the context of trying *'to teach my class manners'* (Aisling, *Transition Year, Second Level*); or more positively treating them like adults:

'Fifth class is a very exciting class to be in as we are treated a little bit more like adults' (Lydia, *Fifth Grade, First Level*)

Occasionally, boys' qualitative comments reflected an amused wry understanding of the teacher's needs and her authority position:

'My teacher told me to write about the school and about her because she's the principal, she wants to go down in history, so I'd better mention her' (Cearbhall, *Fifth Grade, First Level*)*

However, by far the most overt references to power in the qualitative material were in the context of sibling power hierarchies based on age and birth order - particularly amongst boys with older sisters:

'Rita is two years older than me and when she bosses me about I tell her to 'get stuffed'' (Paul, *Fifth Grade, First Level*)

'I am an eleven year old boy.....I am the smallest in my family and my two big sisters push me around a lot'. (Luke, *Fifth Grade, First Level*)

Indeed, the general absence of any concern with power in the texts was very striking.

Discussion

The trends emerging in this paper are both very predictable and very unexpected. Thus, as one might expect, the overwhelming majority of these young people referred to family and friends in their texts-thus underlining the reality of a relational

discourse. However, in contrast to what one might expect, the majority of these young people did not refer to a best friend.

Age was clearly associated with a relational discourse. Thus the 10-12 year olds were more likely than the 14-17 year olds to refer to family in their texts; they were more likely to specifically refer to nuclear and extended family; more likely to refer to pets in general, and named pets in particular. The 10-12 year olds were also more likely to refer to friends in general; to identify six or more friends; to identify named friends and best friends. Thus, it appears that the movement away from family ties in mid-adolescence is not compensated for by the number or the quality of friendship ties, as least as indicated by the accounts of such relationships in these texts.

Gender variation also existed. The relational discourses of the adolescent boys were particularly limited- indeed bleak. Thus, 14-17 year old boys were less likely than girls of the same age to refer to family in general and extended family in particular. They were also much less likely to refer to friends; and in those situations where it was possible to assess the number of friends these young people had, the 14-17 year old boys were very much more likely than their female counterpart to refer only one friend. This trend was particularly surprising since male adults are likely to have more extensive albeit less intimate ties than adult women. However in this study, 39% of the 14-17 year old boys had at least two friends as compared with 72% of the girls. Furthermore the boys were less likely to name their friends and very unlikely indeed to have a best friend. Even where the 14-17 year old boys referred to a best friend, the support they described was essentially categorical, rather than being based on intimate confiding.

The importance of confidants can of course be overstated - representing as it does a kind of feminisation of love (Cancian, 1986). Nevertheless, particularly in adolescence, the importance of opportunities to confide cannot be over-estimated. If we accept these texts as descriptions of their lives, the bleakness of young men's emotional landscapes in particular is striking. In this context, it does not seem too fanciful to suggest that typically adolescent male problems in Western Society such as high levels of suicide, alcoholism and delinquency (Clare, 2000) may be related to such a bleak emotional landscape. Insofar as these are relational discourses that reflect concepts of masculinity, the depicted paucity of relatedness is equally disturbing.

Interestingly, the 14-17 year old boys differed little from their female counterparts in terms of references to pets in general or named pets in particular. Hence, one might suggest that the patterns as regards references to friends and family reflect gendered differences in the ability to create and maintain relationships. This hypothesis is compatible with the fact that the gendered trends as regards friends are more extreme than those as regards references to the nuclear family.

There was a suggestion in the texts that attendance at single sex boys' schools was associated with fewer references to extended family; fewer references to pets in general, and named pets in particular; fewer references to friends in general; and named friends and best friend(s) in particular. It is impossible to know to what extent such contexts create such attitudes or reflect selective factors (i.e. that those who are interested in the relational development of boys are unlikely to send them to single-sex schools). Lynch's early work (1989b) suggested that the hidden curriculum of single sex boys' schools was effectively hostile to personal development; her later

work implicitly supporting this by suggesting that masculinity was equated with 'physical strength, height and sporting ability' (Lynch, 1999:239). Hence it seems plausible to suggest that, at the very least, single sex boys schools are not helpful as regards the articulation of a discourse of relatedness.

Within a society where there is a sort of inchoate concern about authority, there were relatively few indications that these young people were aware of hierarchy. The qualitative material did highlight the puzzling tendency for these young people to avoid differentiating between mothers and fathers, although what evidence we have suggests that it is highly improbable that mothers and fathers' roles within the family have become synonymous. Boys were less likely than girls to refer to their parents by name; with the 14-17 year olds and those in single sex boys schools in particular being least likely to do this-thereby suggesting that hierarchy was strongest in such contexts. The rarity with which parental love was named suggests that somehow a discourse of love that is not sexual has become invisible-thus affecting the ability to name love in (non-sexual) relationships.

Given the nature of the texts, it was impossible to assess the class position of these young people. It was possible to assess the disadvantaged/non-disadvantaged status of their schools (based on the Department of Education criteria). There was no relationship between this designation and the quantifiable variables in this analysis.

The data from this study is limited in several ways. It was produced within a classroom situation (a not-atypical solution to an attempt to centre the focus on children and their experiences: James and Prout 1996). However, amongst the

younger children, the structure of some of the texts from some class groups suggested collective planning. It is impossible to assess the extent to which this affected the themes explored in the texts. In addition, the young people were not required to give personal information other than their names and classes: hence limiting independent variables. Thus clearly the hypotheses implicit in this paper need to be explored in other studies.

Overall, then this article shows that young people's relational discourse as reflected in their references to ties with family and friends in their texts are affected by age and gender. A continuum of relatedness can be identified: with 10-12 year old girls being at one end of the continuum and 14-17 year old boys being at the other end. It is possible that such patterns are related to the difficulties that young teenagers in general, and young men in particular are seen as experiencing in our society (lower educational attainment; higher levels of suicide etc.)

***Footnote:** The documentation sent to schools included a leaflet outlining the project; a set of guidelines for teachers; a short video featuring one of the presenters on an afternoon TV programme for children; a poster for display in the classroom as well as sheets of specially prepared long life manuscript; and an envelope for the return of the completed manuscripts. There was one sheet of such manuscript per student-with students being encouraged to use the reverse side for artwork if they so wished. The documentation stressed that it was not a competition, but an account for future generations-such future readers being referred to by some of the children (see O'Connor et al, 2002). It was made clear that all the sheets completed by the children should be returned, rather than selecting the best/excluding those which were untidy etc. Since the teachers were involved in the project, the possibility that collective planning of the texts occurred cannot be eliminated, although this was one of the few examples where this was specifically referred to. Such collective planning might have affected the frequency with which family or friends were referred to, particularly amongst the younger children. However, the content is likely to reflect the children's own opinions.

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Table 1: Profile of Respondents in terms of School Grade and Gender

School Grade			Gender		
Fifth Grade, First Level	84%	Girls	55%	Boys	45%
Transition Year, Second Level	15%	Girls	62%	Boys	38%
Special Class or School	1%	Girls	49%	Boys	51%

Table 2: Profile of Schools

School Denominational Affiliation		School Gender Intake	
Roman Catholic	92%	Single Sex Girls	25%
Protestant	4%	Single Sex Boys	14%
Jewish	0.1%	Co-educational	61%
Muslim	0.1%		
Multi-denominational	4%		
School Location		School Status	
Rural	23%	Disadvantaged	15%
Town	41%	Non-Disadvantaged	86%
City	16%		
Suburban City	20%		

Table 3: Age by References to Family controlling for Gender

Gender	Reference to Family	10-12	14-17	Total
Girls	Yes	91%	64%	86%
Boys	Yes	84%	42%	78%
Overall	Yes	87%	56%	82%

Table 4: Age By Type of Family Described Controlling for Gender

Gender	Type of Family Described	10-12	14-17	Total
Girls	Nuclear	59%	42%	57%
Boys	Nuclear	58%	32%	55%
Total	Nuclear	58%	38%	56%
Girls	Extended	28%	13%	25%
Boys	Extended	23%	5%	21%
Total	Extended	25%	10%	23%

Table 5: School Gender Intake by reference to Family

	Single-Sex Girls	Single-Sex Boys	Co-educational
Reference to Family	83%	75%	84%
To Nuclear Family	56%	57%	55%
To Extended Family	23%	16%	25%

Table 6: Age by Reference to Pets, Naming of Pets controlling for Gender

Age		10-12	14-17	Total
Girls	Reference to Pets	38%	9%	33%
	Naming of Pets	25%	5%	22%
Boys	Reference to Pets	28%	7%	25%
	Naming of Pets	16%	2%	15%
Total	Reference to Pets	33%	8%	30%
	Naming of Pets	21%	4%	19%

Table 7: School Gender Intake by references to Pets

	Single-Sex Girls	Single-Sex Boys	Co-educational
Reference to Pets	31%	21%	31%
Pets Named	20%	12%	19%
Pets as Part of Family	3%	3%	2%

Table 8: Age by Number of Friends Mentioned controlling for Gender

Gender	No. of Friends Mentioned	10-12	14-17	Total
Girls	1	26%	28%	26%
	2-5	47%	52%	47%
	6 or more	28%	20%	27%
Boys	1	23%	62%	24%
	2-5	48%	39%	48%
	6 or more	29%	-	29%
Total	1	25%	34%	25%
	2-5	47%	49%	47%
	6 or more	28%	17%	28%

Table 9: Age by A/ Reference to Friends and B/ Friends Named C/Best Friends controlling for Gender

A/Reference to Friends	10-12	14-17	All ages
By Girls	73%	56%	70%
By Boys	60%	26%	56%
Total	67%	44%	64%
B/ Friends Named			
By Girls	56%	17%	49%
By Boys	46%	6%	41%
Total	51%	13%	45%
C/To Best Friends			
By Girls	39%	17%	36%
By Boys	25%	4%	22%
Total	33%	12%	29%

Table 10: School Gender Intake by reference to Friends

	Single-Sex Girls	Single-Sex Boys	Co-educational
Reference to Friends	71%	56%	63%
To Named Friends	49%	38%	46%
To Best Friends	37%	24%	29%

Table 11: Age by Reference to Parents by Name controlling for Gender

Gender	10-12	14-17	Overall
Girls	36%	11%	32%
Boys	29%	8%	26%
Overall	33%	10%	30%