

Historical, cultural, and emotional meanings: Interviews with young girls in three generations

Author: Harriet Bjerrum Nielson

Persistent link: <http://hdl.handle.net/2345/4111>

This work is posted on [eScholarship@BC](#),
Boston College University Libraries.

Berkeley, CA: Center for Working Families, University of California, Berkeley, 2001

Use of this resource is governed by the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons "Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States" (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/>)

**Historical, Cultural, and Emotional Meanings:
Interviews with Young Girls in Three Generations**

**Presentation at the Center for Working Families
University of California, Berkeley
19.3.01**

**Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen
Centre for Women's and Gender Studies, University of Oslo, Norway
e-mail: h.b.nielsen@skk.uio.no**

Abstract

People use cultural concepts to organize and construct their social worlds. The question asked in this paper is how such constructions are infused with personal meaning and emotions from specific psychobiographies, and how this may facilitate or impede cultural and social changes, for instance, in the form of what one could call a certain inner psychological readiness for some discourses and not for others, for some structural changes and not for others. With examples from an on-going study of young girls in three generations the paper discusses the relations between historical context, discursive constructions, and emotional reality as they appear in texts of interviews. The interaction between these three levels of meaning is also illustrated by an analysis of the housewife of the 1950s.

A Three-Generational Study

The paths to adulthood for the last three generations of young Norwegian women have been accompanied by significant geographical and social changes. How has this process of modernization been experienced from “below”, from the perspectives of everyday life and through the eyes of the young women themselves? “Young Girls in Three Generations”, the study I am doing with Monica Rudberg, looks at how the processes of *social* mobility and *cultural* modernization have been associated with the *psychological* project of becoming adults for these young women. We seek to understand interactions between cultural and personal gender in a process of change, to grasp the historical embeddedness not only of cultural norms, but also of subjectivities, and, more specifically, how generational relations in the family contribute to these changes on the psychological level.

Twenty-two chains of women were interviewed in 1990-91 about their lives as children and young girls.¹ The daughters of the study, born in 1971-72, are from Oslo.² Their mothers were born in the 1940s and half of them had grown up in Oslo. Of the maternal grandmothers, born in 1910-27, only one had lived in Oslo; the others grew up in rural areas. In this paper I discuss some theoretical and methodological aspects of the project, especially the problem of how to combine a psychological and a cultural level of analysis.³

Where the Psychological Meets the Cultural

We wanted to understand how psychology is historically and culturally embedded – not just in the sense that different psychological *models* are historical, which they evidently are, but also in the sense that the actual psychological makeup of people changes, that the formations of subjectivities and motivations are historical phenomena.⁴ This idea that not only cultural discourses, but also inner psychological worlds, come in historical versions has roots in the Frankfurter school studies of personalities and “social characters”. These ideas played an important role in my early years in university and gave me a long-lasting engagement with trying to understand “that place where the psychological meets the cultural or the self meets the world”, as Nancy Chodorow (1999: 6) phrased it. Today, however, I chase this place within a different psychological framing. It is still psychoanalytic, but the ideas of fixed personalities of the early Frankfurter school have given way to a more object-relational understanding of the inner world, more oriented toward the subtle and ongoing interaction – *osmosis* is a good metaphor – between

material structure, culture, and psychology that also eventually produces societal change. *The Power of Feelings* (1999) by Nancy Chodorow outlines an inspiring theoretical framework that makes it possible to understand both the total interdependency and empirically interwoven dynamics of culture and emotions and, at the same time, to see them as mutually irreducible realms. The domains of personal emotional meaning and of shared cultural meaning *do not* coincide just because they are interdependent and empirically interwoven. The meaning that we experience in any social situation will come simultaneously from within and without, and this is actually what gives the social encounter its dynamic character: Something *new* can be created in this “potential space” between the inner and the outer worlds (see also Winnicott 1971 and Benjamin 1995 for elaborations of this point).

The point that interdependent phenomena are not thereby identical is hard to grasp. For instance, the distinction between the cultural and the personal is often confused with the distinction between the historical and the universal, even though these distinctions are about completely different things. Both societal/cultural phenomena and the making of subjectivities can display historical as well as universal traits. The idea, for instance, that a society always includes some kind of structural relations between people, and that culture works through symbolic interchanges between them, is not less universalizing than the idea that human beings have a capacity to develop language and to experience emotions. The question about *what* language and *which* emotions is no less historical than the question about what structures and which symbolic interchanges.

Another prevalent idea is that the insistence on an inner domain of emotions or a personal subjectivity implies a concept of the subject as a coherent, unitary, and unchangeable entity. This might be the philosophical subject of Descartes, but it is certainly not the psychological subject of Freud. The very point in psychoanalytic theory is that the self is incoherent and harbors multiple and often conflicting emotional positions. This, however, is not necessarily seen as dysfunctional, but rather as what makes us feel alive. This inner dynamic is, in fact, seen as one of the presuppositions for agency.

What triggers me is that if emotions and inner psychological worlds are such central parts of our lives, which I believe they are, they must also be a central part of our understanding of how culture and society work and change. In my view a theory of emotions should be an integrated part of any general theory of the work of culture. It is often remarked that structural

determinism makes culture look like an epiphenomenon, always lagging behind economic or material structures. I see the same problem with a cultural analysis that views the emotional worlds of people only as epiphenomena, always lagging behind the cultural meanings. However, economic and social structures, shared cultural meanings, and personal emotions are all sources of societal change; they interact in complex ways, but cannot be reduced to each other or neatly fitted into hierarchical models of relative importance. Most sociologists and anthropologists today would agree that it is important to understand how people actually *use* cultural concepts to organize their social worlds and construct themselves and others in a way that makes sense of what is going on around them. This approach has many names, such as socialconstructionism, the agency perspective, and “history from below”. I consent to these approaches, but I want to take the issue *one step further*: to see how such constructions are infused with personal meaning and emotions from specific psychobiographies, and how this may facilitate or impede cultural and social changes, for instance, in the form of what one could call *a certain inner psychological readiness* for some discourses and not for others, for some structural changes and not for others.

To ask about relations between social patterns, cultural patterns, and psychological patterns and how they change our understandings of gender comes close to “a larger than life” question. It is necessary to become more focussed. When the data are transcriptions or texts from interviews, as in this case, one might translate the question to one that is still difficult, but more manageable: *What can these texts tell us about relations between historical context, discursive constructions, and emotional reality?*

Discourses in Three Generations

Both within and across generations there are different “genres” at work in the way empirical subjects talk about the world, the self and their gender: The grandmothers, aged between 64 and 80 when interviewed in 1991, tend to construct their stories in a rather deterministic “structuralist” way, where different perspectives or ways of interpretation are not made relevant (“that was the way it was back then” they often say). They give us broad and generalized pictures of their family life, their activities, and the community they grew up in. To listen to them evokes a feeling of standing in front of a naturalistic landscape painting. Here is a taste of this descriptive story-telling mode where the outer world, what one did, ate, said, is in the center:

I must say that I grew up in a good home. I must say I did. And father was a carpenter, so we always had skies and ski sticks. I had an awfully long way to school, so in winter we went on our skies, if the snow was good. And we had sleighs too. We lived close to the railway station, so when we went to school, we had to go all the way down in the valley, and over the river – I think we had a 6 km walk to school. (rural girl, born in 1910)

Typical, especially of the rural grandmothers' way of talking is this alteration between "we" and "I", and the description of parents and other adults as positions more than as individuals: The grandmothers refer to "father" and "mother"; the two younger generations use the more individualized "my father" and "my mother". The grandmothers show some distance from a modern psychological discourse. For instance, when we asked if they had experienced adolescence as a difficult time, they would typically respond: "We did not have so many problems in those times" or "I can't remember that we had like puberty and all that stuff. I can't say I had that". Their evaluations are purely descriptive ("This was good. That was bad.") or conveyed indirectly if about other people. Critiques of parents are very rare; it is the external conditions that are seen as limitations and problems. To say that you are discontent seems to go against deeply rooted norms of modesty. Only death and illnesses can be openly lamented.

This deterministic sociological genre is outdated in the talk of the mothers, most of them in their 40s when interviewed in 1991. Their self-presentation is within a psychological discourse, always problematizing their own motives, seeking the answers in childhood experiences as well as reflecting upon their own reconstruction of memories, as in this example:

When I think back on my childhood, and as a young adult, I must say I think it was un-usually good and, well, fortunate. And I know that it is like you often forget things, and you repress bad memories, because nobody is totally happy. I know that. But, really, I found this diary, from when I was 17 years of age, and it reads there that "I am so happy, everything is so good". So I did write that there. (urban girl, born in 1944).

In contrast to the grandmothers, many of the mothers explain almost every problem in their lives by blaming their parents, especially their mothers. They provide lengthy descriptions of family relations and dynamics. They are much less focussed on material life conditions or the community they grew up in. Recollections of activities and events often slide into interpretations and evaluations of those activities and events. Psychological concepts have become everyday concepts in the mother's stories, and psychological models are brought up to interpret their lives and feelings. This also seems to imply the removal of a taboo against talking negatively about others – such statements can now be understood within a legitimate field of analytic and interpretative activity, not as final assertions about how somebody “really” is. Such a distinction does not seem to have much meaning for the grandmothers.

The youngest generation – the 18-year-old daughters in this study – still makes use of this psychological discourse, but it is often simultaneously ironically negated. Perhaps the psychological genre is already empty and dead to these girls, who relate it not only to their mother's generation, but also to a trend of confessional intimacy in a media-saturated culture, which some of them find immensely ridiculous (for instance, talk shows on feelings and other “women's themes”). The “who-am-I?”-orientation seems to permeate everything these girls say, and instead of a “story” of their upbringing, they give us bits and pieces, held together more by the underlying emotional tone than by the actual information or a story line. TV genres promoting irony or black humor seem to be at work in their talk. Their families are often described in this humorous vein, almost like the Cosby or the Bundy families, and it can in fact sometimes be difficult to grasp whether they convey problems or just put themselves and their family on the stage. Here one of the young girls describes dinners at home:

Well, mostly we eat at home, but not dinners really. We just have a sandwich system. We make dinners when we feel like it and have sandwiches when we don't feel like it. My mom got quite frustrated. Llike every time she had made something I said “Ugh, are we having that for dinner?!” [laughs] “Ugh, I don't want that. Phew!”. If it looked kind of boring. (urban girl, born 1971)

In some ways this is a much less personalized genre than their mothers' descriptions of family dynamics. The family appears as stagehands for the presentation of the daughter's unique

personality. Sometimes the girls perform like stand-up comedians in the interview situation, where there must always be a point to the stories they tell us about their everyday life. This could be age-related, but it could also be a product of this generation's exposure to commercialized media culture. Their perspective on the world, relates more to "cultural studies" than to the "sociology" of the grandmothers or the "psychology" of the mothers. One of the main characteristics of cultural studies is often said (at least by their critics) to be a nonjudgmental approach to phenomena that otherwise seem to trigger moral panics. This distanced attitude is also seen among our young interviewees as they tell us about their lives.

Historical Contexts and Discursive Constructions

Evidently, these generation-specific genres stem from varied sources. One could be the specific *life phase* of the interviewees: It is different to talk about one's childhood and adolescence when one is in the midst of it, when one has children who are in the midst of it, or when both oneself and one's children survived it. Another source could be the different contexts of *the interview situation*: To the grandmothers we as interviewers slide into the position of the respectful daughter (grandmother tells stories about her childhood), to the mothers the position of a female friend (intimate confessions), and to the daughters, who are on the threshold of entering university, the position of a wise and admirable researcher (eagerly giving us data about contemporary youth cultures). The different genres, however, may also tell us something about the discursive positions, as well as the historical change in such positions, from where young women's lives and selves are understood and constructed. Viewed strictly as historical resources, these interviews are all remnants from 1991. But the fact that the three generations so consistently pick different discourses when constructing their memoirs of youth also makes it feasible to view them as *small pockets of history*, preserved in the individuals. Still, the question remains whether these recollections can tell us more than something about historically changing discourses. Can they also give us some historical knowledge of changing social practices in the 1920s, 1950s, and 1980s? I think they can, but there are evidently problems to be considered.

One problem is that the different genres make it difficult to compare the life situations of the different generations. How are we to know what is the product of a discursive selection and what is an expression of actual differences in aspects of their lives as young girls? For example, the grandmothers give much more elaborated accounts than the mothers of the social hierarchies

in their local community and also of political disagreements, for instance, right-wing fathers and left-wing uncles yelling at each other at family reunions. Does this exclusion of a political world have to do with the mothers' obsession with psychology? Or rather with the fact that their childhood coincided with a period in Norwegian history (1950s and 60s) when the building of the welfare state really took off and was based on important political compromises both between political parties and in the labor market? Due both to this and to the rapidly increasing standards of living, income differences between people decreased. So the lessening of social hierarchies and of fighting between fathers and uncles could actually express the historical fact of a period of more political consensus and that the social and economic world had become a dynamic system. Or should these explanations not be seen as alternatives, but rather as an example of the on-going interaction between historical context and a perspective of narration?

Another problem is the fact that the stories of childhood in these generations are seen through discourses or "lenses" that belong to different historical moments, some of them earlier than the time they are telling us about. For the grandmothers, for instance, "younger" lenses provided the narrative perspectives of *increased standards of living and possibilities for schooling, diminished social differences among people, more openness about sex and bodily functions, and changed norms of morality*. Even so, most of the values they learned in their childhood seem to persist into the present. This is not the case with the middle generation. They distance themselves from most of the values they learned as children and young girls. Hardly any of the "lenses" of the grandmothers are present in the mothers' stories. Instead their narrative perspective highlights *increased enlightenment, the psychological approach, and the norm of gender equality*.⁵ Many of the mothers tell stories of "coming out" as feminists, with somewhat ironic depictions of themselves as young girls. They describe themselves as caricatures of teenage girls, very different from the grandmothers who may talk about their youth with joy or sorrow, but never with irony. The psychological perspective seems to lead to a paradoxical blend of self-centeredness and self-contempt. The self-caricature can also be due to the fact that the mothers describe themselves much more as members of a specific generation – and their recollections of their own youth, as well as the interviewer's response to it, seem to slide together with the media images of our generation as young people. They – and we as researchers – also share a ready-made discourse about "the 1950s" that affects our own memories of this time. In comparison the grandmothers have neither this youth generational identity nor such strong

discourse about the historical period –“the hard times” in the early 1930s seem to have a much more limited reference than the all-inclusive concept of “the 1950s”.

On a theoretical level problems like these may underline the futility of asking what the interviewees are “really” talking about. However, if one poses the question on the textual level, it is not always impossible to argue about what belongs to social practices (including the discourses of such practices) of the past and what belongs to later discourses. Although the poststructuralist wave has created a much needed awareness of the discursive level, also to be taken into account in social research, it has also contributed to a less fruitful dichotomy between language and experience. But language and experience always come together, and the task of the researcher should be to analyze how they intertwine, not to choose between them.

If one keeps *the double perspective on language and experience* in mind, it is often possible to argue about (which is something other than to “prove”) what belongs to the social practices of a past time, not only contemporary constructions. A close textual reading can, for instance, detect discrete messages about discontent that come together with the grandmothers’ assurance that one did not have any problems in those days or the seriousness that infuses the funny stories of the youngest generation. Sometimes the interviewees themselves highlight the difference between how they saw it then and how they see it now. Another example is the 1950s housewife as fact and as construction: The women in the middle generation depict their mothers as energetic housewives, and in contrast to the previous generation this housewife of the 1950s is no longer admired for her competence and support to the family, but is mainly depicted as someone who made the home a living hell for husband and children. This narration is definitely indebted to 1970s feminism, but even so we can find in the text information that connects the image of the controlled house to the actual time of the 1950s childhood. The women who grew up in the 1950s report that they spent much more of their leisure time outside the home than the other two generations, and those who had mothers who worked outside the home remember how lucky they were to come home to a free house and how they were envied by their girlfriends whose mothers were at home. This is not told in a way that gives modern feminist support to the working mothers of the 1950s; the same girls who enjoyed the free house lament the fact that their mothers imposed duties on them that the other girls did not have. Here we hear the “child” talk, and thus can discern the housewife of the 1950s – or at least the house as a zone of maternal control – as something other than the 1970s discourses about her.

Discursive Constructions and Emotional Realities

The fact that different generations tend to share the same genre of narration and discursive lenses does not mean that such shared discourses are conveyed in exactly the same way. There is often *an emotional tone* in the interview where a mother and a daughter can resemble each other just as much as they resemble their generational group. Or if they are different from each other, one may still infer a psychological connecting logic between these emotional tones. Such emotional tones can, for instance, be cheerfulness or sadness, be open or more reserved on intimate matters, or be confident or suspicious toward the interviewer. Or it can be displayed through their use of the same *type of psychic defenses*, for instance, splitting, where people are described in terms of all good or all bad, tendencies to idyllic accounts or self-pity or aggrievement. This gives another line of analysis that can be viewed against the discursive style. Emotional continuities can also often be detected in the way a specific chain of daughter-mother-grandmother relates to their bodies or to notions of femininity/masculinity. Contempt toward femininity and idealization of masculinity seem also to run in families. We have chains where all three generations lament that their mothers preferred their brothers to them, but do not see that they the pattern with their own children. For women who experience such unequal treatment by their mothers, feminist discourse can later become a sort of bandage on a hurt self. For others the feminist message joins a celebration of strong women that *they* have from their female ancestors. Some are feminists by injury or anger, others by pride.

Examples like these indicate the individual differences in emotional stories that can go along with shared generational narratives. This can help us understand why different persons are attracted to different cultural discourses or to the same discourses for different reasons.

Emotional Reality and Historical Context

I have thus far tended to tie cultural patterns to the generational level, and emotional patterns to the individual story. It is not that simple because these categories intersect. Cultural discourses and patterns can be tied to the specific family; for instance, we were often struck by the similarity in a daughter-mother-grandmother chain in the way each served us in the interview situation. The women of some of the chains had prepared almost full meals for us to eat during the interview; others hardly offered a glass of water. And even though emotionality always is

closely connected to the individual story and often transmitted from mother to daughter, it may still be possible to also see some generational patterns on the psychological level. Here are some examples of lines of inquiry from I work with in the interview data:

Is there any relation between the emerging culture of intimacy and individualism in the family and the emotional states experienced by the daughters? There are evidently cultural changes in the standards of what it takes to be a good mother, and the daughters evaluate their mothers according to these. For the grandmother a good mother is someone who takes care of you and satisfies your material needs. For the mothers it is someone with whom you can have an open and affectionate relationship. For the daughters it is someone who loves you unqualifiedly, but still allows for autonomy. The experienced emotional relations seem to vary according to these changing mother standards. The good versus the bad mother seems to be expressed within *different emotional polarities* in the three generations. The grandmother generation *admires* the good mother and expresses *bitterness* toward the bad. The mother generation *feels close* to the good mother and *rage* toward the bad.⁶ The daughter generation shows *appreciation* of the good mother and *distance* from the bad.

Another example of generational psychological patterns could be sibling rivalry. This phenomenon seems to be related to both family dynamics and generation. A full analysis would have to include both and the relation between them. Sibling rivalry is reported by all three generations, but seems to change in its target and emotional expression. Most of the grandmothers direct jealousy toward their sisters, maybe because it was so self-evident that the brothers were of a different kind, that differential treatment was not experienced as a personal matter. The envy of the rural grandmothers takes the form of a *moral critique* toward sisters who behaved selfishly and kept all the good things for themselves. The urban grandmothers and many of the mothers more often lament the sad experience of *not being the preferred child* of the mother or the father. Others of the mother generation, especially those who direct their jealousy toward the preferred brothers, express their envy in the form of *indignation over the sheer injustice* of things. From a psychological point of view, these three forms of sibling rivalry represent very different positions.

The Housewife as Historical Fact, Cultural Construction and Emotional Reality

The relation between mothers and daughters in the middle generation of our study is much more negative than in the eldest and youngest generations. This is often expressed and symbolized through the image of mother as a housewife. However, this housewife image of their mothers in some respects is an erroneous construction: Of the 22 mothers, only 3 were actually full-time housewives. Eight had held steady jobs throughout the childhood of the daughter, most of them on a full-time basis, 7 had worked with their spouses, either as farmer's wives or as assisting wives (for instance doing the accounts in a family enterprise), and 4 had occasionally held low paid and unskilled jobs outside the home. But, except for three girls whose mothers had higher education and skilled jobs, all interviewees from the middle generation describe their mothers first and foremost as dull housewives. Some of them say that they only later, as adults, became aware how much their mother actually had done, for instance in the family enterprise, and how competent she must have been. Generally, they belittle their mothers' activities, in regard not only to paid work, but also in her leisure activities and her activities in the local community, things described at length and with pride when it comes to fathers.

This housewife image has a scholarly parallel both in statistics from the period and in most historical accounts of the 1950s and 60s. Even in feminist history writing of the 1950s, adult women's lives are described mainly through the housewife icon, and the frequency of paid work among married Norwegian women is reported to be 4% (Melby 1999). The problem is, however, that statistics at this time counted only full-time paid work as work for women. Part-time jobs and the work of farm wives were not officially registered as "work" until 1970, so the huge increase in women's paid work from this decade can actually be questioned (Blom 1999; Kaledin 1984). The historical facts for this period are not clear, but we definitely can say that our informants are over reporting the housewife identities of their mothers. Why?

One reason may be that the mothers themselves saw their role as housewives as the more important one and thus underplayed the role of their paid work outside the family. Another is that the concept "housewife" work *as a dividing line*, important for the self-construction of the daughters of the 1950s. If we list all the characteristics that these daughters attach to the word "housewife" and compare them with all the characteristics they use to describe themselves or what they see as positive traits in others, a clear-cut dichotomy emerges:

A housewife is:

- occupied with details and her own home
- a person who lives her life though others
- dependent and submissive
- occupied with the facade
- perfectionist
- unable to relax
- manipulative
- psychologically insecure
- ignorant and old-fashioned

The daughter is (or wishes she were):

- occupied with bigger issues and engaged in society at large
- somebody in her own right
- independent and equal
- occupied with the essentials
- relaxed
- someone who values pleasure
- open and direct
- someone who dares to be herself
- enlightened and modern

The housewife is really constructed as “the other” to a liberated woman! In the interviews with the daughters it is not only the life situation and behavior of the mothers that is interpreted against this modern discourse of women’s liberation, but also the mothers’ desires. The mothers are often described by their daughters as *sad and bitter* because they never had lives of their own outside the family, but the description of the interviewee’s own mother often slips into what she may have heard about friends’ mothers. Thus this is as much a shared generational discourse as the memory of her own life.

As we have interviewed some of these supposedly sad and bitter mothers, we know that they tell a somewhat different story. Many of them retrospectively admit they would have liked to have been something other than a housewife and a part-time worker, but they do not appear as bitter and frustrated as their daughters portray them. What they stress is actually not so much the lack of paid work outside the home, but rather the lack of education and learning. Again, the generational norm of not complaining can play a part in this apparently contradictory picture. One grandmother, for instance, expressed herself this double-edged way: “Well, I guess I had expected something different of my life, but I must also say that I actually think that I have had a very good life.” The 1970 construction of the 1950s may not have been taken entirely out of the blue, but the construction is exaggerated and drawn in a certain direction to support the self-constructions of the adult daughters.

Even though the housewife imagery can be seen as the product of a more recent discourse, this does not exclude a connection to emotions that actually stem from childhood and adolescence in the middle generation. The strong emotional charge of the image of the housewife (including the negative psychological characteristics of the mothers as manipulative, anxious, submissive, etc.) indicates that more is at stake than just a change of cultural norms about

women's paid or unpaid labor. For some of the daughters the feminist critique of the housewife coincides with a positive evaluation her own housewife-mother and an identification with her on a more personal level, but for the majority the critique of the housewife seems to merge with a strong devaluation of the mother, also on a psychological level.

Thus, these emotions, whether positive or negative, cannot be explained just by the fact that the daughters in the middle generation came to live a life different from their mothers. Actually, the reverse could be the case: Negative mother-daughter relations on the psychological level could have given emotional force to this specific cultural construction of the housewife. So here we have a case of these complex relations between a structural change in women's lives, a cultural change of norms for femininity, and a specific pattern of inner mother-me relations of many girls of this generation.

A way to approach such inner mother-me relations is to look into patterns of parental identifications in this middle generation of young girls and compare them with those of the elder and the younger generations. As Jessica Benjamin (1995) has shown, parental identification is about both *like subjects* and *love objects* – not either-or, as Freud thought when he described the difference between identification with the same-sex parent and object love for the other-sex parent. Similarity versus difference and love versus hate are two entirely different dimensions that do not overrule each other. It is possible to love or to hate your father/mother and at the same time experience your self being similar to or different from him/her in varying aspects. What makes parental identification such a pivotal point is that this indeed is a place where the personal, emotional, and cultural meet: The words and concepts we use to express these often strong, emotional states are saturated with cultural meanings of femininities and masculinities. Just compare the very different connotations aroused by the following two utterances:

- *I am a very emotional person, just like my mother – but we don't get along very well.*

- *I am a very emotional person, just like my father – we are very close.*

The notion of what it means *to be emotional* and the notions of what it means *to be close* or *don't get along* would for most of us convey very different meanings depending on whether we are talking about two women, a man and a women, or two men. In this respect daughters or sons will always have to do some “work of culture” (Obeyesekere 1990) in order to make themselves and their parents, as well as their own emotional relations to their parents, understandable in relation to cultural concepts of femininities and masculinities. And the creativity in this regard is

amazing! What comes out are very *personal recipes of gender*, but perhaps some generational patterns as well.

According to an object-relational perspective one does not have only one inner relation to one's mother and only one to one's father. Normally we have a whole array of different mother-father constellations, both conscious and unconscious fantasies that can be activated by different contexts. This points to yet another of the unsolvable methodological problems in using psychoanalytic theory on interview data – even lengthy qualitative interviews are quite meager data in this respect. Thus, we are limited to analyzing only those relational images that actually come up, well knowing that there are more. With this limitation in mind I have found some differences in the patterns of parental identification between the three generations of women in my study, and I have also found that similar patterns can have different effects in different generations. For instance, across the different types of mother-father-daughter constellations, almost all girls in the middle generation say that they *identify most strongly with their fathers*, which is not so clearly the case with the other two generations. I will here examine two patterns seen in all three generations, but in different settings and thus with different outcomes: (1) contempt for mother – idealized father and, (2) strong mothers – warm fathers.

The first constellation, contempt for mother – idealized father, seems to be a lower-middle-class/working-class pattern in the two eldest generations, and it has almost disappeared in the youngest generation.⁷ But the pattern *interacts differently with the socio-historical context*, and thus it seems to have different consequences for the social and psychological development of the interviewees as young women. Those in the *eldest generation* who devalued their mothers' competence, and idealized their distant fathers did not have any other social possibilities than to pursue a woman's life. Thus, they did not oppose their mothers, but took over a traditional feminine identity with strong psychological ambivalence. In the *next generation*, where the mothers' social status had declined and the social situation had changed, giving the daughters choices other than staying on the track of their mothers, *psychological ambivalence can develop into open contempt*, and they can identify with their fathers, who are actually also much more available in the 1950s city family: At that historical point, fathers and children shared leisure activities like sports and hiking while the mothers were home preparing the dinner. Within this pattern of parental identification we first and foremost find the girls who devalue the housewife most fiercely on the psychological level.

The girls in the other pattern, strong mothers – warm fathers, do not express such an emotional contempt for the housewife, even if they distance themselves from such a life. This pattern has changed from being a farmer's daughter pattern in the eldest generation in our study to being mainly a higher-middle-class pattern in the next two generations. But only for the eldest and the youngest generations does this pattern accompany a clear maternal identification. The farmer's daughters in the eldest generation identified proudly with their strong, competent mothers; the middle-class daughters of the middle generation tended to identify more with their fathers, even in cases where they actually perceive their mothers as strong and competent. The reason may be that the old rural division of labor is gone in the city and has turned into a new gender constellation where only men's work is acknowledged as work. Thus the notion of competence becomes heavily associated with masculinity. But when this constellation of strong mothers – warm fathers is found in the youngest generation, cultural notions of femininity have changed so much that the daughters tend again to identify with such strong, competent mothers, limiting fathers' role to be that of a warm and loving figure. In both cases I would say that *an inner psychological readiness* was actually present *before* the structural and cultural change of women's work and status, and we can ask to what extent this has *contributed to facilitate the societal change* in the relation between men and women. The ambivalence toward the mother we saw in some of the daughters in the eldest generation gets a cultural chance to escalate in the next generation, breaking into a new way in life for these women, although with high psychological costs for both mothers and daughters. The basically good relation we saw in some daughters in the middle generation turns into a clear identification with the mother in the youngest generation because such female identification is now supported by new cultures and practices in gender relations. To be a woman does not connote incompetence in a society where women can be professionals in both work and politics.

However, even though the parental identifications analyzed change within and between these generations, we can also see some continuities. The overall picture within the two patterns is that the emotional relation to the father mainly stays on the positive side. It is a change from the father being seen as *powerful and competent* to the father as *warm and competent* to the father as *warm and emotional*. The mother is a much more contested figure. She moves from being perceived as *strong and strict* to *weak and incompetent* to *competent and effective*. Although mothers can be more or less *admired* by daughters, they are seldom *adored* in the ways

fathers are. So in spite of the important changes, we also see traces of the well-known old psychological story of the father as “the knight in shining armour”, as Margareth Mahler depicts him (Mahler, Pine and Bergman 1975, and the mother as the grey, unexciting shadow that Susan Contratto (1987) describes. Might this suggest that both the persistence and the undermining of patriarchy have their allies in the inner world of emotions?

References

- Benjamin, Jessica. 1995. *Like Subjects, Love Objects: Essays on Recognition and Sexual Difference*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Bjerrum Nielsen, Harriet. 1996. "The Magic Writing-Pad. On Gender and Identity Work". *Young - Nordic Journal of Youth Research* 4,3:2-18.
- Bjerrum Nielsen, Harriet and Monica Rudberg. 1994. *Psychological Gender and Modernity*. Oslo: Scandinavian University Press.
- Bjerrum Nielsen, Harriet and Monica Rudberg. 1995 "Gender recipes among young girls". *Young - Nordic Journal of Youth Research* 3,2:71-88.
- Bjerrum Nielsen, Harriet and Monica Rudberg. 2000. "Gender, Love and Education in Three Generations". *The European Journal of Women's Studies* 7, 4: 423-453.
- Blom, Ida. 1999. "Brudd Og Kontinuitet: Fra 1950 Mot Årtusenskiftet." (Break and continuity: From 1950 toward the millenium). In *Med Kjønnsperspektiv På Norsk Historie*, edited by Ida Blom and Sølvi Sogner. Oslo: Cappelens akademiske forlag, 1999.
- Breines, Wini. 1992. *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Chodorow, Nancy, and Susan Contratto. 1992. "The Fantasy of the Perfect Mother." In *Rethinking the Family: Some Feminist Questions*, edited by Barrie Thorne and Marilyn Yalom. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Chodorow, Nancy J. 1999. *The Power of Feelings*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Contratto, Susan. 1987. "Father Presence in Women's Psychological Development." In *Advances in Psychoanalytic Sociology*, edited by Marion S. Goldman, Jerome Rabow, and Gerald M Platt. Malabar: Krieger.
- Elder, Glen H. 1974. *Children of the Great Depression*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hareven, Tamara, ed. 1982. *Aging and Life Course Transitions: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Kaledin, Eugenia. 1984. *Mothers and More: American Women in the 1950s*. Boston: Twayne.
- Mahler, Margaret S., Fred Pine, and Annie Bergman. 1975. *The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant*. London: Hutchinson.
- Melby, Kari. 1999. "Husmorens Epoke: 1900-1950." (The era of the housewife: 1900-1950) In *Med Kjønnsperspektiv På Norsk Historie*, edited by Ida Blom and Sølvi Sogner. Oslo: Cappelens akademiske forlag.
- Modell, John. 1989. *Into One's Own: From Youth to Adulthood in the United States 1920-1975*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Obeyesekere, Gananath. 1990. *The Work of Culture: Symbolic Transformations in Psychoanalysis and Anthropology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Roberts, Brent W, and Ravenna Helson. 1997. "Changes in Culture, Changes in Personality: The Influence of Individualism in a Longitudinal Study of Women." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 72, 3: 641-51.
- Rudberg, Monica. 1995. "A bloody story? On construction of bodily gender among young girls". *NORA - Nordic Journal of Women's Studies* 3,1:32-44.
- Veroff, Joseph, Elisabeth Douvan, and Richard A. Kulka. 1981. *The Inner American: A Self-Portrait from 1957 to 1976*. New York: Basic Books.
- Winnicott, D.W. 1971. *Playing and Reality*. London: Tavistock.

Notes

¹ Only 14 chains are complete with all three generations. The remaining 8 chains consist of only the two youngest generations (in these cases the grandmother had either died or did not want to participate).

² The girls come from two different high schools in Oslo: one with a very good academic reputation in central Oslo, students coming mainly from middle-class families where parents have higher education, and another more ordinary suburban school with students from lower-middle-class, working-class, and small self-employed families. Our data also comprise ethnographic observations at these two high schools. Norwegian high school (*Videregående skole*) includes years 10-12 (16-18 years olds) and is divided into different courses. Both schools in this study teach theoretical courses (*Allmennfaglig linje*), preparing for higher education. The vast majority of high schools in Norway are free; access depended at the time of the study partly on grades from junior high school, partly on the catchment area, giving priority to students living nearest the school. Thus, the girls in our study are normal city youth of present-day Oslo, with slight differences in their social backgrounds. Most of their mothers are the first generation to receive higher education in their families, many of them coming from working-class or lower-middle-class families in Oslo or other towns. Half of the grandmothers are rural girls with no further education, but three of the urban grandmothers have higher education.

³ For details on the project and some of the outcomes, see Bjerrum Nielsen and Rudberg 2000. Other publications in English presenting data from the project are Bjerrum Nielsen and Rudberg 1994 and 1995, Rudberg 1995, Bjerrum Nielsen 1996.

⁴ My stay at UC Berkeley in 2001 has made me aware of many US scholars who have been occupied with similar questions about the relation between individual lives and historical change, most of them within the perspective of life course research. See, for instance, Elder 1974; Veroff, Douvans and Kulka 1981; Hareven 1982; Modell 1989; Roberts and Helson 1997.

⁵ The shift toward a more psychological approach to understanding self and others that we see between the eldest and the middle generations of our study has also been documented on a much larger sample in the US in the same historical period (Veroff et al. 1981; see also Roberts and Helson 1997).

⁶ They match exactly the “fantasies of the perfect mother” and, consequently, the rage toward the imperfect one depicted in feminist theory by Nancy Chodorow and Susan Contratto (1992). My suggestion is that this mother-daughter pattern is specific to this generation – the women born in the postwar period, the women of the second feminist movement.

⁷ It is present in only two girls of the higher-middle-class, where the power relations between parents are very asymmetrical – with father as the dominant figure, even though the mother has the same level of education and job. These two girls find it humiliating to belong to such outdated families, but blame their mothers for it.