

# Modern Lives, Subjectivity, Schooling, and Social Change

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*There is never a single set of constitutive criteria to appeal to in characterizing complex social practices.* (Benhabib 1995)

*Every act of research is simultaneously empirical (it confronts the world of observable phenomena) and theoretical (it necessarily engages hypotheses about the underlying structure of relations that observations are designed to capture).* (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992)

This book is about young women and men shaping their lives as they move through the years of secondary schooling and into the world beyond. It is also a discussion about how both the personal and the big picture are significant in researching and theorizing social change, as well as an ongoing reflection about how one researches subjectivity. The book is framed by concerns about education and inequalities, differences, and changes in education. The stories we tell and the arguments we make are an attempt to foreground things we think matter both in education and in understanding subjectivity, schooling, and changing times.

The book emerges out of a longitudinal project in which we set out to explore how dispositions, attitudes, and identities develop over a period of significant personal change—the adolescent years—and during a social era often characterized as “New Times.” We designed this study to examine more specifically how such dispositions, attitudes, and identities develop in particular (and different)

school settings, and against particular (and different) biographical experiences. We are interested in how individuals form themselves and in how social patterns and inequalities are created.

Over a seven-year period (1993–2000), we interviewed and videotaped 26 young Australians (14 girls and 12 boys) as they aged from 12 to 18 years, from diverse social backgrounds, attending four different types of school. (We called this the 12 to 18 Project.) Twice during each year of high school, and in the first year afterward, we listened to these students talk about their sense of self, their values, attitudes to the future, and their experiences of school. Their individual narratives illuminate the uneven and differentiated impact of contemporary social and gender change, and the profound influence of school community and culture on the shaping of subjectivity.

In following young people over the significant years from 12 to 18 we were engaging with broader questions about social forms today (of class and gender and race, as well as contemporary schooling) and with the problem of what this thing, subjectivity or identity, looks like, and how you might empirically research it. Take Keren's story for example.

*Keren lived in a small country town with her mother and sisters; when we first met her, she was 11 years old and at the end of elementary school. She smiled a lot, told us that she would like to be a teacher, and that she was excited about going to high school. When we interviewed her again in the first years of high school, she was not so happy and enthusiastic about school, indicated that she was being bullied, said she liked "technical subjects" but was not any good at math, and was seeing a remedial teacher. She did not like the way she looked—her hair, her teeth, her body. She saw herself becoming a cook, or a preschool childcare worker. When she talked about the future, she said she would "just take it as it comes." She wanted enough money to have "a car that works" and she dreamt of having a nice house, but that was "imaginary, very very imaginary." Throughout high school "taking it as it comes" remained a prominent theme in her thoughts about herself and her future. She attended a school in which the majority of students left before graduation, but Keren stayed on and passed her final exams. When we last interviewed her, she was enrolled in a one-year training certificate to become a nursing assistant and was saving to move into an apartment of her own.*

The questions we are interested in and which we explore in later chapters include: How is Keren's sense of self and subjectivity shaped? What does she bring from her family, her biography, and

what does she encounter at school? What is our own role in the story we elicit from Keren and the stories we make from our conversations with her? How are changes in education and work patterns affecting Keren and her peers? In what sense is one person's story "evidence"? In what sense is Keren's story a familiar one of a working-class girl and her path through school and life, and in what respects are there signs of a new era, new experiences, a new "detraditional" world? How would we tell?

Questions such as these are about theory and substantive focus; they are also about methodological ways of proceeding and writing, about how to do research.

To begin with, consider our decision to examine issues of schooling, social change, and inequalities by a longitudinal focus on subjectivity. Subjectivity has become an object of fascination for contemporary theory, and the reasons for this, as well as the questions being posed, warrant attention from those who are concerned about young people, or schooling, or social power and inequalities. For some theorists, the new attention to subjectivity is responding to broad social and cultural changes. It involves questions about what is required of the person in this era—what fashioning of subjectivity or identity does the new work and cultural order require, and how do young people shape themselves, over time, in the context of their family and school life? For others, the interest in subjectivity is a continued development of a range of theoretical, practical, and political attempts to address "difference." It is part of an ongoing engagement with questions about how gender or class or race and ethnic formations work today, with how individual identities as well as social patterns are made and remade; and with how inequality, advantage, and disadvantage are produced and might be changing.

This book is one account of young people in current times, and of the theories that try to understand them. Our stories of what happens and what is said by the young men and women we follow are set against and in dialogue with some of the different claims and theories being made about these times, about gendered identity today, about schools and what they do. We set out to study, for example, changes in how girls today are seeing their lives and thinking about their future compared with girls of their mothers' generation. We look at the aspirations and dreams they develop in the school years, and the meaning of the choices they make as they take their first steps of their work or career path beyond school. These changes are evident in both middle-class and working-class girls, although their

stories are not the same. It is also a study of changes affecting boys, of new forms of uncertainty about who they are and where they are going—though, here too, the story is differentiated by class and ethnicity. For both males and females, some of the assumptions and conscious expectations they have about men and women today, both at school and in future public and family life, have changed.

But this book also argues that the constant theoretical and political focus on “change,” “New Times,” and new forms of identity has been overdone and the extent of change somewhat exaggerated. The new types of work and opportunities, new modes of entry to work, the intensified push to govern and present the self in new ways foregrounded in the “new times” rhetoric, are taken up and experienced very unevenly by different groups of young people in our study. And many of the patterns and claims theorists have noted about previous periods, such as inequalities and class or gendered ways of being, or schooling’s role in producing and consolidating difference and inequalities, are still apparent, even though they may have different substantive forms today.

When Keren’s mother was in high school in Australia in the mid-1970s, the average age at which women had their first child was 23; far fewer women went to university than did men; employed women were concentrated in three types of occupations (sales, clerical, and service); and, on average, women earned only two-thirds of male wages. From the 1970s onward, new “equal opportunity” policies and initiatives for girls were introduced in schools. By the time Keren left school in 2000, the average age at which women were having their first child was 28. Over one-third of marriages now ended in divorce, single-person households were the second most common statistical norm, and the likelihood that a woman would have a single lifelong marriage was greatly reduced. Also by the mid-1990s, slightly more women than men were going to university; yet the great majority continued to work in a relatively narrow range of occupations, with many adult women concentrated in part-time or casual jobs and in the service and hospitality industries. For men, many traditional jobs in factories or farms have disappeared and divorces as well as decline in marriage rates mean that many fathers do not live with their children. While there has been some closing of the gap in the wage differential between women and men, women nevertheless earn significantly less than men. Notwithstanding well-established Australian policies for girls’ and women’s equal opportunity in education and in the workplace, in 2002, women’s average earnings in Australia were

\$555 per week while men earned \$839, a larger gap than 10 years earlier (Summers 2003, 3).

Since the 1990s, new debates about gender and schooling have become prominent in most affluent countries, with a turn away from concerns about the education of girls to a focus on the educational experiences and outcomes of boys, evident in a huge growth in books about boys and men, conferences about boys' needs, and, in Australia, two parliamentary inquiries into the educational experiences of boys. In 1995, we asked our participants, then aged about 13, what they thought of the media debate about girls doing well at school, and boys needing more special programs. Most of them, girls and boys, agreed that girls did apply themselves better at school, but almost all rejected the idea that boys needed any special attention, since "boys are just normal." In relation to gender, education, work, and futures, the late twentieth century was a time of major change. Our longitudinal project set out to see how these changes are being lived by girls and boys from different backgrounds.

The stories of two young men in our study, Brett and Marcus, suggest how some of these changes are being differentially experienced.

*Brett lives in a rural town, attends the same working-class secondary school as Keren, leaves school early, and, when we last interview him, is seeking work in a factory or a manufacturing trade. He was tired of school, and longed for the adult world of work where he could be with his "mates." Friendships were important; in many respects, they replaced the sociality and purposefulness once derived from paid work. But Brett's self-identity remains linked to getting work, being independent, and facing a traditional future as a "breadwinner." He has a taken-for-granted view about who he is that is not shared by Marcus.*

*Attending an "arty" state school in a middle-class suburb of a large city, Marcus has also not completed his schooling. After some time abroad on an exchange program, he cannot seem to find the motivation to return to school (though he thinks he will do some more study eventually) nor does he feel inclined to think too much about his future in a strategic sense. Rather, he is committed to "sorting himself out," to being true to his values, to exploring options, independently of the world of paid work. Marcus is consumed with introspective work on the self. His biographical project is his work.*

In making sense of these different lives, we engage with a range of theories of subjectivity, gender, and contemporary times. Throughout

the book, we explore the fit between the large-scale, macro analyses that these theories offer and the situated, embodied, and uneven effects of social change, read through the lives of our participants. Much contemporary social theory, as we noted earlier, analyzes the form of late modernity in relation to the production and characteristics of the “self.” Giddens’s (1991, 1992) arguments about “narratives of the self” and reflexive biographies and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s (1995, 2002) related examination of “individualization” and the “detraditionalization” of identities and social relationships have been very influential. They analyze the emergence of new forms of identity in tandem with transformations in social relations and with associated imperatives to make oneself. Many scholars influenced by the work of Foucault provide a different and less optimistic vision of this process. They see it in terms of “government” of the self and “technologies of the self.” They examine the emergence of a new “culture of the self” evident in the contemporary concern with therapeutic practices of the self and strategies for making the self an object of knowledge (Popkewitz and Brennan 1998; Rose 1996, 1999). Other theorists address the making of the self in terms of capacities they see called up for a new kind of worker, shaped in new capitalist times. James Gee, for example, describes the formation of a “shape-shifting portfolio person” (du Gay 1996; Gee 2000/01; Gee, Hull, and Lankshear 1996). The vocational literature (and policy-making) today is full of calls for the development of new lifelong learners, people who reshape themselves as needed (Chappell et al. 2003).

In a longitudinal study of a new generation of young people, what connections do we find between such theoretical accounts of the current era and the young people we study? How do they in their adolescent years now construct their lives and imagine their futures? Are new forms of self-making evident, and are they part of a general change or reasserted in forms of social differentiation?

We argue in this book that the forms of change and continuity in relation to gendered subjectivity are not adequately encapsulated in the types of theories that are now widely embraced. It is not simply a story of the pervading spread of “risk biographies” (Dwyer and Wyn 2001; Furlong and Cartmel 1997; MacDonald 1999), nor a unitary narrative of the “detraditionalization” of gender (Adkins, 2000, 2002a; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, 2002). The usual contrasting options of either “reproduction” or “transformation” do not capture the complexity, unevenness, and double-edged quality of “gender

changes” today. For example, influential theories of women’s gendered psychology have emphasized themes of connection and autonomy as problematic developmental agendas for women (Gilligan 1982; Gilligan, Lyons, and Hanmer 1990). In our repeated interviews with the young women of different backgrounds, we certainly saw how issues of connection and relationship continue to be highly important for them; we also observed how issues of autonomy and public achievement are equally important. Different things are now taken for granted by young people in terms of possibilities and future lives; for the young women, connection is neither irrelevant nor something to which all else must be sacrificed. It also seems to be the case that the achievements of feminism and girls’ ways of being today have produced both new possibilities and dilemmas for them. And dilemmas arising from the desire for connection and community together with independence are taking on a distinctive salience for many young men today (discussed in chapter 8). Masculinity is being renegotiated in relation to changes in work, cultural imperatives to be “your own person,” and social and political legacies of feminism—and again, the combination and salience of such factors are unevenly experienced.

Other feminist theorists have discussed women’s self-perceptions and psychology in terms of their mediated sense of themselves through the “male gaze” and their culturally derived awareness of what is required to be judged as a “good” woman. We emphasize in our story of the young women in our project, particularly the young women from middle-class backgrounds, what we have called a highly honed reflexivity. This is a keen awareness of how they are being heard and interpreted by others—in the research interview, in their concerns about friends and families, in relation to schools and their teachers. But this reflexivity and the forms of femininity we explore are not quite the same in the specific temporal context of our study, contemporary times, and the high school years, as they have been in the past. This reflexivity is double-edged: it can take a self-punitive mode, a relentless self-scrutiny of seeing the self through the eyes of others, or a sense of never being good enough (Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody 2001). Yet the reflexive personal style and ways of being are also an asset in the contemporary school and workplace, contexts in which self-regulating, flexible, adaptive, and reflexive identities are highly valued (Chappell et al. 2003; Gee, Hull, and Lankshear 1996). What is valued by school curricula and by work today has changed and this has different consequences for gendered ways of

being. In other words, there is some rearticulation or realignment of the cultural significance and effects of gender difference.

At age 14, many girls in our study were dreaming about a future of almost unlimited possibility: travel, combining different glamorous jobs, fast cars, adventure (McLeod and Yates 1998). At 18, a summary of their postschool pathways (see Appendix 2a) looks like a pattern that would make the “girls can do anything” feminist reformers of the 1970s wring their hands in despair at the gender-stereotyped choices: three enter nursing, others go into arts and commerce, music therapy and law. The young men chose equally gender stereotypical occupations of mechanical engineering, medical technology, computer studies, and gardening. These are the kind of summary data that one expects to find in tracking studies of destinations. But neither the pathways to these occupations at 18, nor their meaning to the individuals or their significance in terms of social power, can be assumed from this simple summary. Our close-up and recursive study of subjectivity follows the antecedent influences on destinations and the shifting cultural and subjective meanings of those decisions. Following young people’s strategies and narratives of identity-making over the six years of high school through a focus on what they say to us about their self, their school, their future—repeatedly, prospectively, retrospectively, contradictorily, recursively—provides a different way of seeing “pathways” than the tracking from outside that databases and large-scale survey-based research provide. It shows practices of meaning-making, and the ways in which identity is developed and reshaped over the course of the high school years.

We started our study with strong interests in understanding contemporary relations of difference and inequality and in the wealth of sociological theories on what schools produce and reproduce in relation to this. Many of these sociological studies focus on difference, and the ways in which the dispositions and embodied ways of being young that people bring to school and to their future-thinking are deeply differentiated by class, or gender, or race, or “habitus.” Recently, there has been a renewed upsurge of interest in the writings of Bourdieu and Bernstein and their attention to class or habitus and differentiated processes of interaction between individual and school (Arnot 2002; Ball, Maguire, and Macrae 2000; McLeod 2005). There has also been a rash of new studies examining schools from the context of what the “new middle class” is doing in the changed environment of current times and current education and economic policies (Ball 2003; Brantlinger 2003; Power et al. 2003). Following people



from different backgrounds at the four schools in our study reiterates the continuing relevance of what these well-known theories have shown, particularly the ways in which socially learned dispositions, knowledge agendas, and ways of being are taken up by schools and by individuals experiencing schooling as signs of their capacity or incapacity to be successful, to be certain kinds of people. But our study of particular individuals located in four different schools, and including close attention to two schools “in the middle” as well as to more elite and more disadvantaged locations, tells a more micro and differentiated story of identities and pathways being shaped in the course of schooling. Our story is consequently not just about schooling, but about particular schools.

While acknowledging and not detracting from the broader picture of how schools shape and produce inequalities, we show how, at the individual and family level, these processes do not produce uniform effects. Accepting that people from certain backgrounds will only, realistically, have access to certain schools, we can still see the effects on young people’s formation of attending different schools and encountering different configurations of school agendas and cultures. For each of our four schools, some of our selected students were supported more than if they had gone to one of the other schools; at least one young person in each of the schools we studied would, hypothetically at least, have been better served by a different school. This, however, only intensifies one issue that clearly affects young people and their families today, one that we also discuss (chapter 3), and this is the pressure to make perfect choices, and the greater weight on schooling outcomes and associated focus and pressure on making (successful) futures.

Our study was designed to investigate patterns and experiences of difference and inequality and was framed in dialogue with the sociological literature on inequalities arising from class, gender, and race/ethnicity. Whatever words were used, this literature tended to portray what happens to young people in schools as a story of reproduction. The project was also set up with attention to the “school effectiveness” literature that had so dominated the decade before we commenced our longitudinal study. That literature often bracketed big differences out of the picture and compared like with like to show that some schools did better or worse. We tried to bring the different starting points of these two perspectives together in the initial design of our project. We aimed to encompass elite and disadvantaged and address the big patterns of social inequality that frame schooling

experience, but also to select schools and individuals so that we might be more aware of schools “in the middle” (where outcomes are not so predictable), and could compare young people from different backgrounds in the same school and from similar backgrounds in different schools. Focusing on subjectivity and meaning-making longitudinally, and selecting schools and participants in the way that we did, offers a different type of perspective from both the “reproduction” and “school effectiveness” research. The question becomes not only “who gets what” in terms of retention, success rates, entry to higher education, and so forth, but “what kinds of people and agendas are formed by particular school environments?” This is an issue that tends to get discussed more in relation to elites and those who are most disadvantaged by the system. However, in countries like Australia, the great bulk of people are in neither of these situations (Pusey 2003). We had a sustained attention to these people in “the middle” and to “ordinary” high schools (Yates and McLeod 2000).

One of the most interesting aspects of the project for us has been seeing how, over time, two schools with roughly comparable student body demographics shaped different types of identities, aspirations, and values. This increased our sense that the individuals we had begun to study in that school did take on some cohort characteristics. This was very evident in our interviews with the young people at age 18, when most had left school, but also noticeable at points when political values are discussed, midway through the project (see chapters 3 and 7). Elaborating the effects of particular and contrasting school cultures on biographies is a significant focus of this book. As we discuss, the pattern seen at Regional High School was of people embarking on vocationally oriented courses, working hard, analyzing their next step, seeing their life outcomes as the result of how hard they worked, planning strategically, and expressing relatively unsympathetic views to the unemployed or to social discriminations. In other words, an “enterprise school,” where life is a CV. At the other school with some comparable demographics, Suburban High School, at 18 the young people were mainly preoccupied with inner-directed self-discovery. They were finding the transition to university difficult, and a number were dropping out. They appreciated the care their school had given them, and spoke out about social injustices. But, in most cases, they were rather unsure about where they themselves were going in life, but nevertheless regarded self-understanding and introspection as worthwhile pursuits. Here we

have a “therapeutic school,” in which life is about examining and nurturing the self.

Here, and in stories from the other two schools in our study, we show how “pathways” and subjectivity are closely intertwined. It is not simply a story about what examination results a particular school achieves—though we do not discount that in the expensive private school in our study, the norm for students in the final year was to get marks that would put them in the top 20 percent of students in the whole state, and, for one student in our study, even going on to a university other than the most prestigious one feels like an aberrant path.

The effects of different school cultures are also evident in how students articulate their political values. In chapter 6 we show how different ways of talking about race and unemployment developed in different school environments. We also demonstrate how these orientations developed in relation to students’ sense of personal and national identity, their sense of “who am I?” In other words, their views were shaped in the interaction between processes of schooling and processes of subjectivity. Our study is based in Australia, and this means that issues of race and national identifications are set up in nationally specific ways, ones likely to be different from how they are addressed elsewhere (by researchers, by participants in popular debate and historical imagination). But the reasoning of these young people about who they are, their sense of national belonging and identity, express dilemmas that are likely to be encountered in many different countries, where questions of “nation,” “migration,” “colonialization,” and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples have become prominent. How do the young people in our study orient to a history in which the existing inhabitants of a country were displaced and now have rates of mortality, morbidity, and poverty that are significantly worse than non-Indigenous Australians (ABS 2004)? How do they think about who Australians are, given that, on the one hand, almost one-quarter of the population is born overseas (ABS 2004) and, on the other, there has been a long history of public fears about immigration? During the course of this project, one backdrop was a major political campaign about the unfair advantages of so-called Aboriginal welfare and multicultural groups, the dangers of further immigration, and the disadvantaging of older working-class and especially rural families. In the ways the young people in this study talked about these issues, we hear their own identity-making, their family

experiences and projections to the future, and also the genres of particular school cultures.

Examining political attitudes, such as attitudes to race/ethnicity and racism, offers insight into processes of subjectivity and identification (who am I? who is “us”?). It also points to methodological and conceptual challenges in researching political views. This pertains to issues about who are the interviewees and what is happening in the interview relationship, and it also concerns issues of interpretation and the theories we draw on to construct our story about what their political values mean.

In this book, we reflect on our own activities as researchers, along with our own interpretive strategies and claims to truth. We work in departments of education, and we wanted our work to have something to show to that field. We began this project believing that a new longitudinal empirical study might help us and others address questions about inequalities, subjectivities, and young lives in the context of schools, particularly the contested terrains of “reproduction” versus “effectiveness” approaches to schools and inequalities, and sociological versus psychological versions of identity-forming. But when we began we were also immersed in the challenges posed by feminist and poststructural researchers about the constructing role of researchers and their claims to power and truth (McLeod 2003; McLeod and Yates 1997; Pillow 2003), a form of questioning that arose because of the stories that are inevitably trampled over, or rendered invisible, or marginalized as particular researcher claims are made. We don’t subscribe to a view that research means nothing, is nothing other than power, is nothing but a construction. But we do consider that reflexive attention to the constructing or trampling over or making marginal is an important part of the research on inequalities and power. The issue of what we thought we were doing (and what effects we were having) when, as comfortable professional Anglo-Australian women, we asked working-class boys what they were thinking about in terms of their future or urged young people from different national and cultural backgrounds to tell us about their views on race and national identity needs to be part of what we look at.

Today we are writing in a climate in which there are powerful political moves to say that only “scientifically based research,” only randomized controlled trials and quasi-experiments are good enough to count as real research in education (Yates 2004). We do not agree. We think that the type of research we discuss here, and the reflexive scrutiny of the stories we tell from it, do generate knowledge that

matters for those working in education and youth and gender studies. We show schools as sources of biographical meanings, values, and trajectories over time. This contrasts with studies that view schools primarily in terms of statistically measured outcomes, such as retention and achievement at the end point of schooling. By attending to different types of theory and different types of interpretation in relation to our interviews, by keeping alive different perspectives that make sense of what is happening, we try to show that building “powerful models” is not the only form of research that matters. Situated and interpretive knowledges matter too. Again, to refer to chapter 6, attempts to “make sense of” how our Australian students talked about politics and race requires attention to place, history, situated specificity, yet also raises questions about how such values are formed and function in other countries and places.

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### **The 12 to 18 Project: Design and Methodology**

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Our longitudinal and qualitative study is, from one perspective, a small-scale study, following 26 people. From another perspective, it was a major undertaking, with elements of four school ethnographies, and our intensive involvement in the project has now lasted a decade. Over seven years, we conducted over 400 lengthy interviews and generated multiple sources of evidence or “data” for each interview: notes at the time and subsequently, tapes and transcriptions, videotapes, our own recollections, as well as later comments by the people involved, including comments from a final interview after participants had watched a compilation video tape of extracts from the seven years of their earlier interviews. The project was structured to offer ongoing attention to interpretive comparison. We built it by selecting between six and eight main students from four different schools (initially we had interviewed all students in a class from each of those schools, and we continued through the first three years of the project to interview other friends together with the main students we were following). Unlike a more common form of qualitative research, school ethnographies, we did not want to focus only on the experiences of one “type” of student (e.g., working-class boys), or different groups of students within a single school. And we wanted to look at schools beyond the kinds that are usually chosen by researchers like ourselves whose interests are in difference and inequalities—that is, the most disadvantaged or most elite. We

wanted to pay attention to “the middle,” to explore what happens in ordinary high schools, where experiences are not so overdetermined. This, we felt, was a particularly important focus for “new world” countries such as Australia.

In the study design we wanted to set up some opportunity to consider what particular school experiences bring to the biographical characteristics of students differentiated by class or gender or ethnicity. So the four schools and the 26 students were selected to include students from different backgrounds in the same school, and students from similar backgrounds who attended different schools. There are, of course, important methodological questions about what we are assuming and doing here, what it means to do this kind of research with small numbers of subjects, and the implicit categories in how “different backgrounds” are selected; these issues are discussed in later chapters when we talk about “class” or “race” (see also Yates 2000, 2001, 2003).

In each interview, twice a year over seven years, we were asking our participants to talk about various aspects of three things: their views of self, their views of school, and their views of the future. In each interview we asked questions or embarked on the conversation in different ways. Sometimes we asked directly (“How would you describe yourself?” “What do you think this school views as important?” “Do you think much about the future?”), sometimes indirectly, asking them to bring along and talk about a favorite photograph, or what they thought of certain issues that were in the news. Our interview questions and style were more influenced by sociological and feminist perspectives than psychological ones. Our intent was to embark on topics in ways that were relatively nonleading, and nondirective, both in the sense of attempting to avoid setting up certain types of responses as the appropriate ones, and in the sense of not closely privileging a particular type of theory and theory-testing in the design of the questions themselves. We also had an ongoing interest in and concern about the meaning of the interview exchange and the effect of our own embodied personas on what those in the study would say or choose to say, and we will discuss that further throughout this book. These were not a “confessional” style of interview, and our approach, as all research approaches, set up some possibilities and foreclosed others (McLeod 2003; McLeod and Yates 1997).

One decision we made was to try to minimize the impact or significance of our study as an event in the lives of those we studied. Contrary to many feminist approaches, we did not seek an “intimate”

relationship with those we studied, and we did not, as some other projects do, show previous videos or talk about what was said in previous interviews in subsequent interviews (until the end of the study when we prepared and discussed with each participant in our study an overall compilation tape from their individual interviews). This did not mean that no relationship developed between us and those whom we interviewed, or that the study had no meaning or impact for them. During the course of the study, we found that the mere event of appearing twice a year as nonjudgmental outsiders who gave people a chance to talk was specifically valued by some, whereas others were not particularly comfortable with this, but nevertheless tried to help us. Again, we will discuss this further throughout the book. But a longitudinal study, with repeated interviewing, does inevitably build a more significant research relationship than a one-off survey, and we attempted to minimize as far as we could having the research event itself shape the choices and thinking that we were setting out to study.

Our project was an interview-based study, not an ethnographic one. The methods are ones that elicit conscious and often self-conscious talk about what people are thinking, and what they want to say to researchers about this. We interviewed participants in a conventional interview setting (in an empty schoolroom, and later in a neutral outside location); in a space that was “time out” from their school day. We did not observe them in the classroom or in the school grounds with their friends; we did not follow them out of school, or interview their parents or teachers. Of course, in one sense, this is a limitation, and circumscribes what we can say. But it is not possible to be a fly on the wall; had we done any of those other kinds of research, that too would have shaped certain events and interpretations and foreclosed others. For example, to the people in our study, the fact that we were not having any direct involvement with teachers or parents was a feature of their interview space. The “buddy” ethnographer relationship by no means guarantees access to events as they would be if that ethnographer were not present. In any case, we too have families and lives, and other demands of our working life beyond this study. In terms of the specificity of our lives as researchers, we were also mindful of the effect of our presence as older women from the university on what the participants told us and the dynamic of the interview; we discuss this in the following chapter. The larger issue of what we, and all researchers, are able to do and not do as we try to study lives is an ongoing part of our account.

Although our study is not an ethnography, it draws on elements of ethnographic form in its design and interests. In particular, the study was designed not as a study of 26 individuals who might carry certain gendered, class, ethnic, and family features with them, but as a study of “biographies in interaction with schooling.” The school is intended to be a presence in the study; it is part of what we are studying. The individuals were selected and interviewed in the context of their four different schools. One of the main interests of this study was to look more closely at the influence of schooling in the shaping of subjectivity. Many existing research projects and theories offer broad insights into how schools, or academic knowledge, or competitive curriculum work to confirm some advantages and confirm some students as disadvantaged or as “other.” We wanted to deal with school culture and situation and context, as do ethnographies. By listening to what participants said about a particular school over many different interviews (including retrospective comments) and hearing how views and values changed or deepened over that time by school “cohort,” we gathered a large amount of direct and indirect evidence about the school and the student’s relationship to it. As well, we conducted all the interviews ourselves and twice a year, over seven years, visited the schools, and experienced their style of administration, bulletin boards, and publicity materials about the schools. This is part of the story we discuss in this book.

In terms of the selection of students for the study, we first chose the four schools. We wanted to include one that might be identified as disadvantaged and one that would be identified as elite and two “ordinary” high schools. Second, in terms of location, we selected two from the metropolitan capital city of the state and two schools from a regional or “country” city. This was to give comparative attention to the significance of a mid-sized city experience (as distinct from the “urban” or “rural” settings that have drawn much more research attention in Australia). Finally, we wanted opportunities to study people from similar backgrounds in different schools, so we chose schools (and individuals) in which at least some of those involved might potentially have gone to one of the other schools in our study.

This structuring of the study might seem to mimic, inappropriately for a small-scale and interpretive study, the quasi-experimental structuring that is more commonly found in large-number research designs, given that we have only six to eight students at each school, and similarly small numbers that might represent different kinds of class or ethnic backgrounds, especially in combination with gender. It might therefore be argued that for any type of comparison, the



numbers involved are so small as to make the activity meaningless. But the comparison here is not a reading-off of “findings” guaranteed by adequate sample construction and computer-based technical methods. The object of comparison is itself constructed of interpreted texts, but comparison is also used in the process of interpreting the texts (the subjects, the schools): it is always a process of moving back and forth between whole and parts, between different extracted comparisons. And the process of interpretation includes reflexive attention to the context of production of our data, including the temporal context of our embodied interview. What we are setting up in the comparative design and method of the project is not a replication of “controlled comparison” in the ways done with large-scale studies, but the setting up of opportunities to think self-critically about the attributions we are making about the meaning of the texts in relation to the larger education issues that are the context of our study.

To select the students, we first interviewed and videotaped, in friendship groups of three, all students in a particular class. In the case of the regional schools we did this by taking one final year class of three elementary schools whose students would be proceeding to those two schools. In the case of the two capital city schools, we interviewed in similar groups of three, all of one Year 7 class—first year of high school—near the commencement of that year. We then watched the videotapes and tried to simply select about eight “different” students for each school, with equal numbers of girls and boys, and not just those who were particularly engaging or talkative. We wanted to include some “class” diversity and some “ethnic” diversity, but we chose not to do this by having the students fill in questionnaires about their family backgrounds. We did not want to predecide what “class” is, or in what way “ethnicity” should be categorized and then embark on a study to follow young person X because they “represent” this class or this ethnicity. In the ensuing interviews, we wanted their own accounts about the significance or nonsignificance and markers of these categories and relations (as well of those of gender) to emerge through what they said. This sets up a different type of interpretive work than if we had begun with each participant categorized.

After our first round of whole-class interviews, we approached the 12 year olds and parents of those we wanted to participate. Most were happy to do so, but a particularly inarticulate girl from poor circumstances and a boy whose parents were very wealthy did not agree to

continue. Our participants did include some whose families were relatively poor, unemployed, single-parent, relatively recent immigrant, and some whose families were relatively wealthy, in high-status jobs, with holiday houses at the beach and in ski resorts and who took overseas vacations. Some parents were teachers, worked in small business, or did manual work. Our study did not include the students from the extremes, in terms of the most elite and powerful and the most powerless and disadvantaged. But the repeated interviews, with their glimpses of family over seven years, also indicate the inadequacy of these demographic one-word descriptors of people. Some mothers were returning to study; some fathers were having business problems and experiencing changes in work; some families were splitting up; some families were being dominated by a particular issue such as the health or behavior of one of the children. The brief biographical snapshot of each participant provided in Appendix 1 shows how imperfectly glib database categorizations of “SES” or “ethnicity” capture the complex mixture of experiences in family backgrounds that are the norm today.

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### **The Schools and Participants**

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Pseudonyms have been used for all participants, the four schools and the regional center.<sup>1</sup> Appendix 1 provides a brief sketch of each of the participants, and Appendix 2 is a very summarized version of what happened to the people in each school—their outcomes—and the various ways they thought about their future over the seven-year period. However, given the small numbers, these summaries and destinations only become meaningful on the basis of the more interpretive account of how each school is producing certain kinds of people, values, and possibilities (McLeod 2000b, 2002; Yates 2001, 2003; Yates and McLeod 2000).

Our study was based in two Australian cities in one state. All four schools are coeducational, and none is academically selective in enrollment. Two schools were in Melbourne, the state capital city of over 3 million people. In Australia, schooling policies and administrative structures are state-based and directed from each state capital. Melbourne houses most of the universities in the state, including the most prestigious, and, until the 1970s, the only tertiary institutions that had university status were located here. Two schools were selected from Cubbin, a regional city of around

100,000 people, some two hours from the capital city. Cubbin is a substantial center of education, with a large number of state and private schools as well as technical colleges and a small university, of relatively recent status, and not prestigious. In comparison to larger cities in Australia, Cubbin is not very ethnically diverse, has had less post WWII immigration, and a greater proportion of families living in the area for three generations or more.

At the high school phase, for historical reasons, Australia has a relatively large proportion of students attending private (or “independent”) schools, and this is particularly strong in the state where this study is based. Historically, the larger and elite private schools dominate the top ranks of results in the final school certificate and are very disproportionately represented in entrants to the prestigious universities (Teese 2000), and more generally in important and powerful positions in the society generally—as evidenced by inclusion in *Who’s Who* (Peel and McCalman 1992). So private schools are a visible presence to parents and teachers in this state—and indeed a substantial number of teachers who teach in state schools themselves send their children to private schools. There is a widespread perception that private schools produce both academic advantages and social network advantages in relation to later social hierarchy, though when family background is controlled for, the academic advantages are not as evident as commonly perceived.

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### School 1 Regional High

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This school of some 1100 students is one of the oldest high schools in the state. It is located in Cubbin, a city with many private boarding schools and a regional center of education for what was in the past a prosperous farming community. This high school, unlike all the other public schools in the same city, has long been an honorary member of the private school sporting association in Cubbin, and news of its students and events are frequently covered in the local newspaper. Within the state school system, this school is recognized as having particular distinction as a sporting center of excellence, as well as for its strong musical program. It allocates among its staffing a specialist rowing master, has its own rowing shed, and boasts a number of impressive buildings and playing fields. In Cubbin, among parents who want to send their children to a “good” school, but cannot afford the fees of a private school, there is competition to move into Regional High’s

selection zone (it is not academically selective, but geographically zoned, except for sporting prowess). In social demographics, the school has a mixed population, with students who might come from any of the categories represented in SES surveys. However, its composition overrepresents those from “lower middle-class” backgrounds (nonwealthy small business, some teachers, nurses, etc.) and underrepresents both the poorest groups (more likely to go to Regional Tech or other similar schools in the city) and the highest SES and more historically elite groups (more likely to go to a private school). At Regional High, the students wear uniforms that are similar in style and quality to the uniforms worn by the private schools—for example, high-quality wool blazer and pleated skirt or wool trousers.

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### **School 2 Regional Tech**

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Historically, the education system in this state offered two kinds of secondary school: schools with traditional academic subjects, called high schools, and schools with overt vocational purposes and designed for those likely to leave school before Year 12: “technical” schools to train boys for manual occupations and “girls’ [domestic] schools” to prepare girls from a similar class for lower occupations and then domesticity. In the 1970s, with gender equity reforms, schools were merged into coeducational technical schools, with both girls and boys formally offered similar access to “trade” subjects. By the 1980s, when there was a greater concern about “league tables” and relative Year 12 results, and when apprenticeships were no longer easily entered after Year 10 but began to require Year 12, a further reorganization of the system took place. In Cubbin, and throughout the state, technical schools were amalgamated and restructured to form junior campuses (Years 7–10; with students aged approximately 12–16) with students then moving to a common senior school for the final two years of secondary school.

The junior campus of Regional Tech, which was the site of our study for the first four years, was located on the edge of a public housing development, and also drew a number of students from some smaller, relatively poor, rural towns not far from this city. It had relatively new buildings, and was very well equipped with new computers and other technical equipment. The senior campus was an older, more run-down set of buildings in an adjoining suburb. At the junior school, the “uniform” consisted of the requirement to wear a

sweatshirt in a dark color and leather shoes rather than trainers. There was no uniform at the senior campus, and students were encouraged to view the transition to this campus as an opportunity for greater independence and to be treated more as “adults.”

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### **School 3 City Academy**

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In Australia, in each capital city, a number of elite private schools associated with church foundations were established in the nineteenth century and have grown and maintained a status as “leading schools” throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries. Although they now receive high levels of funding from the Australian commonwealth government, they also charge high fees (and thus have much higher funding per student than state schools, as well as impressive buildings and extensive grounds and facilities). They are therefore socially selective. Although they may have some scholarships for academically gifted achievers or for particular occupational categories such as families of clergy or teachers in the school, compared with the broad population demographic, they overrepresent professional and managerial occupations and overrepresent those from wealthy backgrounds.

Within the group of elite private schools in each city, there is considerable advertising and “word of mouth” publicity about the different emphases and agendas of different schools. Today, the association with particular religions (Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist, etc.) is a less strong part of the public profile of the elite private schools, although these tags may remain in both the name of the school and the composition of its governing board. City Academy was one of these elite schools, with extensive beautiful grounds and buildings in a desirable and visible part of the city. Unlike some other private schools, this school was not academically selective, and emphasized its breadth in curriculum choice, especially its support for the arts as well as sport and academic areas. In the senior years, it offered a choice of certification routes.

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### **School 4 Suburban High**

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Public schooling in Australia is administered centrally as a state system compared with the U.S. system of local school boards, but there has

been some variation in how different states have allowed schools to develop. Victoria, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, supported some diversity of style and approach by different schools. These schools were not specialist schools, and each was expected to offer the same broad curriculum as its core in the early high school years, and to enter students for a common final certificate. However, some variety in curriculum offerings and facilities was available between schools, along with differences in their organizational form and culture. Some schools were known for formality and discipline and others for pastoral care or informality; some emphasized science and language and music, others offered photography and drama. Suburban High was one of these “arty,” more informal schools. We selected Suburban High because it was in a middle-class suburb very near the suburb where City Academy was located.

Suburban High was in a desirable and attractive suburb, with many large houses in beautiful gardens, but the area also includes some less wealthy sections, including those with public housing. Its school population included professional and middle-class parents who knew and liked its curriculum and values emphasis as well as those whose parents were in manual jobs or unemployed or recently arrived immigrants. This school had much more visible ethnic diversity than the other schools in our study. During the time of our study, the school underwent some changes in direction. It had been established in the 1960s, and through the 1970s and 1980s had shown its commitment to a more informal, “progressive” style of education by not having a uniform (uncommon in this state at the secondary level) and developing an impressive arts center and fostering related achievements, including photography exhibitions, and so on. Some middle-class parents in professional occupations chose this school because it appeared to value cultural diversity, to care for students, and to place less emphasis on the disciplining regime and competitive academic curriculum of many other schools. However, when we began our study, this school had been experiencing a declining popularity. In the media there was much attention to “school effectiveness” and university entrance scores, along with worries about drug culture. The state government too, in the wake of some unpopular cutting of school budgets and closing down of schools, had made a gesture to still criticism and show its commitment to “progressive” issues about gender equality by developing a new showpiece public girls’ school and providing free public transport to take girls there. This school was located close by Suburban High, and had drawn

potential students from that school. In the first year of our study, Suburban High had only a small Year 7 intake, and one in which boys outnumbered girls by around 3:1. As the study continued, this school took steps to reverse these problems: it introduced school uniforms, embarked on new publicity campaigns with local primary schools emphasizing its values and curriculum, and gave more attention to retaining students in the final years.

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### **The Plan of the Book**

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In the following chapters, we do not set out to present the story of our project, in the sense of a chronological narrative, but to discuss themes and issues that we were exploring in dialogue with this project: questions about meanings, subjectivity, inequalities and social differentiation, questions about how particular schools and particular biographies come together. Some stories and incidents are referred to in more than one chapter. Readers can remind themselves of the characteristics of schools or individuals by returning to the quick sketches presented in this introduction, or by looking at the participant snapshots and summary tables of aspirations and outcomes presented in the appendixes.

Chapter 2 explores the value and theoretical rationale of embarking on a longitudinal study of subjectivities in the particular way that we did. A range of other recent work has been broadly concerned with the terrain that we explore in our project, and here we discuss some contributions of that work as well as our own particular framing. We consider some issues about what it means to do “theory” as well as discuss the particular value of a qualitative and longitudinal method that allows retrospective and prospective components.

Chapter 3 frames the stories of our seven-year project in terms of what we heard about what actually counts with schools today and with how this is differentially inflected in the sociocultural settings of the four schools. Some of the story we tell here is a familiar one, in terms of the practices that enhance the already advantaged and further disadvantage the already disadvantaged—a story already much explored by other theorists in terms of “codes” and “dispositions” and “reproduction” and effects of “school mix.” But our project also shows some changes in the agendas of schools today (their emphasis on image-making, for example, on young people needing to be an advertisement for their school), and draws attention to the relational

positioning of schools and the students in them—relative both to that school’s population, history and community, but also to other schools in the same city. The chapter illustrates how individual engagements with being a good student are to some extent specific to their school culture and student makeup. In everyday words, we show that while (as databases attest) school outcomes are broadly in line with family background characteristics, for individual students a more specific or more differentiated sense of themselves and their potential is generated by the particular school. We can see how some students at every one of the four schools might have fared better or differently had they been to one of the other schools in our study. We show in this chapter that being a good student is not simply a result of enacting what each school formally endorses, but is shaped by peer interactions, by the history of both the school and the family, and that their history in the school over time constrains possibilities for an individual. The schools too are conveying agendas that engage with social differentiation and changing work possibilities in different ways. In one school (not the private school), being well noted in terms of social distinction is understood by the students as more important than final academic results. In two other schools, students see the school as heavily engaged in teaching them to be a certain type of person—a well-networked and distinctive individual in one case; someone attuned to and comfortable with difference in the other. We argue in this chapter that today students become part of the marketing of schools; the civic values they learn include the importance of marketing themselves.

Whereas chapter 2 discussed a longitudinal approach to subjectivity and our perspectives on doing theory, chapter 4 considers in more detail some specific sociological debates that have framed our own research and analysis. We outline here how our dual focus on processes of subjectivity and social differentiation led us to engage with different types of theory. A key aspect of our approach has been to explore subjectivity as both a project of self making—one that many theorists argue has intensified in the current era of late modernity—and as an ongoing process of “becoming” that is socially and discursively embedded but not reducible to either. We consider these debates in relation to associated arguments about transformations in gender identities and gender relations, and the manner and extent to which young people today are formed in and by processes of detraditionalization, including the de (or re) traditionalization of gender.



But we bring two additional perspectives to these debates. One is a cluster of discussions concerning the role of discourse in shaping subjectivity, and the attention to the psychosocial subject as in part a reaction against both social and discourse determinism. Here we argue that we need to keep in focus both sociological and psychological ways of seeing, not to compress one to the other, and to actively acknowledge the different kind of insights each does or does not make possible. The second perspective we bring to the larger debates about new forms of identity involves the practices of social distinction and differentiation and embodied dispositions that Bourdieu's concept of habitus emphasizes. Student subjectivities are formed in interaction with the ethos of the school, which cultivates dispositions and orientations that may contradict or correspond to the habitus formed in the family.

Researching subjectivity within a qualitative longitudinal study offers distinctive insights for seeing how the project and the process of becoming someone is embodied and happens incrementally and recursively over and in time; we illustrate this with discussions of two young women at different schools as they reflect on and describe themselves at different stages of the project. We consider the methodological dilemmas involved in asking young people to "tell us about yourself" and the challenges of making interpretive claims from interview material—text, encounter, visual record, and our own recollections—and develop a case study of one young woman's changing relation to her school that also illustrates the value of keeping in play different perspectives on subjectivity.

Chapter 5 considers "subjectivity and becoming" through a close-up study of one young woman and her dreams and planning about her future and her career choices. Central to this are her self-understandings about who she is and who she wants to become, and her positioning in relation to family, her school, peers, and broader social discourses. Our discussion of this is set against two divergent traditions of studying young people's orientation to the future in the high school years. Policy-makers tend to see "pathways," "transition," "career choice" in rational and instrumental steps. Cultural studies theorists are interested in the ways young people project, reflect on, and negotiate their own biography, revisiting their dreams, their values, and their sense of who they are and who they want to be. Even theorists who do attempt to meld the social and biographical with concepts like habitus do not usually examine the remaking

of biography and the dreams that form individuals, but look to exterior readings of lives via gender, class, locality. Our focus in this chapter is both on the social (field, school, culture, discourse) working in individual lives—“how do discourses turn into subjectivity?”—and on how individual subjectivities turn into social patterns: “how do social patterns of unequal futures begin to get set up?” This chapter shows gender-differentiated patterns in the projections of the future; and it uses a comparative illustration of girls from different background to also demonstrate how class difference frames the dreams and pathways that we see.

In chapter 6 we consider who is “us”?—Australian students on politics, racism, ethnicity, and unemployment—and we also consider how they are talking about these matters to us and how we are complicit and awkward in the research and writing we do here. In Australia, discourses of racism are often voiced through judgments of belonging, of who is and is not “Australian.” But the issue of who is Australian is also pervasively problematic, given the colonial dispossession of Aboriginal Australians. We show how, for these young people, their identifications of “us” and “them” are shifting ones and ones that relate to young people’s own processes of identity-making and becoming. That is, they are about belonging and projected belonging as well as about demographic background, inherited values, and experiences. We also compare attitudes to racism and ethnicity with other political values in relation to unemployment. This chapter again indicates the significant effect of school ethos on the understandings and political values that individuals develop, as well as the different salience and consequences of being “different” in different schools.

Chapter 7 discusses class in the new world and the new economy. This is a period of change in work, social relations, and labor structures, and “class” is not a foregrounded identity in either Australia or the United States (or even, for many young people, in the United Kingdom). This chapter discusses the problems of working with a concept of “class” but also argues the importance of keeping alive a discussion of class in relation to the experiences of the individuals and the schools we studied and for discussing schools and society more generally. We take a new look at the large group who might be said to be “in the middle” in SES hierarchies—neither clearly advantaged in terms of school and work nor clearly disadvantaged. In terms of class consciousness and class identification, we show that class, in the sense of social distinctions, is salient in some subjectivities and not in others; that it operates differently in different schools, and for

different individuals at a school. In terms of class reproduction or the story of how middle-class kids get middle-class jobs, we take up the issue of social change, and different formations of work today, and discuss how the schools and individuals in our project are engaging (or not engaging) with these changes. We point to patterns of both reproduction and change that are evident against this changing backdrop. And we discuss this story of reproduction and change with particular attention to class-gender subjectivities and situations, specifically what we see in this study happening to middle-class girls compared with working-class girls, and working-class girls compared with working-class boys.

Accounts of young people today often want to pin down a typology or come up with a key label. In chapter 8, we draw together a number of themes concerning gender, subjectivity, and change that emerge in earlier chapters of this book. In particular, these are debates about gender detraditionalization, reflexivity, and “enterprising subjectivity” as well as discussions about the changing social and work opportunities for girls and boys, and gender differences within class patterns, especially working-class patterns. We introduce two main new discussions in this chapter. The first is the large discursive picture of what “gender equity” or “equal opportunities” means for girls and boys today. On the one hand, the official language of equal opportunities has been well grasped, and men and women are said to be equal; there is clear evidence that some actual and imagined possibilities have changed for young women in particular. Most do not think of their futures solely in terms of domestic responsibilities; most imagine a future of emotional and economic independence. But, on the other hand, the young women and men tended to not hold a political view of gender, evidenced in the belief that “males are just normal,” and an impatience with examining social issues and changes in relation to gender.

The second discussion we develop here concerns changing resonances of conventionally gendered dilemmas and cultural themes—namely, autonomy and connection. In discursive binaries, girls have typically been aligned with relationships—to self and others—and to seeking “connection” over “autonomy.” Diverse theorists have outlined the dilemmas young women encounter as they negotiate these apparently conflicting desires. Here we look at these themes in relation to the experiences and thinking of young men and consider how those conventional markers of gender difference and gender identity are changing and being mediated in class and school differentiated ways. The binary of autonomy or connection does not seem to be

holding for either young women or men. We suggest that characterizations of the current era as one marked by a “culture of the self” (Rose 1999), where autonomy is foregrounded, need to take into account gendered and situated mediations of the quest for autonomy, and the different cultural and subjective resonance that quest offers for men and women. Similarly, accounts of the transformation of gender must attend to the ways in which young women and young men are differently responding to changed economic, social, and discursive circumstances as part of their project of the self.

Our concluding chapter returns to some of the contextual and sociological issues with which we opened this first chapter. It considers the specificities of our study in relation to large-scale social changes, particularly in relation to gender and work and to current debates about the purposes of schooling. It shows, as Benhabib (1995) argues, that understanding complex social processes, such as schooling or subjectivity—and the interactions between the two—cannot be reduced to single explanatory frameworks, to single “constitutive criteria” (Benhabib 1995, 27), or to discussions that privilege either subjectivity or schooling. Throughout this book, we try to keep both processes simultaneously in view.