CHAPTER 13

MARGINALISED YOUNG MEN AND SUCCESSFUL YOUNG WOMEN? RURAL YOUNG PEOPLE ENTERING ADULTHOOD

Tone Magnussen

Introduction

Today, young people find themselves on their way to adulthood in a rapidly changing world where modernity, individualism and restructuring predominate. The consequences of these structural changes affect young men and women entering the local labour market. Traditional male jobs based on informal on-the-job-training such as construction, engineering and crafts, are disappearing. While young men with a more or less complete vocational training background seem to lose out in the competition for fewer jobs, young women with higher education tend to be the winners in the local labour market (Fylling 1994, Magnussen 1995).

Achieving status as an adult is a transitional process which involves two central aspects; the practical setting up of a household, and the symbolic construction of an adult identity. The contraction of a household is one of the rites of passage in the transition from youth to adulthood. The household is a social unit that encompasses certain key activities, such as housekeeping, budgeting, production, child care and cooking (Gullestad 1984). Setting up a household is a process which involves working towards attaining status as an adult, and describes aspects of economy, work and housing related to the family. Young people’s attachment to the parental home is changing. In the early post-war period, the main tendency was for young people to move away from home at a progressively earlier age. Over the last decade this trend has changed, with young adults staying longer in the parental home (SSB 1992). Economic restructuring, rising unemployment and new patterns of employment have led to delayed youth transitions into the labour market and out of the family household.

Attaining identity as an adult is another crucial aspect of the transition into adulthood. Modern society is characterised by freedom of choice and individualism; people are seen as free to create themselves and their own lives. Modernity may in this sense be considered as a condition in which people are forced to make active
choices about who they want to be and how they want to live (Giddens, 1991). People are responsible for constructing themselves as individuals; they are responsible for, and free to construct, their own identities. In a modern context, there is a multitude of alternative ways in which social identities are constructed and identity management is a crucial part of an individual’s struggle to create a self.

The empirical material in this chapter is based on a study of young adults and their adjustment to rural communities and labour markets during the transition from school to work or further education. The study took place in Fjord, a rural community in northern Norway. A combination of semi-structured interviews and participant observation was used to collect information from 25 young women and men aged 20-30. We here discuss the impact of economic change on young adults in terms of labour market adjustment, and how young men and young women experience and cope with this situation in different ways. Do changing global and national conditions lead to new and different transitions into adulthood and, if so, how do they impact on gender relations? What does this changed framework mean for gender identities? Has there been a shift in the basis for construction of identity?

The economy of Fjord has traditionally been based on primary industries and local natural resources. Two or three decades ago, traditional industry consisted of a combination of farming and fishing. Today, the transition from primary industries to service employment is striking. The rise of the Norwegian welfare state, and especially the growth in public services during the 1970s, created new jobs in rural areas. Within the new state and municipal institutions, new kinds of jobs were established locally. At the same time, improved means of transportation made it possible to continue living in rural areas while commuting to work elsewhere. The development of public transport systems integrated the rural areas into larger regional contexts, including larger and more varied labour markets. The strong ties between work, local resources and local community, were loosened (Foss, Halvorsen and Vatne, 1994). Schools, nursing homes and local administration created new jobs and a demand for new professions. Most of these jobs, whether unskilled or professional, are held by women. Structural changes in the local economy have created a new and more difficult challenge for young adults trying to enter the labour market. Decline in the traditional resource-based industries and rise in service employment have restructured the labour market and have led to fewer jobs. Unemployment rates are rising.

These marked structural changes in the local economy are connected to more general trends in the labour market characterised by disappearing recruitment positions and stronger demands for formal training. A move towards a more polarised labour market is noticeable. On the one hand, there are knowledge-based and information-intensive occupations with high wages and good working conditions. On the other hand there is a labour market consisting of routine, unskilled work; jobs that are often temporary, with low wages, and poor working conditions (Foss 1993; Lash, 1994). In recent years, national unemployment rates have grown. Young adults under the age of 25 represent 18 per cent of the national labour force, but 40 percent of the unemployed were under 25 years old (1992 figures). Compared to Great Britain, there are a higher proportion of young people among the unemployed in Norway (Hammer