



## Articles

# A Phenomenology of 'Blending in': Beyond Emotional Regulation

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## Abstract

The phenomenon of devaluing of self for adolescent girls has been highlighted in previous qualitative research in a US cultural context. Carol Gilligan and her colleagues have documented a loss of connection to self and loss of voice. 'Blending in' pertains to such a loss of connection and voice. 'Blending in' emerges from many aspects of 8 Irish females' retrospective qualitative phenomenological accounts of their adolescent experiences. These features of blending in include: a dumbing down of intellectual ability in order to fit in, a desire to be hidden in the group to 'fade into the background', to not stand out as being different, fear of being labelled by others and fear of challenging others. Blending in gives phenomenological support to Gilligan's (1990) accounts of silencing and loss of relation to self in adolescent girls, to a rendering of self as other. This phenomenological exploration is resonant also with de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* and to a loss of capacity for introversion in Western culture, echoing Jung (1921). Blending in requires firmer addressing in social and emotional education (SEE), especially regarding challenge to self-management as emotional impulse and behaviour regulation. Self-management as blending in risks being a process of loss of voice and alienation of self.

**Keywords:** social and emotional education, emotional regulation, adolescence, female, Gilligan, blending in

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The phenomenon of devaluing of self for adolescent girls has been highlighted in previous qualitative research in a US cultural context. Carol Gilligan and her colleagues have documented a loss of connection to self and loss of voice in various samples of US adolescents, across different social classes and ethnicities. [Brown and Gilligan \(1992\)](#) observe, 'For girls, adolescence is a time of particular vulnerability; a point where a girl is encouraged to give over or to disregard or devalue what she feels and thinks- what she knows about the world of relationships- if she is to enter the dominant views of conventional womanhood.' (p. 83). A similar retreat from connection to self and voice has been documented for US women's fear of success ([Horner 1970, 1972](#)) and internationally ([Komalasari et al., 2017](#)), where career success may threaten a loss of relationships with others and distancing based on others' perceptions and reactions to women's professional roles. This conception of fear of success was extended in social class terms and to both genders in a sample of Irish working class youth ([Ivers & Downes, 2012](#)). A recent US study ([Dascal, 2017](#)) of 425 undergraduate students found fear of success to be higher in men, while anxiety and depressive symptoms were higher for women.

This issue of loss of voice especially for females requires firmer consideration with regard to curricular approaches to social and emotional education (SEE). A curricular focus on social and emotional education

includes a range of holistic approaches emphasising awareness of emotions, caring, empathy and concern for others, positive relationships, making responsible decisions, impulse control, resolving conflict constructively and valuing the thoughts, feelings and voices of students (see also Weissberg et al., 2015; Brackett et al., 2015; Downes, Nairz-Wirth, & Rusinaite, 2017). At times, this is viewed as including selfregulatory skills which are to equip students with more positive views towards their futures and empower them to manage their social behaviour (Bandura, 2006). Positive international meta-analytical reviews of SEE highlight its benefits, including for positive social behaviour, conduct problems, emotional distress and academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011) and anti-social behaviour, substance abuse, positive self-image, academic achievement and prosocial behaviour (Sklad et al., 2012). The question arises as to whether there is a need to interrogate such findings of positive social behaviour as being through a process of conformity and loss of voice and self.

Influential for SEE has been the CASEL (Consortium on the School-Based Promotion of Social Competence) five competence domains, namely, self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making. Concern for current purposes is with the self-management aspect which 'requires skills and attitudes that facilitate the ability to regulate emotions and behaviors. This includes the ability to delay gratification, manage stress, control impulses...' (Weissberg et al., 2015, p. 6). This aspect is treated in the *Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning* (Durlak et al., 2015) as a foundation of social and emotional learning, though not necessarily a feature of all the SEE approaches reviewed by Durlak et al. (2011) and Sklad et al. (2012). It is notable also that selfregulation for Bandura (2006) is explicitly envisaged as being beneficial for agency, through purportedly aiding students to cope with the challenges of contemporary society.

Drawing on what is interpreted as the *phenomenological* work of Gilligan and her colleagues (Downes, 2012), this article engages with a sample of eight Irish females' retrospective accounts of their experiences in adolescence. The purpose of this study is to investigate whether a silencing process or loss of voice has taken place for these females during their experience of adolescence and to address its implications for SEE, specifically with regard to self-management aspects.

Gilligan's (1982) seminal work, *In a Different Voice*, sought to give voice to females; she believed they had been misunderstood and misrepresented within developmental psychology. She critiqued Kohlberg's theories of child moral development objecting to the notion that female moral development was not lower than the level of male moral development. Gilligan (1990) highlights the tensions between female adolescent experience and a Western logic based on rigid dualisms:

The either/or logic that Gail was learning as an adolescent, the straightline categories of Western thinking (self/other, mind/body, thoughts/feelings, past/present) and the if/then construction of linear reasoning threatened to undermine Gail's knowledge of human relationships by washing out the logic of feelings. (pp. 18–19)

Significantly, there is a specific recognition of the need to challenge Western cultural assumptions and conventions of experience that negate other spaces for experience.

Taylor, Gilligan, and Sullivan (1995) conducted research in an American urban public school, with working class girls of various ethnic backgrounds - African American, Hispanic, Portuguese and White. Gilligan in this work offers accounts of girls on the fringe of adolescence, she notes this stage where they become not so selfassured and where they can take two routes - retreating into themselves becoming passive, or the

alternative- remain as confident, where they risk being named the 'troublemaker' or becoming isolated: 'Girls in the study live in a territory between voice and silence: If they continue to speak from their experience they may find that their voice is out of relationship, too loud, off key. If they remain silent they are in immediate danger of disappearing' (Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan 1995, p. 202).

In Gilligan, Rogers, and Tolman (1991), the psychological development of girls is examined, from girls of eight years of age up to adolescence. They wanted to examine this change that occurred in some girls, 'who demonstrate a solid sense of confidence in preadolescence, begin in adolescence to repudiate their own point of view' (Stein, 1991 p. 107).

Brown and Gilligan (1992) describe one girl in depth that she interviewed, Jesse, at age eight, nine and eleven. At eight, Jesse is very open about her feelings, she speaks directly about them, she is aware that people have different feelings, 'If she thinks someone is not listening, she will try again, and if that doesn't work, she sometimes finds creative, even disruptive, ways to be heard' (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p. 74). At the age of nine, Jesse changes slightly, her feelings become more complicated, her responses show hints of influences from parents and teachers when she says "cooperating is better than fighting", she becomes less argumentative. She becomes more articulate, however, she fears causing trouble. Jesse fears speaking openly about her feelings, she admits to being "nice" and "calm" just for friends to play with her not because she wants to be nice. If she does not act this way, she fears losing the friend, 'And so what once were the signs of authentic relationship for Jesse ... the potential for difference and disagreement, are now withdrawn as too dangerous and risky' (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p. 76). At the age of eleven, there is a huge change in Jesse's personality: 'Speaking up about her feelings, no problem at all for Jesse at eight, and of some concern for her at nine, is now, at eleven, the basis for real trepidation.' (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p. 77). Jesse explains if a girl does not like another girl she should "pretend" to like her. This fear is about being the 'perfect' girl -who is nice, calm, never mean, and thinks kindly of everyone, the girl that everyone wants to call her their friend, the girl that can contain angry feelings. She speaks of what risks are of standing up to a friend, that the friend may get the whole group on her side and she will be left abandoned and alone. Jesse fears upsetting a group of friends, being ridiculed or humiliated therefore she becomes cautious of speaking up. There is a conflict she describes as keeping silent or speaking up, being silent she knows she is unhappy in herself as it is ignoring her feelings, but speaking up could leave her very isolated. Jesse talks of a time when her friends are annoyed with one friend. She says, "I usually just stay away and I know how I act when that happens, I can tell. ... I am not really me. I can tell when it's not really (me)." (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p. 80). If Jesse goes with her feelings she risks the 'terrifying feeling' of public disruption. This fear of ridicule in young girls emerges also in *Between Voice and Silence* where young girls give accounts of being themselves: 'If you tell somebody your ideas, they might be like "Oh that's stupid," put you down. And then you'd be like "Oh I don't want to do this anymore." Bettina, Portuguese American, tenth grade (Taylor, Gilligan, and Sullivan, 1995, p. 152).

Taylor, Gilligan, and Sullivan discussed the concern regarding how some young females approaching adolescence adopt this new found passivity, when previously they possessed an inner confidence and awareness of their feelings. As they move towards puberty, they discard their inner world for answers, as they feel they are not worthy enough. Many young females are silenced into accepting norms within their culture. This period for these young girls is a time of vulnerability, they can devalue their deeper self, i.e., when Jesse says she stays quiet in a moment of confrontation, and says she knows she is not being herself.

Brown and Gilligan (1992) discovered from their interviews that most of the girls would reluctantly go along with situations as they feared 'social disruption'. Speaking out is seen to be dangerous for many young girls. This can also be described as blending in, as the consequences of standing out against the crowd are too great for these young girls.

De Beauvoir suggests that a girl up to the age of twelve, is as strong as boys of that age, but that she is 'sexually determined' that 'doom her to passivity' not from instincts but 'because the influence of others upon the child is a factor almost from the start, and thus she is indoctrinated with her vocation from her earliest years' (De Beauvoir, 1949, p. 296). De Beauvoir described the physical onset of puberty, how boys become proud of their 'manliness', girls with their first menstruation become embarrassed and ashamed for history has told stories that this is 'dirty', girls are socialised to feel like this. Whilst puberty for boys brings on more activity to explore, to compete in sometimes aggressive manner, the girls are trained to be 'ladylike'. De Beauvoir interpreted these ideas as being due to the cultural construction of women, she called for a change in how girls and boys are reared which will be more equal and bring a more positive position for women.

A traditional weakness of phenomenological research, including the qualitative research of Gilligan, is that it does not tend to situate lived experience in cultural-historical context. A recent phenomenological study of 12 Maltese students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Cefai et al., 2016) is an exception, through its attempt to situate their educational experiences in a wider societal context, as is the phenomenological account of heroin addicts' experiences in an Estonian socio-historical context (Downes, 2003). Peer pressure conformity was an issue which arose in this Maltese context, associated with poverty (Cefai et al., 2016). In the words of the student 'Maureen': 'Peer pressure...that's the worst thing I guess...because that's how many bad habits start...friends could be the worst obstacle sometimes, obviously they won't be genuine friends...' (Cefai et al., 2016). Likewise, the impact of peer pressure was a prevalent theme with regard to first use of heroin in the Estonian context of male heroin addicts, associated with socio-economic marginalisation of its Russian speaking minority (Downes, 2003). Kohn (1970, 1977) has argued that conformity is more strongly associated with lower social classes as there is a more pessimistic view that change might not be for the better, though this assumption requires much more cross-cultural and phenomenological substantiation.

## Irish Cultural-Historical Context for a Phenomenological Approach

The cultural-historical context of when the interviews took place in the current study, with the females remembering their recent adolescence, was one of relatively high wealth in Irish society, during the so-called Celtic Tiger era that lasted approximately from 1998-2007. It might be expected that during this era, that a cultural confidence of members of Irish society would be relatively high. Nevertheless, this is not to overlook issues of poverty and social exclusion affecting the Irish society even of that time of peak national (though not necessarily individual) wealth. An overview of Child Poverty in Ireland from 2005, at the height of the 'Celtic Tiger' economic peak, revealed the following statistics: Ireland had one of the highest rates of poverty among developed countries, ranking third highest in the United Nations Human Development Index (United Nations Development Programme, 2005) which measures the extent of 'human poverty' in eighteen OECD countries. Within Europe, Ireland performed poorly in comparative child poverty rankings. In 1999, the average EU-15 child poverty rate was 19%, but Ireland's was 21%. Denmark and Finland had levels of 6% and 7% respectively. The Celtic Tiger model of society wove social structures of exclusion into the heart of its fabric (Downes, 2014). Social class is a dimension of the current study, as it is important to situate the cultural-

historical context of the interviews in a specific era in Irish society, prior to the subsequent economic crash. After the economic crash, poverty for young people in Ireland soared at the quickest rate of acceleration in Europe, from 2008 to 2011 (Eurostat, 2013).

It is important to note that across the panorama of Gilligan's work, Gilligan does not claim to be engaging in a phenomenological approach (Downes, 2012) but draws more on psychoanalytic traditions. However, a phenomenological tradition of focusing on lived experience and deeper structures within this, is arguably strongly resonant with the concerns of Gilligan and her colleagues (Downes, 2012). Gilligan looked at preadolescent and adolescent females in America. The current study looks at retrospective adolescent experiences of a sample of third level female students in Irish culture.

## Method

### Participants

The use of qualitative methods was employed to select participants for interview through a purposive nonrandom sampling approach, resonant with Ivers and Downes (2012). Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 28) outline sixteen different types of sampling used in qualitative research. The sample of participants that took part in the interviews was selected on the basis of three of Miles and Huberman's (1994) sampling methods:

- Maximum Variation: The principle is that if one deliberately tries to interview a selection of different people (age, gender, level of education) their answers can give voice and meaning to the individual and wider subpopulations. A logic of maximum variation was applied to the extent that some students were sought from outside Dublin, as well as some from a working class inner city area of Dublin, as well as middle class Dublin students. Thus, there was variation by social class and urban/rural background, though not for nationality.
- Criterion sampling was also applied for gender (females), education level (attending a given third level institution in first/second year), age (18-22) and nationality (Irish)
- Opportunistic sampling follows new leads and taking advantage of the unexpected: Those students who were the first to volunteer were chosen, subject to the need for the criterion sampling dimensions and logic of maximum variation sampling approaches to be met. Out of the eight interviews, six were from Dublin, including two from inner city Dublin and two from the countryside in Ireland. All were of Irish nationality. This was a convenience sampling approach to the extent that all participants were attending the same third level institution and were available to participate.

Eight females participated from first and second year of a third level education institution, located in Dublin, Ireland. Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted, involving more than forty questions with room for more depending on the interview. These girls were informed that they would need to discuss their experiences between the ages 12-16. They were made aware that it was a study on female adolescence and were asked about the main stresses, doubts, influences and pressures for young girls today and for the interviewee at that time. This included questions on their perceptions about societal expectations on Irish adolescent girls. Orne (1962) emphasises the importance of sensitivity to demand characteristics which may alter participants' responses. A neutral and quiet location outside the education institution was arranged to conduct all the interviews and to ensure privacy for the students.

As all interviewees were over the age of majority, parental consent was therefore not obligatory. All the interviewees took part on a voluntary basis. Their confidentiality was respected from the beginning. At the beginning of each interview, each participant was informed that this research is confidential, that they are not being judged and there is no right or wrong answer. They were told that they did not have to answer any question and are free to leave at any time.

Their actual names were disguised. The interviews took place in 2007, at the peak of an era of prosperity in Ireland, during the 'Celtic Tiger', shortly before the subsequent economic crash. The data was transcribed immediately after the interviews from the voice recorder. All transcripts were gathered and examined closely to note any themes or issues. The interviewer was an Irish female from an urban background in Dublin.

## A Phenomenological Approach

Phenomenology is based on the idea that experience, rather than simply factual content, reflects situations. It is an attempt to perceive the world as it appears to the individual. This approach involves an epistemological commitment to the validity of the lived experience of individuals, as an important truth in and of itself, whether or not it correlates with an external world reality. It is a phenomenological tradition resonant with that of Laing's (1960) attempt to engage with people's experience, a phenomenological approach echoed by Downes (2003) for the lived experience of heroin addicts in Estonia and Latvia and Ivers and Downes (2012) for inner city Dublin youth. As outlined by Laing (1960) in his work with people experiencing schizophrenia, a focus on these patients' experience treats them as people and not as abstract categories (Downes, 2003).

Key thematic categories were developed through an iterative process of identifying recurrent issues in general, together with issues especially pertaining to the female participants' loss of voice or loss of connection. Such a phenomenological approach is necessarily interpretative, involving a dialectical interaction between top-down theoretical approaches to understanding the data and bottom-up text driven issues (Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978).

## Limitations

This small sample cannot be generalised to represent all adolescent Irish girls. They are retrospective accounts of experiences which may limit the extent to which they are lived experiences of the participants. Through using the voice recorder to store data from the interviews, this could inhibit the responses in some way; Borg and Gall (1989) emphasise the voice recorder's disadvantages, that it could affect the responses of the participants.

## Results

The data presented here is clustered around key categories which emerged as recurrent themes in the interviews. It is recognised that this is necessarily an interpretative process in a qualitative phenomenological approach to research.

### Fear Around Young Females Acquiring a Label

#### Weird/Strange/Different

The first interviewee, Jane, stated that if a girl has individual beliefs that may contradict friends' beliefs they may be seen as 'weird'. Mary commented on being labelled weird: 'Yeah, you don't want to be the weird one in



school'. Jenny emphasised that, it can be embarrassing telling your friends things. When questioned further ... 'You don't want to be called a weirdo like'. The majority of the girls said that it was a time where you just wanted to be like your friends and did not want to stand out or be different. Susan stated that girls may refrain from talking to friends because you don't want them 'to think you're different'.

### **Un-cool/Loser**

When asked about things that would stop a girl from speaking out, Jenny responded, 'I don't know, being called a loser or something'. According to Jane you could be called a 'loser' if you did not have a boyfriend when your friends did. Alice stated that the reason for striving to be popular and outgoing with loads of friends is as follows: 'just say you've few closer friends, people say that you know, you're a loser'. The more popular for girls at this age is, according to the interviews, the better. Bernadette responded that it is better to be outgoing and the worst to be quiet, she said friends will question why you are so shy around boys.

### **'Intelligent'**

The issue around girl's intelligence arose in some interviews. Alice talked about the risks that went along with being 'intelligent'. It is not seen as cool. It is seen as boring, she gave examples of how girls can fake a grade lesser than what they got so, as not be labelled as a nerd or a 'brain'. This also came up with Maria who said she liked study and school work; she said that because of this, a lot of people looked down on her: 'it was seen as uncool like' and went on to say that to be cool was to be seen as 'stupid'.

## **Young Girls Inner World Being Hidden Through "Dumbing Down"**

It was notable how many participants brought up this issue without it actually being put forward to them. Anna spoke about how girls avoid being too intelligent: 'you see a lot of people like kinda dumbing themselves, because you know they get slagging because ya know for being too, bookish or whatever so that way'. This girl said that to be stupid was to be cool, that a lot of girls play up to being dumb especially around boys. They are more attractive to the boys. She said boys also associate these girls with being more 'easy going and easier'. Maggie also emphasised this, stating that for young girls to attract young boys, they dumb themselves down:

'like one of my cousins she just wants to ya know, everything she does ya know, she's a smart kid, she just makes herself seem stupid coz' that's what the guys want and it looks more attractive'.

In the words of Mary, 'you don't want to be bitched about, you just kind of try and stay on everyone's good books'. Many of the girls of this age have a fear of acquiring a label, whether it be in school, with friends or boyfriends, which could actually prevent them from being comfortable in themselves, thus forcing them to adopt a persona which 'blends in' with friends.

## **Fear of Challenging Others**

In asking what were the main stresses for young girls today, two similar responses that emerged were: trying to be like 'everyone else'. In Susan's words, 'trying to be like everyone else, I'd say lotsa them do coz just trying to fit in to avoid being bullied and all that kinda stuff'.

Most of these girls said that their friends experienced feelings of low self-esteem and being self-conscious; reasons around these feelings were mainly physical appearance. Whilst Maggie stated that young girls, during this period of lower self-esteem, disliked bringing any attention on themselves so much, that it would stop them

from answering a question in class... 'that is a big thing, they just want to fade into the background'. Regarding these feelings of low self-esteem, 'it was bringing them down, it was stopping them from saying what they wanted'.

When asked if they ever felt the need to disregard thoughts and beliefs in certain situations, many of the girls gave examples where, they went along with others to avoid challenging them on the subject. Five out of the eight interviewees said that either themselves or their friends had done this before. Many said they did this in the environment of friends. Bernadette observed how, in their group, they never really spoke up; especially around the boys: 'if boys in the group are doing something, you don't say it and when we were younger maybe if boys were getting into fights it would just be the one thing, if we seen (sic) someone getting picked on, you wouldn't say anything'.

Catherine stated that you would often hold back in speaking out when in your group of peers:

'You definitely feel you've to hold back, especially in groups, some people would take strong offence to certain things ... so you have to hold back certain views .... Now I would never hold back then it was different coz' you weren't secure around those people and you feel you're afraid to go against them...'

The girls tend not to speak out or challenge under the pressure from friends. All these girls said that friends were a huge influence on young girls, and the majority agreed that they would do most things with their friends. There were various examples given of times perhaps these girls or their friends did not speak up but reluctantly went along with their friends; Jane discussed how one of her friends was encouraged to steal and then got caught. Jenny spoke of how she wore sovereign rings as all her friends in the group were wearing them: 'which isn't really me but all my friends were doing it so that's what I done'. When she was questioned further on why she wore these rings if they were not 'her' she replied, 'just because all my friends were doing it'. However, over half of them claimed that they could make a decision that stood against the group. Of these girls, they maintained that they could trust their group of friends to respect their decision, although most of them agreed with the idea that in a big group of boys and girls it is much more difficult to stand up and challenge others.

On asking these girls was it easy or a struggle to challenge a friend, four of them said it would be difficult, three said it depended on the type of friends they had and one said it was possible, although it's easier if they had backup from other friends. Bernadette stated it was possible to challenge a friend in a one on one environment, however in a group, it would be difficult: "coz' there's always the fear of getting picked on", moreover Alice agreed that it was easier when in a one on one environment.

Maggie described such difficulties as follows:

'they don't want to feel like, that they're gonna be laughed at, or they're gonna be made fun of, and if they're gonna be made outcast (because of challenging a friend) that they wouldn't be able to find somebody else to fit in with'.

Susan was of the view that it would be a struggle around the age of 12-13, however it gets easier when you reach the age of 15-16. Jane stresses she would have no problem with challenging a friend, that all her friends had very strong personalities but acknowledges for the timid kind of girl it could be difficult: 'it can be risky to be open and honest, coz' they might feel their opinion doesn't count, so they mightn't feel confident enough to express their own opinions so they might feel they should say nothing that they're better off to say nothing than stick out'.



## Young Girls Being Encouraged or Discouraged to Speak Out

Three interviews said that girls were encouraged to speak out. Two of the girls said that there is more space in Irish culture for young girls to speak out than there was previously. One girl (Maggie) stated that parents, teachers, siblings tell the young girl to speak out although it's what the friends say that matters at that age. This girl said it depended on the friends if they were encouraged to speak up or not, she then went on also to say: 'it's kind of hard to speak out when you don't really know, when you're afraid of what the next question might be coz' you don't know if you're able to answer it or not so'.

Similar hesitation was found with Jane, when she said she rebelled in school, that she spoke out if she disagreed with something: 'I'd say it like ... even though I was probably wrong ... Even just to be difficult like'.

Five out of the eight interviews said that young girls are discouraged to speak out, of these five the overall idea was that it seemed young girl's opinions are irrelevant, that they cannot think for themselves. One girl (Bernadette) objected to cultural assumptions regarding young girls, 'they're not really regarded at that age as having an opinion on anything other than like ...girly stuff like clothes .. And stuff like that nothing else'.

Alice raised this recurring reason for why girls are discouraged to speak out i.e. in class: "like if you act a certain way, like if you act 'too intelligent' or whatever, people will regard, as you know, whatever a 'brain'. In different questions, Catherine and Maggie stressed the concern of being too studious also, that girls can be encouraged not to act so intelligent, which means perhaps not answering questions in the classroom and keeping quiet.

## The Significance of Geographical Areas

One of the girls from a more rural context outside Dublin was asked, if she grew up in Dublin would it be any different. She said that there would be a difference as she knew of young girls living in Dublin within the period of 12-16 years of age and commented on how these girls seemed a lot more mature and to grow up quicker. She said that she was at an advantage living out of a big city during that period as she stayed a child for longer, 'running through fields' and having fun without being exposed too soon to adult life. The two girls that were not from Dublin seemed to show more resistance in the face of peer pressure. These two girls maintained they have a very close group of friends in which they could disagree with. One of these girls said that she would have had no problem challenging friends as they all had 'strong personalities'. These two girls spoke of their close friends where individual differences were generally respected.

There were many similarities between two girls who were both from working class backgrounds in inner city Dublin. Both of these girls stressed the importance of fitting in with your group and doing everything they did—same accents, same clothes, 'wearing sovereigns'. Both of these girls talked of how they went along with things in their gangs to avoid being excluded or 'picked on'; both these girls stressed how they were less likely to speak out when around boys in their gang. These girls really stood out when questioned on confiding in others. Whilst one said she would have not confided in anyone, the other said 'when you're young you don't really want to talk about different things'. Their reluctance to speak out or confide in others was very similar. Both girls talked about friends that were going through tough times and how neither of their group of friends discussed these problems. Both displayed a lack of communication with parents, whilst one said they would never confide

in their parents, the other girls said that parents don't realise other things that might affect them'. Both of these girls were the least likely to speak up about stresses, worries with family or friends.

## Discussion

Various themes emerged from this sample of Irish females with regard to a pressure to 'blend in' during adolescence. Many girls commented on how young girls 'dumb down', as they fear being labelled 'too intelligent' and to attract boys. These girls described, speaking out, as being quite difficult, they spoke of the risk of being humiliated, isolated, causing trouble, or their opinion not being valued. There was an evident struggle for many of these girls to confide in others at this period. The majority of the girls said at this age, it is more important for a girl to be outgoing and popular with lots of friends than being themselves with a few closer friends. The majority of the girls in different questions emphasised the need for girls 'to fit' in to situations i.e., friends.

The phenomenon of 'blending in' emerges from many aspects of this sample of Irish females retrospective accounts of their adolescent experiences. These features of blending in include: a dumbing down of intellectual ability in order to fit in, a desire to be hidden in the group to 'fade into the background', to not stand out as being different, fear of being labelled by others and fear of challenging others. Blending in can be interpreted as giving phenomenological support to Gilligan's idea of a silencing and loss of relation to self in adolescent girls, to a rendering of self as other, resonant with de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*. Understood in terms of this sample of Irish females experiences, blending in is a process of alienation of self.

The concern arises for the CASEL ([Weissberg et al., 2015](#)) approach to self-management of emotions and behaviour in social and emotional learning that this may invite girls to further blend in and fade into the background through an acquired passivity of conformity to delay gratification, control impulses and conform through prosocial behaviour. Impulse regulation may involve the abdication of trust of voice and experience. The difficulty of many of the girls' experiences in this study is not the regulation of impulses and emotions but rather in the *suppression* of them in their lived experience in order to conform to the group. The value or otherwise of impulse regulation may be contextual, different for genders and replete with questionable culturally constructed value judgements as to what are the acceptable norms for behaviour and modes of experience; it tends to assume the priority of societal norms over individual phenomenology. This echoes a related concern of [Boland \(2015\)](#) with regard to the [OECD's \(2015\)](#) recent emphasis on social and emotional skills. [Boland \(2015\)](#) strikes an important cautionary note about the danger that social and emotional education can be put to policy purposes that are not centred on children and young people's needs and their and others' wellbeing, but rather more narrowly, on economic concerns. This is an important point to be borne in mind to ensure a person-centred focus in held in a curricular vision for social and emotional education.

Blending in is not simply based on a fear of being rejected by others, it is also a process of cultural conditioning to suppress emotions that could also be coopted by a social learning paradigm, where learning to self-regulate is a learning to suppress emotions and voices. Blending in may be a cultural conditioning process of adjustment to cultural norms through a social learning process of self-regulation or self-management that suppress emotions. While it is to be acknowledged that self-regulation processes may be of benefit for females with regard to academic motivation, including female elementary students ([Lavasani et al., 2011](#)), the concern is

with social learning processes of female enculturation that bring a self-regulation of emotions as a blending in process to the social group. Self-regulated learning involves motivational, metacognitive, behavioral and cognitive strategies (Cazan, 2013) and a blending in process of suppression of emotions can potentially take place at all these levels, with the current, albeit small sample providing examples of blending in at the levels of cognition and motivation, arguably also translating into behaviour as well as being at a level of self-awareness corresponding to metacognition.

Obvious limitations to this research are its small sample in one cultural-historical context. Another is that it is not directly examining a specific social and emotional education curricular approach with regard to self-management. Nevertheless, this research echoes De Beauvoir's and Gilligan's theories on girls becoming more passive at this period, the majority of these girls agreed it is a time where they become less sure of themselves. In her work, Gilligan constantly stresses see how many young females depend on the social acceptance of others. Gilligan refers to this loss of connection as 'disavowing the self' where the girl's own ideals and feelings are devalued for external values imposed on them. This research echoes Gilligan's work in this respect. The current findings on a pressure to 'dumb down' perceived by at least some girls can be interpreted as a developmental antecedent of the phenomenon of fear of success (Horner, 1972; Ivers & Downes, 2012) and require addressing for social and emotional education, including caution regarding approaches promoting emotional, impulse and behaviour regulation.

One possible inference, though to be treated with caution in this small sample, is that Irish culture is an island culture which accentuates a collectivist tribal group conformity, where there are heightened structures and processes of exclusion through spaces of diametric opposition (Downes, 2014). Another is that this is part of a wider Western cultural process of silencing of female voices and experiences in adolescence, as Gilligan and her colleagues suggest. It is notable that this sample is one of university educated female students. This may suggest that less highly educated females may experience even more pressures to blend in, though again caution is needed about generalising from this small sample. No inference can be made that this phenomenon of blending in for a sample of Irish females regarding their adolescent years is necessarily unique to girls; it raises the question for future research on a parallel blending in process for boys in Irish and Western culture. Phenomenological research with Russian-speaking male heroin addicts in an Estonian context (Downes, 2003) also highlighted issues of cultural conformity, especially among those with limited family and peer relationships characterised by distrust.

An educational implication of this phenomenon of 'blending in' may be to increase curricular focus on those aspects of social and emotional education which support self-awareness and development of self-esteem and self-efficacy, including a gender dimension. While concerns have been raised in an Irish context of a curricular shift away from social and emotional education, such as through the squeezing of time for the Social Personal and Health Education curriculum through an increasing emphasis on literacy and numeracy (Ó Breacháin & O'Toole, 2013), it is notable that the experiences of these Irish females was of a time when greater time than currently was given to social and emotional issues in the Irish school curriculum, though not particularly emotional regulation as self-management.

Jung (1921/1971) discusses how the introvert draws their energy from their inner world- their ideas, beliefs and reflection whilst the extravert draws their energy from the external world, from social interaction. The individual through experience and situations goes through alternating phases of introversion and extraversion, although a

person could be generally more introverted orientated or more extraverted orientated, 'introversion and extraversion are not traits of *character* at all but mechanisms which can, as it were, be switched on or off at will' (Jung, 1921/1971, p. 287). There are echoes of Jung's work in Gilligan as they both stress the need for space and expression for individuals of varying orientations. There is a gap in Jung's work, as although he wrote briefly about children, he did not look at adolescence when examining extraversion/introversion.

A potential tension between Jungian concerns to develop a more balanced approach to introversion and Gilligan's concern with loss of voice is with regard to their different understandings of silence. For Gilligan, silence is a loss, a loss of voice, a pruning of sound, whereas Jungian introversion influenced by Eastern traditions is open to positive possibilities of silence (Downes, 2012); such silence is resonant with mindfulness in education for social and emotional education (Costello & Lawler 2014) as part of a wider strategy to remedy neglect of emotions in educational policy (Downes, 2011). This has recently been recognised as an issue for understanding teachers' relational styles as dimensions of their personalities, including the need to balance between extraversion and introversion (Göncz, 2017). A further issue of tension here is that whereas Gilligan emphasises associations with female gender and loss of an inner world, Jung does not conceptualise introversion in gendered terms. Jung characterises extraversion as being a mode of adaptation (Downes, 2003a) that is very much resonant with this observed process of blending in. The phenomenological accounts in this study of female experiences of a silencing do not preclude this being a process also affecting males where introversion may be a strong feature of their needs and personalities. Nevertheless, both Gilligan and Jung treat this loss of voice or surrendering of introversion as being a process of imbalance arising in Western culture.

Taylor, Gilligan, and Sullivan wanted to promote resilience against societal demands through 'A healthy resistance and courage lead girl's to take action against social or cultural conventions that encourage them to disconnect from themselves and others' (Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1995, p. 168). This study provides exploratory supportive evidence for this societal and educational agenda in a context beyond a US one, to offer experiential opportunities to adolescent females to go beyond the possibility of 'blending in'.

Gergen (1973) highlights the possibility that social psychological observations may be of history, merely historical trends rather than expressive of any fundamental pattern. This raises the question for future research, especially regarding social and emotional education, as to whether different points in history and across different cultures give expression to female adolescent experiences that are not a blending in and dumbing down 'to fade into the background'. Such a concern with avoiding a blending in needs to be distinguished from Gergen's (2009) later position which seeks to move beyond a conception of self to argue for relational being, beyond even a relational self, where the relation itself is more fundamental than the separate self. The concern here is that the relation consumes the self in a blending in process, as a process of cultural conditioning (Downes, 2012). While allowance must be made for what Gergen (2000) describes as a 'saturated self' with a multiplicity of relational identities, celebration of multiplicity and diversity must not bring an accelerated conformity through a 'blending in'.

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