



A grounded theory study of the psychological and social processes apparent in the lives  
of contemporary 16-18 year olds

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## Summary

This thesis is divided into three sections: an empirical paper, a literature review and discussion and a critical appraisal. Part one, the empirical paper, reports on the use of a grounded theory methodology to investigate possible social-psychological processes apparent within the lives of contemporary 16-18 year-olds. The researcher makes use of sensitizing concepts gained from a reading of the British Psychological Society's 'Power, Threat, Meaning Framework' and of Erikson's theory of adolescent psychosocial development, to inform the research design. The 'grounded theory' formulated from the research process posits a novel social-psychological mechanism (labelled 'defensive mentalizing') by which the adolescent participants in the study appear to critique the motivation and 'intentional state' of others in order (perhaps) to undermine the significance of perceived negative appraisal. The conclusions of this research project are discussed with reference to implications for the practise of Educational Psychology and future research.

Part two, the literature review, is divided into two parts: division one makes use of theoretical literature, an engagement with this literature allows the researcher to more fully lay out the developing theory whilst also challenging its logic and explanatory power. Division one, explores theories concerning how human beings relate to themselves and how this relating is inherently tied up with how they relate to others. It makes use of some of the logical and conceptual apparatus of social comparison theory, the theories of cognitive dissonance, fundamental attribution bias and Mead's theory of 'The I and the Me', to support and extend the emergent theory of 'defensive mentalizing'. A discussion of two examples of a type of negative case analysis is included in this section of the literature review.

The second division of the literature review deals with the more empirical research literature surrounding adolescent development, social status and 'social pain'. This part of the literature review explores points of convergence and divergence between the emergent theory and research investigating adolescent sociality. It is used to suggest that, in support of the emergent theory, seeking peer affiliation and peer acceptance and avoiding social isolation, low social status and corresponding 'social pain', are significant motivating/influencing factors in respect to adolescent behaviour/state of mind.

Part three, the critical appraisal, offers a reflexive and reflective account of the research process. It includes reflections upon the philosophical and methodological decisions taken throughout the research process and an attempt to outline both the benefits and drawbacks entailed in such decisions. It also explores difficulties encountered and how they were overcome. Finally it considers limitations of the research and the implications of the research findings for: future research; the field and practice of Educational Psychology and the researchers own personal practice as a Trainee Psychologist.

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**PART ONE: EMPIRICAL STUDY**

**(Word Count: 6052)**

## **Abstract**

**Aim:** This research aimed to investigate/explore social-psychological processes at play within the lives of contemporary 16-18 year-olds.

**Rationale:** Adolescence is a difficult developmental period for many individuals and difficulties with mental health and wellbeing are common in this age period. A reading of Erikson's 'psycho-social' theory of adolescent identity development, as well as the British Psychology Society's 'Power Threat Meaning Framework', enabled the researcher to adopt 'sensitising concepts' which, shaped a research paradigm interested in identifying: intersubjective, social and psychological patterns that might be of use in gaining insights about some of the difficulties associated with contemporary adolescence.

**Findings:** The 'grounded theory' formulated from the research process posits a novel social-psychological mechanism (labelled 'defensive mentalizing') by which the adolescent participants in the study appear to critique the motivation and 'intentional state' of others in order to undermine the significance of their behaviour/appraisal, when this behaviour is perceived as posing a threat to the participants self-concept and/or status.

**Conclusions:** The conclusions of this research project are discussed with reference to implications for the practise of Educational Psychology and future research.

## 1. Introduction

### Adolescent mental health crisis

In the United Kingdom there is evidence for a recent increase in the emotional and psychological difficulties experienced by adolescents, for example UK Universities reported that there has been a dramatic five-fold increase in the number of students disclosing mental health conditions over the past decade; the numbers jumped from 9675 in 2007 to 57305 in 2017-18 despite only a small increase in the number of students (Universities, U.K, 2018). There is also substantial body of evidence showing an increase in affective and mood disorders in adolescence (Collishaw, 2015) and a 2017 report suggested a 68% increase in hospital visits for self-harm between 2011 and 2014 for girls between the ages of 13-16 (Morgan et al., 2017). There is also evidence for subclinical increases in stress and anxiety and decreases in wellbeing in contemporary UK adolescents (Booker, Kelly, & Sacker, 2018; Patalay & Fitzsimons, 2018; Woods & Scott, 2016).

In 2017 the UK government published a green paper (Department of Health and Social Care and Department for Education, 2017) which recognised an increase in ‘mental health problems, mental distress and low wellbeing’ amongst 16-25 year olds (Department of Health and Social Care and Department for Education, 2017 p. 34) and pledged to:

*...set up a new national strategic partnership with key stakeholders focused on improving the mental health of 16-25 years olds by encouraging more coordination, experimentation and robust evaluation. (Department of Health and Social Care and Department for Education, 2017, p.34).*

The green paper also constituted a shift of the responsibility for “mild to moderate mental health difficulties” (Department of Health and Social Care and Department for Education, 2017 p, 21) from health services to schools and new community based ‘Mental Health Support Teams’. These teams are to be jointly overseen by the Department for Education and The Department of Health. This shift which will involve a coordinated multidisciplinary approach from health and education to provide early intervention on some mental health and emotional wellbeing issues (Department of Health and Social Care and Department for Education, 2017).

This can be interpreted as a move towards a community based, pre-emptive approach to the psychological wellbeing of children and adolescents. Educational Psychologists are often trained in community based interactionist and systemic approaches to facilitating psychological wellbeing (Ashton & Roberts, 2006; Boyle & MacKay, 2007; Kennedy, Frederickson, & Monsen, 2008; Rhydderch & Gameson, 2010), and as such have much to offer in contributing to this new strategic approach. This shift in policy perhaps represents an opportunity to shift perspectives around promoting adolescent mental health and wellbeing, possibly moving further away from an individual ‘within-child’, medical model approach, towards looking for: interactionist, systemic and intersubjective factors that either promote, or put at risk, the mental health and wellbeing of adolescents. The research paper that follows aims to investigate intersubjective factors and possible social and psychological processes, present in the lives of 16-18 year olds studying in the mainstream state education system; it makes use of a grounded theory methodology as a way of investigating possible processes at play without limiting the possibility of the findings by bringing preconceived ideas or

theoretical perspectives to the investigation (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, Strauss, & Strutzel, 1968; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Initial engagement with the literature and Sensitising concepts

The researcher adopted a research methodology based on a reading and fusion of the three most significant formulations of the grounded theory approach. Those of Glaser and Strauss (1968), Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Charmaz (2006) (see part three: p.143 for a discussion of this methodological decision). A grounded theory methodology allows the researcher the possibility of approaching an area of study without too many preconceived ideas about what the findings of their study might entail. Strauss and Corbin suggest that:

*It is impossible to know prior to the investigation what the salient problems will be or what theoretical concepts will emerge. Also, the researcher does not want to be so steeped in the literature that he or she is constrained and even stifled by it[...] It is not until they are able to let go and put trust in their abilities to generate knowledge that they finally are able to make discoveries of their own. (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 49)*

There is debate in the grounded theory literature about how much theoretical apparatus is appropriate to bring to a piece of grounded theory research (Martin & Gynnild, 2011). Charmaz (2006) adopts a similar position to that of Strauss and Corbin and uses Blumer's (1979) concept of 'sensitizing concepts' to describe the way in which existing theoretical tools can be utilised in grounded theory research:

*In short, sensitizing concepts and disciplinary perspectives provide a place to start, not to end. Grounded theorists use sensitizing concepts as tentative tools for developing their ideas about processes that they define in their data. If particular sensitizing concepts prove to be irrelevant, then we dispense with them. Grounded theorists evaluate the fit between their initial research interests and their emerging data. We do not force preconceived ideas and*

*theories directly upon our data. Rather, we follow leads that we define in the data, or design another way of collecting data to pursue our initial interests. (Charmaz, 2006, p. 17)*

The current piece makes use of sensitizing concepts gained from an interpretation of the political context above; of the British Psychological Society's 'Power, Threat, Meaning Framework' (Johnstone et al., 2018a) and of Erikson's theory of adolescent psychosocial development (Erikson, 1994). It adopts an abductive rather than deductive or solely inductive approach to reasoning (see part three: p.148 for a discussion).

Also important to the development and preliminary stages of this project was a grounding in the contemporary literature on adolescence relating to a cognitive psychology and neuroscience perspective. Points of particular interest here were the cognitive developments in attention, memory, processing speed, organization and metacognition (Lerner & Steinberg, 2004) thought to be entailed in this developmental period, as well as the proposed links between these 'thinking abilities' and self-concept. For example it has been argued that cognitive developments in early adolescence result in increased self-awareness and awareness of others and improvements in the ability to think about the future. It is thought that these shifts result in adolescents coming to define themselves in terms of their opinions and values instead of, as most children, their physical traits (Carlson, Buskist & Martin, 1997). These ideas were deemed relevant by the researcher in thinking about how adolescents come to think about themselves, their world and others, and also how such factors might be tied up with the psychological difficulties experienced by some adolescents. Also of interest were constructivist ideas (Arsalidou & Pascual-Leone, 2016) which raised questions around

how contemporary adolescents are interpreting their own development and life situation, and what ideas or concepts they are making use of to construct meaning for themselves.

#### Erikson: Identity, youth and crisis

Erikson (1994) argued that adolescence constitutes a period of ‘identity crisis’ whereby an individual is engaged in a conflict between identity synthesis and identity confusion. This crisis involves a struggle to develop a psychosocial identity. For Erikson the word ‘Ego’ represents the part of one’s personality experienced as ‘I’ or the ‘self’ (Erikson, 1994). He suggests that an individual’s identity is determined by and ‘felt as’ the interplay between their social contextualisation and their sense of self:

*Ego identity then, in its subjective aspect, is the awareness of the fact that there is a self-sameness and continuity to the ego’s synthesizing methods, the style of one’s individuality, and this style coincides with the sameness and continuity of one’s meaning for significant others in the immediate community. (Erikson, 1994, p. 50)*

Thus, for Erikson, healthy, stable identity development involves a sense of oneself that corresponds with social reality and the perception of others. Erikson suggested that if an individual successfully navigates this period of crisis and comes away with an identity nearer to ego synthesis than identity confusion, he/she will go on to navigate life with a clear sense of his/her individual identity, which he/she feels confident in sharing with others. However, if an individual’s navigation of this period of crisis is less successful, and he/she remain in a state of identity confusion, Erikson argues, the individual is unsure of who he/she is and therefore is unwilling to share him/herself with others. He/she may become socially isolated and disconnected from reality.



Identity, for Erikson, is intersubjective and thus involves a tension between self and other, and between societal expectations, or socially acceptable roles and behaviours (what he terms the coordinates of cultural consolidations, Erikson, 1994, p. 32), and individual freedom, agency and instinctual/irrational drives. Erikson suggests that cultural consolidations consist of ritualised patterns of behaviour entrenched over time; initially due to their success in meeting certain goals, such as obtaining material rewards for the group, but over time also influenced by vested interests and entrenched power structures. For Erikson these consolidations direct and inspire action whilst also offering the coordinates for identity.

For Erikson the ‘crisis’ of adolescence involves moving away from the social institution of the family and trying to find a position within the culturally consolidated ‘coordinates’ available to them (Erikson, 1994). Erikson suggests that this allows individuals to find a sense of familiarity with the world and limit their horizons.

The researcher was intrigued by the concepts outlined in Erikson’s theory of adolescent psycho-social development and wondered if they might have utility in informing an exploration and analysis of the social, intersubjective and age-related factors possible linked to contemporary adolescent mental health and wellbeing.

#### Power, Threat Meaning Framework

Next the researcher turned to The British Psychological Society’s ‘Power, Threat, Meaning, Framework’, which served as an orientating device in this respect and helped

the researcher further in the aim to distil some core ‘sensitising concepts’ on which to build a research question and methodology.

The ‘Power, Threat, Meaning, Framework’ claims to be a meta framework whose aim it is to offer a: ‘fundamentally different perspective on the origins, experience and expression of emotional distress and troubled or troubling behaviour’ (Johnstone et al., 2018b, p. 8). Of interest here are a few of its core principles:

*‘Abnormal’ behaviour and experience exist on a continuum with ‘normal’ behaviour and experience and are subject to similar frameworks of understanding and interpretation. These include the assumption that, unless there is strong evidence to the contrary, our behaviour and experience can be seen as intelligible responses to our current circumstances, history, belief systems, culture, and bodily capacities, although the links amongst these may not always be obvious or straightforward.*

*[...]Humans are fundamentally social beings whose experiences of distress and troubled or troubling behaviour are inseparable from their material, social, environmental, socio-economic, and cultural contexts (Johnstone et al., 2018b, p. 8).*

The purported ‘main features and purposes’ which these core principles ‘inform’ are also of note:

- *It allows provisional identification of general patterns and regularities in the expression and experience of distress and troubled or troubling behaviour, as opposed to specific biological or psychological causal mechanisms linked to discrete disorder categories.*
- *It shows how these response patterns are evident to varying degrees and in varying circumstances for all individuals across the lifespan.*
- *It does not assume ‘pathology’; rather, it describes coping and survival mechanisms which may be more or less functional as an adaptation to particular conflicts and adversities in both the past and present.*
- *[...]It integrates relational, social, cultural and material factors as shaping the emergence, persistence, experience and expression of these patterns.*
- *[...]It assigns a central role to personal meaning, emerging out of social and cultural discourses and belief systems, material conditions and bodily potentialities.*

- *It assigns a central role to personal agency, or the ability to exercise influence within inevitable psychosocial, biological and material constraints. (Johnstone et al., 2018b, pp. 8-9).*

### 1.1 Research question and interview schedule

The researcher took, from the reading of this initial literature, the following sensitising concepts, which helped determine: the research question; the questions in the interview schedule and also helped justify the use of a grounded theory methodology:

- The way in which individuals respond and relate to their social and circumstantial context may follow patterns which are evident to some extent or another ‘amongst all individuals’.
- These patterns may be shaped by ‘relational, social, cultural and material factors.’
- That they may involve a functional ‘response’ and ‘adaptation’ to ‘conflict and adversity.’
- That ‘personal meaning’ and ‘personal agency’ may be central to these response patterns and determined to some extent by the social constructions individuals live into.
- And that the 16-18 year old age would be a suitable age for participants in order to interview individuals who are on the verge of entering the adult world and wider community and thus interacting with Erikson’s culturally consolidated coordinates, whilst at the same time falling within an age range with which Educational Psychologist work on a regular basis (Ashton & Roberts, 2006) and thus ensuring that the research is relevant to the profession.

These sensitizing concepts translated into the following research question:

- **Are there any clear social-psychological processes apparent within the lives of contemporary 16-18 year-olds?**

And the following semi-structured interview schedule:

Table 1: Links to sensitizing concepts

Interview Schedule	Link to Sensitising Concept
Can you tell me about a time that you have had a positive experience of a group?	Social and relational factors
Can you tell me about a negative experience you've had within a group?	Social and relational factors
What are your hopes for the future?	Personal meaning and personal agency
What are your fears for the future?	Personal meaning and personal agency
What kind of things make being the age that you are now difficult?	Response and adaptation to conflict and adversity
What kind of things could make it easier?	Response and adaptation to conflict and adversity

These sensitising issues offer support for the use of a grounded theory methodology.

The task of exploring the patterns of response to social, relational and material circumstances; of looking for psychological and social processes, involves a commitment to the idea that such social and intersubjective processes are important determinants of psychological and social reality. Philosophically this is in line with the 'symbolic interactionist' and 'social constructionist' orientation of , what is sometimes termed, the 'evolved' grounded theory method of Corbin and Strauss and also, to an extent, Charmaz (Chamberlain-Salaun, Mills, & Usher, 2013; Charmaz, 2006; Martin & Gynnild, 2011). Even the original formulation of the methodology outlined by Glaser

and Straus (Glaser, Strauss & Strutzel, 1968) took the study of social process as its premise. Charmaz paraphrases Glaser and Strauss as suggesting that: “process, not structure, was fundamental to human existence; indeed human beings created structures through engaging in processes” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 7). She suggests that for Glaser and Strauss “a finished grounded theory explains the studied process in new theoretical terms” and “constructs abstract theoretical explanations of social processes” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 5).

The aim and rationale behind the current piece of research was to look for any psychological and social patterns and processes evident in the day to day lives of contemporary 16-18 year olds in the education system; to look for any patterns or processes that might shed light on some of the contextual, systemic and intersubjective factors involved in influencing adolescent wellbeing and/or distress. It was hoped that any insights gained may help to inform the practice of Educational Psychologists in their work with individual adolescents, and perhaps more importantly with the systems and institutional cultures which they inhabit. It was the hope of the researcher that by looking for patterns in the way contemporary adolescents experience themselves, their lives and others, avenues for possible psychological intervention and future research might arise. It was also hoped that if the research could identify patterns in how adolescents were relating to each other and their world, their environment and their future, then some sort of insight might be gained into how the environment and structures they inhabit might be adapted and influenced to best facilitate psychological wellbeing and prevent the risk of (non-functional/maladaptive) psychological distress.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 Ontology and Epistemology**

This research is rooted in a pragmatist ontology which considers language and thought, tools by which we navigate our environment; tools which are inseparable from this agency in and on the world. Pragmatism rejects the proposition the such tools can claim to access or represent ‘reality’(Blumer, 1979; Mead, 1934; Rorty & Rorty, 1991).

The epistemological stance of this research is situated within a symbolic-interactionist and social constructionist paradigm, which highlights the (social constructionist) idea that the shared social constructs which we inhabit, grow and live into, influence our behaviour and interpretations (Burr, 2015; Lock & Strong, 2010). But leaves room for the (symbolic interactionist) idea that specific interactions between individuals and groups have the power to establish specific ‘meanings’ (Blumer,1969) alongside and apart from those that are socially inherited: that meaning is modifiable (see part three: p.140 for a wider discussion of this point and fuller definition of ‘symbolic interactionism’).

### **2.2 Design**

The researcher employed an abductive method of data collection and analysis (see part three: p.148 for a discussion of this point). In line with the epistemological and ontological position of the research, a qualitative, or flexible, research design (Robson, 2011) was deemed appropriate to explore complex and unpredictable social structures and relations. Amongst the different qualitative methodologies and data analysis techniques grounded theory method was deemed the most suitable because of its ability

to tolerate uncertainty, open up opportunities for original thinking and go beyond the descriptive level and produce theory with explanatory power which, avoids conjecture by assuring the production of theory grounded in research data (Chamberlain-Salaun, Mills & Usher 2013; Charmaz, 2006; Glaser et al., 1968; Martin & Gynnild, 2011; Strauss, 1998). (See part three: p.131 for a discussion of how the ontology and epistemology of the research links to the grounded theory methodology).

### 2.3 Data Collection

The current piece of research is concerned with a close reading of semi-structured interview data in an attempt to uncover and analyse some of the features and social/psychological processes of the lives of contemporary 16-18 year olds in order to construct an abstract theoretical explanation of these processes.

The interview is a commonly used data collection method in qualitative research and is often celebrated for its ability to generate rich data in which participants are able to report on their perspectives and experiences in their own language (Howitt, 2016; Robson, 2011; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The semi-structured interview was deemed an appropriate method for this piece of research because it enabled the researcher to direct the interview enough so participants were discussing the areas that the researcher was interested in exploring (groups/intersubjectivity, the future, difficulties) whilst allowing the participant to go where they liked with respect to these topics. Follow up questions were couched in the same terms as the participants and were used for clarification and to encourage elaboration, they were not intended to lead participants into saying certain things.

The interview schedule was checked, prior to the interviews taking place, with young people aged 16-18 known to the researcher to check comprehension and accessibility.

As part of this process two of the questions were reworded.

Semi-structured interviews have sometimes been criticised as a research method for taking interview data at face value and failing to take into account the power dynamics, social desirability effects and other conversational features made more explicit by the fact that the interviewer directs the conversation as the interview unfolds (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Robson, 2011). The researcher held these issues in mind during the interview and data analysis processes and was careful to avoid leading questions within the interviews and also to consider the intersubjective forces at play in the interviews during data analysis.

## 2.4 Participants

Potential participants were approached from sixth forms and colleges from across England and South Wales. Participants were asked to take part in a semi-structured interview lasting approximately 1 hour. Interviews were recorded, and the researcher also took some notes during the interview process.

Five participants were interviewed from two different settings, one a school sixth form in an economically deprived town in the north of England the other a sixth form in a city in South Wales serving students from a mixture of different socioeconomic backgrounds. After five students had been interviewed and the data transcribed and analysed, the researcher decided the point of saturation had been met, the concepts in the



theory were well developed and no new categories were emerging from data analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser et al., 1968; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

College/sixth form students were selected as well placed participants for this study as they had recently made a transition from key stage four and were involved in the process of beginning to explore their position and possibilities in the wider adult world. They were also likely to discuss factors that are relevant to the secondary and further education systems, factors that are likely to be of interest to the field of educational psychology.

Unlike many grounded theory studies (Charmaz, 2006, Strauss & Corbin, 1998), the current research did not make use of theoretical sampling, whereby the researcher's participant sampling decisions and sometimes interview schedule are shaped by the developing conceptual/theoretical ideas emerging from the data analysis (Charmaz, 2006) (see p.139 for a discussion on this methodological decision).

## 2.5 Procedure

Table 2: Outline of data collection procedure

<b>Step 1:</b> Gatekeeper letter (See Appendix A) sent to SENCOs/ALNCOs and headteachers of schools and colleges who teach students post 16.
<b>Step 2:</b> SENCO/ALNCO and headteacher asked to share information sheet (See Appendix B) with students expressing an interest.
<b>Step 3:</b> A date arranged for researcher to visit sixth form to gain written consent and, if appropriate, conduct interviews.
<b>Step 4:</b> Researcher clarifies that the participant has understood the information sheet and consent form, given an opportunity to ask any questions and then asked to provide written consent.

**Step 5:** Following the interview participants are provided with a debrief form (See Appendix C) given an opportunity to ask any questions and to ask for any sections of the interview to be censored from the transcript.

## 2.6 Analysis

Data analysis took place in accordance with the conventions of Straus and Corbin's 'evolved' grounded theory method (Chamberlain-Salaun et al., 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) (see appendix F for examples of each step of the data analysis process) and involved the steps detailed in figure 1 (below). Within this method of analysis, 'open coding' involves line by line reading of the data and the generation of initial open codes which take the first step of describing the phenomena under investigation, these initial codes are then grouped into categories. The instances of these codes and categories are then compared to each other via 'constant comparative analysis'. The next analytic step of 'axial coding' involves arranging the categories in a way in which they stand in relation to each other and tell a story. In axial coding "linking takes place not descriptively but rather at a conceptual level" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 125). In this way theory with explanatory power begins to be generated. The final step in the coding process is called 'selective coding' and involves centring the theoretical conception or 'storyline' around a single core category or central phenomenon, which situates and contextualises the other categories.

Negative case analysis involves exploring and discussing the data in a way that is critical of patterns and explanations that are emerging from the analysis (see part three: critical review, for a fuller discussion).

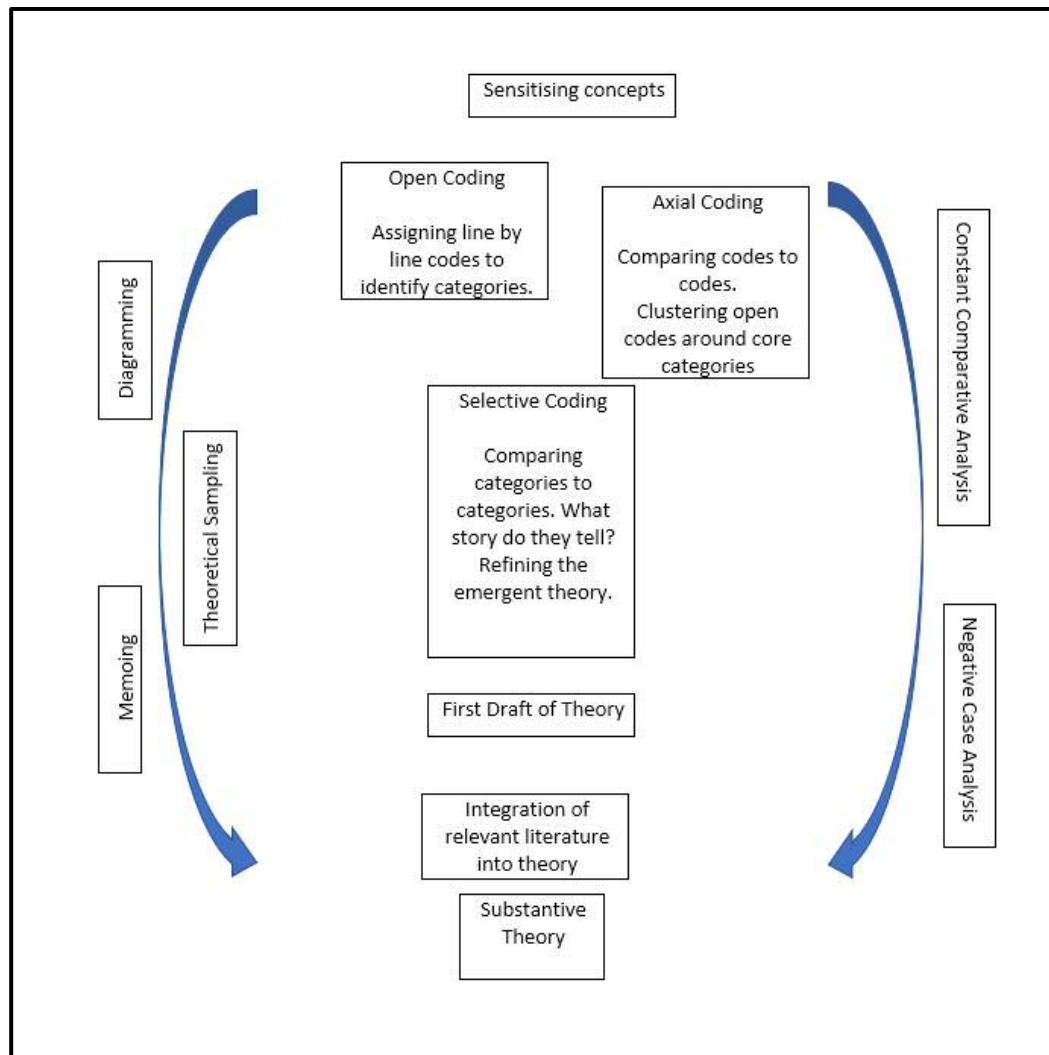


Figure 1: Steps of data analysis

## 2.7 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was gained from the ethics committee at Cardiff University prior to the completion of the research. See Appendix D for an outline of the main ethical considerations and how they were attended to.

## 2.8 Evidencing Trustworthiness

The researcher used Yardley's (2008) principles in order to analyse the validity and trustworthiness of this piece of qualitative research (see appendix E). These principles: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence and impact and importance, are used to determine whether the research is well enough conceived and executed to be considered rigorous enough to have utility.

The analysis of trustworthiness (See Appendix E) concludes that this piece of research is rigorous and has utility because it is grounded in the research data, it uses numerous examples and 'incidents' from the data to support its theoretical assertions and also makes use of negative case analysis (see part two: literature review) to discuss and analyse alternative theoretical explanations for the data other than the explanatory theory arising from the data analyses. This criticality (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was significant in the adaptation and development of the theory arising from this research and (see part two: literature review and appendix F) .

## 3. Findings

The table below shows a representation of the first draft of the emergent theory, the pages that follow divide/define the categories and concepts in this first draft and offer evidence from the data to support their existence.

### 3.1 First draft of emergent theory

The figure which follows represents the initial draft of the emergent theory prior to an engagement with the wider literature.

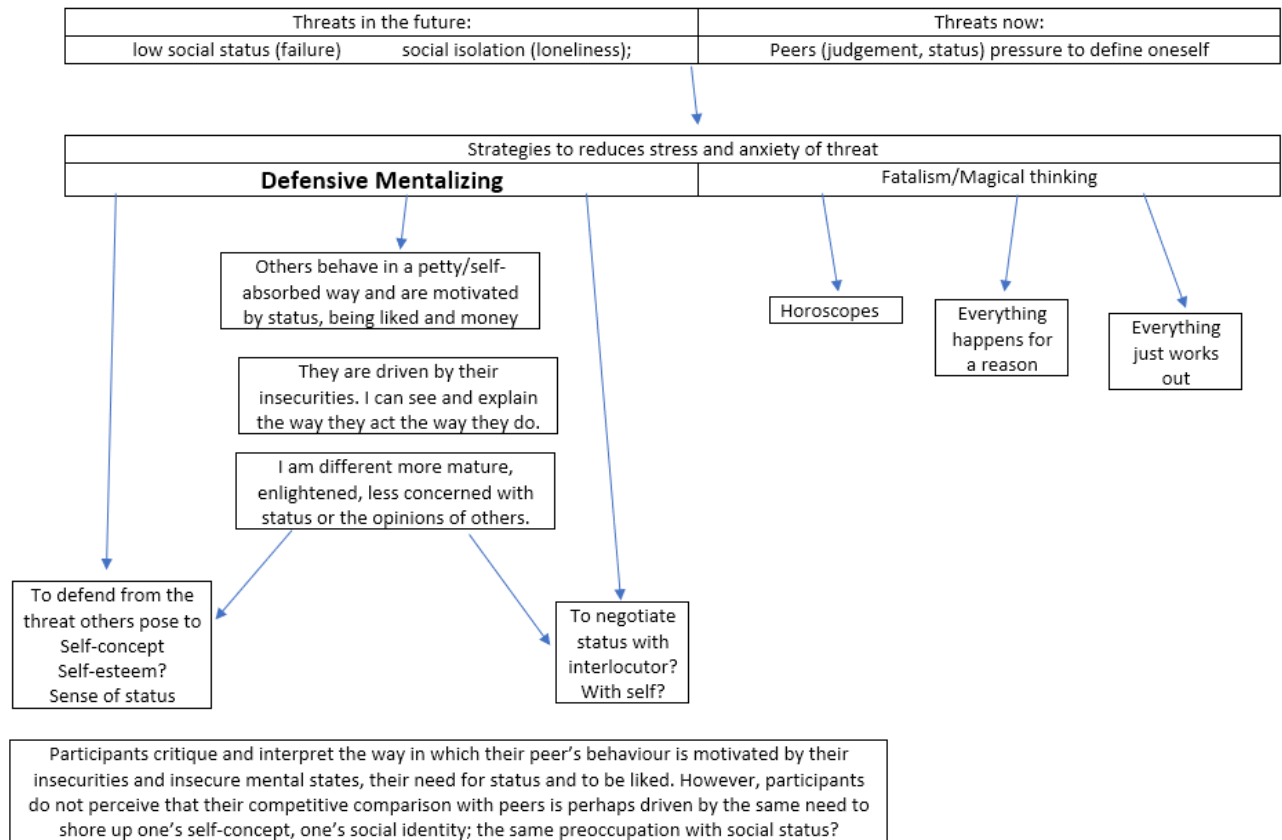


Figure 2: First draft of emergent theory

### 3.2 The perceived threats of low social status and social isolation

Each of the five participants expressed concerns which related to themes of a lack of achievement, a lack of success or a ‘dead end job’ (low social status) and/or concerns about being lonely or being socially victimised (social isolation).

Table 3: Threats of low social status and social isolation: illustrative data extracts

Participant	Anxiety over social isolation and low social status	Evidence from the data
Oscar	Low social status	...dead end job, not going anywhere, stuck with the same life, struggling. Like that and having to work very hard for minimum rewards. (paragraph 101)
Oscar	Social Isolation/Low social status	Honestly the best thing I can hope for is just to be 'appy, as long as I'm happy and I'm making other people happy that is the main thing for me, I think, in an ideal world, I'd like to be happy and rich, but , I think happiness is key. If I'm still playing rugby, I've still got friends, I've travelled a bit, I've got no regrets, then I can maybe think I am here but look what I've done before and does that out way now, so happiness is key. (paragraph 133)
Sean	Social Isolation/Low social status	(discussing being bullied) I feel like they understood what they were doing and it came to a point of just pure nastiness and at the time I was a massive push over, I wouldn't have ever said anything to anyone, I was just like please mate, come on, but now it was like you know stop if you don't stop, do you know what I mean kind of thing. And it is like, I've tried my best to sort of like flip it because I don't want to be in that position again it is the worst position to be in, I hate it, it is quite scary to me the fact that you know, someone can, you know, just another person can impact you in that way. (paragraph 149)
Sean	Low social status	my biggest fear is stuff not going the way I expect it to go and being really like, err in a rut that's the biggest fear of being in a rut. I don't want that at all because that's just, that's terrifying, yer that's terrifying, I don't like that thought at all cos it's like everything going tits up, not a fan of that, no I

		<p>wouldn't like that at all. (paragraph 90)</p> <p>You get used to the fact that you are beneath people sort of thing, you get used to the fact that o yer I'm subordinate to bosses. You don't get to choose when you work, you work when you are told. Sort of like, it gets, I don't want that to happen, I can't imagine enjoying that at all, like I'd like to work for myself. (paragraph 78)</p> <p>I don't want to be the alpha or whatever and that has changed a bit now because I feel like if you don't have that thing in you then you end up at the bottom and that is the way it is, so you have to make a conscious effort to compete because if you don't you are going to end up at the bottom and at the time I was sort of like why , why are you bothering, why are you sort of trying to move. (paragraph 129)</p> <p>Not thinking rationally, not isolating yourself, if you isolate, I did that when I got bullied it was the worse, no you should never isolate yourself, when you are alone with your thoughts you think the way you have been thinking through that situation, you know you need a second opinion cos, you become really stubborn when you are in a bad situation, you feel like you don't have many options where as if you have someone else, your like o actually yer, you snap out of it a bit. (paragraph 247)</p>
Anna	Low social status	<p>I'd like you know going out with friends and you know travelling and seeing places I know it's sort of like a dream lifestyle that a lot of people want and not many people have but I</p>

		<p>think if you work, you know, for it, and I know people work for it and still don't get it, but I think you just have to hope because if you don't hope that you can get what you want then I guess there is no point really. (pt 2 paragraph 88)</p>
Rebecca	Low social status	<p>Probably being maybe unsuccessful because I feel like I've had a lot of... Not pressure, but yeah, I'd say pressure actually.</p> <p>Yeah, so I think if I was unsuccessful in a career that would really kind of damage my ego a little bit, because I've been told this whole time that I'm worth a good career, you know? Also probably just like, I don't even know there's so many things I'm scared for future. (paragraph 123)</p>
Rebecca	Social Isolation	<p>Probably just being lonely. I only need a couple of people but loneliness that is scary. That is really scary.</p> <p>And I'm really scared. Well, I'm really scared, I won't find people that are like me, 'cause I haven't been able to, which is understandable 'cause school day is a small places, it looks huge but it's small... But yeah, I really hope I find people but... . (paragraph 125)</p>
Mary	Low social status	<p>So you've got your degree and after that, not being able to get into the job that you did your degree to get... 'cause obviously jobs are limited there are only so many and also in certain locations maybe...</p> <p>there might be careers where you can't find that job very quickly and you have to kind of think of other things and then you might end up in places you don't wanna be in... So I think that's scary, 'cause you work pretty much all your life and I think</p>



		<p>you don't wanna be in a situation where you hate your job.</p> <p>because you're there all the time, every day. And I think that can turn quite negative so</p> <p>I kinda don't wanna be in that situation. (paragraph 95)</p>
Mary	Social isolation	<p>I think not having a family. I would be gutted if I didn't have it. And I think it's a real thing you might not find someone like I really want that to happen, in my future, it's a very big thing, because I'm so close with my family, so I would not want to have that. (paragraph 108)</p>

### 3.3 The threat posed by peers

Each of the five participants also reported ways in which they perceived the behaviour and/or opinions and perspectives of their peers as threatening to them.

Table 4: Threats posed by peers

Participant	The threat of peers (paraphrase/interpretation)	Evidence from the data
Sean	Others are threatening and you have to compete and play the game in respect to social status lest you end up at the bottom, and you don't want to end up at the bottom.	<p>I was like as long as I'm happy I'm happy, I don't want to be the alpha or whatever and that has changed a bit now because I feel like if you don't have that thing in you then you end up at the bottom and that is the way it is, so you have to make a conscious effort to compete because if you don't you are going to end up at the bottom and at the time I was sort of like why , why are you bothering, why are you sort of trying to move. So</p>

		<p>obviously I see it as though everyone is here and everyone is trying to you know, it is like a pyramid kind of. (paragraph 129)</p> <p>I feel like they understood what they were doing and it came to a point of just pure nastiness and at the time I was a massive push over, I wouldn't have ever said anything to anyone, I was just like please mate, come on, but now it was like you know stop if you don't stop, do you know what I mean kind of thing. And it is like, I've tried my best to sort of like flip it because I don't want to be in that position again it is the worst position to be in, I hate it, it is quite scary to me the fact that you know, someone can, you know, just another person can impact you in that way. (paragraph 149)</p> <p>I couldn't believe the fact that he could be, after going through that and you know, being rejected, and being made to feel the way you are made to feel when it happens. That you can then come and be an arse-hole to people, how are you managing that? Like, that's, do you know what I mean? It was just mental, I couldn't believe it, how are you being like that when you have just had all of that happen to you? (paragraph 205)</p>
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Oscar	Others a threat to me physically, they are aggressive.	<p>Lower down you sort of have to be a bit sort of guard up a bit more, because there are more people who don't want to be there and they are more bothered about going at you and you know trying to like upset people or something. (paragraph 39)</p> <p>You get some of the same people, and they are fine like, it's just sometimes they just decide that they'll flick a switch and they are going to be at you and stuff like that. It's not necessarily a problem because you just get used to it and you expect it and you are ready for it but you don't like it. (paragraph 57)</p>
Anna	My peers are higher achieving, got the grades to get into sixth form when I didn't and they all know what they want to do when I don't.	<p>Yer I felt a bit like because everyone else sort of got in and did what they wanted to do I felt should I really be here. I've not got onto the course that I wanted to do. I'm not good enough for it you know. (pt 2 paragraph 15)</p> <p>I think that has stressed me as well because my best friends I think they all know what they wanted to do, they all have their hearts set on this, they were going to do this that and I think that's when I was like O my gosh I don't know what I want to do. (pt 2 paragraph 72)</p>
Rebecca	My peer group mark me out as different	So even since like year 8,

	from them.	'cause I've never fitted in with people in high school I always kind of been... Well, just always, people have always called me the hippy or the... what's the lady, the feminist, what was her name? Rosa Parks. I've always been called Rosa Parks, I've always been called a hippy, which I'm fine with, 'cause my parents are, but it's like but I've never found people I connect with. (paragraph 71)
Mary	Sometimes your public image is beyond your control.	I think anyone who's involved in situation, they don't even want to be involved. They're not gonna be happy, 'cause you get lots of information and it can persuade a lot of people because I've seen you get like impatient and then it's not true or it's really negative. It can portray the people in a negative way, when they maybe don't even deserve that for things, what is said might not be true when it's not a very nice place to kind of be in either really. (paragraph 58)

### 3.4 The pressure to define oneself

Each of the five participants also reported feeling a pressure to decide who they are, what they want to do or be and/or a pressure to succeed.

Table 5: Pressure to define oneself

Pressure to define oneself	
Sean	<p>I would say it is about whether they prioritise their, you know how they are socially or educationally, erm, personally I'd say that I do the socially just for the fact that because I prefer being around my friends than I do being in the classroom definitely, it's probably the same for everyone but I sit here thinking o yer I need to get these grades because if I don't get these grades then I'm not going to be successful but in the same breath I'm like but ah I don't want to do that (laughs) do you know what I mean, it's really weird. (paragraph 157)</p>
Oscar	<p>Honestly I just don't know, I don't know what I'm going to do, I don't know if I want to go to uni, I don't know if I want to get an apprenticeship, I don't know if I want to work, I just I don't know, I just know what I want for tea. I just know short term and I know what I want to do now and tomorrow. (paragraph 144)</p> <p>I feel like I know there is something wrong but I don't even know what to do about it or why I don't want to do anything about it, it's more subconscious than conscious (paragraph 154). I've gone from start sixth form, not thinking about it at all, to the odd maybe I should do this, maybe I should do that and I feel like it's gonna get progressively worse until the end. (paragraph 170)</p> <p>I can't just keep saying I don't know what I want to do because it's like a broken record but that's</p>

	the truth. (paragraph 178)
Anna	<p>I felt like I needed to fit in and everyone knew what they wanted to do and I had no idea, and that really scared me. I've still got so much time to grow, I am so young and, you know, to feel that kind of pressure, that I need to know what I want to do for the rest of my life, I don't. (paragraph 52)</p> <p>...a lot of them know what they want to do erm you know they want to be like accountants or my friend wants to be a dentist if you know I think that has stressed me as well because my best friends, I think they all know what they wanted to do, they all have their hearts set on this, they were going to do this this that and I think that's when I was like O my gosh I don't know what I want to do. (paragraph 72)</p>
Rebecca	<p>There's all these things like gender fluidity is coming out, and I know I know girl who is coming out a gender fluid and now she isn't and it's very confusing because now that there is all these labels that everyone can conform to I, it's kind of like people actually sit down thinking What am I? You know, I think it is really hard now and obviously it's not fake, I'm not saying that, I'm saying it's a good thing to people actually coming out about themselves, but I think it's very so much pressure right now because some people are like, come on you just got to express yourself that then other people are like gender fluid? There's no such thing as that... You know so it's kinda a hard time... (paragraph 167)</p> <p>I think it's just no one's really knows what they wanna do. There's people applying for courses, they probably don't wanna do just because they felt that they have to... Being with the right friendship group all of that is just hard and there's a lot of personality things coming out and she like everyone's being a lot more open about the personality and about sexuality, and gender, and I think there's a lot of pressure now, there's a lot more pressure before because</p>

	<p>you just had to hide it but there's a lot more pressure now to actually come out and actually find yourself. I feel like almost now, it's not just like... People don't just... people actually have to sit and think to themselves, like am I this am I this? Because there's so many... Now, which isn't a bad thing. (paragraph 165)</p>
Mary	<p>I don't wanna rush anything but obviously, that's a... I think this societal pressure like you have to do this by the age in this by this age that kind of is... influences the... The way you live your life a little bit. (paragraph 95)</p> <p>So I think you just take everything in perspective. Otherwise, I think the pressure just gets too much and you fixate on everything, then whatever you achieve won't be as good as what you want anyway. (paragraph 118)</p> <p>I've always been a worrier always about absolutely everything. It could be like, Oh my God. it's made me such a stressful person... Now so, under pressure I don't do well, I don't strive. So, I think worrying about the future has always been like a big thing for me but it has got worse as it's got closer to exams and things. (paragraph 122)</p> <p>I think there's a lot of pressure to know what you wanna do, to do well at school, at such a young age we're still young but this is the age where you set up yourself the rest of your life. And I think that's the pressure that kinda gets to everyone. (paragraph 128)</p>

### 3.5 Fatalism/Magical thinking

Four of the five participants described holding beliefs which could be described as representing a fatalistic logic: that events are predetermined and thus beyond one's control.

Table 6: Fatalism/ Magical Thinking

Fatalism/magical thinking	
Sean	Well I feel like I read into stuff a lot, I mean I love astrology and horror scopes. Obviously I doubt it is a real thing but it is weird how accurate it can be, but I will read into it a lot and say o yer, that links to that, and sort of thing and I'll actually act on it, and it is crazy how I will let that impact me but then in other things I will be like o no that's stupid, do you know what I mean, sort of thing to me, it's weird because I try to think as practically as I can and as logically as I can, then I'm following this thing that tells me, laughs, do you know what I mean it's really hypocritical. (paragraph 125)
Oscar	I think it's optimism but I think it is blind optimism, I think because things sort of have just worked out, like my GCSE's just worked out, I don't think I worked particularly that hard for them I think it just worked out, and I don't know I feel like everything just works. (paragraph 109)
Anna	NA
Rebecca	I call him brother, and when I met him, it was weird because we'd seen each other, I don't know anything about him, but we had an instant weird connection. It was like there was some kind of air thing which I know I've never believed in... I just kind of believe in, I don't believe in a blood relationships, I believe in social relationships, so I believe like you are close with your mum because of the social aspect that has happened from birth, I don't believe in... 'cause I could walk past him and I wouldn't know who he was in street so I don't believe in any of that, but when I met him, we went for a meal just me, him and his girlfriend which is funny. I know I don't know, we just literally were so similar and it was really weird and I was like, Oh my God, I feel like he should have been with me the whole time. (paragraph 113)



Mary	<p>Yeah, I think you're gonna go just see the wider picture. Yeah, and just say, like, you have so much time, you just need to... everything will just happen and if that means your in a job like you didn't wanna go into... You could get into a job that you didn't think you'd be in to, but then everything happens for a reason in my opinion. So, I think you just a take everything in perspective. Otherwise, I think the pressure just gets too much and you get too fixate on everything, then whatever you achieve won't be as good as what you want anyway.</p> <p>(paragraph 118)</p>
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### 3.6 Selective Coding : Defensive Mentalizing

The researcher identified a repeated pattern on display in the data, and exhibited by all five participants to one extent or another, whereby participants critiqued or undermined the motivation and psychological stance responsible for their peers behaviour, for example suggesting that it was motivated by insecurity and petty self-interest, and then pointed out how their own motivations were more mature and enlightened. Through constant comparative analysis, diagramming and memoing (see appendices F, G and H) the researcher proposed an initial theoretical explanation for this pattern which, suggested that participants were motivated to critique the motivation of other's behaviour either as a way of defending themselves from the threat posed to their self-concept by the possible negative appraisal of others (a threat summarised/evidenced in table 4, above) and/or to negotiate status with the interviewer or in their own estimations by pointing out the ways in which their own motivations and characteristics are more evolved and mature than their peers (a motivation evidenced in table 7, below). This

theoretical conceptualisation represents the core category or central phenomenon of the emergent theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998)

Table 7: Defensive Mentalizing

SELECTIVE CODING						
Participant	Examples of core category/central phenomenon: <b>Defensive Mentalizing</b>					
	(paraphrase/ interpretation)  Others are....	Evidence from data	(paraphrase/ interpretation) Corresponding motivation-TOM	Evidence from data	(paraphrase/ interpretation)  I am....	Evidence from data
Sean	Petty/ have the wrong priorities	Well, it's like a balance, I feel like at this age you have to put ego aside and just sort of concentrate on your education, A levels, are hard, I didn't really realise how hard they would be and if people have time to be messing about with like their ego and trying to get above people then you know I'm like what you are doing? Sort of think like, you know there are bigger things to worry about, there are bigger fish to	They are insecure and preoccupied with receiving social validation.	...it's just about what people's priorities are. If someone's priorities are yep I need this person to like me, then to me that's the wrong order of priority but to them that's just the way it is. (paragraph 159)	Self possessed/ mature	You don't get to choose what other people do, you can only control your thoughts and your actions so don't worry about anything else. (paragraph 157)  ...but I can take my head up and have a conversation with someone, and you know, I'm not sat there going um um er er (imitates stuttering) getting all flustered, you know, I can hold

		fry/ (paragraph 153)				a conversation and that's a massive, no one seems to be able to do that, I don't know it's just mental that no-one can talk to people. (paragraph 197)
Sean	Have the wrong values. Are immature	Well everyone likes to say I've got this many birds or whatever, do you know what I mean [..]I feel like, you know, everyone talks about a body count and everybody seems to care about that kind of stuff like that, but like at the same time when you get older it's quite trivial, do you know what I mean? (paragraph 181)	They feel the need to compete overs status/sexual prowess.	Everything is about popularity sort of thing, if you talk to more people you are seen as more... (paragraph 185)	Wise/ Mature/ authentic	I feel like it's actually more, if you do have that or whatever, but you don't say anything that's a lot more, like to the people who do know, it's a lot more, o yer he's a lot more sort of, you have a lot more respect for you, because your not shouting about it, your doing it because your doing it sort of thing. (paragraph 181)

						<p>...but like at the same time when you get older it's quite trivial, do you know what I mean? (paragraph 181)</p> <p>...not really bothered about that sort of thing, we will talk about it, but we don't try and one up each other, if someone is trying to do that then I don't really want to associate with them because it's not a fun thing to be around you know I better than you, I've got this, I've got that, shut up [laughs]. (paragraph 193)</p>
Sean	Respond to being bullied by being unkind to others	I don't know that many people who also got bullied and actually a few people that joined this school after	They got psychologically hurt and respond by hurting others.	He got bullied out of his old school, and that's fine, there is nothing wrong with that cos it	Reacted to being bullied in a more mature and moral fashion.	I was like as long as I'm happy I'm happy, I don't want to be the alpha or whatever and that has

		<p>me who also got bullied, I noticed it was one of two ways they were either really quiet or they was a massive knob, and do you know what I mean, I felt like, I wasn't in either category. (paragraph 205)</p>		<p>happens, it happened to me, it was sort of like, it was mental like, I couldn't believe the fact that he could be, after going through that and you know, being rejected, and being made to feel the way you are made to feel when it happens, to the point that you have to move schools. That you can then come and be an arsehole to people, how are you managing that like? that's , do you know what I mean it was just mental, I couldn't believe it, how are you being like that when you have just</p>		<p>changed a bit now because I feel like if you don't have that thing in you then you end up at the bottom and that is the way it is, so you have to make a conscious effort to compete because if you don't you are going to end up at the bottom and at the time I was sort of like why, why are you bothering, why are you sort of trying to move. So obviously I see it as though everyone is here and everyone is trying to you know, it is like a pyramid kind of. (paragraph 129)</p> <p>You like play the game but you</p>
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				<p>had all of that happen to you? (paragraph 205)</p> <p>you know, when people put people down to make themselves seem better, that is the worst thing. (paragraph 129)</p>		<p>don't acknowledge it. If you acknowledge it you lose, laughs. So I feel like everyone is trying to one up everyone. (paragraph 149)</p>
Oscar	Unmotivated/ have the wrong values and priorities	<p>Lower down you sort of have to be a bit sort of guard up a bit more, because there are more people who don't want to be there and they are more bothered about going at you and you know trying to like upset people or something. (paragraph 39)</p> <p>You get some of the same people, and they are fine like, it's just sometimes they just decide that</p>	<p>They are competing over status... and they can't get beyond that petty competitiveness... also lots of them can't compete academically or intellectually so they do so physically.</p>	<p>For those people before it was all about social, they were bothered about social situations, they weren't bothered about the work load or doing well or anything like that. (paragraph 41)</p> <p>I think it is not the same for all of them, but I think a lot of them did struggle, sort of like on an</p>	<p>Can compete academically and intellectually and am motivated to improve, grow and develop.</p>	<p>Implicit in quoted material</p> <p>The main fact is that primarily we are all here to work and get a decent experience out of sixth form whereas I do feel like it was the school, the fact that they were bored being in the same place and they wanted to go to other places, didn't want to be here and that is what makes it difficult.</p>

		<p>they'll flick a switch and they are going to be at you and stuff like that. It's not necessarily a problem because you just get used to it and you expect it and you are ready for it but you don't like it...(paragraph 57)</p>		<p>educational front and they couldn't find a way to deal with that and they thought o no, I'll just give up then. (paragraph 45)</p> <p>Yes because people like that don't change, they stay like that because they don't have any other way to be, they can't make developments because they are not trying to develop, they are happy where they are, they're stuck. (paragraph 61)</p> <p>You will never be able to fully escape them because they aren't going to move. They will</p>		(paragraph 53)
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				stay in the same place. (paragraph 67)		
Anna	Conformist	Yer, err because yer, you know they are all sort of sticking to what I always thought was the plan, you know, GCSE's, sixth form, uni, and I think me straying from that I am scared because going to uni, set timetable, set this it probably what I've always been used to but I just know I wouldn't fit in there, I know I am not ready for that. (pt 2 paragraph 76)	Some are doing so to fit in with their peers but also because of the pressure from school and society to conform.	O yer, I felt like I needed to fit in and everyone knew what they wanted to do and I had no idea, and that really scared me. I've still got so much time to grow, I am so young and, you know, to feel that kind of pressure, that I need to know what I want to do for the rest of my life, I don't. (pt 2 paragraph 52)	Being brave, striking out on the path less travelled and I'm pleased with my bravery and excited about the future.	I think I sound like I know what I want and I think I have not sounded like that for a while you know, I've always been unsure, not really knowing quite nervous. you know and I think now I sound a bit more like I know what I want to do. (paragraph 92)  I don't know, and now I just sound like a have more of a plan and that makes me feel a bit better as well as I can sort of talk to people and have a conversation about what I'm going to do after

						<p>school. (pt. 2 paragraph 96)</p> <p>I am sort of excited at the same time, excited to get out of school and you know to do something different and just to sort of like, you know, find my way erm and see what comes about. (pt. 2 paragraph 100)</p>
Rebecca	Petty/ immature	So me and my best friend spoke about it all the time and were like this is getting ridiculous, 'cause obviously some people mature more than others, or not even that, some people have different ideas of levels of severity of situations and I personally, I don't,	They are competing over status.	...it was a build-up it was their relationship they've always been- not jealous, they've always been very competitive, about grades and things, and they almost went... So it sounds so ridiculous, but they're both	Wise/ grounded	... small situations, I can brush them off quite easily, so I'm not... I just didn't understand that situation... If it was me, I would have, I would have brushed it up or ignored it. (paragraph 63)

		<p>I'm not a big arguer (paragraph 63).</p> <p>It sounds like we're like 10-year-olds. (paragraph 59)</p>		<p>from very well brought families who both have quite a lot of money. (paragraph 69)</p> <p>They give them a lot of things at Christmas and spend a thousand pounds each... and even that it's that like they're on the same level of lifestyle, same level of grades same level of they've got same opinions politically, so it's, they're just two people who are very similar. (paragraph 71)</p>		
Rebecca	Have the wrong values/ Are immature	I really hope so 'cause it is really hard, sometimes as right now I'm with very girly girls.	They are shallow and motivated by money.	She wants to do a law degree because she knows there's money in it.	Mature/ Motivated by my values	I can say immature because it is technically what they were...

		<p>Lets go clubbing, what dress are you wearing tonight. That's the kind of people I'm with right now, which is fine. I love them all, but it's not me at all. (paragraph 135)</p>		<p>Do you want to do law or do you want money? (paragraph 155)</p>		<p>Because they'd have brothers and they had to fight to their brothers and I just kind of was... I've always grown up very quickly, so I've always been kind of like... So, sounds so big headed, but one step ahead of everyone. (paragraph 145)</p> <p>I just feel like I'm not on the same level as them. I think it's just because I'm more interested in things that adults interested in... like politics, my friends could not care less about politics. (paragraph 147)</p> <p>I'm just a bit</p>
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						<p>more aware, Yeah, I that's my form of intelligence (paragraph 151)</p> <p>I don't, I'm doing a criminology degree, and I know that in the end, I'm gonna be absolutely begging for money. I know I am, but it's what I wanna do (paragraph 155).</p>
Mary	Are self- absorbed and petty	<p>I think just seeing two people you care about, just creating such a divide in people, where people shouldn't need to make a choice. I think it can make you feel guilty. (paragraph 48)</p> <p>I think we all just</p>	They were too caught up in their conflict and competition to think about how they were affecting others.	they expected too much of people and to back a side, which a lot didn't wanna be involved in it... a kind of difficult position that we really didn't wanna be in. (paragraph 50)	Balanced and somewhat unbiased	Obviously everyone has a view on what happens. I do sympathize with a lot of people, I like seeing both sides of the story 'cause I know there is always more than one side to a story, I always try and have my

		<p>got a bit fed up of it. Especially me, I was like I'm gonna do whatever I want to do. You guys can sort this out between yourselves? But I don't wanna be involved in it any more...(paragraph 54)</p>				<p>own input on it, but I think... I don't really know this is a difficult one, but I think you kinda do analyse the situation for yourself and kind of see where you stand on it and then that's what you base your decisions from the things on. (paragraph 58)</p>
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### 3.7 Coding paradigm

Within Strauss and Corbin's version of Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) emphasis is placed on using a 'coding paradigm' to help structure the emergent theory. The importance of using deductive and inductive logic is stressed as is the idea of exploring the nature of the relationship between categories and codes. The researcher did not deliberately structure the emergent theory around this paradigm but found on reflection, that the draft theory can be seen to conform to the areas of the paradigm (see table 8 below).

Table 8: Coding paradigm

Area of the coding paradigm	
Context conditions, structural conditions causal conditions	Perceived Future Threats (low status, social isolation)  Perceived Threats now (peers, pressure to define oneself)
Interactional strategies for managing handling conditions	Defensive Mentalizing, Fatalism/Magical thinking
Consequences of strategies	Defended from threat to self-esteem, self- concept posed by others.  Negotiated status with interlocuter

The proposed psychological-social pattern of 'defensive mentalizing', whereby participants appear to critique the motivation of others in order, perhaps, to nullify the

threat to their self-concept posed by the possible negative appraisal of others and/or to negotiate status within the context of the conversation, was selected as the ‘central phenomena’ or ‘core category’ (Glaser et al., 1968; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) because:

- It appears to offer a novel theoretical conception.
- There appears to be substantial evidence in the data to support it (see table 7 p.44-55).
- The other categories in the theoretical construction can be seen to be situated and contextualised by the ‘core category’ (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For example perceived threats is able to be seen as a motivating factor for ‘defensive mentalizing’.

It is important to explore and acknowledge the similarities and differences in the use of language and conceptual apparatus in the emergent theory and in the work of Bateman and Fonagy (2012) and Baron Cohen (2001). The key points to be made are:

- The ‘mentalizing’ outlined in the theory of ‘defensive mentalizing’ is built on the foundation of the work on ‘Theory of Mind’ by Baron Cohen (2001) and ‘Intentionality’ by Dennett and Haugeland (1987) (see p.93 for more details).
- Both Baron Cohen (2001) and Dennett & Haugeland (1987) suggest that the way individuals interpret the behaviours of others is, more often than not, determined by inferences made about the ‘mental’ or ‘intentional’ states (beliefs, desires, motivations) of others.
- The emergent theory of ‘defensive mentalizing’ put forward in this study builds on this proposition, but suggests that the way in which individuals make



inferences about the intentional states of others is not, perhaps always, aimed at accuracy, but rather somewhat determined or biased by the individual's own motivation or psychological needs (see part one: results p.44). It suggests that the adolescent participants in the study can be seen to be making inferences about the intentional states of their peers and that a pattern in these inferences suggests that they are perhaps motivated/structured by a 'defensive' or self-protective logic, whereby the motivation of a peer's behaviour is critiqued in order to nullify the possibly damaging/threatening significance of the behaviour.

- This pattern and the conceptual explanation posited has been labelled 'defensive mentalizing' by the researcher.

This theoretical conception is fundamentally different to the concept of "defensive decoupling of mentalization" outlined by Bateman and Fonagy (2012, p.412) which describes a process where individuals diagnosed with 'personality disorders' "decouple" or take "off-line" the mentalization process, in response to their own negative psychological state "depressed mood or high arousal levels" (p.395). Bateman and Fonagy (2012) suggest that:

*[..]these individuals tend to have a low threshold for decoupling of mentalization, and they typically also need considerable time to recover from this decoupling. Particularly in situations of acute stress, or when they are severely depressed, depressed mood seems to overwhelm them completely, which can lead to a total inhibition of the capacity for mentalization (p.411)*

Fonagy describes a process whereby individuals, who have often experienced trauma, periodically cease to, or fail to, mentalize as a defensive strategy whereby they avoid unpleasant psychological states. The theory of 'defensive mentalizing' in the current study, derived at independently of, and prior to, a reading of the work of Bateman and

Fonagy (2012), rather than positing a cessation or failure of mentalizing in response to psychological stress, instead proposes a biasing in the process of typically developing adolescent participants. The emergent theory proposes that the interpretation of the intentional states of others sometimes serves a defensive function for the adolescent participants, by removing social threat and protecting self-esteem, rather than accurately representing the ‘reality’ of, or predicting the behaviour of, others. Whereas Bateman and Fonagy’s decoupling of mentalizing is portrayed as ‘pathological’ response to trauma and/or pronounced psychological distress, the bias in mentalizing proposed by the emergent theory is perhaps more appropriately understood as a functional response by adolescent participants to being socially embedded beings in a position of vulnerability in terms of social status and social and/or self-identity (see p.61-67 for context).

#### **4. Impact of Literature Review and Discussion**

In line with Glaser and Strauss’s original outline of grounded theory (Glaser et al., 1968) and ‘evolved’ grounded theory suggested by Corbin and Strauss, the major literature review for this piece of research was postponed until the initial data collection and analysis had occurred in order that the researcher was not “constrained and even stifled” by the literature and so that they might “let go and put trust in their abilities to generate knowledge” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 49).

For Charmaz, a grounded theory literature review ‘often means going across fields and disciplines’ (Charmaz, 2006, p. 166) and allows the researcher to:

- [...]make explicit and compelling connections between your study and earlier studies
- To permit you to make claims from your grounded theory [...]
- Enlist your conceptual argument to frame, integrate and assess the literature [...]
- Position your study and clarify your contribution (pp. 167-8)

The literature review in this study attempts to achieve these aims (see part two: Literature Review) and it aims to find and cite “the most significant points of convergence and divergence” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 166) between the emergent theory and the literature.

#### 4.1 Final Emergent Theory

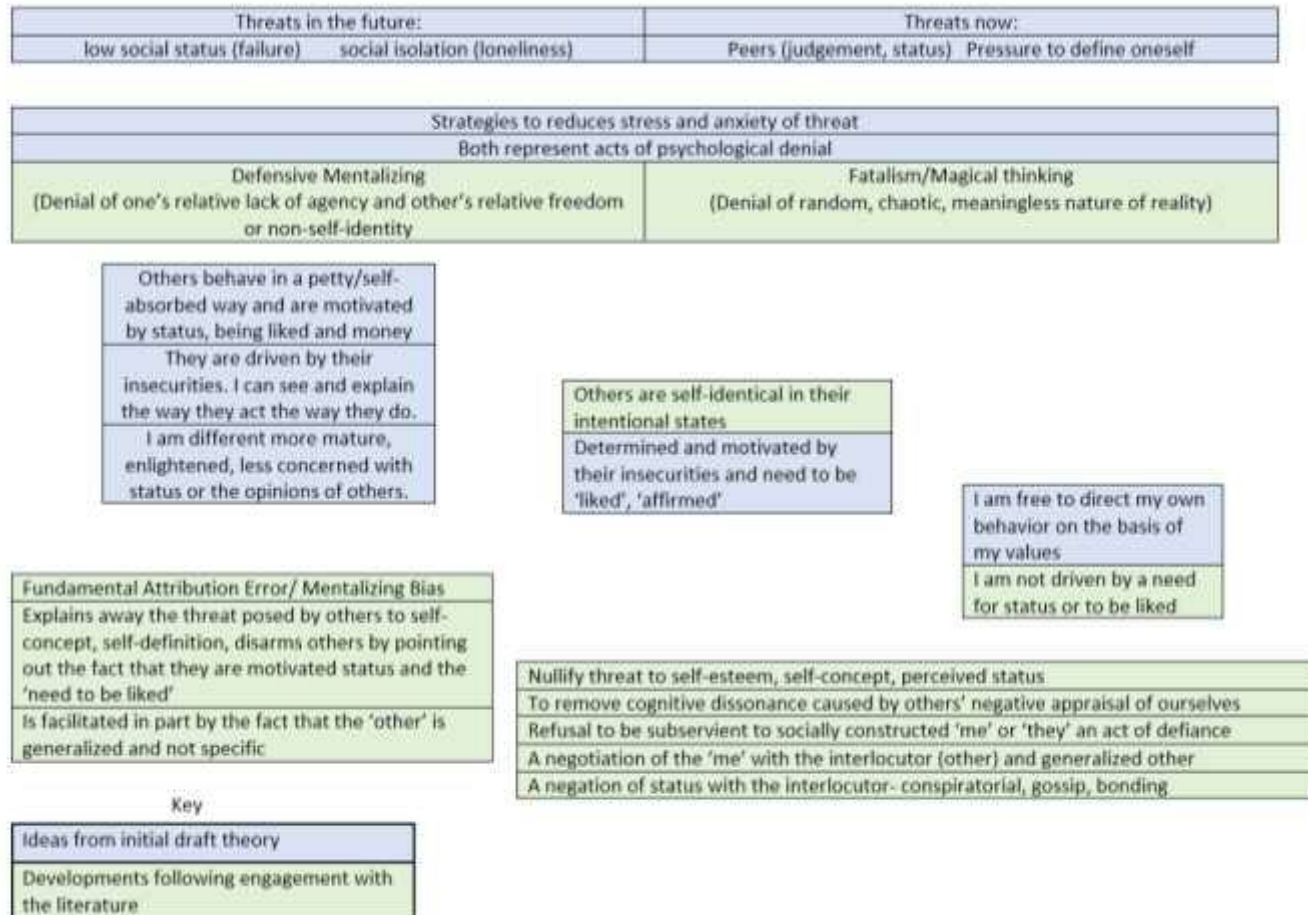


Figure 3: Final emergent theory

Above (figure 3) is a visual representation of the final emergent theory following the engagement in the literature.

The main contributions to, and contextualisations of, the theory gained from an engagement with the empirical literature are as follows:

- There is substantial evidence from the empirical research literature that the desire for peer affiliation and peer acceptance influences the behaviour of

adolescents (Kaufman, Brown, Graves, Henderson, & Revolinski, 1993; Knoll, Leung, Foulkes, & Blakemore, 2017; Knoll, Magis-Weinberg, Speekenbrink, & Blakemore, 2015; R. Larson & Richards, 1991; R. W. Larson, Richards, Moneta, Holmbeck, & Duckett, 1996; Richards, Crowe, Larson, & Swarr, 1998).

- The findings of a number of neuroimaging studies suggest that the experience of ‘pain’ related to social rejection or isolation activates the same ‘pain centres’ in the brain ( Eisenberger, 2008; Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003; Guyer et al., 2008; Sapolsky, 2017). This data has been used to argue, from an evolutionary perspective, that perhaps ‘social pain’ serves a similar adaptive function as physical pain, in that it results in unpleasant psychological states in order to prompt the organism to do something about the source of the pain which is a threat to the organisms survival. In this case the threat is being isolated from the group rather than the physical threat of fire etc.
- There is substantial evidence for the long-term negative outcomes linked to experiencing low social status and/or social isolation in adolescents (Copeland, Wolke, Angold, & Costello, 2013; Gustafsson, Janlert, Theorell, Westerlund, & Hammarström, 2012; Isaacs, Hodges, & Salmivalli, 2008; Mamun, O'Callaghan, Williams, & Najman, 2013; Sandstrom & Cillessen, 2010; Stapinski et al., 2014).
- There is substantial evidence for the long-term positive outcomes of experiencing high social status and ‘popularity’ in adolescence (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001; Conti, Galeotti, Mueller, & Pudney, 2013).

Taken together this section of the research literature offers support for the idea that adolescents are motivated by the desire for peer acceptance, peer affiliation and the avoidance of low social status and social isolation and for good reason. The findings from the wider research literature support the findings of the current paper in terms of these motivating factors and serve to contextualise and support the emergent theory. Where the emergent theory goes beyond these findings from the wider literature is by positing a novel mechanism by which adolescents appear to try to avoid the threat and ‘pain’ of perceived negative peer appraisal and peer hostility by undermining the perceived legitimacy of the perspectives of their peers by critiquing their motivation (defensively mentalizing).

The theoretical literature offers a contextualisation of this proposed mechanism (emergent theory) and also serves to extend and modify the theory. The main contributions to, and modifications of, the theory after the engagement with the empirical literature are as follows:

- Mead’s (1934) theory of the “I and the me” suggests that the others in one’s environment might be seen as posing a threat, because in a straightforward way one’s social identity and status are beyond one’s control and are largely determined by the other people in one’s social groupings. However, in a more complex, philosophical way, Meads theory can be used to suggest that peers might pose a threat to the identity and status of the adolescent participants because, he suggests, it is only through using language and the ability we have to project ourselves into the perspective of others in our environment, that we are able to think about and conceptualise who we are, our identity as a ‘me’ (Mead,

1934). In this way the perspective and judgements of others can be seen to form our own perspectives on ourselves and thus the way others see us is the way we see 'us'. [For adolescents this seems to be even more true, with neuroimaging studies suggesting that adolescents are less able to sensor and rationalise the pain of social rejection (Eisenberger, Lieberman & Williams, 2003)

- Eisenberger, N. I., Lieberman, M. D., & Williams and less able to distance their self-concept from the internalised opinions of others (Guyer et al., 2008)] In this context it could be seen as very sensible for adolescents to adapt and undermine the perceived negative appraisals of their peers by 'defensively mentalizing', because in doing so they are able to perhaps mediate in the process of others perspectives of their 'me' determining their 'me' for themselves and others. In this way, they are perhaps at least, able to improve the quality of their internal monologue to increase their self-compassion.
- Mentalizing (or Theory of Mind) as a psychological theory suggests that individuals interpret other people's behaviour on the basis of inferences they make about their mental/psychological states (Baron-Cohen, 2001; Frith & Frith, 2006). The theory of 'defensive mentalizing' proposes that for the adolescent participants of the study, there is perhaps evidence to suggest that this process is mediated by bias; bias which is motivated by the drive undermine and protect oneself from the danger posed by the behaviour of others. The grounded theory proposes that the intentional state, psychological state and motivation of others is critiqued by the participants in order to defend themselves from the constitutive (see previous bullet point) threat of the behaviour of others.

- Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954; Wood, 1989) and the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) suggest that if another person is more able than you in a domain then this might pose a threat to the positive way you see yourself (as usually we use social comparison as a form of self-enhancement, comparing ourselves favourably to others) and result in ‘cognitive dissonance’. This dissonance is experienced as stressful and unpleasant and as a result of it, according to Festinger, you are likely to change your cognitive representation of the other so as to suggest, that they are actually not similar to you so no comparison is necessary and thus the dissonance is removed. The theory of ‘defensive mentalizing’ can be seen as identifying a similar psychological pattern. The presence and behaviour of the participant’s peers poses a threat to their conception of themselves (in straightforward and more complex ways, see previous bullet points) and thus perhaps results in cognitive dissonance and the need/drive to remove this dissonance by shifting their cognitive representations of the others. i.e., perceiving their motivations as petty, insecure and self-absorbed, in order to remove the negative implications of their appraisal.
- The idea of fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977) might also be seen as useful in contextualising the emergent theory; this theory proposes that we as humans, are predisposed to a cognitive bias by which we are more likely to interpret other people’s behaviour as the result of their character and our own behaviour as the result of circumstance and situational factors. In a similar way the adolescent participants of the study can be seen as recognising their own vulnerability to the appraisal of others, and their own lack of consistency and



self-identity (at times motivated by insecurity, fear and pettiness at others capable of generosity, love and kindness). However, at the same time, being biased in their interpretation of others' behaviour, which is often interpreted by participants, with broad brush strokes, as being representative of their character, rather than as a response to the same circumstances and vulnerability they themselves are subject to.

A type of negative case analysis was carried out in respect to the two following questions:

- Is the pattern identified in the data not better explained by a performative theory of self like that proposed by Goffman (1978) (see part 2 p.90 for an in depth exploration of this question)
- Is the pattern identified in the data not best explained by social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) itself (see part 2 p.93 for an in depth exploration of this question)

## **5. Research findings and implications**

- The theory of 'defensive mentalizing' distilled in this study suggests that it might be the case that a significant social-psychological process is at play in the lives of contemporary adolescents; that of adolescent's cognitive representations of others being at times biased and influenced by, the drive to protect themselves

from the perceived threat posed to their social status and self-concept by the existence, agency and constitutive power of their peers.

- This study consisted of a small sample size ( $n=5$ ) so further research is necessary to explore this theoretical hypothesis further. Future research should also investigate whether the pattern/process identified in the emergent theory is also observable in adolescents in different settings (for example college, work and apprenticeship settings and those not in education, employment or training) and in BAME individuals.
- Other Possible interesting avenues for future research might include:
  - An investigation as to whether ‘defensive mentalizing’ is associated with a reduction in social anxiety and or/peer influenced adolescent risk taking (see part two: literature p.110, for context).
  - An investigation into the prevalence of the pattern of ‘defensive mentalizing’ in adults in comparison to adolescents, given it is possible adults are less influenced by a drive towards peer affiliation (see part two: literature p.114, for context).
- If this theory is to have utility, in a pragmatist sense, it might be in highlighting the importance of peer relations and intersubjectivity in the lives of adolescents and pointing to the possibility that adolescents are vulnerable in terms social identity and self-concept. It might also be of use in highlighting links between these factors and adolescent mental health and psychological wellbeing. If we

come to see adolescents conception of themselves and their social status as determined intersubjectively and we posit that defensive psychological mechanisms and bias might be instrumental in mediating this process, then we might be open to thinking about how these complexities could illuminate specific difficulties in the lives of individuals, groups and systems. A strength of this study is that it captures the voice and perspective of a sample of contemporary adolescents.

- For Educational Psychologists who have the privilege of working across individual, group and systems levels and who are practised at looking for interactionist explanations for difficulty, the theory of ‘defensive mentalizing’ could have utility in unpicking the complexities of a problem situation and in highlighting areas for intervention that might be based around conceptions of intersubjectivity, like those found in the ‘systems theory’ and ‘family therapy’ literature (Caws, 2015; Fox, 2009; Rothbaum, Rosen, Ujiie, & Uchida, 2002; Stanton & Welsh, 2012); the concept of ‘circular causality’(Dowling & Osborne, 2003) could be particularly pertinent here.

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A grounded theory study of the psychological and social processes apparent in the lives  
of contemporary 16-18 year olds

**PART TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW AND DISCUSSION**

**(Word Count: 10,792)**

“In a world full of danger, to be a potentially seeable object is to be constantly exposed to danger. Self-consciousness, then, may be the apprehensive awareness of oneself as potentially exposed to danger by the simple fact of being visible to others. The obvious defence against such a danger is to make oneself invisible in one way or another.”

— **R.D. Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness***

## 1. Introduction

The literature review that follows aims to take the first draft of the emergent theory of ‘defensive mentalizing’ and situate it in the empirical and theoretical literature in order to contextualize, substantiate and extend the emergent theory (see figure 4, below).

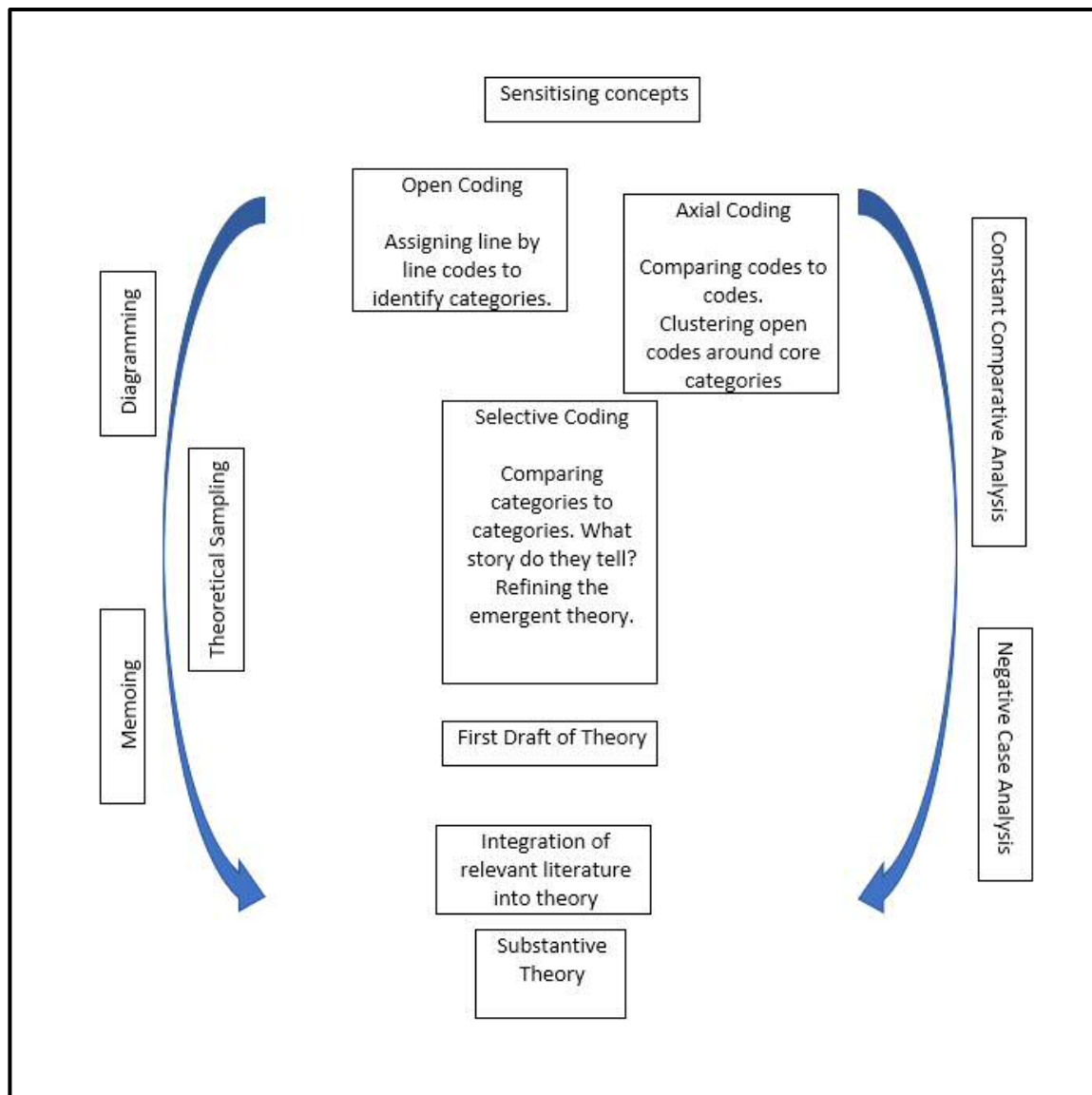


Figure 4: Steps of data analysis

The review is divided into two parts: division one makes use of theoretical literature, an engagement with this literature allows the researcher to more fully lay out the emergent theory whilst also challenging its logic and explanatory power. Division one will explore theories concerning how human beings relate to themselves and how that relating is inherently tied up with how they relate to others. It will make use of some of the logical and conceptual apparatus of social comparison theory (Festinger 1954), the theories of cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957), fundamental attribution bias (Ross, 1977) and Mead's (1934) theory of 'The I and the Me' to support an argument for the emergent theory of 'defensive mentalizing', representing a type of psychological activity and/or bias by which adolescents might mediate the constitutive relationship between themselves and others. A discussion of two examples of a type of negative case analysis (Hanson, 2017; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) are included in this section of the literature review.

The second division of the literature review deals with the more empirical research literature surrounding adolescent development, social status and 'social pain'. This part of the literature review will explore points of convergence and divergence between the emergent theory and research investigating adolescent sociality. It will be used to suggest that, in support of the emergent theory, seeking peer affiliation and peer acceptance and avoiding social isolation, low social status and corresponding 'social pain' are significant motivating factors for/influencers of adolescent behaviour and psychological states.

## 1.1 Description of Key Sources

The researcher adopted a ‘dynamic’ and also ‘integrative’ approach (El Hussein, Kennedy, & Oliver, 2017) to the literature review process. The aim of an integrative literature review is to enable the researcher to distinguish between new and already existent ‘knowledge’ or ‘theory’. An integrative literature review might include attempts at comparing different and/or competing models of understanding, employing “critical analysis and synthesizing new knowledge” (Torraco, 2005, p. 363). In respect to the first division of this literature review, the theoretical conceptions arising from the emergent theory led the way in terms of the use of literature. Psychological and philosophical theories pertaining to the non-self-identity (see p.83 for definition) of the human subject were explored in order to compare competing models of understanding and realise conceptual boundaries where the emergent theory could be seen in a sharper relief. Theories and authors led to, and signposted, different theories and authors and the researcher’s prior knowledge and grounding in the fields of psychology and philosophy was also important here (see part three: critical review, for a wider discussion of the decisions made by the researcher in respect to the use of literature see part three: p.164).

The literature for division two of this review was obtained in a more systematised fashion by searching online databases including PsycINFO, ASSIA and Web of Science. These databases were selected for use because of their specialist focus on the social sciences. Google Scholar was also used to search for literature which may have been missed by the database search. Search terms were determined by the concepts arising from the data and emergent theory and these included: ‘adolescent/adolescence’ *and*:



‘neuro development’ ; ‘peer rejection/peer acceptance/peer affiliation/popularity’; ‘social status, social isolation’.

## 1.2 Inclusion/ exclusion criteria

Studies were included in the literature review if they were deemed to have a significant conceptual or theoretical relationship with, or impact on, the logic of the ‘emergent theory’. The literature review was carried out in line with the ontology and epistemology of this research, which sees human ‘knowledge’ as a set of tools, gained from linguistic abstractions, which enable us to navigate our environment and engage in complicated activities (Rorty & Rorty, 1991). The researcher was not attempting to systematically order and sort all of the data in a ‘scientific field’, but rather used an engagement with the literature to produce a theory that might have utility in a pragmatic sense. The researcher was not looking for a gap in the literature in which to generate a hypothesis or research questions, but rather using the literature review as part of the wider grounded theory project of exploring a web of complex variables, social and psychological, that might tell us something about the experience of contemporary 16-18 year-olds in our culture and that may have utility in helping us understand the difficulties sometimes experienced by individuals in this age range.

## **Division One- Situating the emergent theory in the theoretical literature**

The draft emergent theory outlined in section one (see results, p.30) describes individuals attempting to disarm the threat posed by the judgement of their peers and perhaps negotiate status by critiquing the motivation, the intentional state; the why, of their peers' behaviour. Invariably, this why, turns out to be, in the eyes of the participants, petty and based on a small-minded self-interest and insecure need for status, to be liked, to be 'on top'. In developing this theory of 'defensive mentalizing' the author has observed or 'named a pattern' (Glaser et al., 1968) in the data; from this pattern it has been inferred that the participants' own motivation in this context is to shore up their own self-esteem, to protect themselves from the threat posed to their self-concept and identity by the judgement of others and also perhaps to negotiate their own status in respect to themselves but also with the interviewer by comparing their own motivations favourably with this self-interest.

This inference is based on the observation of the pattern of 'critiquing behaviour' (see part one: results, p.44) but also on the observation that:

- each participant explained the way in which the judgement of their peers posed a threat to them (see part one: results p.35).
- each participant expressed fears of low social status and social isolation as significant concerns in respect to their future (see part one: results p.31).

So the inference has been made by the researcher that the data concerning the threat of peers and the data concerning the fear of social isolation and low social status can be linked to, indeed serve an in an explanatory capacity, in relation to the observed pattern

of participants critiquing the motivation of their peers behaviours and comparing it negatively to their own motivations. Taken together this process has been termed ‘defensive mentalizing’ by the researcher.

## **2. Non-self-identity**

Many of the theories to be discussed in this division can be seen to have something in common and that is that, they are each interested in what is sometimes termed the ‘non-self-identity’ (Jordan, 2017) of the human subject . That is the idea that unlike most animals on the planet, humans do not just behave, they also think about their behaviour, they think about themselves as objects (Sartre, 2012), or as the philosopher Martin Heidegger puts it: they are “beings aware of their own being” (Heidegger, 1996). For many these theorists there is distinction to be made between the self, as an object in the world, which other people interact with and have opinions about; and the experiencing ‘self’ or subject which stands apart from the self, as object, and is also able to take a view and think about the self as object.

The emergent theory of ‘defensive mentalizing’ identifies participants’ non-self-identity and posits, in somewhat of a theoretically naïve way, that participants are involved in a process of negotiating their self-concept and social identity with themselves, others and the interviewer. This theory implies that participants see their social ‘identity’, or status, as something that is up for debate, up for negotiation. It is the hope of the researcher that by turning to the literature this theory can be further explicated.

## 2.1 Sartre and being-for-itself

Jean Paul Sartre (2012) identifies non-self-identity in human beings, he suggests that human beings are not self-identical like objects or animals (which he terms beings-in-themselves) but stand next to their 'selves'. Sartre suggests that other people, or we ourselves, can ascribe meaning to ourselves as a kind of object, but it is built into our very structure that we are distanced from, and have a perspective on, that meaning. Sartre gives the type of beings, human beings are, the label 'being-for-itself'.

For Sartre, human beings usually perceive things in the world in a pre-reflective straightforward manner, but they are also capable of reflecting on their perceptions and having judgements about them. For Sartre this is the nature of consciousness, but also the nature of one's relationship with one's 'self' as both subject and object. For Sartre the ability to look back and think about ourselves at a distance constitutes our freedom to choose; our agency, he calls this a 'radical freedom' and suggests it is built into the very structure of what it is to be human (Sartre, 2012). For Sartre humans are somewhat determined by circumstance, by the facts about one's existence and life situation (he terms these facts one's 'facticity') but states that one is always free to 'transcend' these facts through choice and agency.

## 2.2 Mead's theory of 'the I and the Me'

George Herbert Mead's theory of 'the I and the Me' also rests on a notion of the non-self-identity of the human subject (Blumer, 1979; Mead, 1934). For Mead, we each have an experiencing subject: the 'I' and also a socially determined identity he terms the 'me'.

Mead's theory of the self and the subject arises out of a theory of language and the mind. Language, as Mead understands it, is built upon shared interaction. He uses a distinction between 'significant gestures' and 'non-significant gestures' and uses the example of dogs fighting to explain what 'non-significant gestures' might look like:

*Dogs approaching each other in [a] hostile attitude carry on such a language of gestures. They walk around each other, growling and snapping, and waiting for the opportunity to attack ... The act of each dog becomes the stimulus to the other dog for his response. There is then a relationship between these two; and as the act is responded to by the other dog, it, in turn, undergoes change. The very fact that the dog is ready to attack another becomes a stimulus to the other dog to change his own position or his own attitude. He has no sooner done this than the change of attitude in the second dog in turn causes the first dog to change his attitude. We have here a conversation of gestures. They are not, however, gestures in the sense that they are significant. We do not assume that the dog says to himself, 'If the animal comes from this direction he is going to spring at my throat and I will turn in such a way.' What does take place is an actual change in his own position due to the direction of the approach of the other dog. (Mead, 1934, p. 14)*

Mead argues that:

*Gestures become significant symbols when they implicitly arouse in the individual making them the same responses which the explicitly arouse, or are supposed to arouse, in other individuals. (Mead, 1934, p. 47)*

*And that*

*[...]the critical importance of language in the development of human experience lies in this fact that the stimulus is one that can react upon the speaking individual as it reacts upon the other. (Mead, 1934, p. 69)*

Mead suggests that for a gesture to be significant it must result in a response from another person which is the same response that the first person anticipated, for Mead 'meaning' is this ability to anticipate how another individual will respond to a gesture. If someone were to shout 'duck' at you, because a frisbee was about to hit you in the head, the meaning of the 'vocal gesture'(word) 'duck' has meaning, in Mead's theory,

because the shouter anticipated that you would fall to your knees in response to them shouting it at you.

Mead suggests that this shared situation, in which words influence human subjects in predictable ways, makes room for the emergence of reflective thought. Individuals are able to turn language back on themselves because of the very sharedness and predictability of the ‘meaning’ of vocal gestures:

*Mentality on our approach simply comes in when the organism is able to point out meanings to others and to himself. This is the point at which mind appears, or if you like, emerges.... It is absurd to look at the mind simply from the standpoint of the individual human organism; for, although it has its focus there, it is essentially a social phenomenon; even its biological functions are primarily social. (Mead, 1934, pp. 132-133)*

*It is by means of reflexiveness—the turning back of the experience of the individual upon himself—that the whole social process is thus brought into the experience of the individuals involved in it; it is by such means, which enable the individual to take the attitude of the other toward himself, that the individual is able consciously to adjust himself to that process, and to modify the resultant of that process in any given social act in terms of his adjustment to it. Reflexiveness, then, is the essential condition, within the social process, for the development of mind. (Blumer, 1979, p. 134)*

These are difficult concepts to comprehend but the researcher interprets Mead’s wider theory as suggesting that the individual subject spends most of their time directly involved in un-reflective, or reflexive, experience; simply getting on with the day to day activities and routines of what he terms elsewhere ‘the world that is there’ and the ‘biologic individual’ (Mead, 1934, p. 352). However, Mead suggests that modern humans also have the ability to inhabit a more reflexive state in which the universality inherent in the structure of language enables them to abstract from immersion in immediate experience and think of themselves as object, to think of themselves from the perspective of other people. For Mead this is the trick of language, it enables one to, or

in fact presupposes the act of, taking another's view on oneself and this allows one to react to one's environment and one's social interactions in a way which is reflective and thoughtful. This process of repeatedly seeing oneself from the point of view of the other, is for Mead, the way in which the mind and the thinking subject come into being:

*Only in terms of gestures as significant symbols [i.e., linguistic symbols] is the existence of mind or intelligence possible; for only in terms of gestures which are significant symbols can thinking – which is simply an internalized or implicit conversation of the individual with himself by means of such gestures – take place. (Mead, 1934, p. 47)*

For Mead this process also ushers in the experience of the self:

*When a self does appear it always involves an experience of another; there could not be any experience of a self simply by itself ... When the response of the other becomes an essential part in the experience or conduct of the individual; when taking the attitude of the other becomes an essential part in his behaviour – then the individual appears in his own experience as a self; and until this happens he does not appear as a self. (Mead, 1934, p. 195)*

So for Mead you have 'the I' which is the experiencing, prelinguistic, what might be termed elsewhere, 'phenomenological' subject (Rorty, 1991). Then you have the 'me' which is the 'self' which comes into being through the process of using language to look back upon oneself from the viewpoint of the other. Another term Mead makes use of is that of the 'generalized other' and this is the 'other' who is implicit in the structure of language and thought when an actual physical 'other' is not present or part of the conversation. The 'generalised other' allows one to have conversations with oneself and to look upon one's self from a sort of hypothetical other person. It is important to note here that for Mead the 'me' is a shared social construction, it is the product of one taking on board others attitudes and actions towards oneself in a kind of internalisation process in which one takes the perspective of those attitudes and actions on oneself. For Mead

because the 'me' is always a product of language, of shared intersubjectivity, it is, to a significant extent, beyond our control. The linguistic conventions and practices of individuals in our social groupings and the wider culture, largely, determine the nature of this shared construction and also thus the nature or possibilities of 'or for' 'the me'.

'The me' is also the source of one's internal monologue, one's stream of planning, approval and criticism, one's stream of consciousness. For Mead it is 'the I' who acts but 'the me' who comments on that action, who judges and thinks about the action, because that thought and judgement is based in language, and thus based in the shared structure of language and in the transcendental position on one's own life and actions that the 'generalised other' affords. So for Mead, though we might think we experience ourselves through our thought; our running commentary, really what we are experiencing is the commentary of the 'me' on the actions of the 'I'. The 'me' is a shared linguistic construction of our social groupings and wider culture and thus really, we are commenting on our own actions from the perspective of our social groupings, wider culture and societal norms etcetera. So the structure of the self and the structure of language create this split between immediate experience and cognitive reflection on that experience, which we as subjects then mistake for immediate experience itself.

So one might now ask, how does this complex philosophical theory hold any significance to the less complex emergent theory of 'defensive mentalizing' outlined in part one of this paper. The theory of 'defensive mentalizing' suggests that the adolescent participants of the study are involved in the process of critiquing the psychological motivation of the behaviour of their peers. The data shows participants pointing out the



shallow pettiness, self-concern, insecurities, need to be liked and to be 'on top' of those around them. The theory of 'defensive mentalizing' hypothesises that the motivation behind participants discrediting the actions and opinions of their peers, is the fact that these actions and opinions posed a threat to their identity and self-concept and status.

For Sean this was the threat of being bullied again and being isolated or at the bottom of the social pile.

For Rebecca this was the threat of being perpetually 'the hippy' or 'Rosa Parks'; the butt of jokes and the victim of low social status.

For Oscar it was the threat of physical aggression and low status in this respect, which as a rugby playing male seemed difficult.

Now from the perspective of Mead's theory, the participants might be involved in the process of discrediting the value of the actions and opinions of others, in a kind of battle over the nature of the 'me', a battle over one's social identity which is beyond one's control. It makes sense that if one's social identity, and thus 'social status', are beyond one's control then this would constitute a source of anxiety and motivate one to behave in such a way to attempt to reduce that anxiety. 'Defensive mentalizing' may constitute one such way. By discrediting the opinions and judgement of one's peers (peers who on Mead's model are the determinants of the 'me' for the participants) participants may be able to discredit the authority or reality of the 'me' which exists for them both in their social and 'internal' worlds.

### 2.2.1 Negative case analysis: example one

The question arises as to for who's benefit is this discrediting? Is it the case that participants are attempting to influence the interviewers view of them? Is it not the case, in line with Goffman's theory of impression management (Goffman, 1978), that the participants are involved in a kind of theatrical performance where they attempt to determine the interviewers impression of them through their own behaviour and performance?

This is one interpretative option available to us, however, if the aim of the participants was simply to paint a positive image of themselves and their status, why spend time speaking of the ways in which their peers perceive or have perceived them in a negative light? Why should Sean spend time speaking of how painful it was to be bullied and to be socially isolated, why would Oscar speak on the way his peers 'go at him' and the need to keep his guard up, why would Rebecca speak of her friends not understanding her and dismissing her as a 'hippy' or feminist. It seems reasonable to suggest that the participant is looking to present or negotiate a positive picture of themselves to/with the interviewer, but the fact that the participants are happy to expose sensitive and vulnerable areas of their experience to the interviewer, indicates that this is not the sole aim of their behaviour. Rather, perhaps the data suggests, that they wish to make use of the facts of their situation, as they see it, to convince themselves also, that they are worthy of holding themselves in high esteem and do not have to ascribe to, and believe in, the social identity which is on show in the way in which they are sometimes so swiftly dismissed by their peers.

If it is the case, as Mead (1934) suggests, that we carry around with us, in our heads, a commentary on our actions which is derived from an internalisation of the way other people act and inhabit attitudes towards us, if that commentary is negative or persecutory, it then represents a very real and immediate threat to our well-being and mental health. The data shows that the way in which others behave towards participants can constitute a threat to them (see part one: results p.34). If, as Mead's theory suggest, the attitudes and behaviours of their peers towards them (or even hypothetical/projected attitudes) influence the structure of 'the me' which in turn influences their internal commentary on their experience and behaviour; then discrediting the authority of that possibly negative commentary, might constitute a very necessary task for one's wellbeing; one's ability to function and even perhaps to survive. A psychological mechanism which serves to positively bias one's self concept may be adaptive in terms of psychological wellbeing, but also perhaps in one's ability to achieve and maintain status, be assertive and confident etcetera. If such a mechanism allows an individual to maintain/achieve a level of self-assurance this will likely influence how they are able to act in the social world.

From a pragmatist perspective, if we see language as a tool which we use to carry out actions in the world with no claim at defining a 'reality', then we do not have to take Mead's theory of the self and language as fact, and sacrosanct, to adopt it as one way in which to shed light on the experiences of the participants in this study and contextualise/extend the emergent theory.

### 2.3 Mentalizing

Mentalizing is a term which has come to be used to refer to the process by which individuals make inferences about the mental states of others. Research suggests that in ‘neurotypical’ individuals these inferences are made in an automatic way without hesitation or deliberation (Baron-Cohen, 2001; Frith & Frith, 2006). Understanding that other people’s behaviour is determined by, and/or linked to, their mental states has been termed ‘having a theory of mind’ (Baron-Cohen, 2001). Adopting a position whereby the behaviours of others is interpreted in relation to inferences about their mental states and beliefs has been referred to as adopting an intentional stance: that is reasoning that another person’s behaviour is governed by their ‘intentional state’ (beliefs, desires etcetera) (Dennett & Haugeland, 1987; Premack & Woodruff, 1978).

The emergent theory of ‘defensive mentalizing’ outlined in the current paper suggests that participants are making inferences about the mental states of others and the link between these mental states and the behaviour of others, but posits that this process is subject to mediation and bias, in that the interpretations made can be seen as serving a psychological function for the participants. For example the participant Oscar had repeated experiences of being physically threatened by members of his peer group (see part one: results p.34), Oscar made statements about the insecurities and inadequacies that motivated his peers to behave the way they did. Oscar here is using inferences about the mental states of his peers to explain their behaviour.

The emergent theory suggests that Oscar is defending himself psychologically by making these inferences; the idea being that Oscar’s ‘thinking’ (or psychological processes unlikely to be entirely cognisant) ran something like: ‘the actions of these

peers towards me suggest that they do not like me, that I am of low status in their eyes and that perhaps there is something wrong with me, these ideas are threatening, they make me fear for my survival and prompt me to consider changing the generally positive way in which I see myself, I therefore will shift my cognitive representation of my peers by making inferences about how their insecure and immature mental states determine their actions, thus nullifying the threat they pose to my self-concept and self-esteem.

Two theories, both initially developed by the social psychologist Leon Festinger might be of use here to clarify and situate the emergent theory further; that of social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) and the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957).

#### 2.4 Social Comparison Theory

Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory, in its initial conception, was founded on the idea that individuals are driven to gain accurate evaluations of themselves, they are motivated to remove uncertainty in this area and thus compare themselves, their abilities and opinions, with others around them.

This theory was developed to incorporate the idea that, the gaining of accurate evaluations of themselves was not always the motivation behind social comparison, and in fact self-enhancement was often a motivation (Wood, 1989).

The adapted theory suggested that individuals may interpret, ignore or distort social comparison information in order to view themselves more positively and increase their self-esteem (Wood, 1989). This theory suggested that individuals will compare

themselves using ‘downward comparison’; comparing themselves as dissimilar to someone they feel is below, and has less status, as them, or ‘upward comparison’ whereby the individual compares themselves as similar to someone they perceive as above, or of higher status to them. In both cases the theory suggests the motivation for the behaviour is to increase one’s self-esteem. With regard to distorting and ignoring information pertinent to social comparison, the theory suggests that individuals, when faced with comparing themselves with someone whose superior ability or performance in an area means they constitute a threat to one’s self-esteem, will downplay the similarity of the individual to themselves, thus making comparison unnecessary.

## 2.5 Cognitive Dissonance

At this point the developed social comparison theory, makes use of another psychological theory developed by Festinger, that of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) . In the context of social comparison theory, cognitive dissonance arises for the individual because the other person they are comparing themselves to, who is more able in some way, or in some domain, threatens to force them into changing the way they think and feel about themselves; to downgrade their estimation of their self-worth. Social comparison theory suggests that rather than letting this happen, the individual is likely to change their cognitive representation of the person that they are comparing themselves to: if they can decide that the other person is in fact dissimilar to them in some way, then no such comparison is necessary and the threat is nullified. For social comparison theory, this means that individuals are more likely to compare themselves with people who are not close to them in ability and discount the similarity with those who are actually quite close to them in ability.

The theoretical apparatus and logic of social comparison theory and cognitive dissonance may have utility when brought to the context of the emergent theory of 'defensive mentalizing'. Social comparison theory suggests that an individual's cognitive representation of others whose ability or performance exceeds one's own, is likely to be determined by the fact that this person is seen as a threat to one's positive appraisal of oneself. Individuals are likely to discount the similarities between themselves and this other person as a way of avoiding having to compare oneself unfavourably to the other and thus removing the anxiety tied up with the cognitive dissonance of the threat of lowering one's estimation of one's self.

The 'naming of a pattern' or identification of a psychological-social process entailed in the emergent theory of 'defensive mentalizing' suggests that participants in the study are involved in the process similar to that of 'downward comparison' outlined in Social comparison theory, in that they are comparing themselves favourably to their peers in order to improve or defend their self-esteem and self-concept.

The difference is that the emergent theory suggests that the motivation for this favourable comparison is that the 'others' pose a threat to the participants not because they are more able than the participant in an area. The theory of 'defensive mentalizing' proposes that participants are defending themselves from a more fundamental and existential threat posed by the existence of the 'constitutive other' (see discussion of Mead above) represented by the participant's peers. It is the idea that one's peers decide one's social identity, social status and self-concept that threatens participants, and perhaps also that the only way for them to consider and think about themselves and their

social status is by taking the perspective of others or a ‘generalized other’ through language (Blumer, 1979; Mead, 1934).

#### 2.5.1 Negative case analysis: example two

The question is thus raised: does social comparison theory not explain the behaviour of the participants better than the emergent theory? Is the simplest explanation not the best explanation? And is it not simpler to say that by discrediting the motives of their peers behaviours participants were a) attempting to engage in ‘downward comparison’ and/or b) involved in discounting the similarity between themselves and peers who are perceived to be threatening because of their superior ability.

In response to this challenge to the emergent theory, the researcher here would respond by stating that this ‘simpler’ explanation does not fit the data because:

a) The psychological mechanism outlined in the emergent theory is not synonymous with ‘downward comparison’ in social comparison theory. ‘Downward comparison’ in social comparison theory is largely concerned with individuals comparing themselves favourably with those who are ‘worse off’ in terms of a certain life situation, or less competent or proficient in a skill or practice, for example someone whose cancer is more progressed than one’s own (Wills, 1991) or someone who received a lower test score than oneself (Gibbons et al., 2002). Whereas the theory of ‘defensive mentalizing’ posits that the adolescent participants critique the motivation and ‘intentional state’ of their peers in order to undermine the threat posed by their perceived negative appraisal. Peers are seen as ‘having the wrong priorities’, as being concerned with petty matters and being motivated by their insecurities. It is not that the individuals they are



comparing themselves to are ‘worse off’ or less able; the critique is more character or personality based and represents somewhat of a moral judgement. It is the contention of the researcher that it is more motivated by a defensive and protective impulse; to put the other down in order to protect one’s self-concept.

b) Participants each talk of the threat posed to themselves by others in the present and their fears for the future concerning social isolation and low social status.

c) There is little suggestion, in four out of the five participants sampled, that the peers the participants compare themselves to are more able than them (see part one: results).

d) The social psychological, neuroscientific and evolutionary theory literature (see division two of this literature review) agree on the central and real threat of social isolation and low social status.

e) This threat of low social status and social isolation is not likely as simple as someone being better at you at a certain task or activity. Though status is sometimes achieved through being particularly good at an activity, it is also often achieved through birth, luck, relationship building, alliances, social smarts and sometimes manipulation, the people who get to the top are not always the most able (Barber, Eccles & Stone, 2001; Wood, 1989). So if social status is not always determined by ability and the threat to status is the motivating factor here, then it seems reasonable to suggest that the threat posed by participants peers is not the fact that they are better at maths or swimming or more attractive or intelligent than them, although of course these are contributors to social status, but rather by the ability of one’s peers to determine one’s social status to

constitute the ‘me’ (Mead, 1934). This is maybe the more pressing, the more urgent threat.

## 2.6 Mentalizing continued

Perhaps in a similar way in which Festinger’s initial conception of social comparison, as an individual’s attempt to gain accurate evaluations of themselves, was developed into the idea that individuals bias their comparisons with others in order to see themselves favourably and shore up their self-esteem (Wood, 1989), the definition of mentalizing suggested by Frith and Cohen etc. (Baron-Cohen, 2001; Frith & Frith, 2006) can be adapted to suggest that it does not always entail immediate automatic and unbiased inference about another intentions, but is perhaps coloured and determined itself by our own mental states, motivation and psychological needs.

Thus we come to see Oscar’s behaviours in his dismissal of his aggressors as developmentally stunted, or Rebecca’s dismissal of her condescending friends as shallow, or even Anna’s dismissal of her higher achieving peers as conformist, as examples of an individual using their inferences about other’s mental states to nullify the significance of their behaviour.

If we view their process of mentalizing in this way then we are making a statement about the nature of mentalizing and suggesting that the way in which individuals infer an other’s intentional state (Dennett & Haugeland, 1987) is not always straightforwardly aimed at accuracy but is determined, to some extent, by our motivation and by the psychological function of our comparison (see part one: results p.44).

## 2.7 Fundamental Attribution Error

This biasing of the mentalization process contains within it a pattern which is similar to that observed and identified in the theory and research surrounding fundamental attribution error. Fundamental attribution error has been defined as a cognitive bias which involves a:

*[...] pervasive tendency on the part of observers to overestimate personality or dispositional causes of behaviour and to underestimate the influence of situational constraints on behaviour (Tetlock, 1985, p. 227)*

The identification of this tendency, which has been described as the core conceptual foundation on which social psychology rests (E. E. Jones & Harris, 1967), boils down to the suggestion that individuals tend to interpret the behaviours of others as resulting from who they are, their character, personality and traits rather than their situation and circumstance, whereas individuals are more likely to see their own behaviour as influenced by circumstance and situational factors.

In a similar way the inferences about the mental states behind the behaviour of others presented by the participants of this study, involve participants describing their peers in a way in which they are seen as consistent in their motivation and character. The participants are not always generous in their estimation of the other, their thinking is sometimes sweeping and makes use of broad-brush strokes (see part one: results).

Participants posit that the mental states of others are the result of an insecure need to be liked, to have status, to be 'on top' etcetera. The participants can be seen as cognitively biased in that they do not recognise, or accept, that at times their own behaviour, and indeed the very behaviour of comparing themselves favourably to their 'insecure peers', is perhaps motivated by a need for affirmation and status. Participants recognise this

need in others but not themselves and this can be seen in line with the logic of fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977) . The circumstantial and situational factors in this case are that each participant's social identity, status and self-concept is precarious and beyond their control and that this is anxiety provoking and causes stress and pain. However, participants do not interpret the behaviours of their peers as linked to the situational factor of this stress or pain, their 'theory of mind' here is not so complex or empathetic. The insecurities of their peers are deemed to be aspects of their characters, their disposition, their weakness and meanness and the emergent theory of 'defensive mentalizing' suggests that this bias is determined by participant's need to reduce the sense of 'cognitive dissonance' (Festinger, 1957) caused by the threat of other's perceived or possible negative appraisal of them.

If we agree with Mead (1934), that the only way individuals are able to consider themselves cognitively is to look back at themselves from the perspective of others which is enabled by the shared nature and perspective of language, then this apparent bias might be the way in which participants are manipulating or softening this blunt linguistic tool to keep themselves safe and calm, both psychologically, in that they are not subject to a stream of anxiety linked to the internalization of the sometimes negative appraisal of others, but also perhaps socially in their interactions with others. If we perceive ourselves in high esteem, as having status and being able to function successfully with others, we are enabled to go out and do so. However, perhaps if we were not able to 'defensively mentalize' but rather took onboard wholeheartedly other people's negative appraisals of ourselves, we might not be able to function socially and

might become socially isolated and the victim of low social status. So this proposed bias could be seen as perhaps adaptive and necessary.

The emergent theory here offers an account of a type of psychological denial, the participants make inference about the motivation of their peers behaviours and in doing so are involved in the process of reducing the complexity, freedom and inconsistency of their peers, whilst at the same time ignoring/denying their own determination, vulnerability to and dependence on the social definition of others. The adolescent participants in this study are involved in an ongoing process of writing a narrative of who they are and where they are going, in doing so, the tools with which they go about this task are necessarily, in a straightforward way (or in light of the theory of the self entailed in Mead (1934) : a more fundamental way) are the views (and/or imagined views) that other people have of them. The process of determining who they are involves negotiating with these ‘meanings’ which are largely beyond their control and threaten their agency. The participants, then, can perhaps also be seen to be acting out against this perceived limitation to their possibilities, by undermining the authority of the personification of these limitations; of the anxiety provoking existence of others and their opinions, or as R. D Laing puts:

*“In a world full of danger, to be a potentially seeable object is to be constantly exposed to danger. Self-consciousness, then, may be the apprehensive awareness of oneself as potentially exposed to danger by the simple fact of being visible to others. The obvious defence against such a danger is to make oneself invisible in one way or another.” (Laing, 2010, p. 109)*

The participants in this study are perhaps attempting to make themselves invisible, or less visible, by undermining the credibility of the accounts of those who see them. They

are perhaps involved in these psychological gymnastics in order to resist or push back against the constitutive authority of their peers and of societal expectations, perhaps in an act of defiance and assertion of their agency.

In this way ‘defensive mentalizing’ can be seen to represent a pattern of psychological bias whereby individuals avoid the consideration that the other may be experiencing the same level of anxiety and threat to their self-concept. The weakness and insecurity that participants have identified as motivating factors for their peers are the result of the power of others to define them and their status, the very threat participants are defending themselves from. A fuller ‘theory of mind’ or act of mentalizing might take into account these situational factors. It might take into account that others are partially determined by these factors but are also able to, at times, overcome the limitations or barriers presented by their insecurity and position as socially embedded beings, in acts of kindness, generosity, selflessness and self-determination. Participants are able to see and identify these opportunities for freedom and determination within themselves (see part one results pp. 44-55) but with respect to these acts of ‘defensive mentalizing’ they emphasize the limits, weaknesses and determinism of others.

## Summary

For a summary of the preceding division of literature review and a discussion of the impact it had on generating the ‘final emergent’ theory please see the ‘Impact of Literature Review and Discussion’ section (part one: pp, 61-67). The following division will explore points of convergence and divergence between the emergent theory and empirical research investigating adolescent sociality.

## **Division Two- Situating the emergent theory in the empirical literature**

### **3. Adolescence**

3.1 Adolescence: A discrete developmental period? A scientific category, a cultural construct?

The question under investigation in this study is: **Are there any clear social-psychological processes apparent within the lives of contemporary 16-18 year-olds?**

The study takes as a premise that adolescence is a (sometimes difficult) period of change for individuals in our culture and that by interviewing 16-18 year olds about their experiences it might be possible to gain some insight into the social and psychological processes associated with this period and also perhaps to begin to build a theoretical apparatus to situate those insights. In the introduction to this piece (p.13) it is proposed by the researcher that a recent shift in government policy in the U.K might be seen as an opportunity to examine possible avenues for interpreting the psychological difficulties sometimes experienced by individuals during this period in terms that take into account the complexity of environmental and intersubjective factors. The opening paragraphs in this section of the literature review explore ways in which this developmental period is sometimes contextualised within the current scientific literature.

Early twentieth century researchers in psychology defined adolescence as beginning at puberty at the age of around 12 or 13 and finishing between the ages of 22 and 25 (S. J. Blakemore, 2018). The World Health Organisation defines adolescence as the ages between 10 and 19 years of age (Patton et al., 2016).

More recently adolescence has come to be defined in much of the scientific literature as beginning with the start of puberty and finishing when an individual becomes self-sufficient and attains a stable role in society (S.-J. Blakemore & Mills, 2014; S. J. Blakemore, 2018). We can see then that in this case, the start of this period of development is defined with a biological event and the end with a social one. There are some who argue the concept of adolescence imprecise and unscientific, for example Choudhury (2009) states that:

*[...] adolescence conceptualized as a prolonged period of identity development linked to increased autonomy, intergenerational conflict, peer-relatedness and social psychological anxieties, is not the norm across cultures. (p.163)*

Choudhury uses examples from Samoa and Bangladesh to support an argument that adolescence, as understood in western culture, is a feature of wealthy individualistic societies. He points to the fact that children who enter employment in Bangladesh are no longer considered children and thus enter the adult world without experiencing anything like an ‘adolescence’.

It seems clear that in many cultures and societies young people are expected to become independent in terms of social and financial functioning by the time they have reached puberty and in these cultures the idea of ‘adolescence’ as a discrete developmental period is problematic.

Some have suggested that adolescence exists within the more affluent western world because puberty often begins earlier, linked to improvements in nutrition and health, whilst changes in economic structures and education mean that people are having



children at a later age, this gap, so the explanation goes, we have labelled adolescence (Bucholtz, 2002).

### 3.2 Support for the existence of adolescence from the neuroscience literature

Recent work in neuroscientific research offers support for the idea that adolescence is a discrete, empirically observable, developmental period characterised by:

- Significant changes in the structure of the brain
- Differences in brain function compared to adults and children (Blakemore, 2018)

Research suggests that during the onset of puberty there is a proliferation of grey matter in the frontal lobes followed by a period synaptic pruning (Giedd et al., 1999; Gogtay et al., 2004). These changes, it is argued, mark a maturation in the frontal lobes, this is significant because it is believed that these are brain areas that are involved in executive function and attention (Gogtay et al., 2004). It has been argued that this process of maturation and development in the frontal lobes of the brain, which continues into the mid-twenties (Giedd et al., 1999; Gogtay et al., 2004), represent ‘neuro-correlates’ to adolescent impulsivity, risk taking and emotionality (Hare et al., 2008).

Whereas a number of researchers are happy to use changes in brain structure and function during this period as an explanation for ‘teenage’ behaviour (S.-J. Blakemore, 2005; Hare et al., 2008; Luna, Garver, Urban, Lazar, & Sweeney, 2004), there are others who suggest we must be cautious before jumping to concrete conclusions about links between brain development and behaviour. Males (2009) argues that contemporary

neuroscience shares the same historically shaped concepts of what adolescence is and it is these concepts that define the period as one of risk taking, increased emotionality, peer association etcetera, that create the possibilities for adolescents to behave and define themselves. This behaviour, Males suggests, might then structure the young brain according to the principles of 'neuroplasticity' (S.-J. Blakemore, 2005) . For Males, we shouldn't discount the possibility that adolescence is a cultural construct and the 'fact' that there appears to be 'neuro-correlates' to 'typical teenage' behaviour might be an example of 'correlation not causation'. For example we know that the hippocampus' of London black cab drivers are larger than those of your average adult and that this is likely due to the fact that they are required to remember a huge amount of information to pass 'The Knowledge' test of London's streets before they get their taxi license (S.-J. Blakemore, 2005). Now a neuroscientist might look at the increased size of taxi driver's hippocampus and use it as an explanation for their behaviour, namely their daily activity of driving taxis, perhaps suggesting they are good at being a taxi driver because they are gifted with a big hippocampus and thus a strong memory for streets. Males suggests that something similar might be happening with contemporary neuroscientific explanations for adolescent behaviour and maybe it is the case that the culture, social expectations, determines the behaviour which structures the brain not that the brain determines behaviour which informs the culture.

Choudhury (2009) and Males (2009) suggest that these are important consideration lest we risk pathologising the process of being young and growing up which has important political implications. Males (2009), also argues that behaviour in adolescence is more

influenced by culture and economics than brain development. He uses global crime and health statistics to suggest that risk taking and crime behaviours are related to poverty and that adults exposed to the same levels of poverty display similar behaviour (Males 2009). Males (2009) and Choudhury (2009) both worry that brain-based definitions of adolescence influence and limit the possibilities of how young people can be, and how they 'constitute' themselves.

### Summary

The emergent theory outlined in this piece of research offers a tentative social-psychological interpretation of some elements of adolescent behaviour. By positing social and psychological factors as determinants, influencers or correlates of adolescent behaviour, the emergent theory might be seen as challenging, or at least modifying, a narrative of adolescent behaviour as determined by brain development. The emergent theory is suggesting that the adolescent behaviour being displayed by the research participants is not solely the result of brain function, for example of impulse control or executive functioning capacity, but also perhaps linked to their position as social subjects inhabiting a social culture. Turning to social and intersubjective factors influencing adolescent behaviour is a turn towards complexity and necessarily involves a tolerance of uncertainty. However, tolerating such uncertainty is important for political and philosophical reasons (Burr, 2015), especially from the perspective of practitioner psychologists. Explanatory narratives that locate the determinants of behaviour in the adolescent brain only, might serve to encourage, a historical tendency in our culture, to

locate the determinants of psychological difficulties and distress within the pathology of the individual (Choudhury 2009).

#### **4. Adolescent preoccupation with peer acceptance and social status**

The data from the current study suggests that social status is a key preoccupation for adolescent participants, with threats of future and immediate low status, or social isolation repeatedly being raised as concerns for participants (see part one: results p.30). Ideas of social status are central to this research's emergent theory of 'defensive mentalizing'.

Identifying peer relations and social status as a concern for adolescents is nothing new and there is substantial support in the psychological literature for the idea proposed in the theory of 'defensive mentalizing' that aspects of adolescent behaviour are motivated by concerns around peer acceptance and social status. For example, there is evidence that adolescents are more motivated by a desire for peer affiliation and peer acceptance than younger children and older adults (Kaufman et al., 1993; R. Larson & Richards, 1991; R. W. Larson et al., 1996; Richards et al., 1998).

Research also supports the idea that adolescents value the opinions of other adolescents more than they value those of adults (Knoll et al., 2017; Knoll et al., 2015).

Adolescents in the West appear to spend more time with their peers, and less time with their families, than younger children (R. Larson & Richards, 1991; R. W. Larson et al., 1996) though there is research to suggest that this isn't the case in all cultures and that adolescents in India, Japan and South Korea spend the same amount of time with their families as they did when they were children (R. W. Larson & Verma, 1999).

There are also examples of researchers harnessing the power of adolescent concerns with peer affiliation and social status to bring about positive social change, for example via whole school bullying interventions. Paluck, Shepherd & Aronow (2018) designed a study aimed at investigating the influence of the need for peer affiliation and peer acceptance on bullying behaviour. The researchers studied adolescents in fifty six schools in the United States, half of which acted as control group schools and half of which were assigned to anti-bullying programs, in which twenty-thirty pupils per school were educated in the negative effects of bullying and then asked to campaign against bullying in their school.

In one condition, students were asked to design anti-bullying posters and slogans and the student's names and photos were displayed with the slogans and photos, in the other experimental condition students were asked to hand out orange wristbands to the other students engaging in pro-social behaviour. The results showed a 30 % reduction in bullying and student conflict when compared to the 'control' schools with no anti-bullying program.

The researchers also measured the social status and popularity of those taking part in the program, by asking students at the school to report who they had spent time with during the previous weeks and then plotting peer relations. They found a correlation between the effect of the anti-bullying programs and the amount of 'highly connected' students involved in the anti-bullying campaign. The researchers suggested that the results of this study illustrate the power of peer influence on behaviour and social norms.

There is also evidence that adolescent risk-taking behaviour is increased by the presence of peers (Chein, Albert, O'Brien, Uckert, & Steinberg, 2011; Gardner & Steinberg,

2005; Knoll et al., 2015; Peake, Dishion, Stormshak, Moore, & Pfeifer, 2013; Smith, Chein, & Steinberg, 2014; Stapinski et al., 2014; Steinberg, 2008). One notable series of studies showed that adolescents who are not in the presence of their peers take the same amount of risks in an experimental car driving simulation as adults, but when accompanied by their friends, adolescents took three times as many risks as they did when they were by themselves. There was no difference in the amount of risk taken by adults when accompanied by friends (Gardner & Steinberg, 2005).

### Summary

Taken together the studies outlined in this section suggest that peer relations and ‘peer pressure’ have a substantial impact on adolescent behaviour. Taken in this context, the pattern identified by the emergent theory of ‘defensive mentalizing’ can be seen as converging with the established literature. ‘Defensive mentalizing’, in a straightforward way, can be seen as a way in which participants respond to their preoccupation with and drive to ‘fit in’ and maintain social status and a stable self-concept in relation to status.

In this context ‘defensive mentalizing’ might be seen as a way in which to maintain control over one’s behaviour, allowing participants to, for a time, dampen the pressure and sense of threat they experience from the existence and gaze of their peers, by discounting their perspective. In this way it might be the case that ‘defensive mentalizing’ is protective against adolescent social anxiety and/or peer influenced adolescent risk taking. These would be interesting avenues for future research (see part three- critical review).

## 5. Reasons why adolescents may Defensively Mentalize

### 5.1 Reasons why adolescents may ‘defensively mentalize: Avoiding the pain of social exclusion/isolation/low social status.

A number of neuroimaging studies have shown that the pain experienced by individuals in response to social rejection activates the same ‘pain centers’ in our brains that are activated when we experience pain in response to physical injury (Barrett & Wager, 2006; N. Eisenberger, 2008; Kross, Berman, Mischel, Smith, & Wager, 2011; MacDonald & Leary, 2005). Which has been interpreted as suggesting that ‘social pain’ and physical pain serve a similar biological and evolutionary function:

*So, why might physical and social pain demonstrate similar patterns of activation and processing in the brain? Recent theories have suggested that pain is an important self-regulatory signal that aids the organism in directing efforts to return the body to its natural homeostatic set point. It is in this way that acute physical pain serves a key biological and evolutionary function: to spur adaptive responses when an organism is experiencing heightened threat or physical harm. In evolutionary models that define physical pain as arising from tissue damage, the presence of pain provides an important indication regarding the safety of the organism; when pain is present in its acute form, it fosters unpleasant and distressing psychological states that lead to protective responses, such as avoiding use of the injured area and avoidance and escape behaviours to prevent further damage. This paradigm of acute pain as a physical safety mechanism has subsequently been applied to evolutionary models for explaining social pain; just as physical damage to an organism threatens its long-term survival, so too might separation from the organism’s social group. Given that humans have historically thrived in communities, loss of a community and the protections it provides (e.g., from predation or starvation) likely predicts a much higher rate of mortality. Consequently, social pain may have promoted physical safety in a similar manner as physical pain; when a ‘socially painful’ event has occurred, it may spur the individual to repair the social schism or to seek new sources of support. Although aversive or distressing social experiences may not constitute an equivalent experience to physical pain, this evolutionary model does suggest that social pain plays a similar role to physical pain. Given that both physical and social pain might be expected to foster long-term survival, it is not unreasonable to expect that they may interact in determining the affective, cognitive and behavioural reactions to pain. (Sturgeon & Zautra, 2016, p. 65)*

This account of the significance of ‘social pain’ in motivating humans to behave in ways which avoid social isolation and losing one’s community is persuasive. It offers an account of why the negative appraisal of others might be perceived as threatening to adolescents and why the participants in the research might engage in ‘defensive mentalizing’ in order to reduce this threat. Seen in this context the act of discounting the validity of the perceived negative appraisals of others because of their self-interested motivation might serve a preventative function, protecting oneself in advance from the possible threat entailed by others and their opinions, or it may constitute more of a reactive solution to pain already experienced; soothing the already activated pain centres. In either account the relationship to pain runs counter to, or parallel to the evolutionary function outlined above. Participants are not attempting to ‘repair social schisms’ by ‘defensive mentalizing’ they are attempting to remove the social threat, to psychologically make the threat not a threat. Or perhaps as Laing puts it ‘make oneself invisible in one way or another’ (Laing, 2010, p. 109).

Neuroimaging research into social exclusion/rejection suggests that adolescents seem acutely sensitive to the pain of social rejection when compared to adults. Eisenberger, Lieberman & Williams (2003) asked participants to lie in an MRI scanner whilst they played a game of ‘Cyberball’. In this game participants were told that they were playing with two other participants. The three ‘ball players’ were represented by dots on the screen and the ball was thrown between the ‘players’. The participant chose who to throw the ball to and believed the other participants were doing the same, in reality the other ‘participants’ were part of the computer program and programmed to exclude the participant from the game. When this happened, in both adult and adolescent



participants, areas of the brain related to anger, disgust and pain perception were activated (amygdala, insular cortex and anterior cingulate). In adult participants this is was swiftly followed by activation of areas of the frontal cortex (which is usually thought to deal with emotion regulation, perspective taking, executive functioning, self-control, Eisenberger et al., 2003; Sapolsky, 2017). The activation in the areas related to anger and pain then subsided. This is interpreted as the adult participants quickly gaining some perspective and realising the pain of the rejection they are experiencing is trivial and unimportant ( Eisenberger et al., 2003; Sapolsky, 2017). For the majority of the teenage participants though, the second part of the process didn't occur in the same way; the areas of the frontal cortex activated to a much lesser extent and the brain activity in the areas related to anger, pain and disgust was more intense and failed to subside in response to frontal cortex activation. Adolescent participants also reported feeling more distressed by the process than adults (Eisenberger et al., 2003). These findings have been interpreted as suggesting that social rejection hurts adolescents more than adults and means they feel a greater need to fit in and experience peer acceptance (Sapolsky, 2017).

Other neuroimaging studies suggest that when adults are asked to consider what they think about themselves and then imagine what others think of them, two partially overlapping but different brain networks activate (involving limbic and frontal areas of the brain) (Guyer et al., 2008). However, when adolescents are asked to think about the same questions the neuroimaging results suggest that networks of brain activity are almost identical for both questions. These results have been interpreted as offering support for the idea that adolescents use the opinions others hold about them to

determine and structure their own self-concept (Sapolsky, 2017), perhaps offering a 'neural correlate' to Mead's idea of the socially constituted 'me' (Mead, 1934), for adolescents at least.

## Summary

The idea that social pain, in evolutionary terms, provides individuals with an indication of their safety as an organism and promotes behaviour intended to ensure one's social inclusion is an interesting one and serves to contextualise the emergent theory of 'defensive mentalizing'. In some ways this emergent theory diverges from the evolutionary literature here by positing a social-psychological mechanism by which one avoids the 'physiological' response, or correlate, to social pain. This observed pattern in itself might be adaptive in evolutionary terms. It might be the case that as human social groups got bigger it became counterproductive to try and 'fit in' with everyone in your environment and thus a mechanism like 'defensive mentalizing' which 'muted' the alarm bell in regards to the safety of the organism, became necessary for the continued functioning of the organism. If as the neuroimaging studies suggest, the power and significance of 'social pain' is amplified for adolescents then we might hypothesise that adopting protective strategies such as 'defensive mentalizing' might be more important for adolescents than adults. A possible area of future research might be to look for this pattern in the behaviour and cognition of adults and compare its prevalence with adolescents. It might also be the case that 'defensive mentalizing' as a strategy is more necessary during this developmental period because adolescents are in the process of developing and cementing something like a secure 'identity' or 'personality' which in the future might offer them a firmer sense of calm and self-possession, but in the

meantime perhaps defensive psychological strategies are necessary to maintain self-regulation.

5.2 Reasons why adolescents may defensively mentalize: Avoiding the negative long-term implication of adolescent social exclusion/isolation/low social status and/or obtaining the positive consequences of high social status and popularity.

We have seen that avoiding social isolation and social rejection makes sense in term of avoiding the physiological and neurological experience of pain in the present moment, but research also suggests that avoiding these things is beneficial in the longer term.

Research suggests that individuals who were subject to low social status and/or social isolation in adolescence are more likely to experience anxiety and depression in later life (Copeland et al., 2013; Isaacs et al., 2008; Stapinski et al., 2014).

Stapinski et al. (2014) studied a sample of 6,208 adolescents from the Avon Longitudinal Study who were subject to peer rejection at the age of 13. The researcher used multivariable logistic regression and controlled for confounding individual and family factors, the results showed that individuals subject to frequent peer rejection at age 13 were three to four times more likely to develop an anxiety disorder than those who suffered no such rejection (OR = 2.49, 95% CI: 1.62–3.85).

Isaacs, Hodges & Salmivalli (2008) studied a sample of 177 adolescents (ages 14-15) and followed them to young adulthood (ages 22-23) they found that peer rejection in adolescence was correlated with decreases in self-esteem, increases in depression and negative views of others in young adulthood, but found that having a supportive family protected against this risk.

The research literature also suggests that adolescents (n=264) subject to social rejection and/or social isolation in adolescence are more likely to have problems with substance misuse in adulthood (Sandstrom & Cillessen, 2010); are more likely to be clinically obese at the age of 21 (n=1694) (Mamun, O'Callaghan, Williams & Najman, 2013); are 36% more likely to develop metabolic syndrome at age 43 (n=881) (Gustafsson, Theorell, Westerlund & Hammarström, 2012) and are more likely to be diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder and experience suicidality (Copeland, Wolke, Angold & Costello, 2013).

If as suggested by the emergent theory, one of the functions of 'defensive mentalizing' might be for adolescents to negotiate status with others and themselves. For an individual to be involved in a sort of PR campaign whereby the 'spin' or 'smear' the negative appraisals of others in order to negotiate the 'fact' of their shared social identity. If, as Blumer (following Mead) puts it :

*Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them...The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows... These meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with things he encounters (Blumer, 1969, p. 2)*

Then as such the participants of this study may be involved in the process of negotiating the meaning that they, as a 'thing' or social object have in a shared social world. In this way 'defensive mentalizing' might have a positive or proactive function as well as a defensive one. The research literature into the positive long-term implications of high adolescent social status and popularity may serve to further contextualise this suggestion and point to why it might be pertinent for adolescents to be engaged in such a process.

A longitudinal study of adolescent American high school students (n=900) suggested that social inclusion and popularity represented by ‘pro-social activity participation’ and ‘sports participation’ predicted lower substance abuse levels and higher self-esteem in later life as well as increased likelihood of college graduation, lower levels of adult social isolation and positive occupational outcomes (Barber et al., 2001).

Conti, Galeotti, Mueller & Pudney (2013) used data which measured the popularity of 17-18 year old high school males in a Wisconsin High School (n= 4,430) by asking each participant to report the names (maximum 3) of their same-sex best friends. The researchers were then able to plot the relative popularity of the participants and compare this data to occupational outcomes forty years later. They concluded that after forty year those in the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile of high school popularity earned 10 percent more than those in the 20<sup>th</sup> percentile.

### Summary

This research taken together offers a persuasive account as to why adolescence might be justified in valuing peer relations and motivated to avoid peer rejection and social isolation. It also offers evidence for the idea that it might be adaptive in the long term for adolescents to do all they can to ‘fit in’ and maintain social status.

In this context, the observed pattern labelled ‘defensive mentalizing’ can perhaps be seen as a way in which individuals convince themselves of their secure social status and thus temper the physiological response to the threat of social pain and/or a way in which individuals go about negotiating their status with others. The idea here being that if an

individual can show you that her motivations are more mature, and that she is more self-possessed, than her peers then she can negotiate and secure her status in your eyes.

## **6. Summary**

For a summary of this literature review and a discussion of the impact it had on generating the ‘final emergent’ theory please see the ‘Impact of Literature Review and Discussion’ section (pp, 54-62).

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A grounded theory study of the psychological and social processes apparent in the lives of contemporary 16-18 year olds

**PART THREE: CRITICAL APPRAISAL**

**(Word Count: 7745)**

## **1. Introduction**

The critical review that follows will offer a reflective and reflexive account of the process of completing this research project. In it, I will reflect upon the philosophical and methodological decisions taken throughout the research process and attempt to outline both the benefits and drawbacks entailed in such decisions. I will explore difficulties encountered and how they were overcome. I will also consider the implications of the research findings for future research, the field and practice of Educational Psychology and my own personal practice as a Psychologist.

## **2. Research Rationale**

### **2.1 Inception of research idea**

The idea for this piece of research is grounded in my professional and academic interest in adolescence. Working with adolescents as a teacher, trainee psychologist and in a therapeutic capacity, has given me an interest in this complicated and often difficult developmental period. At Masters level I studied some of the contemporary neuroscience which has become popular and influential in interpreting this period. During my doctoral training in Educational Psychology I have been exposed to interactionist ideas from social constructionism and systems theory, which stress the importance of looking for sources of difficulty (and opportunities for change) in an individual's interaction with their environment and with the people who populate that environment. I knew from my work with adolescents and from my studies that peer relations and social groupings were important factors which influenced/motivated the behaviours of adolescents. I also knew from the academic literature that contemporary



adolescents were, as a population, struggling with a reported increase of psychological and mental health difficulties. I felt that a recent shift in public policy, which can be interpreted as a move towards a pre-emptive community based approach to preventing and interpreting psychological and mental health difficulties in children and adolescents (see part one p.13), constituted an opportunity to think about, and explore, the social and environmental complexities that might be linked to these difficulties. If there is a move towards locating these experiences and difficulties away from being simply in the minds and bodies of individuals, then any research that can help to illuminate those complexities may be useful. Equally in respect to my professional practice as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (EP), this research presented an opportunity to inform and challenge my own thinking and practice around identifying both sources of difficulty and distress and opportunities for positive change.

My initial idea was that a piece of qualitative research might provide the flexibility to search for and explore some of the interactionist, intersubjective and relational factors at play in the lives of contemporary adolescents.

## 2.2 Development of research idea

A reading of Erikson's work on adolescent identity development 'Identity, youth and crisis' (1994) provided me with a further theoretical grounding for the development of my research idea. This 'psycho-social' theory posits that an individual's psychological health is influenced by their ability to navigate adolescence and find a social role; so that how they see themselves coheres with how others and how the world sees them; thus resulting in 'ego synthesis' rather than 'ego confusion' (Erikson, 1994). The idea, in Erikson's theory, that the health and stability of an adolescents' personality and identity

are dependent on their ability to successfully adhere to ‘social coordinates’ and receive validation from their environment struck me as insightful and rang true to my experience working with adolescents struggling to find their place in the world, and looking for affirmation from those around them. I thought that looking at and speaking with adolescents about their situation socially and within the context of their life situation/development, might yield some insight into the difficulties/ challenges they might be experiencing and perhaps point to some of the correlates to the prevalence of psychological difficulties in this age group. I also wondered whether there were features of the contemporary environment, including perhaps rapid technological change, that might be influential here.

My initial thought was to ask contemporary adolescents what was going on for them. I was aware, however, from my previous research experience and reading of literature around research methodology, that there were some pitfalls that I needed to avoid. There was a risk that my reading of Erikson might unduly influence my research design and result in confirmation bias (M. Jones & Sugden, 2001) . By this I mean that if I was too enamoured with Erikson’s idea that adolescence involves individuals seeking to establish a stable identity (and ego synthesis) via achieving a social role and function, then there could be a risk that I would go hunting for evidence of this pattern in the data.

A reading of the British Psychology Society’s ‘Power Threat Meaning Framework’ (Johnstone et al., 2018) enabled me to widen the range of theoretical concepts I was using to think about adolescent sociality and adolescents’ interactions with their environment and culture.

I knew if I was to avoid imposing my own preconceived ideas onto the study, I would have to let adolescents speak for themselves and gather rich enough data for interpretation. I knew I wanted to give adolescent participants the chance to become absorbed in telling me about their lives and their experiences and that this would necessitate open ended research questions which encouraged participants to stay within a loose structure of talking about intersubjective experience and their life phase position, whilst at the same time giving them permission to discuss their lives in their own terms. I also wanted to encourage participants not to censor themselves too much, to tell their story and not use the language of the interview questions to try and tell me what they thought I wanted to hear.

### **3. Methodological decisions**

#### **3.1 Ontology and Epistemology**

This research is rooted in a pragmatist ontology which considers language and thought, tools by which we navigate our environment; tools which are inseparable from this agency in and on the world. Pragmatism rejects the proposition the such tools can claim to access or represent ‘reality’ (Blumer, 1979; Mead, 1934; Rorty & Rorty, 1991).

The epistemological stance of this research is situated within a symbolic-interactionist and social constructionist paradigm, which highlights the (social constructionist) idea that the shared social constructs which we inhabit, grow and live into influence our behaviour and interpretations (Burr, 2015; Lock & Strong, 2010). But leaves room for the (symbolic interactionist) idea that specific interactions between individuals and

groups have the power to establish specific ‘meanings’ alongside and apart from those that are socially inherited: that meaning is modifiable (Blumer, 1969).

The implications of adopting this ontological and epistemological position are discussed throughout this document. However, key points to set out here are:

- I adopted a pragmatist rather than a realist or critical realist ontological position, because although I was interested in looking for patterns in the intersubjective psychological and social processes present in the lives of 16-18 year olds, and hoped that such patterns might be repeated amongst participants and might even be useful in thinking about contemporary 16-18 year olds in general. I was not of the belief that, if I was able to identify such patterns, they could be seen as representing a feature of ‘reality’ independent from the social and cultural settings in which they were being observed.
- My epistemological stance suggested that the way in which I had access to the interpretation of such patterns was through the culturally inherited social constructions I live into and that these constructions also likely structure the patterns themselves in a complex and complicated manner.
- I was not setting out to discover ‘scientific’ knowledge about adolescent development. Rather, I was interested in exploring adolescent sociality and intersubjectivity in order perhaps to help make use of the opportunity ( provided by a policy shift towards a community based approach to mental health and wellbeing) to generate ideas (or theory) which might have practical implications for addressing the psychological difficulties sometimes experienced by contemporary adolescents.

- The pragmatist ontological position was seen as fitting with a social constructionist epistemology. In that if ‘reality’ and ‘truth’ are not possible objects of knowledge, and our language and concepts are tools (Rorty & Rorty, 1991), then the concepts and language that we grow up into, and adopt from our culture, are important determinants of our thoughts and behaviours.
- The symbolic interactionist idea that specific human relationships/interactions and social groupings have the ability to develop and modify culturally inherited ‘knowledge’ and meaning was deemed an important consideration when studying specific individuals within a specific context and allowing room for personal agency as well as the significance of social patterns or processes that are specific to particular settings or systems.

### 3.2 Qualitative methodology

Research design is concerned with the question of ascertaining the most appropriate way of answering the research question. Robson (2011) divides research designs into three categories: fixed design, flexible design and multi strategy design.

The current piece of research adopted a qualitative research design which Robson refers to as a flexible design. A quantitative (aka fixed design) usually involves a combination of data collection through fixed measures and statistical analysis and a significant amount of predetermination as to what is being measured and how. A quantitative methodology is useful, for example in testing a hypothesis, or set of hypotheses, where the researcher has a clear idea as to what they are looking for and are looking for data which either confirm or disconfirm their hypothesis. This type of design would not be appropriate for the current piece of research because the aim of the research is more

exploratory in nature. The research question asks: **What, if any, social-psychological processes are at play within the lives of contemporary 16-18 year-olds?**

I did not have fixed ideas about what these processes might be or how to measure and quantify them, but rather intended to take a close look at the real world and follow an abductive method of data collection and analysis. A qualitative, or flexible, research design was thus deemed appropriate and amongst the different qualitative methodologies and data analysis techniques available, the grounded theory method was deemed the most suitable because of its ability to go beyond the descriptive level and produce theory with explanatory power, which avoids conjecture by assuring the production of theory is grounded in the data (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, Strauss & Strutzel 1968; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

### 3.3 Consideration of alternative methodologies

I considered the use of a 'Free Association Narrative Interview' methodology (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000) to encourage adolescent participants to build a narrative which I could then interpret. However, I decided that that apparatus of this methodology, specifically the idea of the 'defended subject' who is shielding himself from the researcher, and the idea of looking for the 'unconscious logic' of a participant's narrative, were too psychoanalytically orientated for my purposes and risked imposing a fixed theoretical paradigm on to the research situation. I wanted to take a more theoretically naïve approach to studying the situation of contemporary adolescents, to allow for ideas and interpretations to arrive that were not predetermined by the researcher's theoretical stance. I did not want a reading of Erikson and a

psychoanalytically orientated research methodology to lead a confirmation bias in which I ‘discovered’ adolescent subjects conveniently presenting with a narrative, which in its unconscious logic, revealed their struggles with ‘ego confusion’ due to their lack of a secure social roles.

What I did take from reading around this methodology, however, was the idea to ask interview questions “which encourage interviewees to remember specific events since these, unlike generalised answers, are replete with emotional meanings.” (Given, 2008, p. 359). I felt that asking participants about specific experiences would allow them to become absorbed in telling a story, perhaps avoiding self-consciousness and eliciting rich data which revealed things about their lives and their ‘selves’. It was hoped that in becoming absorbed in the telling of an anecdote or experience participants would be less self-conscious and spend less time considering or censoring what they were saying. It was hoped that this would allow participants to present events in a way that has meaning for them. This led to the idea of asking participants about examples of their positive and negative experiences of groups in order to get them to talk about their social, intersubjective experiences without shaping the responses too much, hopefully enabling participants to reveal ideas that represent their real lived experience.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Given, 2008; Mills & Birks, 2014) was also considered as a research methodology because of its focus on the detailed exploration of the meaning that particular experiences have for participants. However, IPA is often argued to be most appropriate when exploring, in depth, the perspectives of participants who have share a context and perspective, in order to dig into the details of

how individuals respond to a given phenomenon. I would like to argue that the current piece of research took a wider angle. I was more interested in looking for patterns in the response of participants to their environment and life phase situation, that might be seen as of relevance and import to a wide range of individuals. I was looking for general patterns and processes apparent in the lives of contemporary 16-18 year olds and in this way I was interested in finding points of convergence in the experiences and perspectives of individuals with different backgrounds, whose main similarity with other participants was their age group and of course the culture they have grown up into. I wanted to be in a position to make inferences and abstractions that might be useful when thinking about and working with contemporary 16-18 year olds in general.

### 3.4 Grounded Theory Method

Grounded theory was selected as the most appropriate methodology in this respect, because of its focus on a type of abductive process by which observations are made from which generalised conclusions are inferred; theory is thus generated which is tested for consistency and use in relation to existing data and further data collected (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser et al., 1968; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

For Glasser and Straus and Corbin and Strauss this enables the researcher to take a fresh look at a research situation and allows for new insights and new knowledge to be created rather than using pre-existing knowledge to generate hypotheses to be tested in a deductive manner which, it is argued, can lead to forcing data to fit the hypotheses (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Strauss and Corbin suggest that their grounded theory method:



*[..] forces researchers to consider the range of plausibility, to avoid taking one stand or stance toward the data. Notice we say that it is the researcher who is being jolted out of his or her usual modes of thinking. It is not the data that are being forced. The data are not being forced; they are being allowed to speak. (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 64)*

Grounded theory is a qualitative research methodology developed in the 1960s by Glaser and Strauss (Glaser et al., 1968) which promotes the close reading of qualitative research data in order to develop a theoretical understanding of a research context (Martin & Gynnild, 2011). Charmaz (2006) suggests that grounded theory involves the following:

- *Simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis*
- *Constructing analytic codes and categories from data, not from preconceived logically deduced hypotheses.*
- *Using the constant comparative method, which involves making comparisons during each stage of the analysis.*
- *Advancing theory development during each step of data collection and Analysis.*
- *Memo-writing to elaborate categories, specify their properties, define relationships between categories, and identify gaps.*
- *Sampling aimed toward theory construction, not for population representativeness. (p.5-6)*

Key points here in respect to the current piece of research are that:

- The aim of the research is to go beyond the descriptive level towards theory development; towards naming a pattern or process (Glaser et al., 1968).
- No hypotheses were being tested, the research looked for patterns and processes in the lives of contemporary 16-18 year olds but held no presumptions about the natures of these processes.

- The aim of sampling was to explore the lives of contemporary 16-18 year olds in respect to their developmental phase, the wider culture and social context not in relation to the specifics of a given context, hence why participants were gathered from different sixth forms with different socio-economic demographics.

Theoretical sampling within a grounded theory context asks the question who or what do I need to investigate in order to expand, confirm or challenge the theoretical ideas arising from the data analysis (Charmaz 2006).

In the current study I was interested in investigating patterns in the social-psychological processes of adolescents in general. When patterns were identified in the initial data analysis and constant comparative process, I was interested in ascertaining whether the same pattern would be observable in the next set of adolescent participants. At this stage in the process, where an emergent theory was beginning to take shape, the priority as I saw it at this point, was to shape and construct the emergent theory rather than begin to think about its representativeness in respect to different demographics. This was deemed to be in line with Charmaz's idea of:

*Sampling aimed toward theory construction, not for population representativeness. (Charmaz, 2006 p.5-6)*

In the same vein, of looking for confirmation of the pattern/process emerging from the initial data analysis. It was deemed appropriate in subsequent interviews not to alter the interview schedule. This decision was taken in order to try and minimise the risk of the interviewer attempting to illicit answers from the participant that supported the emergent theory. The idea here was that if the interview schedule remained stable, and similar patterns emerged in the data, then the identification of the pattern might be seen as more

persuasive than if the subsequent interview schedule was re-orientated in order to more directly address the theoretical ideas present within the emergent theory.

It is a weakness of the study that it is limited in its representativeness of the adolescent population in general, because all of the participants attended further education settings, and though heralded from a mix of socio economic backgrounds (see p. 153) were predominantly white British in background. An important area for possible future research would be to investigate whether the pattern/process identified in the emergent theory is also observable in adolescents in different settings (for example college, work and apprenticeship settings and those not in education, employment or training) and in BAME individuals.

### 3.5 Linking Methodology to Ontology and Epistemology

My approach to utilising a grounded theory methodology has been to borrow what I found most useful and logical from the three major grounded theory texts/ approaches: those of Glaser and Strauss (Glaser et al., 1968) often termed classic grounded theory, Strauss and Corbin (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), sometimes termed evolved grounded theory and Charmaz (Charmaz, 2006), sometimes termed constructivist grounded theory.

Glaser and Strauss' original methodological approach is sometimes thought of as representing a more positivist stance or as Charmaz puts it 'positivist leanings' (Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz describes the approaches laid out by Glaser and Strauss and Strauss and Corbin as 'Objectivist' and situates them in a 'positivist tradition' (Charmaz, 2006, p. 133). She suggests that their:

*[..] view assumes an external reality awaiting discovery and an unbiased observer who records facts about it. Objectivist grounded theorists believe that careful application of their methods produces theoretical understanding. (Charmaz, 2006, p. 131)*

My own view here is that this interpretation constitutes a likely misreading of the work of Glaser and Strauss (1968) and even more so of Strauss and Corbin (1998). A robust argument has been made for the idea that Strauss and Corbin's approach is based on and represents a symbolic interactionist philosophical perspective (Chamberlain-Salaun et al., 2013).

Positivist interpretation of theory can be seen to treat theoretical concepts as variables with measurable relationships between them and are often interested in ideas of causation, whereas interpretivist approaches to theory tend to treat theoretical concepts as interpretations which involve looking for patterns (Charmaz, 2006).

Charmaz herself suggests that far from being an objectivist or positivist position, symbolic interactionism is grounded in social constructionism:

*Social constructionism is a theoretical perspective that assumes that people create social realities through individual and collective actions [...] Symbolic Interactionism is a constructionist perspective because it assumes that meanings and obdurate realities are the product of collective processes. (Charmaz, 2006, p. 189)*

### 3.5.1 Grounded Theory and Symbolic Interactionism.

Chamberlain-Salaun, Mills and Usher (2013) draw connections between the grounded theory method outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and symbolic interactionism. The key link and the one also made repeatedly by Strauss and Corbin (1998), is the that of investigating and observing action and process. For symbolic interactionism meaning

arises out of action and interaction. In developing this research project I was concerned with the psychological and social processes apparent in the lives of contemporary adolescents, in this way I was looking at action and process. That is to say that I was interested at looking at patterns in the actions and interactions, behaviour (both physical and psychological) of participants and beginning to make inferences about those patterns and how those patterns might be seen to bring about meaning. It was hoped that by looking for patterns along interactionist lines (that is between an individual and their environment and between other individuals) one might be able to develop a theoretical apparatus that has utility in interpreting and intervening in the process of embedded action. These ideas influenced the formulation of the research question: **Are there any clear social-psychological processes apparent within the lives of contemporary 16-18 year-olds?**

The final emergent theory of ‘defensive mentalizing’ offers an account of how action and interaction might be bring about meaning in terms of the self-concept of adolescent participants. In this theory it is how adolescent participants, perceive others, perceive them, which serves to influence/bias their psychological activity. Much like Mead’s dogs who shift their behaviour in response to the other in a cycle of escalation (Mead, 1934) . ‘defensive mentalizing’ posits a process of individuals drawing inferences about the ‘intentional state’ of others and those inferences forming the basis of a type of psychological escalation which becomes significant in respect to structuring their self-concept related behaviour.

For the purposes of this research, and in line with the pragmatist orientation of the piece, I would like to suggest that this research adopts a ‘interpretivist’ not ‘objectivist’

(Charmaz, 2006) approach to grounded theory one that is informed by pragmatism (Rorty, 1991) , social constructionism (Burr, 2015) and symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969).

I see social constructionism as a term used to represent the idea that knowledge, meaning and understanding are borne out of a cooperative process and shared assumptions about the world, its' subjects and reality, assumptions which we inherit and live into (Lock & Strong, 2010). I see social constructionism as largely concerned with the macro, the wider shared social reality and symbolic interactionism more concerned with the micro; that is how the specific interactions between individuals or groups modify meaning in a shared social reality (Blumer, 1969, 1979; Chamberlain-Salaun et al., 2013).

The research position of the current piece of research does not hold that there is an objective reality capable of being discovered by successful investigation, nor however, does it conform to Charmaz's constructivist perspective whereby meaning and knowledge creation is seen as a form of shared experience between participant and researcher and it is thus the researcher's responsibility to spend much of their efforts understanding why and how they are constructing meaning.

Charmaz suggests that:

*The logical extension of the constructivist approach means learning how, when, and to what extent the studied experience is embedded in larger and, often, hidden positions, networks, situations, and relationships.*

*Thus, constructivists attempt to become aware of their presuppositions and to grapple with how they affect the research. They realize that grounded theorists can ironically import preconceived ideas into their work when they remain unaware of their starting assumptions. (Charmaz, 2006, p. 130)*

I chose to reject Charmaz's constructivist orientation for three reasons:

- 1.) I feel the attempts as a researcher to 'bracket off' oneself by 'becoming aware of one's presuppositions' is philosophically misguided. Of relevance here is the different philosophical positions of two phenomenologist thinkers. Husserl, who believed it was possible to 'bracket off' one's preconceptions about the world in order to investigate it properly (Zahavi, 2003); and Heidegger who believed the human subject is born already thrown into the world and exists as a 'being-in-the-world' (Heidegger, 1996). For Heidegger to try and split the human subject from an exterior world involves a kind of artificial dualism which leads to misguided assertions. On this point I side with Heidegger and other philosophers who followed him (namely Derrida (1997), Sartre (2012) and Wittgenstein (2000)) who point out the impossibility of unpicking oneself from one's position in language and achieving a transcendental position from which to look down on oneself.
- 2.) It is un-pragmatic-in the sense that if one spends one energies and word count as a researcher trying to unpick both the inherited preconceptions of one's research participants and oneself, this may lead to a kind of intellectual paralysis and, as such, unnecessary barriers to theory generation.
- 3.) It is un-pragmatic- in the sense that the version of pragmatism I ascribe to in this piece of research holds that language and concepts are tools we use to navigate and have no claim to 'truth or reality'. Different linguistic and conceptual frameworks reveal different 'truths', different 'knowledge' (Rorty & Rorty, 1991). The task in this piece of research is not to compare or situate different

‘truths’ or ‘bracket off’ existing assumptions but to generate theory which can be judged by its utility.

It is also important to point out here that the approach is not one of critical realism. I am not suggesting that there is a knowable reality out there it’s just that we can’t be sure whether we’ve grasped it in our conceptual apparatus or not. Rather I align myself philosophically with the pragmatists and some of the phenomenologists who suggest that ‘reality is not a possible object of knowledge’. Or a Corbin and Strauss put it in the latest edition of their text book on grounded theory :

*The external world is a symbolic representation, a “symbolic universe”. This and the interior worlds are created and recreated through interaction. In effect, there is no divide between external or interior world.(Corbin & Strauss, 2014, p. 23)*

The aim of this piece was to offer something that may be judged to have, or not have, utility. The aim was not to offer truth or a critique of the concept of truth, not to attempt to achieve a transcendental perspective on the research subjects and myself as a researcher but rather to get ‘stuck in’ to a messy situation whilst making use of the tools at my disposal to make meaning and offer a theoretical construction.

### 3.5.2 A methodological fusion

From Glaser and Strauss original conception of the grounded theory method I took the idea that studying process was of central importance to grounded theory research and also the idea of ‘naming a pattern’ in behaviour and finding the words and concepts



which best fit the naming of the pattern (Glaser, 2002; Glaser et al., 1968). At the inception of this research the idea was to look for patterns and processes in the lives of contemporary adolescents in the hope that some form of novel meaning might arise.

From Strauss and Corbin's (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) work I took the detailed accessible and well-structured coding paradigm.

From Charmaz's work (Charmaz, 2006) I drew on her insight and discussion around the use of literature in grounded theory and the corresponding idea of sensitizing concepts. I also made use of Charmaz's outline of grounded theory as entailing abductive logic and an abductive process.

Taken together I was able to use the approach and insights of these thinkers to create a methodology that served my objectives in terms of my research aims and that also cohered with my epistemological and ontological position.

### 3.5.3 Deduction, Induction and Abduction

#### Deduction

In the context of this research it would have been possible to take an approach based on deductive reasoning. This would have likely involved using theoretical concepts from established theory to formulate hypotheses which could then be tested through observation and confirmed or disconfirmed (Bruscaglioni, 2016).

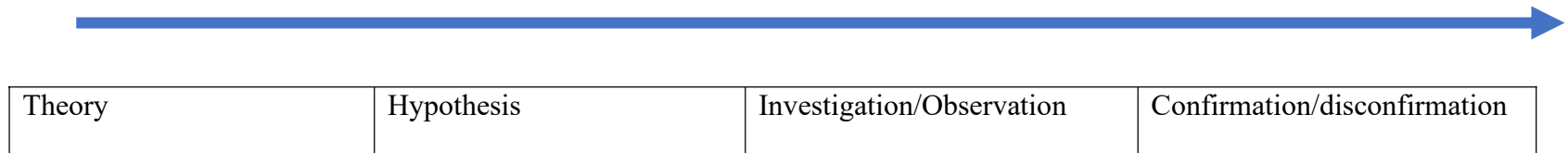


Figure 5: Deductive reasoning

For example, making use of research around substance use a hypothesis might have been formulated suggesting that contemporary adolescent anxiety levels are correlated to the frequency of substance use. This hypothesis could have been tested by investigating a sample of contemporary adolescents, charting their anxiety levels and their level of substance use and then analysing the data in terms of correlation. One downside to such an approach in this context is that it relies on pre-existing theoretical formulations and perhaps leaves little room for novel insight to emerge from a research situation.

## Induction

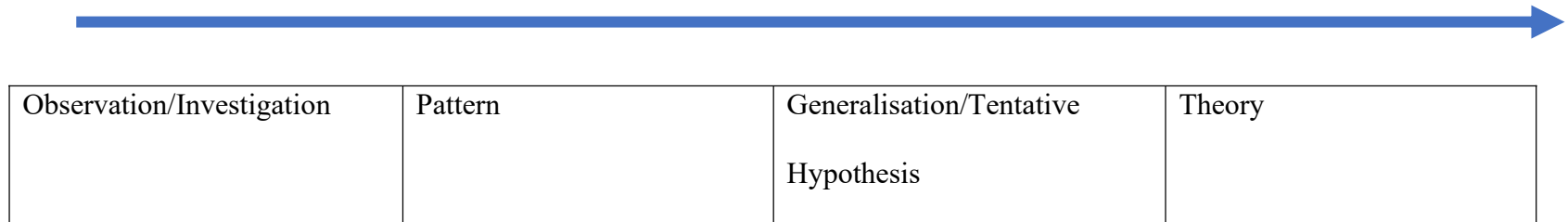


Figure 6: Inductive reasoning

It would also have been possible to take a solely inductive approach to this piece of research. Whereby data was gathered from/on contemporary adolescents and from analysis of this sample of data, patterns were observed, generalisations were made and theory generated. One disadvantage of such an approach might be that there is a risk of conjecture and the theoretical assertions being inspired by, but not sufficiently 'grounded' in, the data.

## Abduction

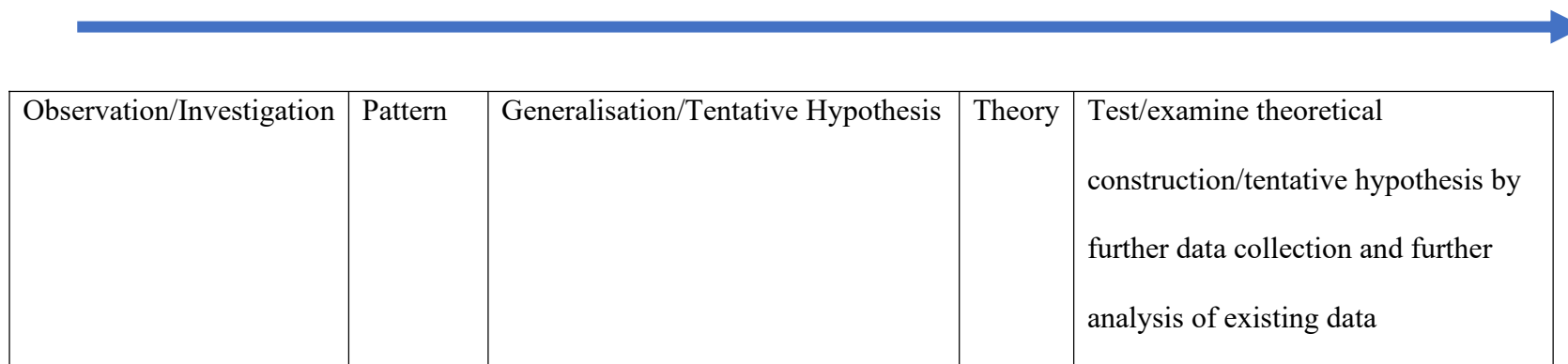


Figure 7: Abductive reasoning

The extra step of testing the inferences made from the initial data analysis makes the grounded theory methodology of this piece of research one centred in a form of abductive reasoning. Charmaz suggests:


*The particular form of reasoning invoked in grounded theory makes it an abductive method because grounded theory includes reasoning about experience for making theoretical conjectures and then checking them through further experience. (Charmaz, 2006, p. 104)*

In the case of the current piece of research, initially three interviews took place with three research participants, from this sample the data were analysed and through constant comparative analysis, memoing and diagramming patterns were observed and theory generated. This theory was then taken back to the existing data to see whether it fit (see appendix F for examples from each stage of the data analysis process), negative case analysis was used to consider cases where the theory did not fit the data. In this way the theory developed. Two further two participants were interviewed from a different setting and the

process of constant comparative analysis and negative case analysis continued in order to extend and test further the possible validity of the theoretical constructions. Following this process an initial draft of the emergent theory was established and I was then able to turn to the wider literature to contextualise, extend and challenge the emergent theory and reach the end point of a final emergent 'grounded theory'.

There is a question as to how inductive the initial stages of the research process were given the existence of the sensitising concepts outlined in the introduction (see part one: pp.15-22) and the fact that the interview questions (see part one p.21) could be interpreted as: a) encouraging polarization as they ask participants to discuss positive and negative experiences, and b) have a pre-emptive focus on experiences of groups and intersubjectivity.

I would like to argue that this research project involves an abductive process, however, perhaps one with additional steps than those discussed above:



Sensitizing concepts born out of professional/academic experience and initial engagement with literature	Interview questions informed by sensitizing concepts	Observation/ Investigation	Pattern	Generalisation/ Tentative Hypothesis	Theory	Test/examine theoretical construction/ tentative hypothesis by further data collection and further analysis of existing data.
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To the question as to whether the interview questions encouraged polarization, this is very much a possibility. However, I would contend that given the semi-structured nature of the interviews, the questions were intended to act only as a starting point and prompt for thought and discussion. In reality, I would suggest that this is how they were made use of. The participants seemed comfortable moving between topics and ideas and were encouraged to do so. The participants were all very forthcoming and keen to talk at length about their lives and outlook. By asking participants about their negative and positive experiences, and about their hopes and fears for the future, it could be argued that to then use the negative experiences and fears as motivating factors in a theoretical model is reductionist. This is a possible weakness of the study. However these ‘motivating factors’ do not make up the core insight or mechanism in the grounded theory that has been developed. The central phenomena of ‘defensive mentalizing’ is built around the repeated observation in the data that participants engaged in critiquing the intentions of their peers behaviour and perspectives. The fears and threats arising out of the possibly somewhat leading questions on negative experiences and fears for the future serve to contextualise and support the idea that adolescents participants might be involved in holding bias representations of their peers in order to defend themselves from the threat they pose to their self- esteem. However these threats and fears are contextual and supportive they are not essential to the core psychological mechanism described and supported by observation in the interview data (see part one: p.44) though the theoretical assertions would certainly be weaker without them.

### 3.6 Method of Data collection

I decided to use a semi-structured interview process as the method of data collection for this piece of research. The interview is a commonly used data collection method in qualitative research and is often celebrated for its ability to generate rich data in which participants are able to report on their perspectives and experiences in their own language (Howitt, 2016; Robson, 2011; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The semi-structured interview was deemed an appropriate method for this piece of research, because it enabled me to direct the interview enough so participants were discussing the areas that I was interested in exploring (groups/intersubjectivity, the future, difficulties) whilst allowing the participant to go where they wanted in respect to these topics. Follow up questions were couched in the same terms as the participant's and were used for clarification and to encourage elaboration, they were not intended to lead participant into saying certain things.

The interview schedule was checked, prior to the interviews taking place, with young people aged 16-18 known to me to check comprehension and accessibility. As part of this process two of the questions were reworded.

Semi-structured interviews have sometimes been criticised as a research method for taking interview data at face value and failing to take into account the power dynamics, social desirability effects and the fact that the interviewer directs the conversation as the interview unfolds (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Robson, 2011). I held these issues in mind during the writing of the interview schedule, the interviews themselves, and also during the data analysis processes. I was careful to avoid leading questions within the



interviews and also to consider the intersubjective forces at play in the interviews during data analysis.

### 3.7 Participants

Participants were sought from sixth forms and colleges from across England and South Wales. Participants were asked to take part in a semi-structured interview lasting approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. Interviews were recorded.

12 college and sixth form settings were approached to take part in the research, and of those 12, four settings expressed an interest in taking part and two were able to find the time and resources necessary to participate. Although the overarching aim of the sampling process was theory generation rather than population representativeness, the researcher did aim to gather data from individuals from as diverse a background as possible. In this light the researcher approached settings from the north and south of England, Wales and a number of inner-city London settings.

Five participants were interviewed from two different settings, one a school sixth form in an economically deprived town in the north of England, the other a sixth form in a city in South Wales serving students from a mixture of different socioeconomic backgrounds. After five students had been interviewed, the data transcribed and analysed, I decided the point of saturation had been met, the concepts in the theory were well developed and no new categories were emerging from data analysis (Glaser et al., 1968; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

College/sixth form students were selected as well-situated participants for this study as they had recently made a transition from key stage four and were likely involved in the

process of beginning to interact with the wider adult world. They were also expected to discuss factors that are relevant to the secondary and further education systems, factors that are likely to be of interest to the field of educational psychology.

### 3.8 Data collection

The table below outlines the data collection process.

<b>Step 1:</b> Gatekeeper letter (See Appendix A) sent to SENCO's and headteachers of schools and colleges who teach students post 16.
<b>Step 2:</b> SENCO and headteacher asked to share information sheet (See Appendix B) with students expressing an interest.
<b>Step 3:</b> A date arranged for researcher to visit sixth form to gain written consent and if appropriate conduct interviews.
<b>Step 4:</b> Researcher clarifies that the participant has understood the information sheet and consent form, given an opportunity to ask any questions and then asked to provide written consent.
<b>Step 5:</b> Following the interview participants are provided with a debrief form (See Appendix C) given an opportunity to ask any questions and to ask for any sections of the interview to be censored from the transcript.

Table 2: Outline of data collection procedure

### 3.9 Data analysis

Data analysis took place in accordance with the conventions of Straus and Corbin's 'evolved' grounded theory method (Chamberlain-Salaun et al., 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and involved the steps detailed in figure 1 (below).

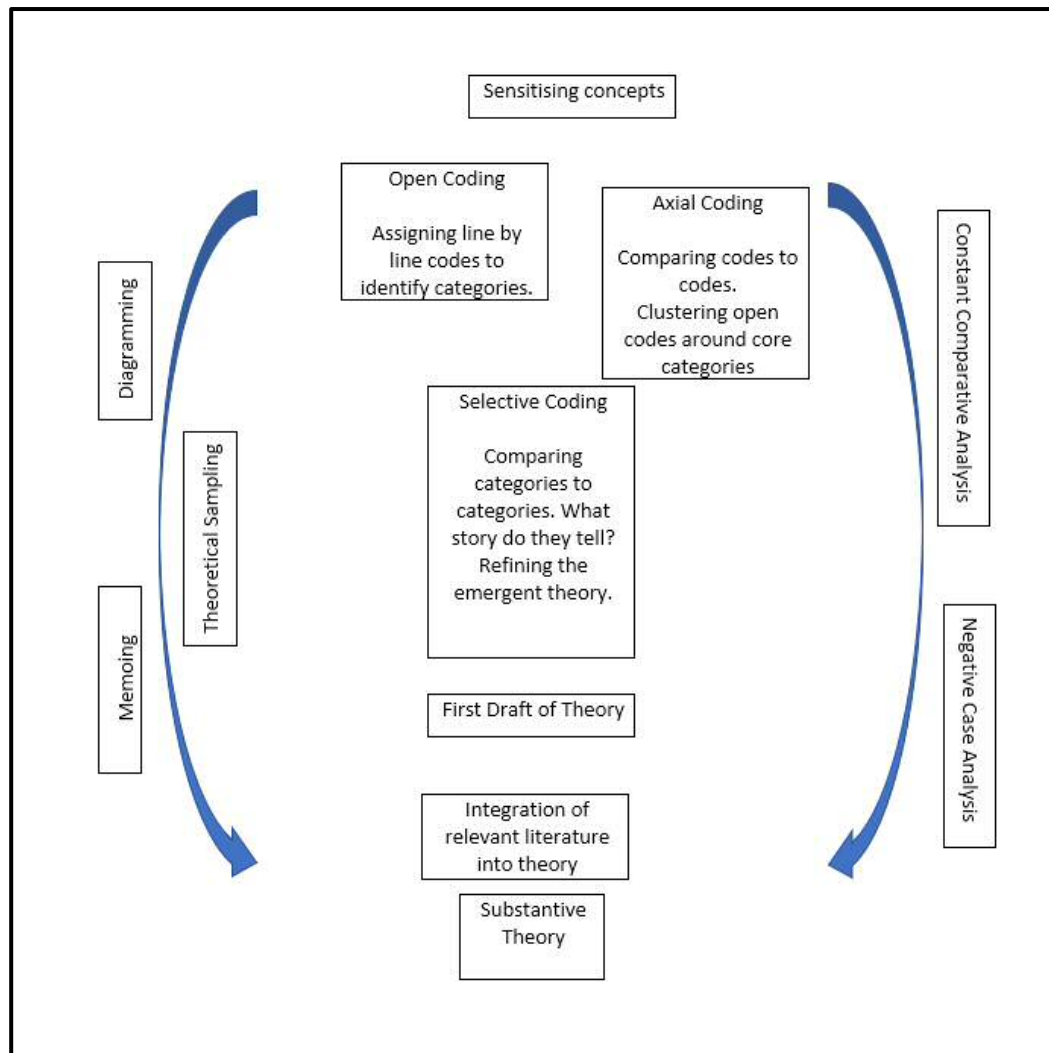


Figure 1: Steps of data analysis

It made use of the following analytical tools (see appendix F for examples from each stage of the data analysis process:

Table 9: Analytical tools

Analytic tool	How it was used and evidence
<p>Constant comparative method</p> <p>This is at the core of the grounded theory methodology and involves the procedure of: whilst coding or categorising an incident in the data, comparing it with all previous incidents labelled with the same or similar codes or categories. This involves comparing codes to codes, categories to categories, codes to categories etcetera. Glasser and Strauss in their original conception of the methodology suggested that this process ‘very soon starts to generate theoretical properties’ (Glaser et al., 1968, p. 106).</p>	<p>This process was used throughout the data analysis process (see appendix F-H) it was essential in the development of the emergent and then emergent theory of ‘defensive mentalizing’.</p>
<p>Open coding</p> <p>Open coding is the process of reading through the data several times and assigning tentative tags which label concepts and identify what you as a researcher perceive is happening in the</p>	<p>This process marked the beginning of the data analysis process and enabled me to get familiar with the data. It involved the first steps of sieving through large amounts of data and looking for significant concepts. (see appendix F)</p>

data.	example evidence of open coding)
<p>Discovering categories</p> <p>Strauss and Corbin suggest that:</p> <p>“Eventually the analyst realises that certain concepts can be grouped under a more abstract higher order concept, based on its ability to explain what is going on[...] Grouping concepts into categories is important because it enables the analyst to reduce the number of units with which he or she is working”</p> <p>(Strauss &amp; Corbin, 1998, p. 113).</p>	<p>Grouping the concepts from the initial coding process enabled me to distil the vast amount of interview data into a handful of manageable categories. I could then use the constant comparative method and abstract theorising to explore how these categories gave shape to and contextualised each other and the codes associated with them (see appendix F-H).</p>
<p>Memoing</p> <p>Memos provide the researcher with a record of the development of a grounded theory and also constitute a place for that theory to develop. Memos are a place for constant comparative analysis to take place. (Willig, 2013). Memos, within Strauss and Corbin’s methodology are presented as place for conceptual and</p>	<p>Through memoing and diagramming I was able to play around with the relationship between categories and concepts, to see what made sense, what had explanatory power? What relationships began to usher in a sense of knowledge creation? (see appendix H-I)</p>

analytical thought rather than description. (Glaser et al., 1968)	
<p>Negative case analysis</p> <p>Negative case analysis usually involves the process of seeking examples in the data that do not fit with, or undermine, the developing theory (Martin &amp; Gynnild, 2011; Willig, 2013).</p>	<p>Negative case analysis was important in this research to go back to the data and think: ‘I have come to these theoretical generalizations but do they actually fit the data, do they hold up?’</p> <p>This process enabled the development and clarification of the emergent theory as some of the initial theoretical constructions did not hold up when compared to the data.</p> <p>For example an important intermediate theoretical formulation, on the way to the final emergent theory, was that participants were involved in the process of using the interview process as experimenting with their self-presentation. Looking to the interviewer to affirm or disaffirm that they are playing a part</p>

	<p>convincingly. Whether the self that they are constructing/presenting is socially acceptable.</p> <p>This was an appealing formulation but whilst returning to the data and the constant comparative method it became apparent there were numerous examples (negative cases) where this interpretation didn't fit (see appendix f and g). Where participants were clearly more interested in the process of trying to understand for themselves the meaning of social and interpersonal events and negotiating meaning and self-concept in this context. Participants seemed to not be so much trying to experiment with ways of presenting themselves, but rather trying to interpret the facts (social and intersubjective) as they saw them. This appeared to be a process of negotiating a self-image/construct that they could accept and justify and that had logical</p>
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	<p>consistency for them.</p> <p>A type of negative case analysis also took place following the process of situating the emergent theory in the literature. Whereby the question was asked: can the patterns/feature of the data not be better explained by the existing conceptual apparatus of social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) or Goffman's (1978) theory of the performative self (see part 2 p.90 and p.94 for an in-depth exploration of this)</p>
<p>Axial coding</p> <p>Axial coding involves identifying relationships between codes and categories, telling a story, or as Corbin and Strauss put it: axial coding "helps us contextualise a phenomenon, that is, to locate it within a conditional structure and identify the 'how' or the means through which a category is manifested."</p>	<p>Constant comparative analysis and negative case analysis was important here in determining whether the stories being told, the axial constructs being experimented with, held a kind of internal logical consistency but also whether they fit the data. The process of diagramming and memoing was also important in exploring the relationship between codes and categories (see appendix F-H),</p>



(Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 127)	
<p>Selective coding</p> <p>Selective coding involves choosing a central category.</p> <p>“A central category has analytic power. What gives it that power is the ability to pull the other categories together to form an explanatory whole” (Strauss &amp; Corbin, 1998, p. 146)</p>	<p>Defensive mentalizing was selected as the core category or central phenomenon because:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It appears to offer a novel theoretical conception</li> <li>• There appears to be substantial evidence in the data to support it (see table 7 pp.44-55 )</li> <li>• The other categories in the theoretical construction can be seen to be situated and contextualised by the ‘core category’. For example perceived threats is able to be seen as a motivating factor for ‘defensive mentalizing’.</li> </ul> <p>The selective coding process helped to clarify my thinking further and distil the research findings into a short articulatable formulation.</p>
Integration with relevant literature	<p>This was essential in contextualising and expanding the emergent theory (see part one pp. 60-65 for a summary). It was also</p>

	<p>a rewarding part of the process as it allowed me to explore and learn from a wide range of theoretical and empirical literature.</p>
<p>Theoretical sensitivity</p> <p>This is the idea within the grounded theory methodology that the researcher has insight into, the ability to recognise, what is meaningful and significant in the data</p> <p>(Mills &amp; Birks, 2014; Strauss &amp; Corbin, 1998)</p>	<p>In this piece of research this meant sensitivity to features of the data that had the capacity to say something theoretical or explanatory, rather than descriptive, about the lives and experience of participants</p>
<p>Theoretical saturation</p> <p>The point at which concepts in the theory are well developed and no new categories were emerging from data analysis (Strauss &amp; Corbin, 1998).</p>	<p>After five students had been interviewed and the data transcribed and analysed, the researcher decided the point of saturation had been met, the concepts in the theory were well developed and no new categories were emerging from data analysis</p>

#### **4. The literature review and writeup**

One challenging decision during this project was where to situate the literature review within the writeup. Within the research process the main interaction with the wider empirical and theoretical literature took place after the first draft of the emergent theory was produced but before the final emergent theory was outlined. This decision was taken so as not to be “constrained and even stifled” by the existing literature (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and so that I could attempt to make connections and generate theory in a creative way that wasn’t unduly influenced by existing paradigms or bodies of research. With respect to writing the ‘empirical paper’ section of this thesis this posed a logistical problem, because the traditional method of outlining the literature review before the empirical paper would not be appropriate. The grounded theory project turned to the literature midway through the research process and I therefore decided to locate the literature review section of the thesis after the empirical paper. I refer to and summarize the findings and implications of interacting with the wider literature, on the emergent theory in the empirical paper.

Because the main literature review happened after data collection and initial theory development, and in line with the tenants of the grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser et al., 1968; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), I was able to explore a wide range of literature from fields as diverse as neuroscience, evolutionary psychology, social psychology, sociology and philosophy. The fact that I waited until after the initial theory generation, allowed me to look to literature for studies and theories that had a theoretical or conceptual relationship with the logic of the ‘emergent theory’. This had its advantages, for example the use of ideas from: Mead’s (1934) theory of ‘the I and the

me', social comparison theory and 'fundamental attribution bias' (Ross, 1977) , were important to the development of the final emergent theory. If the literature review had only focussed on adolescent development and sociality this would not have been possible.

However, this strategy also presented its own difficulties, including the fact that the amount of theoretical literature that might be deemed relevant and shed light on the emergent theory was vast. I spent a lot of time reading and considering the emergent theory from different theoretical perspectives and this was time consuming and intellectually exhausting. For example, I spent a lot of time considering the emergent theory from the perspective of the work of the philosopher Martin Heidegger (see appendix F), this process likely aided in the development of the theory somewhat but did not make it into the research paper. There were also a number of times where my thinking was dragged off to theoretically distant places which were interesting, but ultimately turned out to be distractions. Attempting to keep the theory 'grounded' was difficult and what helped at each point was going back to the data and seeing how much distance there appeared to be between the research data and the abstract theoretical conceptions I was currently thinking about. Guided by the methodological literature (Chamberlain-Salaun et al., 2013; Charmaz, 2006; El Hussein, Kennedy, & Oliver, 2017; Glaser et al., 1968; Martin & Gynnild, 2011; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) I was aware that if it was the case that I felt that I had to force the data to fit the theoretical conception then it was likely that I had gone too far in terms of speculation.

#### 4.1 Criticality in the use of literature

In respect to the more empirical section of the literature review; it was largely used to contextualise, shape and support the assertions being made in the developing grounded theory. The literature was used to support or make a point, if the point was supported by

the findings of more than one, preferably several, studies and the results of these studies seemed persuasive.

There are examples where I used theoretical literature which challenged the logic or assertions of the emergent theory, for example social comparison (Festinger, 1954) theory and Goffman's (1978) theory of 'the performativity of self' were used to consider the robustness of that logic. There are also examples where there is significant debate and criticality in the literature review, for example where I explore whether adolescents should be interpreted as a discrete developmental period or a cultural construct.

However, the use of literature in general during this piece of research is somewhat creative and exploratory in nature. This is to do with the methodology adopted and the epistemological and ontological stance of the research; the fact that I granted myself permission be creative in the aim of theory generation and the production of novel ideas. However, this leaves the literature review open to criticism that it lacks criticality and that the literature is cherry picked to support the researcher's existing theoretical formulation.

To this criticism I would respond by acknowledging that this is a possible limitation of the study, but also by saying that the primary aim of this project was to generate theory. I began with a broad query about the possible social psychological processes on display in the lives of contemporary 16-18 year olds, in the hope that this query might reveal insights which could be of use to understanding the intersubjective determinants/correlates of the psychological difficulties often currently experienced in that age range. An engagement with the literature was used in order to facilitate this

process of theory generation with the hope that the theory would have utility. Literature was used to try and illuminate the data and to support and extend the theoretical conclusions being made. The aim was to use the literature to help explain the observations from the data. Where debate and criticality were deemed appropriate, it was used. However, the aim was not to debate the merit or logical consistency of competing psychological or other theoretical theories, or to fill gaps in the scientific literature; the research aim was to generate theory that might have utility. The criticality within the project comes from using the literature, as well as my analytical and theoretical capacities, to explore the research situation and critically analyse the theoretical assertions being developed. Again, this hinged on returning to the data and analysing how well these assertions held up. It is true that given the scope of the project, in respect to time and word count, it has not been possible to explore each of the theories or research areas discussed in significant depth in this thesis. It might also be suggested the broad-brush strokes used in parts of this project are indicative of overambition. However, I hope that these possible concessions in terms of meticulousness have been justified by the goal of theory generation.

#### 4.2 Avoiding an exploration of overarching psychological paradigms

In line with the pragmatist ontological position, I decided to avoid an exploration of wider psychological paradigms or ‘grand world views’ which might serve to contextualise the emergent theory of ‘defensive mentalizing’. This decision was done largely for reasons of brevity, there was not scope to frame and position the ‘emergent theory’ in the context of an in depth consideration of (for example) a psychoanalytic, cognitive behavioural or existential world view, though each of these discussions may

have been of value. Another reason for this decision was pragmatic: for the grounded theory to have utility does it need to be centred in a logically coherent overarching psychological or philosophical world view? To this question I answered with a tentative ‘no’.

One obvious perspective to situate the emergent theory, given the use made of Erikson’s (1994) theory of ‘psychosocial development’ as a sensitising concept and the ideas of ‘denial’ and ‘defence’ utilised in the theory, is a psychoanalytic one. This might have been particularly pertinent given the work Fonagy (Allen, Fonagy, & Bateman, 2008; Fonagy & Target, 1997) has done around ‘Mentalization’, which he suggests is the effort that an individual makes to understand others in terms of their thought their thoughts, feelings, beliefs and desires. I became somewhat familiar with Fonagy’s work during the engagement with the literature which followed the first draft of the emergent theory. I deliberately avoided a comparison of the emergent theory with Fonagy’s theory because it was deemed an interesting aside rather than central to the extrapolation of the grounded theory.

Fonagy’s theory is largely concerned with ideas of psychopathology and the effective use of therapy particularly with individuals struggling with ‘personality disorders’ (Allen et al., 2008; Fonagy & Target, 1997). The ‘mentalizing’ outlined as taking place in the process labelled ‘defensive mentalizing’ is different to the process described by Fonagy. Whereas Fonagy describes a process of ‘second order representation’ (Allen et al., 2008; Fonagy & Target, 1997) whereby one comes to identify one’s thoughts, feeling and beliefs from the perspective of the attachment figure and thus is enabled to derive a comforting, regulating therapeutic distance from one’s immediate experience.

The constitutive other posited in the emergent theory of ‘Defensive Mentalizing’, and the sense of self-concept and self-construct tied up in the ‘gaze’ of this other, is within the emergent theory, an ongoing everyday process linked to the fact that humans are socially embedded creatures whose social structures and social systems are shifting and thus insecure. The emergent theory posits biases in the ‘mentalizing’ process and suggests that these biases might serve a functional (adaptive rather than pathological, or at least not always pathological) purpose. in that they may allow the individual to maintain a level of self-assurance and control in the context of possible social threat. This may allow individuals more of an opportunity to function successfully in a social, and socially complex, world.

## **5. Ethical issues**

See Appendix D for an outline of the main ethical considerations and how they were attended to.

## **6. Contribution to knowledge and dissemination**

### **6.1 Contribution to the literature and research concerning adolescence and the professional practice of Educational Psychologists**

This piece of research contributes to a body of literature pointing to the importance of peer relationships and social status in the lives and psychological development of adolescents (see part two: literature review). It offers a novel social psychological mechanism by which adolescents perceive the possible negative appraisal of their peers as threatening to their self-concept and/or social status and are thus motivated to undermine/ critique the ‘intentional state’ and motivation of their peers behaviour/



perspective, in order to nullify this threat. This grounded theory makes use of the apparatus and findings from the exiting empirical and theoretical literature which evidences the impact and importance of peer relations to adolescent behaviour. It builds on this literature by offering a tentative theoretical explanation/mechanism as to one way in which the adolescent peer relations might influence the structure of the psychological and behavioural processes of some adolescents. There is a significant body of research exploring the social, psychological and neurological changes that accompany/constitute adolescents, however, there is little research into how these changes influence/correlate with the psychological and interpersonal experiences of actual adolescents. The final emergent theory outlined in this study provides one such offering, which, whilst grounded in a (relatively small) data set, is of course tentative and hypothetical in nature.

The aim of this research was exploratory, to look for some of the possible social and psychological processes at play within the lives of contemporary 16-18 year olds. Through this process, this piece of research has looked at a body of data, used a type of abductive process to analyse and identify a pattern in that data, before turning to empirical and theoretical literature to make broader generalizations about the possible relevance/significance of this pattern. It is quite possible that this process has been in some way ‘wide of the mark’ or perhaps conjectural or ‘ungrounded’.

If we are to consider this possibility, it is important that we return to the ontological and epistemological position adopted by the project. The pragmatist ontological perspective of the piece centres on the idea that we cannot either ‘know’ or ‘not-know’ reality, and that human language is a tool by which we orientate and navigate and has no claim to

representing ‘reality’. The epistemological stance pertaining to ‘social constructionism’ (Burr, 2015) posits that our ‘knowledge base’, those concepts which we use to navigate our lives, are the product of the cultures which we grow up into and which shape our perspective and possibilities. In this context if we consider whether or not this project has value, we perhaps have to turn to the pragmatists question which is not: is the theory true, but rather does it have utility? (Menand, 1997). An answer to that question is difficult to give at this current moment, so we might consider another; could the theory have utility?

The theory offers a new conceptual tool, creates ‘new knowledge’ and its future relevance, or lack thereof, will lie in its utility. This utility will have something to do with the ‘how things actually are’, in that if the theory helps people working with adolescents to understand them, adapt environments to them, helps them in difficult circumstances, then it can be thought to have utility. Equally if the theory helps me, or other practitioners working in the field, in our professional practice as applied psychologists and enables the facilitation of positive change in the lives of adolescents being worked with, then it can be seen to have utility. This theory could have utility in influencing mine and others’ agency within the world, it may constitute a useful conceptual tool. For this theory to be deemed substantive rather than emergent it, the pattern/process observed and named in the theory of ‘defensive mentalizing’ will need to be identified in a wider sample of adolescents, preferably from a wider demographic and/or be shown to be of use in the work of practitioner psychologists working with adolescents.

## 6.2 Dissemination

One of the ways this theoretical tool might come to have utility is through its dissemination and the dissemination of the wider thinking and findings of this research paper. I intend to present the ideas in this paper to my fellow trainees and other colleagues working in Educational Psychology during a scheduled university presentation event. I also intend to attempt to publish the empirical paper section of this thesis in one of the Educational Psychology professional journals. I also hope to present my findings to colleagues at the Educational Psychology Service I will be employed with after my training.

For a consideration as to whether this piece of research can be considered well executed and ‘trustworthy’ using Yardley’s criteria (2008) see appendix E. These principles: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence and impact and importance, are used as a measure of whether the research is well enough conceived and executed to be considered rigorous enough to have utility.

## 6.3 Implications for future research

This study consisted of a small sample size ( $n=5$ ) so further research and investigation will be necessary before the theory can be thought to be representative beyond the scope of these participants. In respect to future research, a study which looks for the pattern outlined in the theory of ‘defensive mentalizing’ in the experiences of a wider sample of 16-18 year olds would be desirable. Research which adopted a mixed methods methodology which looked for the existence of this social psychological mechanism/pattern whilst at the same time measuring an individual’s status amongst

their peers and/or self-concept/self-esteem, would also allow researchers to begin to investigate the prevalence of the mechanism/pattern whilst also starting to consider its wider function and implications. Is the use of this kind thinking and relating to others correlated with high self-esteem and positive self-concept and its absence the converse? In which case we might begin to consider ‘defensive mentalizing’ an adaptive and proactive pattern/mechanism. Or is this patten/mechanism most prevalent in individuals in a position of low social status? In which case we might begin to consider that the pattern/mechanism represents a reactive/protective response, perhaps still adaptive, to adversity. This type of research would be complex because looking for ‘the existence of this social psychological mechanism/pattern’ would likely involve further qualitative endeavours and given the complex nature of the environmental, social and situational variables involved, eliciting convincing results would be a challenge. It might be the case that the grounded theory would have more relevance in respect to future research in terms of ‘practice-based evidence’. That is to say that it might be that research carried out by professionals/practitioners who work with adolescents, and who were making use of the theoretical perspective enabled by the grounded theory, could provide evidence for or against its efficacy/utility in for example, aiding the process of psychological formulation for adolescent service users experiencing social difficulties.

For the emergent theory to be considered a substantive theory, future research will need to determine whether it is either a) applicable across settings and demographics or if not for which settings and demographics it is applicable and/or b) show that it has use as a guiding theoretical construction in applied psychology practice. This constitutes the pathway for impact of this piece of research: future research which confirms the

findings of the emergent theory that leads to evidence-based practice and/or data gathered from applied psychological practice which constitutes practice based evidence.

For example, one could imagine a situation where an Practitioner Psychologist integrates the logic of the emergent theory into personal construct psychology (Ravenette, 1999) work they are doing with an adolescent service user who is experiencing anxiety and is somewhat socially isolated. The psychologist might notice that the young person is critical of the motivation of his or her peers and reduces the complexity of their behaviour to self-interest, they might then speculate, in terms of a psychological formulation, whether this criticality represents a bias by which they are protecting themselves from the perceived negative appraisal of their peers. This formulation might hypothesise, that this criticality is a result of the young person's need to protect themselves in their socially vulnerable context and to defend their self-concept. They may also infer that this behaviour is perhaps contributing to the young person's level of social isolation whilst perhaps also serving this protective function. In this context the theory of defensive mentalizing may be seen as having utility in the formulation and hypothesis construction work of the practitioner psychologist.

If then the psychologist goes on to use their training in systems theory and/or family therapy to think about the concept of circular causality. They might design an intervention whereby the young person is enabled to see that their interpretation of their peers behaviour is reductionist, lacking in generosity and does not take into account their peers' vulnerability as socially embedded creatures occupying a space and developmental period where social status is of paramount importance. If in this way the young person may be helped to see that their pre-reflective bias does not necessarily

constitute ‘fact’ and if they can move towards a more generous interpretation of their peers’ ‘intentional states’, they may be better able to relate, respond and interact with them, and again the theory of ‘defensive mentalizing’ can be seen to have utility.

A brief discussion of the concept of circular causality found in systems theory could be useful in informing a discussion of how the emergent theory of ‘defensive mentalizing’ might have utility when working with adolescents, Dowling and Osbourne suggest that:

*If we view behaviour in terms of cycles of interaction, instead of asking whether A causes B, the behaviour of A is seen as affecting and being affected by  
 $b=B\dots(p.4)$*

As has been mentioned, we might see the way in which adolescents interpret themselves and others as tied up in a kind of circular causality. If it is true as the emergent theory hypothesises, that adolescents display a cognitive bias towards an ungenerous interpretation of their peers motivation and intentional states, perhaps linked to a defensive impulse to protect themselves from the constitutive power of their peers in terms of their social (and more fundamental) identity, then we can see how this might foster relationships, and environments, where unsympathetic/ungenerous interpretations of motivations result in defensive and/or hostile behaviours, which in turn elicit similar response thereby reinforcing, accelerating or amplifying a stressful context and perhaps making strategies like those outlined in the emergent theory even more necessary and ‘adaptive’.

It can be suggested, that in such a context, an opportunity arises for those working with adolescents and their environments (e.g. Educational Psychologists, educators) to interrupt or draw attention to circular causality at play. Perhaps if adolescents in a group can be helped to become cognisant of one another’s social vulnerability, the fact that the

social identity of each of them is largely out of their control. They may be able to recognise that, it is from this ‘defensive’ position, that some of their behaviours arise, they may be able to more generously interpret the behaviour of their peers and be less motivated by an impulse to protect their self-identity. It thus might be possible at a group/systems level to go some way to improving the psychological wellbeing of adolescents, this is a possible area of future research. One could imagine this forming part of a pastoral curriculum, Educational Psychologist training for school staff, or group work carried out by psychologists/teachers with students.

Other Possible interesting avenues for future research might include:

- An investigation as to whether ‘defensive mentalizing’ is associated with a reduction in social anxiety and or/peer influenced adolescent risk taking (see part two: literature p110, for context).

- An investigation into the prevalence of the pattern of ‘defensive mentalizing’ in adults in comparison to adolescents given that perhaps adults are less influenced by a drive towards peer affiliation (see part two: literature p114, for context).

The theory might also be of use in highlighting the importance of peer relations and intersubjectivity in the lives of adolescents and pointing to the possibility that adolescents may be vulnerable in terms social identity and self-concept. It might also be

of use in highlighting links between these factors and adolescent mental health and psychological wellbeing. If we come to see adolescents' conception of themselves and their social status as determined intersubjectively and we posit that defensive cognitive mechanisms and bias might be instrumental in mediating this process, then we might be open to thinking about how these complexities could illuminate specific difficulties in the lives of individuals, groups and systems.

## **7. Development as a researcher**

### **7.1 Lessons learnt/Insights gleaned**

The use of a grounded theory methodology was a departure from my previous research involvement and made for an exciting but challenging experience. It was a pleasure to adopt a methodology aligned philosophically with my outlook as an applied psychologist and student. However, orientating myself to the different methodological tools, whilst ensuring I did not become overwhelmed by the large amount of interview data, was a challenge. The whole process was a lengthy one. One of the key lessons learnt from this process was that: allowing oneself time to think, to become familiar with and absorbed in the data; time to make connections and let one's curiosity wander, is time well spent. There is a pull, given the time constraints of an Educational Psychology doctorate, and the demands of practising as an applied psychologist whilst completing a research project, to try and ensure things are moving ahead at a steady pace. I learnt in this research, that a grounded theory project unfolds at its own pace. I sensed that if I didn't spend enough time analysing and exploring my data, and jumped to conclusion too



quickly, the resulting theory would be superficial and forced. At the same time I would not be able to make the best use of the process in respect to my development as a practitioner psychologist. By spending as much time as possible with the data and thus with the lives and world views of my research participants, I feel like I have had the opportunity to empathise with their position and have been reminded of the trials and tribulations of navigating what is often a very difficult and emotionally fraught developmental period. I feel like my day to day work with adolescents has benefited from this progress; that my ability to attune to adolescent clients/service users has improved and that my ability to look for opportunities for intervention in the relationships between service users and their peers and environment has also been heightened.

Without substantial further research the findings of this project are limited in their generalisability. However, for my own professional practice I feel the process has been of value and will significantly inform the way I go about generating psychological formulations about the problem situations of adolescent service users. My studies and experience in psychology suggest to me that the beliefs and cognitive representations that individuals hold are not always accurate and not always adaptive. The psychological bias outlined in the grounded theory could be interpreted as a protective and adaptive response to adolescent intersubjectivity or it could be interpreted otherwise. I feel that being open to the idea that psychological bias, and possible defensive psychological mechanisms, might be influential factors in the lives and behaviour of service users I work with, will become an important aspect of my future practice. I am fond of using techniques and activities derived from Personal Construct

Psychology (Ravenette, 1999) to explore the worldview of the young people I am working with. Looking out for patterns in individual's thinking/relating, similar to those identified in the grounded theory, may enable me to refine the theory further, it may also constitute one more theoretical perspective open to me, which helps me to navigate and unpick the problem situations I am privileged to work with.

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## Appendix A: Gatekeeper letter



17/06/19

Dear Senior Leader,

I am a trainee educational psychologist currently studying at Cardiff university. As part of my doctoral studies I am required to complete a piece of academic research which will be supervised by my research supervisor Dr Dale Bartle. Ethical approval has been given for this research by Cardiff University.

The aim of the research is to investigate the structures, difficulties and conflicts experienced by contemporary adolescents going through the process of identity development in the context of rapid cultural and technological change.

The research will involve interviews with students which will be recorded and last approximately 45minutes- 1 hour. If you are happy for your students to take part in the research, I would be grateful if you could share the attached information sheet with students in your institution who are over the age of 16. Students can then, if they are happy to take part in the research, provide their written consent upon my visit.

The research will be written up and submitted for examination to the university. However, all information will be anonymous and not traceable to any individual or school. It is possible that the information attained will be used in a publication and / or presentation, but in an entirely anonymised format. I would also be happy to share the findings with you.

If you would like to arrange a meeting to discuss the project in more depth, I would be happy to attend.

Thank you for your time and for considering the project, please get in touch if you have any questions.

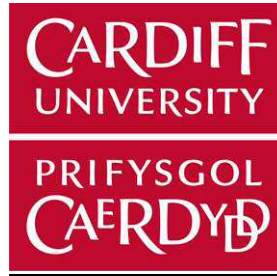
Regards  
Owen Cogan

- Owen Cogan: [cogano@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:cogano@cardiff.ac.uk)

If you have any complaints about the research, you can contact the research supervisor at Cardiff University Dale Bartle via email: [bartled@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:bartled@cardiff.ac.uk) or by phone: 02920876497. You can also contact the university psychology ethics committee via: [psychethics@cf.ac.uk](mailto:psychethics@cf.ac.uk), 02920874007.



## Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet



### Information Sheet for prospective participants

#### Research investigating contemporary adolescent identity development.

**You have been asked to take part in a research project investigating adolescent identity development in the contemporary context of rapid technological and social change.**

#### **What is the research about?**

I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist currently studying at Cardiff university. As part of my doctoral studies I am required to complete a piece of academic research.

This research will involve using interviews to explore the phenomena of identity development in contemporary adolescence. College/sixth form students have been selected as ideal participants for this study as you have recently made a transition from secondary school and are involved in the process of beginning to form an identity in the wider adult world.

Interview and data analysis techniques will be used that focus on eliciting and interpreting factors/issues experienced by research participants.

This data will also be anonymised immediately after the interview process, participants will be given a pseudonym in order to aid data analysis and writeup, data will be stored in this anonymised state in a password protected, encrypted location.

You have the right to withdraw at any point before completing the interview and will also be given the opportunity to ask any questions and/or withdraw immediately after the interview.

#### **Who is the researcher?**

Owen Cogan is the researcher; he is a Trainee Educational Psychologist studying at Cardiff University and the research forms part of a marked assignment for his doctorate course. He will receive support Cardiff University throughout the course of this research project.

The researcher is contactable by email address as follows:

- Owen Cogan: [cogano@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:cogano@cardiff.ac.uk)

### **How will the research be conducted?**

Interviews will be carried out lasting approximately 45 minutes- 1 hour. The data will then be made anonymous upon transcription and any identifying features will be removed. Data will be analysed following the conventions of grounded theory methodology.

- If you would like to take part in the research, please contact the researcher at : [cogano@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:cogano@cardiff.ac.uk)

### **What will happen to the results of the research?**

The anonymised results of the research will be written up into a research paper for submission at Cardiff University. It is possible that this paper could be published in an academic journal or used as part of a presentation, but all information will be entirely anonymous and untraceable to yourself.

### **What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

The research could help give those working in educational psychology an insight into the features of identity development in the contemporary context, it could also form the basis of further research into the area.

### **Who do I contact if I have a complaint?**

If you have any complaints about the research, you can contact the research supervisor at Cardiff University Dale Bartle via email: [bartled@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:bartled@cardiff.ac.uk) or by phone: 02920876497. You can also contact the university psychology ethics committee via: [psychethics@cf.ac.uk](mailto:psychethics@cf.ac.uk) or 02920874007

**Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet**

## Appendix C: Participant debriefing form



### Participant debriefing form

Thank you for taking part in the interview process. The purpose of this research is to investigate some of the experiences and struggles experienced by contemporary adolescent entering the adult world .

The interview data will also be anonymised immediately after the interview process; participants will be given a pseudonym in order to aid data analysis and writeup, data will be stored in this anonymised state in a password protected, encrypted location.

You now have the opportunity to ask any questions of the researcher and, if you chose, withdraw from participating in the study. If you chose to do so the interview data will be deleted. However, if you wish to continue with your participation in the study, know that after this point it will not be possible to withdraw from the research process or retrieve/remove interview data from this process.

If you feel like you are in need of psychological or wellbeing based support following your participation in this research process please contact your college/sixth form wellbeing/counselling service at:

Or one of the following organisations who offer such support:

#### ***Childline***

0800 1111

[childline.org.uk](http://childline.org.uk)

Free 24-hour helpline for children and young people in the UK.

#### ***The Mix***

[themix.org.uk](http://themix.org.uk)

Online guide to life for 16-25 year olds. Straight-talking emotional support is available 24 hours a day. Chat about any issue on moderated discussion boards and live chat room.

#### ***NSPCC***

helpline (adults): 0800 800 5000

helpline (children and young people): 0800 1111

[help@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk)

[nspcc.org.uk](http://nspcc.org.uk)

Specialises in child protection and the prevention of cruelty to children.

What if I want to know more?

If you have concerns about your rights as a participant in this experiment, please contact Simon Claridge:

02920876497, [claridge@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:claridge@cardiff.ac.uk)

Or

Cardiff University Ethics Committee:

[Psychethics@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:Psychethics@cardiff.ac.uk)

Thank you again for your participation.

Owen Cogan:

## Appendix D: Ethical considerations and how they were addressed.

Ethical consideration	How this has been addressed
Informed consent	<p>The consent form asked participants to confirm that they understood the nature of the study. Before the interviews took place, participants were given an opportunity to ask any questions about the study. Participants were also, at this point, given an opportunity to withdraw from the study, they were given another opportunity to do so at the end of the interview. To protect the anonymity of participants all interview data was anonymised post interview and no identifying information has been included anywhere on the writeup of the research. Anonymised data was stored in a password protected encrypted digital location.</p>
Risk of harm	<p>It was deemed possible that the nature of the interview process (and in particular asking participants about their negative experiences of groups and difficulties they were facing) could be emotionally distressing for individuals. In light of this, the participant debriefing form (see appendix C) provided participants with details of the sixth form pastoral support and/or counselling service as well as relevant national helplines. The researcher also made participants aware at the beginning of the interview process that they would have the chance to verbally debrief and discuss any experience of distress at the end of the interview.</p>
Right to withdraw	<p>Participants were made aware of their right to withdraw in the participant information sheet (see appendix B) and reminded of this before and after the</p>

	<p>interview process.</p> <p>At the end of the interview process participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions and were provided with the researcher's email address in case they wished to ask a question at a later date.</p>
Anonymity/confidentiality	<p>The interview data was anonymised immediately after the interview process; participants were given a pseudonym in order to aid data analysis and writeup, data was stored in this anonymised state in a password protected, encrypted location.</p>
Debrief	<p>Participants were debriefed verbally and via a debrief form.</p>

## Appendix E :Evaluating trustworthiness of research using Yardley’s criteria (2008)

Yardley’s criteria	How these were met by the researcher
Sensitivity to context	<p>The choice of methodology, interview questions, epistemological and ontological stance were all geared towards allowing the adolescent participants a chance to speak and the researcher a chance to listen. The researcher endeavoured not to impose pre-existing theoretical or psychological paradigms on to the ‘reality’ of the lives and experiences of the research participants. The participants were approached as individuals not as examples of ‘developmental psychopathology’ which adolescence is sometimes equated with. The researcher endeavoured to generate theory that was grounded in the data as it was presented.</p> <p>The researcher endeavoured to be sensitive to the specific perspectives and constructions of individual participants in both the interview and data analysis process.</p> <p>An ontological and epistemological stance was explicitly outlined to provide clarity around the process and methods adopted in the process of ‘generating knowledge’,</p> <p>Interviews were carried out in settings which participants were familiar with and comfortable in.</p>
Commitment and rigour	<p>The rigorous methodological steps outlined in Corbin and Strauss’s version of grounded theory (Strauss &amp; Corbin, 1998) were conformed to.</p> <p>Participants sampled (n=5) resulted in approximately 4.5 hours of fully transcribed interview data. The researcher committed a significant amount of time</p>

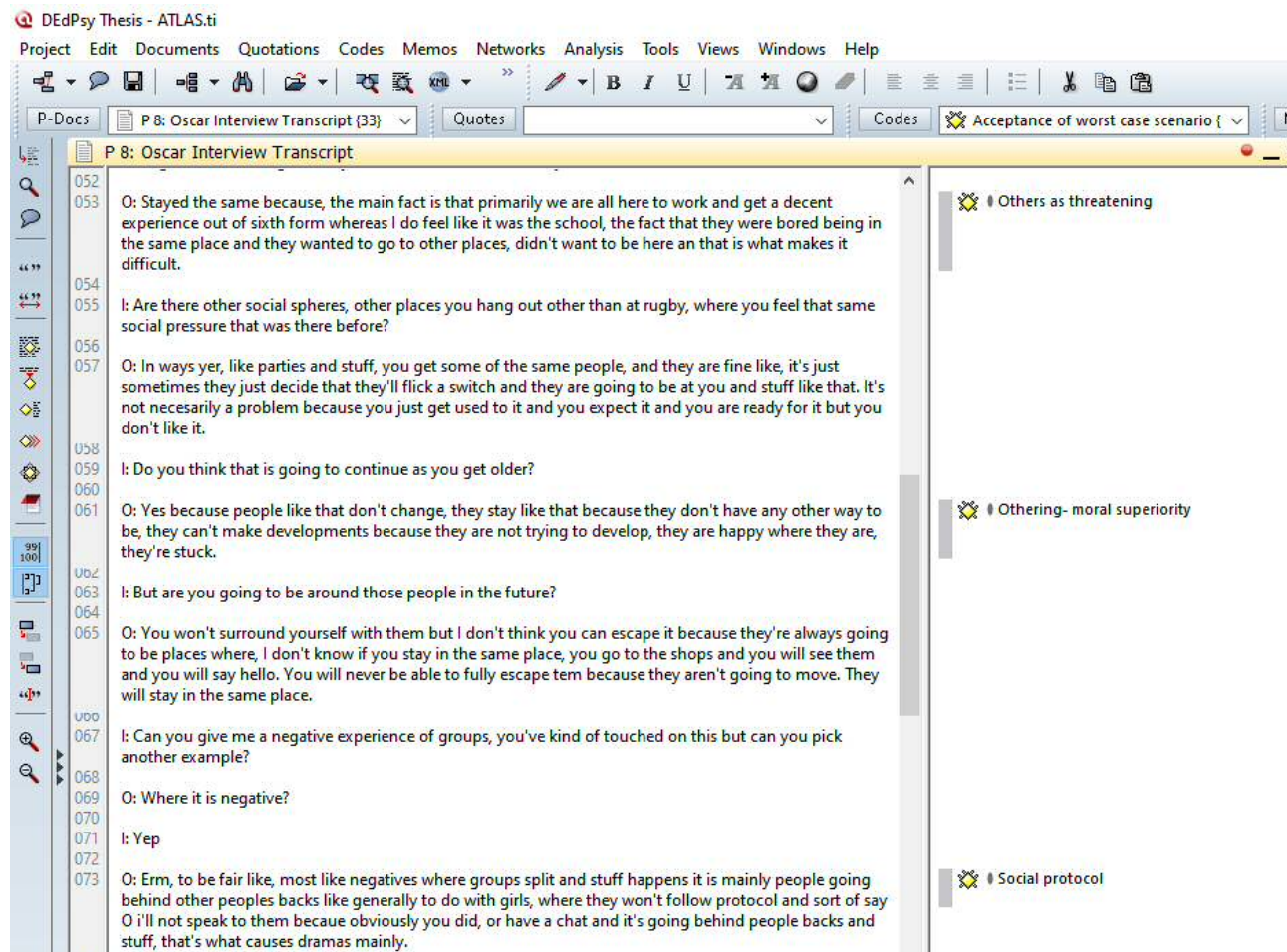
	<p>working with this data, listening to the voices and exploring the perspective of participants. If the tentative theoretical constructions were felt to stray too far from the data and the actual experience of participants they were abandoned or adapted.</p>
Transparency and coherence	<p>All of the interview transcription data from this project is available. The process of coding and theory generation is laid out in detail and discussed throughout the writeup of the project.</p> <p>Each step of the research process is outlined, explored and justified in part three of this paper.</p> <p>The research positioning is made explicit and discussed in length during part three of this paper.</p>
Impact and importance	<p>The possible limitations and shortcomings of the work are acknowledged and discussed in part three of this paper. As are the possible contributions to the field and practice of educational psychology</p>



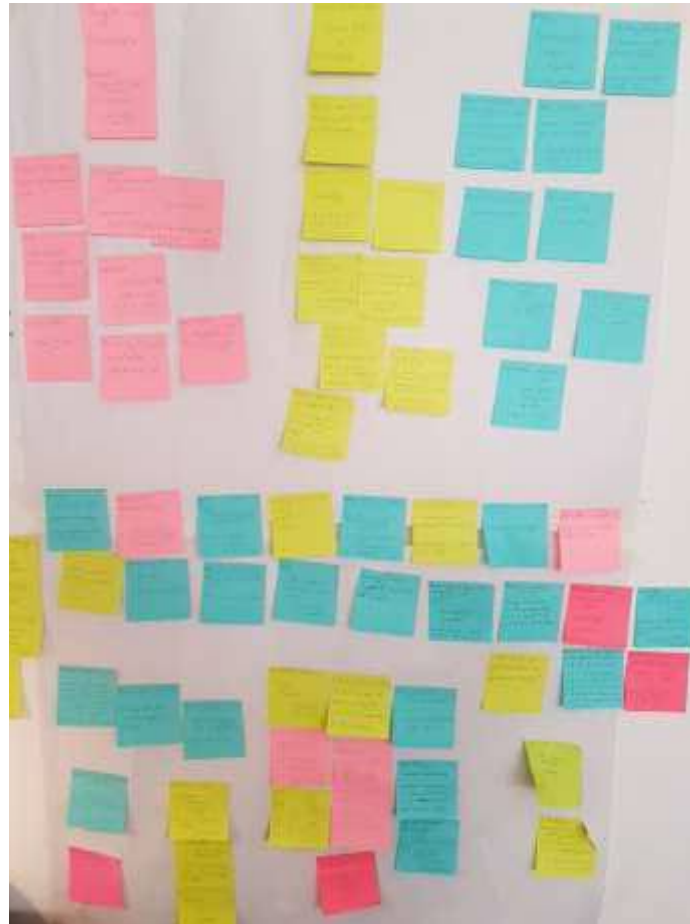
## Appendix F: The coding process: illustrating each stage

### Open coding

Initial open coding was carried out using qualitative research software ATLAS.ti. Below is an example of the coding process



Concurrent to the open coding process, codes began to be structured in relation to each other into categories using 'post-it notes' this provided a visual 'editable' space to begin theory generation.



Open Code	Text example	Initial Category
Perceived Superiority	...it's just about what people's priorities are. If someone's priorities are yep I need this person to like me, then to me that's the wrong order of priority but to them that's just the way it is. [Sean]	Perceived Superiority
Superiority of friendship group	...we were never part of like the popular group, you know we were just kind of friends with everyone, you know our group, we were friends with the popular people the not popular people. I don't know we just didn't want to be a part of that. [Anna]	Perceived Superiority
Peer Judgment/Pressure to define oneself	...there's a lot of personality things coming out and she like everyone's being a lot more open about the personality and about sexuality, and gender, and I think there's a lot of pressure now, there's a lot more pressure before because you just had to hide it but there's a lot more pressure now to actually come out and actually find yourself. I feel like almost now, it's not just like... people don't just... people actually have to sit and think to themselves, like am I this am I this? [Rebecca]	Threats now and in the future
Threat of others	...you get some of the same people, and they are fine like, it's just sometimes they just decide that they'll flick a switch and they are going to be at you and stuff like that. It's not necessarily a problem because you just get used to it and you expect it and you are ready for it but you don't like it...[Oscar]	Threats now and in the future
Threat of low social status	...there might be careers where you can't find that job very quickly and you have to kind of think of other things and then you might end up in places you don't wanna be in... So I think that's scary, 'cause you work pretty much all your life and I think you don't wanna be in a situation where you hate your job. [Mary]	Threats now and in the future
Threat of social isolation	Probably just being lonely. I only need a couple of people but loneliness that is scary. That is really scary.  And I'm really scared. Well, I'm really scared, I won't find people that are like me, 'cause I haven't been able to, [Rebecca]	Threats now and in the future
Fear of economic hardship	Erm, dead end job, not going anywhere, stuck with the same life, struggling. Like that and having to work very hard for minimum rewards. [Oscar]	Threats now and in the future

Everything happens for a reason/works out	Yeah, and just say, like, you have so much time you just need to everything will just happen and if that means your in a job like you didn't wanna go into... You could get into a job that you didn't think you'd be in to, but then everything happens for a reason in my opinion. So I think you just a take everything in perspective. [Mary]	Fatalism/Magical thinking
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Open Coding examples

## Memoing

Memoing which both accompanied and followed the open coding process marked the beginning of theory generation and the axial coding process, beginning to bring the codes together to tell a story. Much of the memoing made use of constant comparative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Memo Manager [HU: DEdPsy Thesis]

Memos Edit Miscellaneous Output View

Search (Name)

Name	Type	Group	De...	Size	Author	Created	Modified	PDs	Families
Central Phenomena	Com...	0	0	1310	Super	20/08/20...	20/08/20...	-	
Central phenomena musings	Com...	0	0	2100	Super	04/10/20...	04/10/20...	-	
Conflict between self concept and behaviour	Com...	0	0	278	Super	12/08/20...	25/08/20...	-	
Contradiction	Com...	1	0	393	Super	12/08/20...	23/10/20...	-	
Discourse	Com...	0	0	589	Super	22/08/20...	22/08/20...	-	
Distance between narrative of self and behaviour	Com...	1	0	1148	Super	12/08/20...	28/08/20...	-	
Fatic language, fillers	Com...	1	0	232	Super	15/08/20...	28/08/20...	-	
Fear of future failure = fear of the irrational	Com...	0	0	1160	Super	13/09/20...	13/09/20...	-	
Fear of work making one unhappy	Com...	1	0	194	Super	10/08/20...	28/10/20...	-	
Female lack of fear of vulnerability, male defended self	Com...	1	0	369	Super	15/08/20...	28/08/20...	-	
I'm not that clever	Com...	1	0	153	Super	19/08/20...	28/08/20...	-	
I sound like I know what I want to do	Com...	1	0	331	Super	19/08/20...	28/10/20...	-	
Language performs and action	Com...	0	0	793	Super	22/08/20...	22/08/20...	-	
Mixture of panic and ce'st la vie	Com...	0	0	450	Super	23/08/20...	23/08/20...	-	
Narratives	Com...	0	0	776	Super	20/08/20...	20/08/20...	-	
Or distance from they self?	Com...	1	0	78	Super	12/08/20...	14/10/20...	-	
Our group is/was different	Com...	1	0	635	Super	15/08/20...	17/10/20...	-	
Performativity	Com...	1	0	615	Super	19/08/20...	28/10/20...	-	
Performativity of identity of the self	Com...	1	0	432	Super	13/08/20...	28/10/20...	-	
Retrospective justification/reinforcing making of events	Com...	1	0	247	Super	17/08/20...	28/08/20...	-	
Rules of external world	Com...	0	0	385	Super	23/08/20...	23/08/20...	-	
Shift from self-objectification as core category to performance?	Com...	0	0	925	Super	18/10/20...	18/10/20...	-	
Speech acts	Com...	0	0	350	Super	20/08/20...	20/08/20...	-	

S: Central narrative is linked to experience of peer rejection and intersubjectivity is central as is social threat.

A: Central narrative is that of immediate future not going to uni going travelling.

Q: Central narrative is I don't know what I want to do.

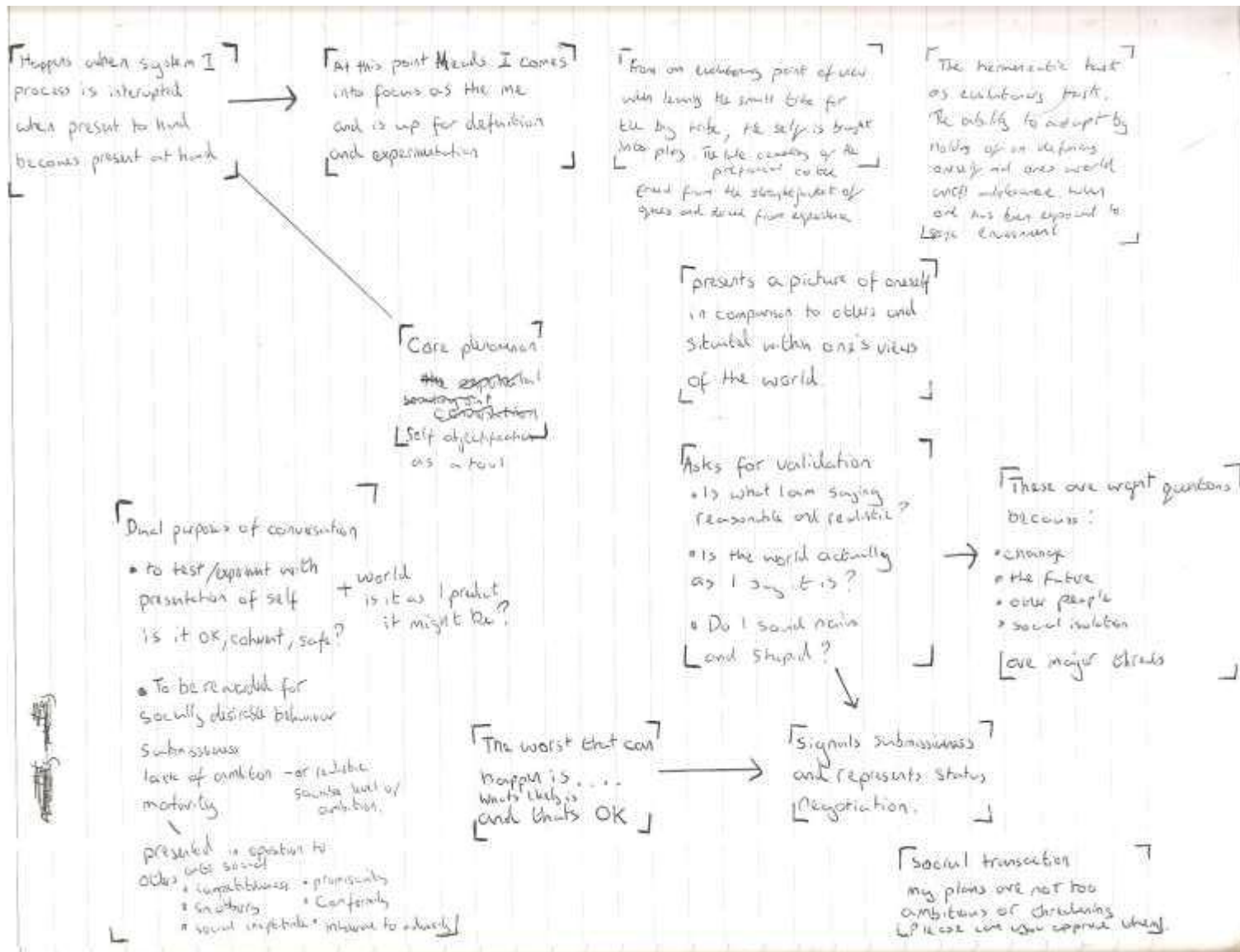
Graham R Gibbs- telling a story, often repeated, to make sense of events.

Relational story: constantly referring to others, what I call othering elsewhere

Narrative of overcoming challenge, avoiding the meaningless and drudgery of social hegemony through hard work and wise decision making leading to a uniquely meaningful existence in the context of other people flailing around in meaninglessness.

Story structures identity...we know or discover ourselves and reveal ourselves to others by the stories we tell

The axial coding process took place largely via the use of both handwritten and computer based diagramming.



## Axial coding and negative case analysis

The Axial coding process involved identifying relationships between codes and categories. The negative case analysis involved taking the axial coding map and returning to the data as part of the abductive process. Here constant comparison was used to analyse whether the emergent theoretical constructions fit the data and if not what were the points of divergence and what could be learnt from them.

Axial coding construct	Relationships between open codes	Negative case analysis	Example evidence from data
Personal Construct Psychology- self experimentation, behaviour as testing hypotheses about self and identity (Ravenette, 1999).	Perceived superiority as experimenting with playing a high-status role.  Social threats negotiated away via interaction with interviewer, negotiation of status.	Participants more interested in laying out their own logic than looking for affirmation/confirmation from interviewer. Not looking for confirmation of hypothesis but rather making use of opportunity for self-reflection and clarifying self-concept.	I feel like they understood what they were doing and it came to a point of just pure nastiness and at the time I was a massive push over , I wouldn't have ever said anything to anyone, I was just like please mate, come on, but now it was like you know stop if you don't stop, do you know what I mean kind of thing. And it is like, I've tried my best to sort of like flip it because I don't want to be in that position again it is the worst position to be in, I hate it, it is quite scary to me the fact that you know, someone can, you know, just another person can impact you in that way [Sean].
			Interpretation
			Here Sean appears to be involved in a process of active interpretation and 'problem solving' rather than one of experimenting with a presentation of self. The adolescent participants in general seemed happy to be given an opportunity to speak and think about the process of making sense of themselves and the world. One got the sense that this was already a major preoccupation for participants.
Language as doing reality.	Interview as sight for 'writing one's self', defining world and subject in discourse.	Participants don't seem to exhibit as much agency as this construct would suggest. Participants expressed a sense of anxiety and bewilderment over the lack of control they have over their future, their status, their identity. Not so much writing (or performing) the self not so much agency or insight in	I felt like I needed to fit in and everyone knew what they wanted to do and I had no idea, and that really scared me. I've still got so much time to grow, I am so young and , you know, to feel that kind of pressure, that I need to know what I want to do for the rest of my life, I don't. [Anna]  I just feel like I'm not on the same level as them. I think it's just because I'm more interested in things that adults are interested in... like politics, my friends could not care less about politics.

		respect to their behaviour. Rather, perhaps their commentary and judgements about people and phenomena in their lives and environments revealed how they were constituting a self - construct and identity.	I'm just a bit more aware, Yeah, that's my form of intelligence [Rebecca]
			Interpretation
			<p>Anna's statement here is an example of how participants expressed anxiety around the uncertainty surrounding their future and their identity.</p> <p>Rebecca's statement shows her comparing herself to her peers. This was interpreted as an example of an earnest attempt at self-definition. It did not seem to be the case that Rebecca was deliberately, and arrogantly, positioning herself above her peer group. Her remarks came across as a well-intentioned attempt at self-definition but were also interpreted as perhaps representing a defensive logic whereby Rebecca was 'unknowingly' motivated to shore up her self-esteem and self-concept.</p>
Heidegger 'present at hand' system 1, system 2	Presentation and interpretation of data around self, world, status, future, past are abstractions facilitated by language and representative of patterns of thought and behaviour ushered in by the fact participants are situated in a life period where everyday routine and environment are interrupted. Homeostasis of their day to day systems interrupted by the imminent presence of dramatic change. Abstraction of defining oneself and one's	Nice ideas but conjecture, little robust evidence present in the data.	



	world (hermeneutic task) necessitated by this interruption of everyday, intuitive relating to the world and others.		
Defensive Mentalizing		See part 2 p.88 and p.94 for a discussion of an alternative approach to negative case analysis where the researcher explores whether the data is not best explained by existing psychological theory: i.e social comparison theory and/or the performative theory of self/	See Table 7 Defensive Mentalizing.

## Selective coding

The selective coding process involved choosing a central category that had explanatory power and that structured the other categories in the theoretical construction (see part one: p.42 for a discussion)

Central category	Relationship with other categories		
	context/ structural conditions	Interactional strategies for managing handling conditions	Consequences of strategies
<b>Defensive Mentalizing</b>  A novel psychological mechanism by which adolescents appear to try to avoid the threat and ‘pain’ of perceived negative peer appraisal and peer hostility by undermining the perceived legitimacy of the perspectives of their peers by critiquing their motivation.	Perceived Threats now (peers, pressure to define oneself)  Perceived Future Threats (low status social isolation)	Defensive Mentalizing, Fatalism/Magical thinking	Defended from threat to self-esteem, self-concept posed by the judgement/behaviour of others.  Negotiated status with interlocuter.

## Situating and extending the emergent grounded theory

See p57-63 for a consideration and extension of the emergent theory presented above following a sustained engagement with a wide range of scientific and philosophical literature.

## Appendix G: Open coding- Text Segment Examples- codes and categories

Category	Text Examples & Open Codes	Interview Participant/ Paragraph of Interview
SELF IN RELATION TO OTHERS	Well, it's like a balance, I feel like at this age you have to put ego aside and just sort of concentrate on your education, A-levels, are hard, I didn't really realise how hard they would be and if people have time to be messing about with like their ego and trying to get above people then you know I'm like what you are doing? Sort of think like, you know there are bigger things to worry about, there are bigger fish to fry. <b>[Othering-Perceived Superiority]</b>	Sean/153
	...it's just about what people's priorities are. If someone's priorities are yep I need this person to like me, then to me that's the wrong order of priority but to them that's just the way it is. <b>[Othering-Perceived Superiority]</b>	Sean/159
	I feel like, you know, everyone talks about a body count and everybody seems to care about that kind of stuff like that, but like at the same time when you get older it's quite trivial, do you know what I mean. <b>[Othering-Perceived Superiority]</b>	Sean/181
	...we are all quite level headed, we are all like-minded, we are not really bothered about that sort of thing, we will talk about it, but we don't try and one up each other, if someone is trying to do that then I don't really want to associate with them because it's not a fun thing to be around you know I better than you, I've got this, I've got that, shut up (laughs) <b>[Superiority of Friendship Group]</b>	Sean/193
	...but I can take my head up and have a conversation with someone, and you know, I'm not sat there going um um err err (imitates stuttering) getting all flustered, you know, I can hold a conversation and that's a massive, no one seems to be able to do that, I don't know it's just mental that no-one can talk to people. <b>[Othering-Perceived Superiority]</b>	Sean/197

Category	Text Examples & Open Codes	Interview Participant/ Paragraph of Interview
SELF IN RELATION TO OTHERS	<p>...we were never part of like the popular group, you know we were just kind of friends with everyone, you know our group, we were friends with the popular people the not popular people. I don't know we just didn't want to be a part of that. <b>[Superiority of Friendship Group]</b></p>	Anna/pt2-019
	<p>...we've got a lot of people in our friendship group that came up new because I think we are quite a welcoming group of people and just that level of maturity. <b>[Superiority of Friendship Group]</b></p>	Anna/pt2-015
	<p>Yer I felt a bit like because everyone else sort of got in and did what they wanted to do I felt should I really be here. I've not got onto the course that I wanted to do. I'm not good enough for it you know. <b>[Self in relation to others- negative comparison]</b></p>	Anna/pt2-031
	<p>I think that has stressed me as well because my best friends I think they all know what they wanted to do, they all have their hearts set on this, they were going to do this this that and I think that's when I was like O my gosh I don't know what I want to do. <b>[Self in relation to others- negative comparison]</b></p>	Anna/pt2-072
	<p>For those people before it was all about social, they were bothered about social situations, they weren't bothered about the workload or doing well or anything like that. <b>[Othering- Perceived Superiority]</b></p>	Oscar/41
	<p>Yes, because people like that don't change, they stay like that because they don't have any other way to be, they can't make developments because they are not trying to develop, they are</p>	Oscar/61

Category	Text Examples & Open Codes	Interview Participant/ Paragraph of Interview
SELF IN RELATION TO WORLD	O yer definitely, I'd like to wake up every morning thinking that this is going to be perfect, but it's not is it, it's not the way life works, it's an impractical way to think. <b>[the world/reality is not like that]</b>	Sean/70
	You can't control that, I think that is just the way it is, you can't say to someone o yer, you shouldn't think like that because that is not how life works. You don't get to choose what other people do, you can only control your thoughts and your actions so don't worry about anything else. <b>[the world/reality is not like that]</b>	Sean/157
	I spend a lot of time with my friends just in the common room, you don't realise how much time you actually spend with someone, and then when you leave you're not spending time with anyone, and I probably spend no more than 10 people that I will speak to in the next 5 years <b>[looking back at now from the future]</b>	Sean/169
	I didn't realise that would hurt, and at this age I'm like ooh that matters a lot but now a month later I'm even thinking that doesn't really matter, you know in a few years that's, I probably won't even remember that do you know what I mean <b>[looking back at now from the future]</b>	Sean/243
	when you have something happening you know who to go to and those people know that they've got you sort of thing and that is massive to me, but in the bigger picture, I'm 17 I can't have experienced much, like I don't even know how much of my life I'm through, probably like a quarter if that, up to know, I feel like so much has happened but it's so little and I feel like later on I will be like that was that kind of thing, do you know what I mean, I feel like it's quite trivial. <b>[looking back at now from the future]</b>	Sean/255
	A lot of us have jobs now, you know, so we sort of have gained that level of maturity by going out and working, I have had a job, going on 10 months now and that's where you get that sort of real life. <b>[exposure to wider world/reality]</b>	Anna/pt2-039

Category	Text Examples & Open Codes	Interview Participant/ Paragraph of Interview
SELF IN RELATION TO WORLD	I think I sound like I know what I want and I think I have not sounded like that for a while you know, I've always been unsure, not really knowing quite nervous. you know and I think now I sound a bit more like I know what I want to do <b>[self-awareness/self-consciousness]</b>	Anna/pt2-092
	I don't know, and now I just sound like a have more of a plan and that makes me feel a bit better as well as I can sort of talk to people and have a conversation about what I'm going to do after school <b>[self-awareness/self-consciousness]</b>	Anna/pt2-096
	I probably feel a bit more fearful but, in sort of like an excited fearful way. I am scared of what the future holds because I have no idea of about because I can say I'm going to do this, say I'm going to do that but I think you just have to take each day by day, but I am sort of excited at the same time, excited to get out of school and you know to do something different and just to sort of like, you know, find my way erm and see what comes about. <b>[novelty seeking/ fear/exhilaration of the unknown]</b>	Anna/pt2-100
	I think it's optimism but I think it is blind optimism, I think because things sort of have just worked out , like my GCSE's just worked out, I don't think I worked particularly that hard for them I think it just worked out, and I don't know I feel like everything just works. <b>[novelty seeking/ fear/exhilaration of the unknown]</b>	Oscar/109
	Yep, I just sort of say put it to the back of my mind, it will work out, what have I got in front of me now, what's my challenge for today and I can just sort of think, I can cross that bridge when I come to it. <b>[novelty seeking/ fear/exhilaration of the unknown]</b>	Oscar/125
	honestly I just don't know, I don't know what I'm going to do, I don't know if I want to go to uni, I don't know if I want to get an apprenticeship, I don't know if I want to work, I just I don't know, I just know what I want for tea. I just know short term and I know what I want to do now and tomorrow. <b>[novelty seeking/ fear/exhilaration of the unknown]</b>	Oscar/140

Category	Text Examples & Open Codes	Interview Participant/ Paragraph of Interview
RATIONAL INTENTIONS/IRRATIONAL BEHAVIOUR	<p>Yep, I always look to the future, it's really weird though cos like, I always think that will be better long term, but I won't end up doing it. I'm quite bad with stuff like that, but yer, I like to think ahead, but I'm quite lazy to be honest. I'm quite a lazy person, in terms of like with school, I do a lot of like o yer, I can't be bothered kind of thing and it's like quite bad to be honest with you, it's not very good. <b>[rational intentions/irrational behaviour]</b></p>	Sean /33
	<p>But like I said, I can be quite lazy , I guess you know it gets almost sort of like, I don't know, it is weird to have such an oxymoron in your life, when you are so passionate about something but you are also really lazy , like painfully lazy. <b>[rational intentions/irrational behaviour]</b></p>	Sean/ 58
	<p>Well I feel like I read into stuff a lot, I mean I love astrology and horoscopes obviously as, I don't think, I doubt it is a real thing but it is weird how accurate it can be, but I will read into it a lot and say o yer, that links to that, and sort of thing and I'll actually act on it, and it is crazy how I will let that impact me but then in other things I will be like o no that's stupid, do you know what I mean, sort of thing to me , it's weird because I try to think as practically as I can and as logically as I can then I'm following this thing that tells me, laughs, do you know what I mean it's really hypocritical <b>[rational intentions/irrational behaviour-magical thinking]</b></p>	Sean/125
	<p>I would say it is about whether they prioritise there, you know how they are socially or educationally, erm, personally I'd say that I do the socially just for the fact that because I prefer being around my friends than I do being in the classroom definitely, it's probably the same for everyone but I sit here thinking o yer I need to get these grades because if I don't get these grades then I'm not going to be successful but in the same breath I'm like but ah I don't want to do that (laughs) do you know what I mean, it's really weird <b>[rational intentions/irrational behaviour-prioritising social life]</b></p>	Sean/157

Category	Text Examples & Open Codes	Interview Participant/ Paragraph of Interview
RATIONAL INTENTIONS/IRRATIONAL BEHAVIOUR	<p>Like o yer, you get one chance if you bugger it up, that is it, do you know. That comes back to the fact that I am quite lazy in school. I know that if I put all my time into studying now, because like I said I'm not very smart, but at the same time I try and if put that effort in and try mu absolute hardest and get reasonable grades to get into university then that will help me in the long run but in the present that is such a depressing thing to be just sat doing your work while all the time, having a minimal social life I hate that. It's just quite difficult to wrap your head around the fact that anything like that is sort of like it matters but if you think like a few hundred years ago, that didn't matter at all, we didn't have that. <b>[rational intentions/irrational behaviour]</b></p>	Sean/267
	<p>Not really, because I try and live now, and I think that is not a positive thing, because I think if I am so busy focussed on now and just doing what I need to do now and short term goals then I might struggle later on when I'm trying to be more about long term goals. <b>[rational intentions/irrational behaviour]</b></p>	Oscar/109
	<p>I think it's optimism but I think it is blind optimism, I think because things sort of have just worked out , like my GCSE's just worked out, I don't think I worked particularly that hard for them I think it just worked out, and I don't know I feel like everything just works. <b>[rational intentions/irrational behaviour-magical thinking]</b></p>	Oscar/109
	<p>I think there is still, I think there will always be, what does he think of me what does she think of me. I need to wear this and wear that or have this bag, I think there will always be that sort of you have to look your best to impress and you know this and that. <b>[rational intentions/irrational behaviour-prioritising social life]</b></p>	Anna/pt2-027
	<p>I felt like I needed to fit in and everyone knew what they wanted to do and I had no idea, and that really scared me. I've still got so much time to grow, I am so young and , you know, to feel that kind of pressure, that I need to know what I want to do for the rest of my life, I don't. <b>[rational intentions/irrational behaviour-prioritising social life]</b></p>	Anna/pt2-052



Category	Text Examples & Open Codes	Interview Participant/ Paragraph of Interview
THREATS & FEARS	<p>if you were in a workplace where that was the case I think school sets you up for that, you get used to the fact that you are beneath people sort of thing, you get used to the fact that o yer I'm subordinate to bosses. You don't get to choose when you work, you work when you are told. Sort of like, it gets, I don't want that to happen, I can't imagine enjoying that at all, like I'd like to work for myself. <b>[Fear of lack of economic freedom]</b></p>	Sean/074
	<p>my biggest fear is stuff not going the way I expect it to go and being really like, err in a rut that's the biggest fear of being in a rut. I don't want that at all because that's just, that's terrifying, yer that's terrifying, I don't like that thought at all cos it's like everything going tits up, not a fan of that, no I wouldn't like that at all. <b>[Fear of mundanity and meaninglessness]</b></p>	Sean/078
	<p>everyone is on about so and so is having a midlife crisis, I don't want to be like that, do you know what I mean, terrified of that. Not a fan of that no. I don't want a crisis.</p>	Sean/090
	<p>you know, when people put people down to make themselves seem better, that is the worst thing. <b>[Threat of others]</b></p>	Sean/105
	<p>I don't want to be the alpha or whatever and that has changed a bit now because I feel like if you don't have that thing in you then you end up at the bottom and that is the way it is, so you have to make a conscious effort to compete because if you don't you are going to end up at the bottom and at the time I was sort of like why , why are you bothering, why are you sort of trying to move. <b>[Threat of others]</b></p>	Sean/129
	<p>O yer, yer, everyone does it , it's just the way it is and then it gets worse and worse and if you point it out I feel like people don't like that, and then, you know, it gets worse and worse and it's a bit like what do I do and then you like play the game but you don't acknowledge it. If you acknowledge it you lose, laughs. So I feel like everyone is trying to one up everyone <b>[Threat of others]</b></p>	Sean/137
	<p>I don't want to be in that position again it is the worst position to be in, I hate it, it is quite scary to me the fact that you know,</p>	Sean/149

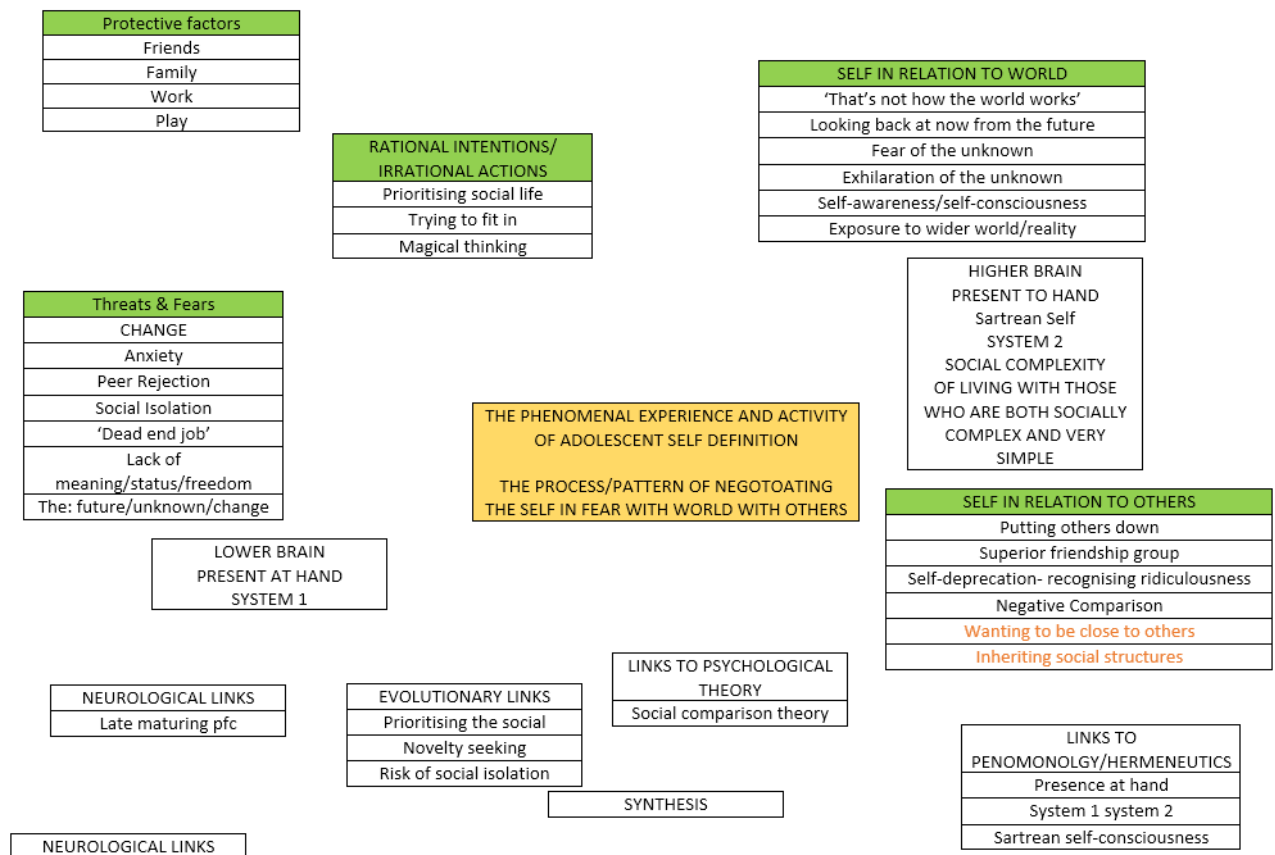
Category	Text Examples & Open Codes	Interview Participant/ Paragraph of Interview
THREATS & FEARS	<p>someone can, you know, just another person can impact you in that way. <b>[Threat of others]</b></p> <p>Not thinking rationally, not isolating yourself, if you isolate, I did that when I got bullied it was the worse, no you should never isolate yourself, when you are alone with your thoughts you think the way you have been thinking through that situation, you know you need a second opinion cos, you become really stubborn when you are in a bad situation, you feel like you don't have many options where as if you have someone else, your like o actually yer, you snap out of it a bit. <b>[Threat of Isolation]</b></p>	Sean/149
	<p>Well, I has a period where I was terrified of it like, what am I going to do sort of thing, I was like terrified of dying which is really weird, being 16 and worried about dying, that's weird but erm it is scary thinking about it. <b>[Fear of the future]</b></p>	Sean/263
	<p>You don't have to sort of act in any certain way, there isn't a right or wrong way to act because lower down you sort of have to be a bit sort of guard up a bit more, because there are more people who don't want to be there and they are more bothered about going at you and you know trying to like upset people or something.. <b>[Threat of others]</b></p>	Oscar/39
	<p>you get some of the same people, and they are fine like, it's just sometimes they just decide that they'll flick a switch and they are going to be at you and stuff like that. It's not necessarily a problem because you just get used to it and you expect it and you are ready for it but you don't like it... <b>[Threat of others]</b></p>	Oscar/57
	<p>You will never be able to fully escape them because they aren't going to move. They will stay in the same place. <b>[Threat of others]</b></p>	Oscar/67
	<p>Erm, dead end job, not going anywhere, stuck with the same life, struggling. Like that and having to work very hard for minimum rewards. <b>[Fear of lack of economic freedom]</b></p>	Oscar/101

Category	Text Examples & Open Codes	Interview Participant/ Paragraph of Interview
THREATS & FEARS	<p>With this, I think that there is so much more. I don't know what I wasn't to be, I don't know what I want to do and I feel like sometimes school can make you feel like you need to know what you want to do and I just didn't and I just decided that I'm not going to uni because I don't want to push myself into doing something that I'm not ready to do. <b>[Pressure to define oneself]</b></p> <p>O yer, I felt like I needed to fit in and everyone knew what they wanted to do and I had no idea, and that really scared me. I've still got so much time to grow, I am so young and, you know, to feel that kind of pressure, that I need to know what I want to do for the rest of my life, I don't. <b>[Pressure to define oneself]</b></p> <p>Yer, err because yer, you know they are all sort of sticking to what I always thought was the plan, you know, GCSE's, sixth form, uni, and I think me straying from that I am scared because going to uni, set timetable, set this it probably what I've always been used to but I just know I wouldn't fit in there, I know I am not ready for that. <b>[Fear of the unknown]</b></p>	<p>Anna/19</p> <p>Anna/pt2 52</p> <p>Anna/pt2 76</p>

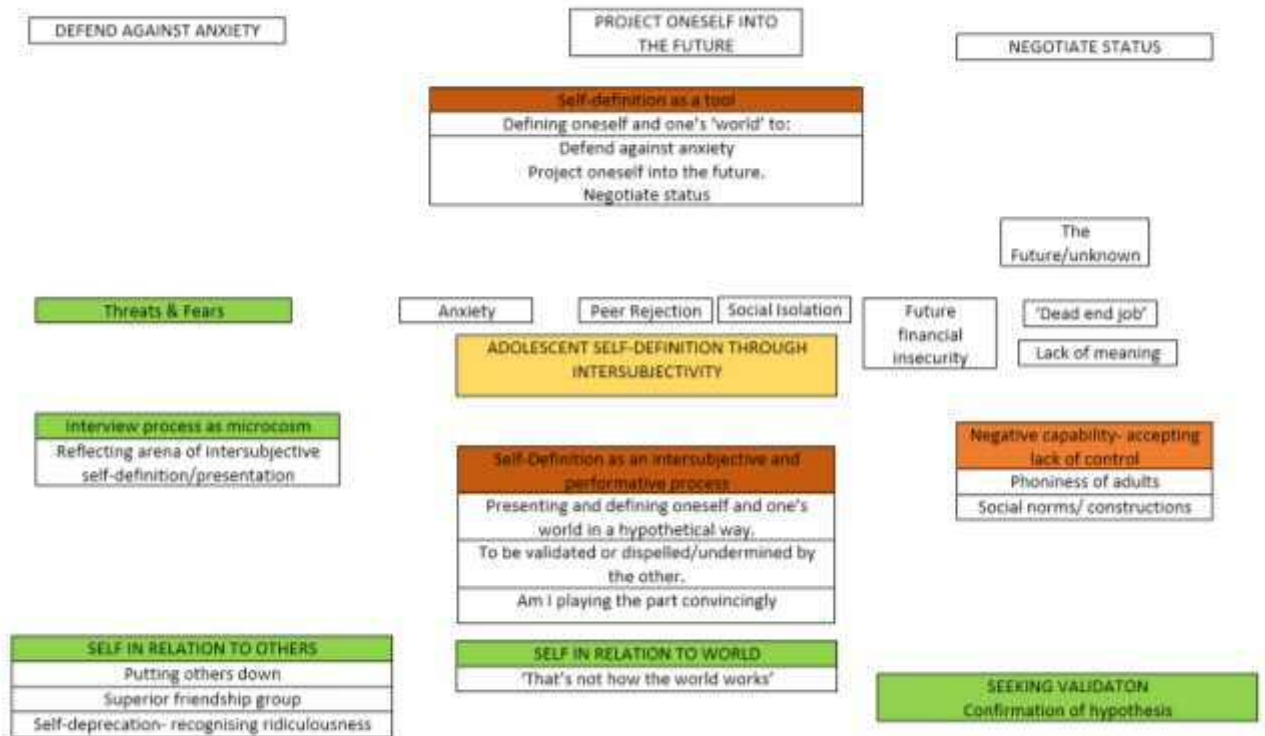
## Appendix H: Diagramming examples to move from open to axial coding

The figure shows the beginning stages of using constant comparison analysis to compare the instances of codes and categories with each other to look for points of confluence and divergence and to begin to generate abstractions which might lead to theory development. See Appendix H for examples of memoing used to the same ends.

Significant emergent theory diagram 1



## Significant emergent theory diagram 2



## **Appendix I: Memoing examples**

### **MEMO: Central Phenomena (0 Quotations) (Super, 2019-08-20 13:09:52)**

No codes

No memos

Type: Commentary

The central phenomena that I am looking at is adolescence participating in the act of defining themselves as subjects and doing so in defining their world

hermeneutics

and defining themselves and their friendship group in opposition to others

Central phenomena is a question- who am I and what am I going to do with my life,

Being asked for the first time in their lives to have agency to make a decision, but don't have sufficient information about themselves, sufficient ego synthesis to do so as previous sense of identity comes from social group and context difficulty imagining world or self beyond this.

The core central phenomena is- the performative interactionist process of the adolescent defining themselves out of necessity as they are in the process of needing the currency of self identity to form the basis of decision making and to act as an explanation for their decision making

A: repeating her narrative over and over to justify her decision making, convince herself that she has made a good decision and then "I feel like I know what I am talking about".

The inability to tolerate uncertainty demands ego synthesis

And this core central phenomena explain the other codes in the axial coding structure and beyond, explain the social processes, why the adolescents behave as they do

### **MEMO: Central phenomena musings (0 Quotations) (Super, 2019-10-04 10:37:32)**

No codes

No memos

Type: Commentary

Do the conversations turn naturally and quickly to talk of the future predicting the future without prompting from the interviewer.

Personal construct psychology

Presenting the self ....a scientific experiment.....testing against interviewer as surrogate for actual reality....predictions about the reality of life after college/sixth form

the psychological and social process of constructing your constructs and testing them out against reality or in this case against someone who has experience of the reality you are going to face.

Core concept- naming of a pattern- the 'sounding out' conversation with someone who knows more than you.

Is what I'm say reasonable, respectable, realistic? Will you laugh at me? Do I need to 'revise my constructs' in order to not get laughed at. Seriously help me out here because I have no fucking idea what I'm doing and this shit is scary, and I don't want to end up cold poor and alone because I've messed this up.

The what's the worse that can happen prediction as a defence against anxiety, CBT reality testing of wild fantasies and fears. But also as a kind of signalling of look I'm not getting 'too carried away '

As major social faux par is to become too self involved and caught up in fears and fantasies in conversation and in life in general. It means 'look I'm not being too ambitious here , I'm not too big for my boots, you can validate me.

<https://www.quora.com/What-does-it-mean-when-people-say-don-t-get-carried-away-with-yourself>

It means don't get so caught up in what you're doing or your ideas that you get carried away and abandon common sense and disappear into flights of fancy, or take something too far.

It can be used more broadly too. So it's not just common sense that you abandon but other things like humility or morality. So you could say it to someone who has become suddenly wealthy, or very popular or has received a lot of praise for something. You are reminding them to not become so impressed with themselves that they change or forget who they are. You are cautioning them to keep both feet on the ground.

**MEMO: Conflict between self-concept and behaviour (0 Quotations) (Super, 2019-08-12 11:52:11)**

No codes

No memos

Type: Commentary

Self concept and persona linked to sense of wisdom and being able to see through the folly of peers running around after status but then baffled by...it's really weird, when his own behaviour is governed by drive for social interaction hierarchy and not by lofty wise narrative.

**MEMO: Contradiction (1 Quotation) (Super, 2019-08-12 11:41:34)**

P 5: Sean interview transcript:  
(157:157)

No codes

No memos

Type: Commentary

Bigger things to worry about than ego and social hierarchy who has time for that.....othering..... i prioritise social because I enjoy it more than being in the classroom.

Defended subject presenting image construct of himself, defence mechanism, self construct- aloof, superior to those concerned about hierarchy...

losing the game well, I don't want to play anyway,

lack of ego synthesis?

**MEMO: Discourse (0 Quotations) (Super, 2019-08-22 10:41:55)**

No codes

No memos

Type: Commentary

An institutionalized way of thinking, a social boundary defining what can be said about a specific topic.

Young people in this study are attempting to work with existing discourse about what one does with one's life, but it all seems quite distant 'phony, insincere, 'unreal', they display very little confidence that the discourse corresponds to the reality, suspicious.

The discourse makes them feel small and fragile, I have to be a success and make the right decisions.

Foucault- linguistic resources that individuals are born, live into and afford them subject positions

**MEMO: Distance between narrative of self and behaviour (1 Quotation) (Super, 2019-08-12 12:00:33)**

P 5: Sean interview transcript:  
(151:151)

No codes

No memos

Type: Commentary

This generation more literate in self narrative techniques, more consciously involved in presenting themselves, in the personal construct psychology sense, constructed self-image, more self-reflective than previous generations...



but still just as driven by competition and social status, animal drives.

Denial of authentic self and drives lead to neurotic anxiety

Hermeneutics

Jung-

Scientific education is based in the main on statistical truths and abstract knowledge and therefore imparts an unrealistic, rational picture of the world, in which the individual, as a merely marginal phenomenon, plays no role. The individual, however, as an irrational datum, is the true and authentic carrier of reality, the concrete man as opposed to the unreal ideal or normal man to whom the scientific statements refer

p.7

The individual who is not anchored in God can offer no resistance on his own resources to the physical and moral blandishments of the world. For this he needs the evidence of inner, transcendent experience which alone can protect him from the otherwise inevitable submersion in the mass.

Heidegger's the they Sartre's freedom

**MEMO: Phatic language, fillers (1 Quotation) (Super, 2019-08-15 15:00:05)**

P 7: Anna Interview transcript:

(11:11)

No codes

No memos

Type: Commentary

Use of you know, do you know what I mean by both participants thus far is interesting.

Looking for affirmation in what they are saying, is what I'm saying making sense?

Sense of self-centred externally, external locus of control.

**MEMO: Fear of future failure = fear pf the irrational (0 Quotations) (Super, 2019-09-13 14:41:30)**

No codes

No memos

Type: Commentary

Fear of being stuck in a rut -without freedom to choose directly linked to fear and discomfort at not being able to direct one's behaviour. Fear of the irrational driving one's behaviour.

In Freudian terms the unconscious in Kahneman systems 1 and Sapolsky and neuroscience the amygdala and limbic system running the show and not being there by underdeveloped frontal cortex.

Fear of not being able to direct one's behaviour.

Decisions based in the now on system one heuristics, shortcuts

Availability heuristic- options for choice are really limited for these young people, what have they been exposed to.

System 1 brain works on heuristics and routine young people have existed in the same environment and have their routines and functions cognitive dissonance comes from knowing change is coming and having to engage system 2 brain to make decisions and try to problem solve this is where repetitive narrative comes into play trying to convince yourself that you know what you are talking about over and over mantra.

Also dissonance and a level of awareness that rational plans do not govern the unfolding of reality or even one's own behaviour.

**MEMO: Fear of work making one unhappy (1 Quotation) (Super, 2019-08-10 11:20:44)**

P 5: Sean interview transcript:

(74:104)

No codes

No memos

Type: Commentary

Major Fear highlighted by all three of the initial round of interviews is the fear of losing ones freedom in later life, being forced to do a job you don't like and thus being forced to be unhappy.

**MEMO: Female lack of fear of vulnerability, male defended self (1 Quotation) (Super, 2019-08-15 13:26:00)**

P 6: Anna Interview Transcript:

(15:15)

No codes

No memos

Type: Commentary

A- not afraid to ask for help to construct herself as vulnerable and in need of support, not afraid of vulnerability.

S: Preoccupied with competition the need to compete and be strong lest be left at the bottom. .

A- lots of warmth about people family friends teachers

S: Fighting a serious battle and friends are a serious business but not cool to feel/show warmth

**MEMO: I'm not that clever (1 Quotation) (Super, 2019-08-19 13:10:14)**

P 7: Anna Interview transcript:

(60:60)

No codes

No memos

Type: Commentary

Both S and A have thought about themselves in comparison to their peers and have a self reported self concept that they are not particularly intelligent

**MEMO: I sound like I know what I want to do (1 Quotation) (Super, 2019-08-19 14:08:43)**

P 7: Anna Interview transcript:

(92:92)

No codes

No memos

Type: Commentary

Reflexivity- relationship with performative self- I sound like I know what I'm talking about and that calms me, I am performing successfully, I'm getting feedback from my environment that my performance, that my narrative is acceptable even though it deviates slightly from that of the norm and from that which I expected to follow.

**MEMO: Language performs and action (0 Quotations) (Super, 2019-08-22 11:33:19)**

No codes

No memos

Type: Commentary

Discursive psychology- Language is not passive it is a site for doing reality.

What reality is being done in these interviews

The reality of defining and performing one's identity

The interview like Facebook is a space for doing so.....

I'd suggest also so is the internal monologue of adolescents and perhaps most adults

But what is the purpose of the speech acts in this interview to present oneself to try on put forward a personal construct an explicit opportunity to do so,

and in some ways as scientist- testing out behaviour, testing out identity, an acceleration of the research project

hence the enthusiasm to talk but also hence the repetitious phatic language, prompts for approval- do you know what I mean.

The science experiment- is this me. can I be this. does it work?

**MEMO: Mixture of panic and ce'st la vie (0 Quotations) (Super, 2019-08-23 15:51:33)**

No codes

No memos

Type: Commentary

Both S and O especially and A to a lesser extent fall back on a fatalistic, things work will work out, whatever will be will be attitude they spend time expressing their worries and then they almost stop themselves from feeling anxious mid paragraph by switching to this level of abstraction which of course makes sense on one level but one suspects in this case it is used to avoid responsibility of making decisions and deciding one's own life course.

**MEMO: Narratives (0 Quotations) (Super, 2019-08-20 11:14:15)**

No codes

No memos

Type: Commentary

S: Central narrative is linked to experience of peer rejection and intersubjectivity is central as is social threat.

A: Central narrative is that of immediate future not going to uni going travelling.

O: Central narrative is I don't know what I want to do.

Graham R Gibbs- telling a story, often repeated, to make sense of events.

Relational story, constantly referring to others, what I call othering elsewhere

Narrative of overcoming challenge, avoiding the meaningless and drudgery of social hegemony through hard work and wise decision making leading to a uniquely meaningful existence in the context of other people flailing around in meaninglessness.

Story structures identity...we know or discover ourselves and reveal ourselves to others

by the stories we tell

**MEMO: Or distance from they self? (1 Quotation) (Super, 2019-08-12 13:04:00)**

P 5: Sean interview transcript:

(153:153)

No codes

No memos

Type: Commentary

Moral superiority, othering?

Or distance from they self, existential freedom?

**MEMO: Our group is/was different (1 Quotation) (Super, 2019-08-15 15:28:54)**

P 7: Anna Interview transcript:

(19:19)

No codes

No memos

Type: Commentary

Both S and A convinced of the specialness, wisdom and moral superiority, enlightenment of their own friendship group in comparison to other people.

Othering, in line with Erikson but at a group level and seems functional not pathological or neurotic a useful step in ego synthesis a necessary intersubjective defence mechanism?

A hangover form when humans lived in small competing groups?

I remember a similar feeling with peer group at university, we were different and had privileged knowledge, not running around like the others.

Of course ridiculous to idealise so much small group of people in the context of so many people.

**MEMO: Performativity (1 Quotation) (Super, 2019-08-19 14:16:28)**

P 7: Anna Interview transcript:

(96:96)

No codes

No memos

Type: Commentary

The activity of the interview is to present narrative of present and future.

This is the very activity that adolescence are engaged in day to day this is their job there obsession so having the space to do it at length they are excited about, and they keep

repeating themselves, practicing their lines, trying to get it down and convince themselves that what they are saying is convincing and true and who they are.

I sound like I have a plan, I sound like I am a real person with a coherent narrative structure, I sound like I'm not a fragmented juxtaposition of feelings, fears desires, self-doubts and hopes.

**MEMO: Performativity of identity of the self (1 Quotation) (Super, 2019-08-13 09:55:17)**

P 5: Sean interview transcript:  
(255:255)

No codes

No memos

Type: Commentary

S is thinking through defining, questioning, unpicking the riddle of who and what he is, recognising his limited access to information, as well as how he is different and better than others, his fears, hopes, these things are all features that are repeatedly presented to him in a phenomenological sense they are being in the world for him and he can interact with them, find them in our discussion attempt to make meaning of them.

**MEMO: Retrospective justification/meaning making of events (1 Quotation) (Super, 2019-08-12 10:43:42)**

P 5: Sean interview transcript:  
(141:141)

No codes

No memos

Type: Commentary

I left school because it was rough and a place to learn how to fight not learn, not because I was bullied.

I was bottom of the pile because I saw through the meaninglessness of competing not because I was the weakest, or most sensitive of the pack

**MEMO: Rules of external world (0 Quotations) (Super, 2019-08-23 15:39:16)**

No codes

No memos

Type: Commentary

Rules of wider social world begin to determine rules of day to more, not just school yard rules, outward looking.

A, O and S all speak of the ways things are, or that's not the way things are or that's life, implying a knowledge of and exposure to the ways of life the rules of life.

Protocol is an interesting word - formal customs and regulations- impersonal, unemotional, distancing

**MEMO: Shift from self-objectification as core category to performance? (0 Quotations) (Super, 2019-10-18 12:11:52)**

No codes

No memos

Type: Commentary

Not that the young people are prematurely or deliberately defining themselves as something stable to defend from anxiety and project into the future.

Rather the statement ' I think i now sound a bit more like I know what I want to do' is important.

That reflective relationship with the self as performer, ability to play a role.

One is made confident in one's ability to play the part through feedback received from performances. The interview process is a prime opportunity for such a performance a focussed and extended performance and all the participants jumped at the opportunity.

To perform their story

Key features of each performance are, talking about yourself in relation to others, talking about how the world is, that there are facts about the world that I am familiar with that temper my expectations. I know enough about the world to not sound ridiculous about my plans, hope and fears don't I?

Self - deprecation

**MEMO: Speech acts (0 Quotations) (Super, 2019-08-20 15:20:30)**

No codes

No memos

Type: Commentary

Austin Language is not describing speech acts are doing things.

Contradictions in S speech act, saying whatever paints him in a good, wise and self-deprecating way.

Harvey Sacks, the work people do in conversation.

What's the work that S is doing in conversation he is trying and achieving being charming and warm affable and self-deprecating.

**MEMO: Symbolic interactionism- negotiating shared concepts (0 Quotations)**

**(Super, 2019-10-04 17:21:28)**

No codes

No memos

Type: Commentary

Blumer- The more experiences you have in your life the better understanding you have of what is the reality of society.

This process of interviewing conversation represents an exercise in the subject attempting to negotiate a shared reality between the I and Me of Mead's theory but also with the interviewer who they are looking for approval from.

**MEMO: The ongoing threat of others (0 Quotations) (Super, 2019-08-23 14:48:29)**

No codes

No memos

Type: Commentary

Both S and O, preoccupied with the social threat of others, who are immature and 'stuck' not interested in developing themselves just want to dominate and compete.

These people you can't escape they will always be around, S suggests you have to make sure you are not dominated by them you have to compete.

O's use of the words stuck and develop are interesting here, he seems engaged in a kind of Rogerian conception of people as growing towards the light towards their best selves, but these people being unaware, blocked from this.

Scientific hypothesis on as part, some people are preoccupied with 'being at you' 'going at you' these people are an ongoing threat but are infirmed, stuck, to be pitied.

**MEMO: Unconscious logic (0 Quotations) (Super, 2019-08-23 16:05:18)**

No codes

No memos

Type: Commentary

A- This is a bit much and its hard I've heard it's OK to disappear on holiday for a bit doing good work so I'm doing that. I'm generally really afraid.

S: I'm a nice guy not interested in social hierarchy just want to get on with people that will protect me right?

O: I want power, money, status but I won't take responsibility for wanting that.

**MEMO: Validation as permission (0 Quotations) (Super, 2019-10-04 11:17:02)**

No codes

No memos



Type: Commentary

Urgent preoccupation with validation might present a social transaction:

my plans are not too ambitious or threatening please can you give them your stamp of approval?

## Appendix J: Transcription example

I= Interviewer

S= Sean

I: So first question is, can you tell me about a time that you have had a positive experience of a group.

S: Just trying to think, anything specific?

I: So just groups, so sometimes you know you have groups of people it might be mates or families and I want you just to talk a bit about a time that you've had a positive experience withing a group, and what did that feel like and what was that like?

S: Erm my mate had a party a few weeks ago, we were all there, I don't know it was just nice to be there just with everyone , I dunno, you can; t complain can you when you are with your friends, that's my favourite time when I am with my friends.

I: Do you find that easy?

S: O yeah, yeah yeah, I love talking to people. I will talk to anyone. I love talking, you know puplic speaking, it's weird that, I love that, I love talking to people. so yeah, parties are a good place to be especially if there are people you don't know, I'll talk for hours.

I: And what do you like about meeting new people?

S: Everyone is different and has a completely different story, like no one is the same, erm.

I: And you feel quite confident in going out and doing that?

S: I like to think so yer. I just enjoy doing it, I think it's nice to be able to to speak to random people. Like if I don't know someone, I mean I was at my Dad's best mates wedding a couple of years ago, it was ages ago but, I just remember I met this bloke called Jamie, he was a mate through family, you know and he's like thirty, but I get on with him like a mate, it's ridiculous, sort of thing, cos you know like, he's like twenty years older than me but I can still have a proper chat with him. Same if you just meet a random person, just have a chat, it's my favourite thing.

I: And is this something new that you've started doing in recent years? Or were you the same when you were younger?

S: Erm well I don't know because I got bullied when I was like 11 and I moved to this school and then after that I've sort of like slowly built up my confidence ,

(pauses to blow nose)

I: So you weren't so confident in year 7 but you've built that up over the years and now you feel more confident. And I suppose when you are younger you don't have so many opportunities to meet new people so do you feel that you meet new people more often now.

S: O yer definitely, like erm I don't have a job at the moment but when I had my job obviously new people are around all the time, when people are having weddings or having functions, I'd have a chat with them, everyone is like from completely different backgrounds, it's just weird, people who you never thought you'd ever cross paths with. Do you know what I mean? I just find it really fascinating. Maybe that is just me.

I: So you are excited about meeting people and moving forward with your life, would you say that?

S: Yep, I always look to the future, it's really weird though cos like, I always think that will be better long term, but I won't end up doing it. I'm quite bad with stuff like that, but yer, I like to think ahead, but I'm quite lazy to be honest. I'm quite a lazy person, in terms of like with school, I do a lot of like o yer, I can't be bothered kind of thing and it's like quite bad to be honest with you, it's not very good.

I: So would you say you are quite excited about growing up and moving on with your life?

Do you feel a bit frustrated with where you are at now?

S: Erm not frustrated, I like where I am at now, I play a lot of basketball, I love that, I put everything into that, erm I'd probably put that down as a passion kind of thing, I love that to bits, it is my favourite thing, and erm when, I feel like when I'm playing basketball, there is just something else to it, I love being in a team, and it's when erm, I don't know, just winning, I love winning.

I: Laughs

S: You can't complain about winning.

I: How do you feel when you are playing basketball, when you are in the midst of ...

S: Passionate, I'd say passionate, basketball is like my favourite thing.

I: Do you think much while you are playing?

S: Erm I was thinking about that the other day, I don't think I just sort of do, it's weird, cos it's like, I remember when I started playing and everything was so difficult for me and it is like crazy how I struggled with certain things and, I started two years ago, and

now I play for a national team, I play for like a men's team, yesterday I got offered to join a division 2 team. So yer, that shaped up quite well.

I: So when you think about your future do you think about basketball?

S: Ideally yer, whether it will happen, you know what I mean, it's one of those, you know you get a lot of things about what do you want to do? Ideally basketball or like a coaching course kind of thing because I want to be doing basketball for as long as I can at the highest level that I can and if I get the opportunity to do that, I will do that and I'm not really fussed about how it effects other things. Sort of like, that is what I want to do, that's me and I'm willing to do a lot for it and my mum is like obviously you need to focus on school. Yep but if I got the opportunity to like play professionally then it's like when you have something like that on the back of your mind you have to go for it .

I: Where do you think it comes from that drive that you have ? You find very confident in the attitude that you have the- I would do a lot to pursue this, where do you think that comes from ? Is it because you love the game so much?

S: I don't know I can't tell you to be honest, I'd say yer, for the fact that, I've never actually thought to myself, I don't want to you know, even if I don't want to train I will go and do it because it is beneficial to me, sort of thing. But like I said, I can be quite lazy , I guess you know it gets almost sort of like, I don't know, it is weird to have such an oxymoron in your life, when you are so passionate about something but you are also really lazy , like painfully lazy.

I: But not lazy about that just lazy about the other stuff that you are not so interested in?

S: Yer, it's like with school, I like being here for my friends sort of thing, like that aspect, but in all honesty I don't enjoy school, I don't know I just feel that it can get quite repetitive and boring so like living for the weekend sort of thing, it's a bit like ah, you know the best thing in the world is when a week has gone fast, obviously wishing your life away is no way to live is it, but yer.

I: And do you think that is going to change after you have finished sixth form? Do you think that wishing the week away is going to change?

S: Err, I don't know

I: Do you hope that it changes?

S: O yer definitely, I'd like to wake up every morning thinking that this is going to be perfect, but it's not is it, it's not the way life works, it's an impractical way to think.

I: So do you suspect that the working week or the normal week after sixth form might be similar to what school is like?

S: Erm I feel like it sort of sets you up for that, I mean if you were in a workplace where that was the case i think school sets you up for that, you get used to the fact that you are beneath people sort of thing, you get used to the fact that o yer I'm subordinate to bosses. You don't get to chose when you work, you work when you are told. Sort of like, it gets, I don't want that to happen, I can't imagine enjoying that at all, like I'd like to work for my self, I'd like to work doing what I want to do , I'd like to work my hours sort of thing, but that is just not how life works . I don't think about it too much.

I: Do you worry about it? Do you worry about what is going to happen when you finish sixth form.

S: O yeah massively yeah, my biggest fear is stuff not going the way I expect it to go and being really like err in a rut that's the biggest fear of being in a rut. I don't want that at all because that's just, that's terrifying, yer that's terrifying, I don't like that thought at all cos it's like everything going tits up, not a fan of that, no I wouldn't like that at all.

I: And when you do worry about things like that err does it make you behave in a certain way, do you do anything to kind of deal with that.

S: Erm well I used to go to this woman at school kind of thing because I got really anxious, I didn't like being out, I used to be terrified of being out like passed, you know when it was dark or something, I used to hate it because I always felt like something was going to happen sort of thing, I just got really anxious so.....so basically like er I went to see her. I don't know what it is but just to calm yourself down if you're like getting like worked up you are meant to just tap there, I don't know why, and I don't know if it's like a placebo type of thing , but it works whether it's a thing or not but it just works for me and I don't do it all that often, I don't get stressed out very often cos I've changes a lot since then, like I've become a lot less caring, I'm less worried because I'm like o yer what is the worse case scenario, let's be honest, sort of like playing it down a bit.

I: So you had that kind of period of stress and then you learnt strategies to cope.

S: Yer it gets boring being stressed out

I: Are you worried that a similar period of stress might happen when you leave school?

S: Yer I expect that to happen to be honest, yer, everyone is on about so and so is having a mid life crisis, I don't want to be like that, do you know what I mean, terrified of that. Not a fan of that no. I don't want a crisis.

I: That's really interesting, you know, and it's clear that you've sort of thought about these things, which is good for me because I'm interested in these things, so it's nice that you've thought about them cos then I can hear.

Ok let's move on to the next question, so errr, we started with a positive experience of groups. Can you tell me about a negative experience you've had within a group?

S: Err probably when I was getting bulled, yer that wasn't great.

I: So how old were you then, what year were you in ?

S: Err year 7... it sounds really like little though dun it? But yer when I was 11. It doesn't seem like it would mean much, but it did, I didn't know how much that had actually impact me, but if it hadn't happened and you just said o yer in this, this wouldn't have happened and then all this wouldn't have happened and then you wouldn't be in this head space, I would be like, I doubt it, but it happened . I'd be a lot different, I wouldn't be sat here today, if I didn't , you know what I mean, like you know, I believe in, you know like the smallest things change everything you know, I think its called the butterfly effect, so me going like that changes things.

I: So do you think where you are now, in some ways do you think it's changed you for the positive ?

S: O yer definitely, ermm because I'm confident but in a way where it is not like obnoxious, because the worst thing is when someone is like confident but incredibly obnoxious that is my least favourite thing.  
It's just like why, you know, when people but people down to make themselves seem better, that is the worst thing.

I: So do you see that amongst your peer group?

S: Yer, definitely.

I: What does that look like when you see it amongst your peer group ?

S: When it is my friends it's a bit disheartening because it's like o come on mate you're better than that. You don't have to do that. Obviously when you are having a banter with your mates you just take it on the chin sort of thing but ermm, when people like actively, you know, like putting other people down to try and one up everyone , I hate that. Because its like no just be comfortable in yourself.

I: So what do you think is going on with those people, why are they doing that?

S: I'd say insecurity, cos everyone has got insecurities, like my acne, that's my biggest insecurity, it's getting better now but I'm on loads of medication for it so I'd expect it to get better. Ideally I want perfect skin, doesn't happen but yer when people say stuff about it, I'm like yer I know but it is like if I feel like, I've heard this thing so you know , if you are going to insult someone don't go for their biggest like insecurity go or their second biggest because they will get that all the time but go for the third or fourth biggest one sort of like erm, because that's the one they are not thinking about all the time.

I: So it's interesting that you talk about people being insecure and that's why they are putting people down, and err do you feel like you have a sense of maturity that is kind of above that ?

S: Err no, no , not at all no, no I'm not better than them it's just the fact that everyone has stuff happen you don't know what other people, like when people are judgmental about other people's situations that's, I hate that, because you don't know what other people are thinking , if you see someone smoking and think things like that's disgusting, yer but you don't know what they are doing it for, you don't know why they are doing it, you don't know what has led them to doing that, you don't know whether they are just doing it because they want to, whether it's to help them cope with stress, whether they are trying to escape something, do you know what I mean.

I: Yep but I think most people don't think about things in the terms that you are thinking in, I'm just wondering what has brought you there, whether it is you natural kind of curiosity and thoughtfulness or whether some of the experiences you have had have made you more sensitive to other people's.

S: Well I feel like i read into stuff a lot, I mean I love astrology and horoscopes obviously as, I don't thing, I doubt it is a real thing but it is weird how accurate it can be, but I will read into it a lot and say o yer, that links to that, and sort of thing and I'll actually act on it, and it is crazy how I will let that impact me but then in other things I will be like o no that's stupid, do you know what I mean, sort of thing to me , it's weird because I try to think as practically as I can and as logically as I can then I'm following this thing that tells me, (laughs) do you know what I mean it's really hypocritical.

I: No, that's interesting, so I asked you about the negative group experience and you mentioned that group and you have talked a bit about some of the ways that groups can behave in a negative fashion because of their own stuff. What do you think about that group in year 7, thinking back how do you feel about that group, what do you think was going on for them? and how do you feel about them now.

S: Well I could tell you the whole story but that would take a long time, in the start I was like best friends with them and then we I moved up them and I feel like there was lots of fighting and vying for the top spot and I was never really that bothered about, because I was like as long as I'm happy I'm happy, I don't want to be the alpha or whatever and that has changed a bit now because I feel like if you don't have that thing in you then you end up at the bottom and that is the way it is, so you have to make a conscious effort to compete because if you don't you are going to end up at the bottom and at the time I was sort of like why , why are you bothering, why are you sort of trying to move. So obviously I see it as though everyone is here and everyone is trying to you know, it is like a pyramid kind of.

I: Is this both genders?

S: O yer, everyone, well in this context I'm on about well lads because I've got more experience obviously with lads.

I: But you think everyone does it ?

S: O yer, yer, everyone does it , it's just the way it is and then it gets worse and worse and if you point it out I feel like people don't like that, and then, you know, it gets worse and worse and its a bit like what do I do and then you like play the game but you don't acknowledge it. If you acknowledge it you lose, (laughs). So i feel like everyone is trying to one up everyone because ig they've, it's like a self fulfilling thing, if you are going up into a new school and you are the littlest in the school you want to be at the top of the bottom. When you are in year 7 you are at the bottom. like now I'm in sixth form, I've got all like year 11s year 10s, do you know what I mean sort of thing, and it's like, you know, not that I'm better than them, but it's the fact that I've got more experience sort of thing.

I: And so you think this is what was going on for you in year 7, you had you friendship group doing that?

S: Yer, and I was sort of like, I felt like cos I wasn't bothered about that, I don't know, I'm not going to tell you it's a maturity thing because I don't think it was at all, you know, what 11 year old is mature? But, erm, I had that sort of thing, where you know, just be nice, you know. But obviously that doesn't work does it when you are in a school, because it was a school, it's quite rough and I only went because all my mates were going, and my best mate came here but I decided like o I will go with the majority rather than to come here with him. Because he only came here because he was sort of like dyslexic kind of thing. So you know what I'll just come here, my parents gave me the choice, they have never been like o you are doing this, in terms of like school and that, so they let me choose I chose D school, because that is where everyone else is going and it was you know, you go there to learn how to fight rather than to learn, it was really bad and I was like, this isn't where I want to be, so yer I was like can we move, just switch schools please.

I: And then things got better?

S: It was hard because I had to start right from the beginning again obviously.

I: So when you think about that group you think about them playing them game? And do you feel angry towards them?

S: Erm some ways yes some ways no erm, yes because I feel like they understood what they were doing and it came to a point of just pure nastiness and at the time I was a massive push over , I wouldn't have ever said anything to anyone, I was just like please mate, come on, but now it was like you know stop if you don't stop, do you know what I mean kind of thing. And it is like, I've tried my best to sort of like flip it because I don't want to be in that position again it is the worst position to be in, I hate it, it is quite scary



to me the fact that you know, someone can, you know, just another person can impact you in that way.

I: And so now you said you've realised you have to play the game a little bit because you don't want to be at the bottom ermm and do you think there is less pressure as you have got older? So within the current sixth form, but maybe think about your GCSE years as well do you think it is more intense that kind of social pressure?

S: Well, it's like a balance, I feel like at this age you have to put ego aside and just sort of concentrate on your education, A levels, are hard, I didn't really realise how hard they would be and if people have time to be messing about with like their ego and trying to get above people then you know I'm like what you are doing? Sort of think like, you know there are bigger things to worry about, there are bigger fish to fry.

I: So do you think you're drive for that kind of thing lessons as you get to this age? Or do you think that for lots of people it is the same?

S: It's about priorities I would say it is about whether they prioritise there, you know how they are socially or educationally, erm, personally I'd say that I do the socially just for the fact that because I prefer being around my friends than I do being in the classroom definitely ,it's probably the same for everyone but I sit here thinking o yer I need to get these grades because if I don't get these grades then I'm not going to be successful but in the same breath I'm like but ah I don't want to do that (laughs) do you know what I mean, it's really weird, because I'm sat thinking I know what is best for me, but i will never do it, because I'm more interested in spending time with your friends, cos when you're older and you have a job you don't have time for that so I want to do that now. It's sort of like, I feel like I'm milking it a little bit, like my best friend harry I go out with him every single week, he's on holiday he got back yesterday, we go out to Nandos every single week because even though we are in the same school, it's so easy to drift apart and you notice that, it starts happening because you are so caught up in your school work and your home and your job and stuff like that and I quit my job the other week, because my boss, I'm doing a basketball coaching course right and that meant so much more to me than the job and I said to her I need this weekend off because of this course and she said no you can't, and I said I have to and she was like no you can't and I was like I'm just going to leave then, do you know what I mean , it's that sort of thing, it's like, it's just about what people's priorities are. If someone's priorities are yep I need this person to like me, then to me that's the wrong order of priority but to them that's just the way it is. You can't control that, I think that is just the way it is, you can't say to someone o yer, you shouldn't think like that because that is not how life works. You don't get to chose what other people do, you can only control your thoughts and your actions so don't worry about anything else.

I: Ok, erm and so you are aware of this social pressure and this game playing and the energy it takes for you to be situated within that and do you think that is always going to be the same, do you think when you get older it is going to be like that, you're going to have to play these games and jostle for position and all that jazz?

S: I feel like that happens everywhere that you go though, I think like everyone want to be the alpha because you know, I'm not bothered personally as long as I'm happy erm, I can't speak for everyone but ideally if everyone just gets on with their own lives and is nice it's gonna work.

I: When you get older what structures do you think, because at the moment your at school and you have this kind of social structure you compete within, what kind of social structure might you be competing within in later life.

S: I feel like when you have a job you have to , if you deserve a promotion , you know to move up the job ladder, but your boss has a mate, he's gonna move his mate up not you, and I think if you have a rapport with someone that is more valuable than knowing.

I: So there is that arena in later life and then there is the kind of social arena isn't there, and do you think the social arena will change, how do you feel about that going forward?

S: I don't know, well, you'll be working all the time so you won't have time to think about it, erm and when you do, because right now I spend a lot of time with my friends just in the common room, you don't realise how much time you actually spend with someone, and then when you leave you're not spending time with anyone, and I probably spend no more than 10 people that I will speak to in the next 5 years but erm now at the same time you are not going to be arguing because you've got so much to talk about, but when you don't have a talking point, you try to one up each other kind of thing, yer I'm doing better than you sort of thing , cos now it's sort of like what car do you have what house do you got , you know everyone seems to care about that. I mean I'm getting , I'm trying to get my first car now, I want it to be the nicest car that I can, not necessarily because everyone else has a nice car but because if you don't have a nice car, then everyone else is like yer yer yer, do you know what I mean, err.

I: So you've talked about a few things here, you go out with your mate to Nandos, you hang around with people in the common room, err do you hang around with boys and girls?

S: Yer both.

I: And is that a new thing do you hang around with girls more than you did when you were doing in your GCSE.

S: No not really I've always hung around girls, that's just the way it is really.

I: How does that link with the social pressure and the game playing and stuff?

S: Well everyone likes to say I've got this many birds or whatever, do you know what I mean ? And it's like o right cool, but I feel like it's actually more, if you do have that or

whatever, but you don't say anything that's a lot more, like to the people who do know, it's a lot more, o yer he's a lot more sort of, you have a lot more respect for you, because you're not shouting about it, you're doing it because you're doing it sort of thing, do you know what I mean? I feel like, you know, everyone talks about a body count and everybody seems to care about that kind of stuff like that, but like at the same time when you get older it;s quite trivial, do you know what I mean.

I: So what do you think drives people to think and talk a bit like that?

S: Err I'd, say media, everything is about popularity sort of thing, if you talk to more people you are seen as more, everyone wants to be like famous don't they.

I : OK so you mentioned media and kind of when we think about social media and how people present themselves on that and play those kind of social games, do you think socially media is a big part of that? Is that where you look and see what games are being played and what's going on. Do people jostle for position on social media.

S: Well sort of, everyone, no one post's any bad stuff it's always like, I'm on holiday, I've got this new thing it's never like o yer erm I'm in a financial crisis, no one is ever, do you know what I mean, it's not what you do because it's not socially desirable. You want people to see your best you and that's why everyone tries to make it a reality.

I: Do you spend much time doing that kind of thing?

S: Erm not my friends because we are all quite level headed, we are all like-minded, we are not really bothered about that sort of thing, we will talk about it, but we don't try and one up each other, if someone is trying to do that then i don't really want to associate with them because it's not a fun thing to be around you know I better than you, I've got this, I've got that, shut up (laughs).

I: So what other places do you do social things, what other, where else do social things happen for you and your peer group? Not just your immediate friends but your year group.

S: Well for me personally basketball, because that's a team sport with a social element, when you have a job you can't not talk to people, because if you don't have nay social skills that's difficult. You know, I know a lot of people who don't talk, you know there are a couple of people who just sit there with their phones an it's like what are you doing like, when you get out into the world you are going to have no clue, like if you can't talk to people here that you know, how are you going to talk to people, do you know what I mean, like it's crazy to me that people can sit so, and it's hypocritical coming from me to say don't look at you phone, because I'm always on my phone, but I can take my head up and have a conversation with someone, and you know, I'm not sat there going um um er er (imitates stuttering) getting all flustered, you know, I can hold a conversation and that's a massive, no one seems to be able to do that, I don't know it's just mental that no-one can talk to people.

I: And why do you think that is?

S: I don't know err, I feel like I was forced to do it when I joined the school because I knew about three people, I had to, everyone had built there friendships, because it was a whole year, I had to, not force my way in but prove myself kind of thing, present myself, this is Sean kind of thing, and errm that's difficult to do, that is very difficult to do. Erm, it's tiring, spending all your time trying to convince other people, not convince, but like push the idea that I'm someone to be friends with when they have already met people that they think they need to, you know. And up to now I've got plenty of good friends but erm at the time, it was like quite difficult, I felt like a bit not the odd one out sort of thing cos being the new person, I hated it, I don't mind now cos I know that I have the social skills to have a chat with someone.

I: So do you think those people that you see and they don't have any social skills, and they can't have a conversation, do you think that they've never done that scary thing that you did which is try and put yourself out there, or do you think.. I mean what are the differences between you and them.

S: Experience, like I said no one has the same experiences, and when someone has the same experiences as you, and when you've shared an experience with someone, that is massive to me, that is quite special because not many people have been in the same situation as us, everyone has their own unique story sort of thing, if you share something like erm, I don't know that many people who also got bullied and actually a few people that joined this school after me who also got bullied, I noticed it was one of two ways they were either really quiet or they was a massive knob, and do you know what I mean, I felt like, I wasn't in either category, I was trying to be me. And I'm like am I doing it wrong because this lad called M, I didn't like him at all, he got bullied out of his old school, and that's fine, there is nothing wrong with that cos it happens, it happened to me. It was sort of like, it was mental like, I couldn't believe the fact that he could be, after going through that and you know, being rejected, and being made to feel the way you are made to feel when it happens, to the point that you have to move schools. That you can then come and be an arse-hole to people, how are you managing that like, that's, do you know what I mean it was just mental, I couldn't believe it, how are you being like that when you have just had all of that happen to you. And then you have to then build friendships, and no one is going to like you when you are like that, how do you have the nerve to do that, yer I dunno.

I: But it interests you at the same time?

S: Yer, he's the sort of person you want to sit down with and say what makes you think that's a good idea, you know.

I: That's really interesting and interesting that you are interested in that.

OK thanks for that that is really good. I want to ask you about older people and you know think about teachers, think about maybe your parents or your parents generation. Do you think they went through all the same stuff that you are going through now? Do you think things are different?

S: No because it was a different time, everything was different then, erm, there's similarities definitely, but not to the extent that now you have all social media and that, like, you didn't have that back then. It's just sort of, it is a bit like ,errr, I don't know the word to use it is sort of like, it's similar but it's so different at the same time. Obviously everyone is a kid at one point but I feel like when your parents, I mean I see it like, parents are just the same as me but later on in life and trying to get on with it a bit like, and as a parent it's just like you're just a normal person trying to get on with your life and you know, when you are a child you are not very aware of the fact that you know like, you're going to be in the same position when you are older, it's like, your parents are just normal people who have ended up where they are now, whether they asked to be there or not, I'm sure that I get on my parents nerves a lot and , you know, I feel like it's quite bad if I'm gonna be as stubborn as I can be when I know that they probably had it harder than me because they didn't have phones. They had to use house phones, I bet it was so much more, not difficult, but so much more inconvenient.

I: Do you think they played the same social games, that you talk about your peers playing?

S: Yep but I'd say a different dynamic.

I: Do you think it was as stressful as it is for you?

S: No because there is not the pressure, it would be quite delusional to say it is more difficult for me so I'm not going to say that, but in different ways it was more difficult, in different ways it was probably easier, like erm, school, education wasn't valued then in like, I don't know the late 80s early 90s kind of thing, probably wasn't as valued, it's not what it is now, everything school, school, school, back then it was more manual stuff, you know, and i don't know myself, I'm 17 I don't know a great deal about anything but at the same time I try to be as self aware as I can. The fact that my parents, you know, have been in my position before and when they tell me, and try to advise me, I should probably take that on board rather than say o no it's just your parents. I feel like they have a lot of things, cos my mum, my grandad used to live in Saudi Arabia and work there, he got payed a lot for it but at the same time he was never at home and my mum saw him 3 times a year. My mum tries to spend as much time with me, she tries to fo as much for me as she can because she didn't have that and my Nan couldn't drive so she had to get the bus everywhere, so if I ask her for a lift, she is always more than happy to give me a lift because it is the fact that she didn't have that. And I feel that that is kind of lost on people my age, definitely, I took it for granted for ages and it's only since I was like 15 that I sort of realised like o yer, my mum and dad are people. They are not here for me, they are here for them. Do you know, it's jus weird, how selfish you can be, it's almost embarrassing.

I: That's really interesting, thank you. OK, so we talked a bit about the future and you've talked a bit about your fears about getting stuck in a rut and having to do something that is not something that you wanted to do and how that would be really bad and depressing and you've talked a bit about your dreams for the future regarding basketball and stuff, how free do you feel in choosing your own path going forward?

S: Not very to be honest, I didn't choose to be doing this, I'm going to contradict myself here, because I said my parents don't sort of force me a certain way but at the time, then, before like the bullying happened not at all. But now, I feel like, I'm 17, I don't need to be molly coddled, but she does it a lot, like, I was meant to be going to S, I got asked to do a basketball course in S college and that is in the top basketball league in England and my Mum was like you are not doing that you are not putting all your eggs in one basket, and I were mortified and I was like, I guess that is the way it is then and then she blames me for that because I will sit here and say I don't even want to be doing A levels, like, I'm grateful that I'm here because not everyone gets this opportunity, I still put all the effort in I've put a lot of effort in, but I find sitting in a classroom, writing stuff down from the board, honestly, as interesting as I find psychology I find it at times quite mindless as I'm sat there just noting stuff down, and it is not sort of going in and I find it difficult to apply it to real life. When we were learning about synaptic transmission, how am I meant to like compute that, that is so miniscule to me, obviously it means something but to me I'm just like, I try to think of everything practically, and then I will be sat in lesson asking questions. You see in that lesson there, if miss says something I will be trying to link it to something in life just so I can understand it, because I'm not very smart it doesn't just stick, I have to feel like I can apply it to real life, sort of thing. Then, everyone is like why is he asking that and it's because that's how it makes sense to me.

I: And that's actually how your synapses work, if your synapses are firing together and wiring together it is because you made connections in your brain and linked it to things in your life and things that you know about already, so it's funny that you mention synapses because that is exactly how it works, so you know, you're doing the smart thing and you've learnt that method.

S: Well I don't think I'm smart, I don't pretend I'm smart erm, I like to think practically and logically, erm, that is not necessarily the way forward, I feel like school is not about learning it is about passing ,it's about remembering not learning at all. Because if you are in an exam and you get a question or something and you mis-interpret a question you could write something, you could bring something new to the thing of psychology but you will get no mark because it wasn't on topic, do you know what I mean it's so. You know, in a uni dissertation, like you get to write about it and you, it's not like, correct me if I'm wrong there is not like a mark scheme as such, the fact that if you don't write about this, about this, specifically about this you don't get any marks for it, sort of like if you bring something else into it you get credit for that?

I: Yer, you are right yer.

S: It's completely different, if you don't, if, you could write the most amazing thing ever.

I: Yep you're right, if you do go to uni, they do value creativity and independent thinking a lot more.

S: I feel like that is restricted at this age, I feel like it is difficult to think for yourself at this age because it's so frowned upon almost to, you know, I'm not going to use the word rebel because I think that is daft. But if you decide to do something differently your way, that is looked down on. Like if you don't follow the system that's like ooh what are you doing? Like if someone decides to leave school early and do something else, ooh are you not staying to do A levels, what about A levels,.

I: OK so you've painted a picture and it's really articulate and really good and you have talked about some of the difficulties so I mean, I've asked you about some of the difficulties, do you think it is difficult being your age at the moment, in this kind of environment, do you think it is hard?

S: Yer, I'd say yer, but I feel like when I'm about 20, I'll look back a couple of years ago and say that were quite funny, but now it's like this is quite difficult because you know, stuff with social groups happening, erm, and different times you'll be having good, bad, err two months ago I was in a decent place, last month was a terrible place, now I'm alright now because stuff happens. You know you just have to get on with it I feel like, cos basically I had a girlfriend, with her for a year and a half, just chilling getting on with that, then you know, I don't think things are working, I'm trying to be mature about it, I'm 17, in the grand scheme of things, that does not matter at all, you know chill out and then she goes and has sex with my best friend and I'm like o ok, that hurt, I didn't realise that would hurt, and at this age I'm like ooh that matters a lot but now a month later I'm even thinking that doesn't really matter, you know in a few years that's, I probably won't even remember that do you know what I mean . At the time last month I was like this is horrible, this hurts a lot and I was in a bad place but now I feel like, I've been in worse situations, you know, and it just sort of showed me the kind of people that I need around. And I take that more as a sign than something bad, do you know what I mean.

S: So what makes it easier to go through those difficult periods for you, what helps? So being your age is difficult and all this stuff happens which you have talked about, which isn't unusual, even what you have just mentioned, you know. What makes it easier for you and maybe not just for you but for people in general your age?

S: Not thinking rationally, not isolating yourself, if you isolate, I did that when I got bullied it was the worse, no you should never isolate yourself, when you are alone with your thoughts you think the way you have been thinking through that situation, you know you need a second opinion cos, you become really stubborn when you are in a bad situation, you feel like you don't have many options where as if you have someone else, your like o actually yer, you snap out of it a bit.

I: So people help, friends and family.

S: O yer definitely, that's another reason why I love having people around me because when people have ideas that you don't think of, me as a person I'm not very smart, I can think on my feet but like academically I'm not the smartest person you know, but if I'm in a situation like I know I can sort of take myself out of it an think o yer right come on Sean sort yourself out, and I feel like a lot of people don't have that which I value a lot and I feel like I can help my friends with that. Sort of thing, you know like. If someone is having a rough time I feel like I can try and help other people using this sort of thing because it's really bad if you are going to isolate yourself, if you are going to shut everyone else out and not tell everyone about it, erm cos I used to lie to my counsellor because I didn't like telling my counsellor stuff. How stupid is that ? You are going there to literally, you know, don't do that.

I: S o is what your saying that some of your past experiences have helped you grow and have helped you learn about yourself and how to deal and look after yourself and that has made things easier as you go forward and you've even been able to use that to help other people?

S:Yer, but I find that quite crazy, that I'm 17 and that is a thing, I wouldn't have thought that that would be the situation, do you know what I mean. I just find it quite fascinating that I am 17 I've had stuff like that happen, you know and when, where am I gonna go from here sort of thing. Because I don't want to make the same mistakes that I've made, I don't want to go through the smae things that I've been through because it's horrible. And everyone has bad days but like I saod, my biggest fear is being stuck in a rut and being in that situation like, I hate that, I don't want that at all. I want to do what I want to do and anything I can do to make that a thing I will do. I feel like loyalty is massive cos when you have something happening you know who to go to and those people know that they've got you sort of thing and that is massive to me, but in the bigger picture, I'm 17 I can't have experienced much, like I don't even know how much of my life I'm through, probably like a quarter if that, up to know, I feel like so much has happened but it's so little and I feel like later on I will be like that was that kind of thing, do you know what I mean, I feel like it's quite trivial.

I: I see what you are saying erm, I suppose it's your life and your life is never really trivial to you yourself and I think that the experiences where you are young are quite formative erm and it seems like you've thought about what this means to you and how these things interact, do you think that's fair.

S: Yer I think about it a lot cos it happens a lot you know an existential crisis, ooh what is going to happen sort of thing, it I think about that a lot and I think that's quite an unhealthy mindset. I think about what is going to happen, why stuff happens and I try to look at the bigger picture. You know, everyone has religions and sort of stuff like that but I feel like, i don't know, I feel like I think in like a really weird way. It's really hard to wrap my head around the way that I think, I don't know. You don't understand if you



think what other people think it's like you don't want to be the person to bring it up sort of thing, do you know what I mean? It's just like if I'm thinking about what happens when you die, because that fascinates me, well then that is a waste of brain space, just think about the now, just live in the moment.

I had a period where I was terrified of it like, what am I going to do sort of thing, I was like terrified of dying which is really weird, being 16 and worried about dying, that's weird but erm it is scary thinking about it. I've read some things, like when you die I feel like that is it, it is the same as before you were born, yu know.

I: Do you think, thinking, any of those thoughts, and you know you mentioned existential crisis , do you think these things effect your behaviour or do you think not?

S: Periodically, when I think about it now, for the rest of the day until it leaves my head I'll be like, I will think about it. And I don't know what kind of impact it will have but it will motivate me , I will be like o yer I need to make the most of my life. If I take the dog out for a walk and I'm sort of there by my own it will end up sort of looping back to that. Like o yer, you get one chance if you bugger it up, that is it, do you know. That comes back to the fact that I am quite lazy in school. I know that if I put all my time into studying now, because like I said I'm not very smart, but at the same time I try and if put that effort in and try mu absolute hardest and get reasonable grades to get into university then that will help me in the long run but in the present that is such a depressing thing to be just sat doing your work while all the time, having a minimal social life I hate that. It's just quite difficult to wrap your head around the fact that anything like that is sort of like it matters but if you think like a few hundred years ago, that didn't matter at all, we didn't have that.

I: So the gap between what you think you might want in the future and now is difficult because the boring stuff now is quite hard to get through.

S: Yep ideally I would be able to snap my fingers and have what I want but it doesn't work like that but at the same time that's, I don't want that either because then it doesn't feel like it means anything. I like having to work, I hate working for it but then after I've worked for it and got it that is the best thing like.