

DEDPSY PROFESSIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMME

THESIS

A Paradox of Brokenness to Strength: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of Factors Influencing Looked After Children's Identity Development

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1st May 2014

Declaration

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

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This thesis is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of DEdPsy.

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Summary

This thesis represents an assessed requirement of the Doctoral training in Educational Psychology at Cardiff University. The purpose of this thesis is to explore the development of self and/or identity in looked after children (LAC), and to address critique about previous research being ‘atheoretical’. The LAC population were specifically chosen as their outcomes continue to be highlighted as poor when compared to the general population (Meltzer, Gatward, Corbin, Goodman & Ford, 2003). Previous research on LAC has tended to focus on the demographics, mental health outcomes and educational attainment, almost exclusively adopting quantitative methods. Quantitative methods do not reveal insight into the personal experience of LAC and thus lack the depth of meaning that may be ascribed by individual perspectives. To date, research has not properly explored the development of self and/or identity processes within LAC (Kools, 1997; Schwartz, 2007; McKinney, 2011; Honey, Rees & Griffey, 2011). The majority of research has been conducted in the United States of America, which potentially confounds the generalisability of findings to the United Kingdom LAC population. In addition, whilst theoretical concepts such as ‘identity’, ‘self’ and ‘stigma’ were identified in the literature, these were poorly integrated with findings. Thus, the intent of this thesis is to address this gap in the literature. The abbreviation ‘LAC’ will be used from this point forward to describe looked after children, which includes adolescents. The thesis is structured as follows.

Part One: Literature Review

Part one consists of an introduction that briefly sets the scene. The literature review begins with a discussion around the nature of LAC, explores reasons for children entering the care system, provides demographics, policy and legislation and discusses life outcomes. It will include a discussion of the limited literature regarding LAC perceptions of the development of self and/or identity, most of which does not integrate findings with psychological theory. It is argued that this omission makes it difficult to build up a coherent picture of understanding of development of self and/or identity in LAC. Following this, some of the major theories and frameworks of self and identity are critically discussed; which provides a lens through which LAC experiences can be understood. Coverage is broad, encompassing a thorough and critical examination of key theories and debates in relation to construct of identity and/or self. Following this, an overview of research into stigma will be presented, and will focus in particular on the importance of a stigmatised identity for the self. Finally, the literature review will outline the rationale for the current study. The relevance to the role of the educational psychologist (EP) in relation to supporting LAC will be discussed. The chapter concludes with a set of research aims and questions for the current study.

Part Two: Empirical Paper

The second section of this thesis is a qualitative study which aims to explore LAC perceptions of the development of self and/or identity, and to address critique about previous research being ‘atheoretical’. An interpretive approach was used, with 7 semi-structured, face to face interviews as the method of data collection. Seven interviews were conducted, which were recorded and transcribed, with an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of data performed (Smith, Flower & Larkin, 2009). The five superordinate themes that resulted from

the IPA of the data were: Theme 1: SHATTERED SELF; Theme 2: FEELING DIFFERENT; Theme 3: DANCE WITH STIGMA; Theme 4: PIVOTAL MOMENTS AND MEANING MAKING; and Theme 5: RE-ESTABLISHING IDENTITY AND TURNING TOWARDS THE FUTURE. These themes are discussed in relation to the existing evidence base and psychological theory. The limitations of the current study are made explicit. Future research and clinical implications for EPs will be tentatively discussed.

Part Three: Reflective Summary

Part three contains reflective summary of the study, which presents a critical overview of the research, the researcher/practitioner and a presentation of the researcher's contribution to knowledge. The implications for future research raised in Part Two will be discussed in greater depth.

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Table of Abbreviations

Looked after Children (LAC)

Educational Psychologist (EP)

Welsh Government (WAG)

United Kingdom (UK)

Department for Education (DfE)

Department for Education and Skills (DfES)

Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF)

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

United States of America (USA)

Office of National Statistics (ONS)

Local Authority (LA)

Part One: Literature Review

9,730 (excluding tables, references and titles)

1.0 The Literature Review

1.1 Overview of the Literature Review

The literature review will begin with a brief overview of how LAC are conceptualised and the current demographics defined in the literature will be reported. An outline of key legislation and policy, which prioritises the mental health and educational needs of LAC will be briefly outlined. This will serve as a contextual background for this thesis. Consideration of the current concerns regarding the high rates of mental health and poor educational outcomes in LAC will be discussed. In doing so, a more complete understanding of children placed in care will emerge. This will be followed by a consideration of the limited literature that specifically addresses the development of self and/or identity process within LAC. Preliminary research suggests that the self and/or identity development is different in LAC from normative expectations (Kools, 1997). In particular, additional experiences related to foster care, such as stigma and being singled out, are suggested to further compound the risk factors for these children. It is argued that whilst theoretical concepts such as ‘identity’, ‘self’ and ‘stigma’ were discussed within this limited literature, these were poorly integrated with findings. Overall, there was very little integration with psychological models or theory. In light of this gap, it seems appropriate to explore not only how identity is constructed, but also how LAC might cope with the potential threat of a stigmatised identity. Therefore, various theories and research around the construct of identity will be explored in order to provide a lens through which LAC perceptions of the development of self and/or identity can be further understood. Following this, stigma and/or labelling research from a variety of different areas will be addressed, with a particular focus on the consequences of a stigmatised status for the self and/or identity. The literature review concludes with a discussion of the rationale and aims for the current study.

1.2 Searches and Sources of Information

The literature has been reviewed using a number of online sources: PsyInfo; Google Scholar; Science Direct and WileyInterScience. The keywords used were ‘looked after children’, ‘foster children’, ‘children in care’, ‘educational psychology’, ‘identity’, ‘self’ ‘self-concept’ and ‘stigma’. Internet search engines were also utilised to access relevant government documents and recent developments in the area. Other key sources include textbooks regarding self-theories, personality, self-concept, personal identity and stigma. The search was completed in December 2013. Research that is particularly relevant to the present study will only be presented, as it is not possible to review all research.

1.2 LAC: What is Currently Known?

1.2.1 Definition of LAC

The term ‘looked after children’ was introduced by the 1989 Children Act. It refers to all children and young people who are looked after by the local authority (LA), including those subject to a compulsory care order and those looked after on a voluntary basis through an agreement with their parents (Children Act, 1989). In the United Kingdom (UK) young people continue to be looked after up until the age of 21, although many cease to be looked after at the age of 18 (Department for Children Schools and Families, 2009). These children and young people are looked after by the LA in a range of provisions including foster

placements, secure units, foster care homes, residential schools, living independently and kinship care (Welsh Government, 2013). It is not unusual for young people in care to experience on average three placements in the course of a year (Department for Education and Skills, 2006), whereas children in the general population move on average three times before reaching adulthood (Moyers and Mason, 1995). Such statistics highlight that LAC are very likely to experience a dysfunctional cycle of instability and subsequent disruptions to caregiving relationships.

Children and young people may become looked after due to a variety of circumstances, although it is commonly a result of adverse familial experiences where their parents are not able to provide satisfactory levels of care (Children Act, 1989). Children and young people typically enter the care system as a result of abuse and neglect (WG, 2013; Department for Education, 2013a). Specifically, 61% of LAC in Wales were looked after by the LA for this reason in 2012-2013. Other reasons aside from abuse and neglect include: unacceptable behaviour of the child (4 %), parents' illness, disability or absence (7 %) and family dysfunction (26%) (WG, 2013). The following section outlines some key statistics in order to provide a profile of LAC in England, Scotland and Wales.

1.2.2 Profile of Children in the Looked After System: Statistics

The most up to date figures released by the Department for Education (DfE, 2013a) indicates that there were 68,110 LAC in England alone. This figure has only slightly increased over the last year (2%), but constitutes a 12% increase since 2009 (DfE, 2013a). There were 5,743 LAC in Wales in March 2013. This is an increase of 24 % since 2007 (WG, 2013). In July 2012, 16, 248 children were in the care of LAs in Scotland. This is an increase of less than 1 % since 2011, and is at its highest since 1983 (Scottish Government, 2012). The gender break-down of the looked after population across the three countries is fairly congruent. The proportion of boys in the care of LAs was 57% in England and 55% in Scotland and Wales. Correspondingly, the proportion of girls was 43% in England and 45% in Scotland and Wales (British Association for Adoption and Fostering, 2013).

1.2.3 Legislation and Policy regarding LAC

Government policies and legislation relating to the mental health and educational attainment of LAC have rapidly developed over the last decade. The publication the Children Act (1989) was a catalyst for a radical reform of the provision of services for children, young people and families in the UK; compelling all local authorities to prioritise the education of LAC. The Every Child Matters agenda (Department for Education Skills and Families, 2004), which was legislated through the Children Act (2004) was a significant piece of legislation that proposed that children's services should be reshaped to help all children achieve whatever their background and circumstances. The guidance highlighted the following five outcomes: be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic wellbeing (DfES, 2004). The implementation of the White Paper *Care Matters: Time for Change* (Department for Education and Skills, 2007) highlighted the significance of improving the health and wellbeing of LAC. The key priorities that were specified in the White Paper *Care Matters: Time for Change* is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Key Priorities specified in the White Paper Care Matters: Time for Change

- Supporting LAC in school admissions.
- Supporting LAC to access leisure activities in the community.
- Improving health outcomes and educational attainment.
- Improving the role of corporate parent.
- Improving family and parenting support.
- Improving standards of foster care for LAC.
- Improving arrangements for transition to adulthood for LAC.

(DfES, 2007, p. 5-11)

Also in 2007, the Welsh Assembly Government published its policy document *Towards a Stable Life and Brighter Future* which placed new duties on health bodies and LAs to improve the health, wellbeing and education of LAC. The recent change in government has led to revised regulations and guidance for LAC with an emphasis on supporting the educational achievement and aspirations for this vulnerable group (Department for Children Schools and Families, 2010). Subsequently, a number of suggestions have been proposed for schools, which include, for example, the appointment of a designated teacher to advocate and act as a resource of LAC (Department for Children Schools and Families, 2009a, 2009b) and the introduction of a virtual school head with the aim of information sharing and effective tracking in order to improve educational achievement of LAC (DfE, 2013b).

1.2.4 Educational Outcomes for LAC

There is a massive gap between the educational attainment of LAC and their non-looked after peers, even when compared with other disadvantaged groups (Ford, Vostanis, Melzer & Goodman, 2007; Borland, Pearson, Hill, Tisdall & Bloomfield, 1998; Jackson, 1999; Borland, 2000; Jackson & Thomas 2000; Social Inclusion Unit 2003; Barnardo's 2006; Jackson & McParlin, 2006; Maxwell, Soda & Stanley, 2006). For example, in England 15.3% of LAC achieved at least 5 A*- C grades in GCSEs including English and Maths compared to 58% of non-LAC (DfE, 2013a). Although this figure represents an improvement in the attainment of LAC since 2008, the gap between the attainment of this cohort and their peers has widened in that time (DfE, 2013a). Many also have a learning disability (67.8%) and 28.5% of LAC have a statement of special educational needs (SEN), compared with under 3% of the population (DfE, 2013a). However, Jackson and Simon (2006) argue that schools may automatically place LAC on the SEN register regardless of their academic ability; suggesting LAC are treated differently due to stereotypical views and the 'labels' assigned to them. Indeed, the Who Cares? Trust (2004) identified that LAC with reading ages 16 + had been allocated to remedial classes based on a small sample of LAC in Kent. Outcomes of young people leaving care in relation to education, employment and training highlight that this trend continues into adulthood (DfE, 2012). Reflecting on the poor outcomes for LAC, Stein (2006) argues that they are "amongst the most excluded groups of society" (p. 423).

The literature suggests that many LAC are not achieving their potential. However, Rees (2012) argues that, “few studies, however, aim to reflect the heterogeneity of these children and those who are performing well may be under-represented in findings” (p. 183). Indeed, Rees’ (2012) study which was conducted in one Welsh LA found that 16% of LAC performed at, or above, the average ability range in a number of areas. The author notes that, “these findings contrast with frequently quoted statistics drawn mainly from sampling-based studies” (p. 195). These findings are echoed by Fernandez (2008) who described that 48% of carers felt their foster child was achieving and doing ‘very well’ at school. Moreover, a number of structural factors within the care system have been identified as having a negative impact upon the educational outcomes of LAC. These include: inadequate planning and a delay in making and implementing decisions, unstable foster placements, numerous school moves and/or time spent out of school (Thomas & O’Kane, 1999; Jackson & McParlin, 2006; Winter, 2006; Berridge, 2007; Stein, 1994; Fletcher-Campbell, 1998). In addition, other factors which, have been raised, include professionals’ low expectations and aspirations for LAC, poor social support and inadequate educational resources in residential homes (Edwards, Sweeney, 2007; Francis, 2000; Buchanan, 1995).

1.2.5 Mental Health Outcomes for LAC

The literature on mental health prevalence rates among LAC is expansive. Research consistently reports that LAC are known to show high rates of mental health problems, early pregnancy and risk-taking behaviours, compared to those of the general population of the same age (McCann, James, Wilson & Dunn, 1996; Dimigen et al., 1999; Meltzer, Gatward, Corbin, Goodman & Ford, 2003; Utting, 1997). Saunders and Broad’s (1997) small study (n = 48) of care leavers, who were mainly female, reported that 35% had engaged in self-harming behaviours, 60% had experienced suicidal thoughts, and of those, a small number had actually attempted suicide. The Dimigen et al. (1999) study sought to gain information about the mental health of LAC (n = 70), within six weeks of entering LA care, and reported that a considerable proportion had a serious psychiatric disorder. Of the 70 children, 12 girls and 13 boys showed conduct disorder, 21 had severe attention difficulties and 18 had autistic-like detachment.

Perhaps the most wide-ranging review of prevalence of mental health disorders in LAC was conducted by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) in the United Kingdom (UK). The study (Meltzer, Corbin, Gatward, Goodman & Ford, 2003) gathered data from 1,039 LAC (aged 5-17) in 132 LAs and combined data from diagnostic interviews with young people (if aged 11-17), teachers and carers which could be compared to with the findings of an earlier ONS study (Meltzer, Corbin, Gatward, Goodman & Ford, 2000) of mental health problems in young people in the general population. The study utilised the ICD-10 classification, a standard manual classifying tool for mental illness. The findings highlighted that 45% of LAC could be diagnosed as having a mental health disorder in comparison to 10% of the overall population of young people in the UK. Among the sample, 37% were assessed as having a clinically significant conduct disorder, 12% were shown to have emotional disorders (e.g. depression and anxiety) and 7% were assessed as hyperactive. The study indicated that boys aged between 11-15 who were living in residential care and had been in

their placement for less than three years were more likely to be diagnosed with a mental health disorder. The findings reflected a 4 to 5 times higher rate of mental health disorders than that found in the 2000 ONS study of the general population. Among the children who were rated as having a mental health disorder, the vast majority (88%) agreed with the diagnosis. However, over two-fifths (43%) of children who were assessed as *not* having a mental health disorder were viewed by their carers as having emotional, behavioural or hyperactivity problems. Studies in Scotland and Wales have reported similar findings (See Meltzer, Corbin, Gatward, Goodman & Ford, 2004a; 2004b)

These studies are an indication that LAC are a high risk population when it comes to mental health problems. However, the evidence base is limited because research in this area has a number of limitations. For example, the sample sizes of the research studies that have been conducted are relatively small with often low levels of participant engagement and have a high rate of attrition (Rees, 2012; O’Sullivan & Westerman, 2007; Gilbertson & Barber, 2002; Skuse & Evans, 2001; Richardson & Joughin, 2002). Ford, Vostanis, Meltzer, and Goodman (2007) reviewed studies on psychiatric disorders and found prevalence rates from 17% to 89% for LAC. The authors suggest that such a large variation could be attributed to the measures of psychological adjustment, the age and type of foster placement studied and length and size of the studies. Thus, comparisons between mental health prevalence studies are difficult to make and may not reflect the wider LAC population, as their methodologies and definitions vary (Richardson and Lelliot, 2003; Rees, 2012). Koprowska and Stein (2000) argue for further longitudinal research that explores how many LAC are referred to child and adolescent mental health services, how many go on to enter adult mental health services and how many suffer with psychiatric disorders in later life. However, it could be argued that such methods cannot give insight into the personal experiences of LAC or achieve an in-depth understanding of the factors that may contribute to the poor outcomes documented. For example, Rostill and Myatt (2005) argued that research has tended to focus on LAC as ‘problems’ rather than considering the psychosocial explanations. The author suggested that the label ‘looked-after-child’ in itself could lead to a young person in care receiving a psychiatric label. Furthermore, Stein (2006) notes that more research is needed that develops far stronger links with theoretical frameworks to develop an understanding of why these difficulties arise. What are the features of growing up in care that contribute to potentially negative outcomes for LAC? In order to address this question, it seems important to explore the perceptions of LAC – what it means to grow up in care, how LAC feel they are treated by others and how they view their experiences affecting their self and/or identity. An understanding of the experiences of LAC is crucial in order to provide appropriate services and intervention to improve outcomes for LAC (Kools, 1997). The following section will go on to consider the limited literature that specifically addresses the development of self and/or identity processes within LAC.

1.2.6 LAC, Identity Development and Stigma

The empirical research exploring the development of self and/or identity processes within LAC is minimal (Kools, 1997; Schwartz, 2007; McKinney, 2011; Honey, Rees & Griffey, 2011). Kools (1997) applied a cross-sectional research design to interview 17 adolescents

(aged 15-19) living in long-term foster care, about their experiences and identity development. Kools (1997) used dimensional analysis from grounded theory to explore experiences shared from the adolescents' perspective. Kools (1997) concluded that foster care was found to have a negative impact on identity development. For example, stereotypical views of the label "foster child" led to feelings of diminished status. The study highlighted that LAC felt stigmatised, inferior and rejected which led to feelings of loneliness, marginalisation and social isolation. Kools (1997) argued that negative stereotypes of "delinquent" and "psychologically impaired" were widely held by peers and adults in their social environment. Kools (1997) concluded that "devaluation of self by others impacted three interrelated areas: the self, interpersonal relationships, and the development of independence" (p. 267). Persistent experiences of stigmatisation were reported to lead to low self-confidence and lack of aspirations for the future. Similar findings emerged in a study of 13 young people (aged 12-16) and their social workers primarily living in residential care (McMurray, Connolly, Preston-Shoot & Wigley, 2011). Findings suggested that more than half of the adolescents in the sample worried about their future and felt their identity was on standby. McMurray, Connolly, Preston-Shoot and Wigley, (2011) discussed how many of the adolescents felt stigmatised and reported the importance of relationships in shaping LAC's identity. Vojak's (2009) analysis complements some of Kools' (1997) and McMurray et al's. (2011) findings, suggesting that in an individualistic society people tend to blame themselves for their predicaments instead of structural inequalities and that stigmatising language can reinforce these inequalities. Vojak (2009) cites the example of the word "foster" which has positive meanings in some contexts, but for LAC may have negative connotations. Vojak (2009) argues that LAC may see their situation as their own fault and internalise this stigma which leads to social isolation, emotional denial, lowered self-esteem and threatened self-concept which can lead to poor aspirations for the future.

McKinney (2011) carried out observations of 23 young people in foster homes over four months, exploring how a child's sense of self is 'co-constructed' through interactions with his or her caregivers. Specifically, the study emphasised the formation of a 'bad' social identity which was constructed through processes of interaction. McKinney (2011) argued that further research within the foster family setting is needed, as the methodology of the study limits the conclusions that can be drawn. Indeed, one study (largely quantitative), undertaken in the UK, has suggested that LAC hold more positive self-perceptions than non-LAC; which is suggested to be a protective factor linked to resilience (Honey et al. 2011). This was particularly noticeable in the ratings for: how much the pupil likes school; home-support with schoolwork; self-esteem; and reaching potential in education and life. However, notable differences were observed between the aspirations of LAC and non-LAC; with a significantly higher proportion of non-LAC specifying aspirations for professional jobs in the future. In spite of the positive self-perceptions, LAC did refer to the negative stereotypes associated with being in care. Taken together, these findings can be interpreted positively, suggesting that, within the educational system, LAC reflect favourably on their experiences and self-concepts.

This small body of research which examines LAC identity development is inconclusive. While Kools' (1997) findings validate the claim that LAC have additional challenges associated with identity development when compared to their peers not in care, limitations in this study's sampling and method should be noted. Due to a sample of largely African American children, Kools' (1997) study must be perhaps interpreted with caution when considering the relevance to the UK population. This was also the case for other studies, including those by Schwartz (2007) and McKinney (2011), where samples were based on LAC from minority ethnic backgrounds. It could be argued that the predominant focus on ethnicity potentially confounds and limits the generalisability of findings to the UK LAC population (White et al. 2008; Phinney, 1990; Schwartz, 2001). Although this small body of research provides some empirical evidence of the challenges that being looked after presents to identity, there was very little integration with psychological models or theory. Whilst theoretical concepts such as 'identity', 'self' and 'stigma' were discussed in the literature, these were poorly integrated with findings. Moreover, a number of authors have argued that whilst there is a substantial body of research in the field of LAC and care leavers, it tends to be atheoretical or pragmatist (Stein, 2006; Winter, 2006; Berridge, 2007). Linking empirical and theoretical work has the potential to enhance understanding of the development of self and/or identity in LAC. The following section goes on to explore potential theoretical directions.

1.3 Theoretical Perspectives on Self and Identity: A Critical Review

Maxwell (2005) suggests that a "theoretical framework should explain the concepts, assumptions and theories that support and inform research – a theoretical framework details a plan of what will be studied" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 33). As discussed in the previous section, there is a paucity of research incorporating theoretical models in studies on LAC. Such research is needed in order to improve knowledge regarding the psychological mechanisms underpinning LAC's development of self and/or identity. Identity is one of the most commonly studied constructs in the social sciences (Cote, 2006; Schwartz, Luyckx & Vignoles, 2013). Work on identity can be found in diverse streams of literature, with their roots in markedly different theoretical traditions. Burke (2003) argued that the concept of identity has become ubiquitous, which cuts across a variety of disciplines and makes a common discourse difficult. Although a full review of identity models is beyond the scope of this literature review (see Schwartz et al., 2013, for a comprehensive review of identity perspectives) some key theoretical approaches to identity development will be examined, with the epistemological tensions between these perspectives explored. In doing so, it may be possible to develop a wider perspective of identity development, which may be helpful to explore and conceptualise when considering the development of self and/or identity processes within LAC. The theoretical literature pertaining to identity will be divided into two halves focussing on firstly, the personal and developmental theories on identity and secondly, the social and collective perspectives on identity.

1.3.1 Personal and Developmental Perspectives of Identity

1.3.1.1 Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Stages of Development

Erik Erikson (1950; 1968) has written extensively about the development of a coherent sense of identity as the primary psychological task facing adolescents; he was one of a number of classic theorists to establish a tradition of identity theory (others include, for example, Cooley, 1902; James, 1892; Mead, 1934 which are discussed elsewhere). According to Erikson (1968), identity formation is a “process ‘located’ in the core of an individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture, a process which establishes, in fact, the identity of those two identities” (p. 22). Inspired by Freudian psychology, Erikson claims that personal continuity and integrity occur as a result of a dynamic interaction between the self and environment. Erikson's (1963) “epigenetic” theory describes eight stages of development, each characterised by a psychological “crisis” that shapes identity over the life cycle (p. 34). Erikson (1968) explains that “crisis is used here in a developmental sense to connote not a threat of catastrophe, but a turning point, a crucial period of increased vulnerability and heightened potential” (p. 46). Table 1 below summarises Erikson's (1963) eight stages of psychosocial development.

Table 1: A Summary of Erikson's Eight Stages of Psychosocial Development

Stage	Psychological Crisis	Age
1	Trust vs. Mistrust	0 – 1 ½
2	Autonomy vs. Shame	1 ½ - 3
3	Initiative vs. Guilt	3 - 5
4	Industry vs. Inferiority	5 - 12
5	Identity vs. Confusion	12 - 18
6	Intimacy vs. Isolation	18-40
7	Generativity vs. Stagnation	40-60
8	Ego Integrity vs. Despair	65 +

Identity versus confusion is the fifth stage of Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. This stage occurs during adolescence, when he or she is faced with the imminence of adult tasks. The psychosocial task of ego identity development, involves a synthesis of earlier identifications into a “coherent whole”, which provides the adolescent with both a sense of continuity with the past and the future (Erikson, 1956, p. 67-68). Criticisms of Erikson's writings include its lack of detail, rigor and theoretical precision, from which operational definitions are difficult to extract (Cote & Levine, 1988; Schwartz, 2001). Andersen (1993) for example, argued that Erikson is “frequently unclear, inconsistent and vague” (p. 40). Indeed, Erikson (1950) does note “at times the reader will find me painting contexts and backgrounds where he would rather have me point to facts and concepts” (Erikson, 1950, p. 16). Although Erikson's writings were rich in clinical description, it has been argued that his theory is not readily open to testing and research (Kroger, 2007; Cote & Levine, 1988; Schwartz, 2001). Extensive longitudinal studies would be needed in order to systematically

research developmental changes through the life cycle, which is arguably time-consuming and costly.

1.3.1.2 Marcia's Identity Status Theory

Marcia (1966; 1993) extrapolated from Erikson's writings, arguing that identity is more dynamic than a simple dichotomy. The author operationalised four identity statuses based on the amount of *exploration* and *commitment* an adolescent is experiencing or has experienced. Exploration referred to questioning, sorting through, and choosing among meaningful alternatives. Commitment referred to the degree of personal investment the individual expressed in a course of action, belief or ideology (Marcia, 1964). Marcia labelled these statuses identity diffusion, identity foreclosure, identity moratorium, and identity achievement. These are summarised in Table 2 below.

Table 2: A Summary of Marcia's Identity Status Theory (based on Marcia, 1980)

		Crisis/Exploration	
		Yes	No
Commitment	Yes	Identity Achievement	Identity Foreclosure
	No	Identity Moratorium	Identity Diffusion

Identity achievement indicates that an adolescent has made a commitment after a period of active exploration. Identity Moratorium signifies that the adolescent is in a stage of active exploration and has not made significant commitments. In Identity Foreclosure, the adolescent has made a commitment without much prior exploration. Identity diffusion signifies that the adolescent has not yet made a commitment regarding a specific development task and may or may not have explored different alternatives. Unlike Erikson's assumption that identity formation involves a developmental process, Marcia views identities as flexible; as future possibilities may lead to a change that re-establishes the exploration and commitment processes (Marcia, 1966; 1994). Numerous studies suggest that Marcia's (1966) identity status theory is predictive of both adjustment and maladjustment (e.g., Kroger, 1995; Hofer, Kartner, Chasiotis, Busch & Keissling, 2007).

Criticisms of Marcia's (1966) identity status theory include its narrowness (Van Hoof, 1999) and lack of attention to broader dynamic relations between a person and their life context (Cote & Levine, 1988). As Van Hoof (2001) has pointed out, the processes of exploration and commitment were predominantly internally driven processes and not necessarily connected to the social circumstances in which identity is formed. Since the mid-1980s the demand for a more dynamic approach to identity that indicates not only the effects of change, but also its

underlying mechanisms was called for in the social psychological literature (Cote & Levine, 1988, 2002; Schwartz, 2001). Adopting such an approach resulted in a number of extension models being offered by e.g., Grotevant (1987), Waterman (1990) and Berzonsky (1989) that are considered to complement identity status theory. Aside from Marcia's identity statuses, other prominent neo-Eriksonian identity models have also been introduced by, e.g., Adams & Marshall (1996), and Cote (1996, 1997), which move beyond and expand on the identity status model in ways that draw on Erikson's original conceptualisations (see Schwartz, Luyckx & Crocetti, in press; Schwartz, 2001). One of these perspectives, narrative identity, is briefly discussed below.

1.3.1.3 Neo-Erikson Narrative Approaches

In an attempt to understand identity in a more integrated way, a number of narrative identity perspectives were introduced into the neo-Erikson literature during the 21st Century (Schwartz et al., in press). Unlike Marcia's identity status perspective (Marcia, 1966) where personal continuity is achieved via the adoption of commitments that guide a person from the present into the future, the narrative approach emphasises the sorting through of past experiences. McAdams (1988) notes:

“It is an individual's story which has the power to tie together past, present and future in his or her life. It is a story which is able to provide unity and purpose. It is a story which specifies a personalized “niche” in the adult world and sense of continuity and sameness across situations and over time”. (p. 18)

This quotation nicely exemplifies how personal continuity is achieved via a collection of self-defining memories organised into a life story (McAdams, 1988; Conway, Singer, & Tagini, 2004). The capacity to construct a coherent life story first emerges in late adolescence when individuals become able to engage in autobiographical reasoning (sometimes referred to meaning making). Habermas and Bluck (2000) define autobiographical reasoning as “a process of self-reflective thinking or talking about the personal past that involves forming links between elements of one's life and the self ” (p. 749). Narrative identity research generally focuses on how a person has made sense of his or her life experiences. In particular, ‘turning points’ are also interpreted, which are believed to serve as an index for self-maturity (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Luyckx, Meca & Ritchie, 2013; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007; McLean and Prat, 2006; McAdams, 2011). McAdams (1993) defines ‘turning points’ as episodes where an individual experiences a substantial change. For example, Schwartz, Zamboanga, Luyckx, Meca & Ritchie (2013) note, that a parent's death could be experienced as a devastating loss and/or a chance to develop independence. McLean and Thorne (2003) suggest that narratives that contain “meaning are more likely to be about conflicting or tension-filled events” (p. 715). Specifically, research has identified that the ability to reframe a negative memory as a learning experience is closely related with psychological well-being (McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001). McLean and Pratt (2005) argue that Erikson's (1968) concept of crisis and/or vulnerability appears to be particularly important to meaning-making. Indeed, in their study of life lessons, particularly turning point memories,

McLean and Pratt (2005) found that emerging adults in the moratorium and achieved statuses, engaged in the most mature meaning-making, in contrast to diffused and foreclosed emerging adults who engaged in the less meaning-making. McLean and Pratt's (2006) study suggests that identity status theory and narrative identity approaches complement each other in some important ways. The author concludes, that "a lack of personal exploration in identity development and life stories lacking in meaning is the crux of where these two paths meet together" (McLean & Pratt, 2006, p. 731).

Additional models of narrative identity highlight how the act of narrating important events impacts the assumptions that individuals make about themselves from their stories (McLean et al., 2007; McLean et al., 2006). In particular, research highlights how audiences play an important role in this process of narrating everyday stories (Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006 for a review). For instance, Haden, Haine, & Fivush (1997) found that mothers who provided their 3 year old children with more evaluative information in their joint retellings of past events, had children who went on to contain more evaluative information in their personal narratives by age five. Much less is known about how children's narratives continue to be socialised during the school years. However, McLean and Jennings (2012) research suggests that peers play a crucial role in scaffolding the self-presentational aspects of narrative identity. The authors suggested that peers serve as a testing ground for exploring identity-related experiences external to the family. It could be argued that McLean and Jennings (2012) enhance the body of literature on identity by acknowledging the role of others in the more everyday aspects of identity development. Although the narrative approach perhaps provides a broader lens through which to examine the role of others in identity development, Pebble, Addis and Tippet (2013) argue that research within this field is fragmented with a "confusing array of self-related terminology" (p. 1). In the following section, social and contextual perspectives of identity will be introduced; which largely focus on the relational and collective aspects of identity. Firstly, symbolic interactionist perspectives (Dewey, 1930, James, 1980; Cooley, 1902; Mead; 1934) will be introduced, before attention is given to two related, yet distinct theoretical perspectives; identity theory (Stryker, 1987, 2000) and identity control theory (Burke, 1991). Following this, a discussion around group identity will be introduced, focussing on social identity theory and its extension self-categorisation theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

1.3.2 Social and Contextual Perspectives of Identity

1.3.2.1 The Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

Symbolic interactionism is a sociological perspective in the study of self and identity (Serpe and Stryker, 2013). Symbolic interactionist perspectives emphasise subjective experience; that society emerges out of interaction, communication and social relationships; and that society is a mirror in which individual's see themselves (Serpe and Stryker, 2013). James (1980) and Dewey (1930) were particularly influential among scholars who were thinking about interaction between people and their environment. Viewing human evolution as an adaption to environmental conditions, Dewey (1930) conceptualised the self as an internal motivating source of action towards goals. James (1980) argued that consciousness reflected human experience. James (1980) discussed the components of self as "I" (the self as knower)

and “Me” (the self as known). He distinguished that individuals have multiple selves, as many selves as they have relationships. The influence of James (1890) and Dewey (1930) can be found in the ideas of Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934) and Goffman (1959). For example, Cooley’s (1902) concept of the “looking-glass self” synthesised James’ beliefs of the nature of the self. Cooley (1902) argued that a sense of self develops through three distinct processes; “the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgement of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification” (p. 184). Indeed, empirical research suggests that children construct their sense of self based on feedback from others and on how they perceive others see them. For example, Bartusch and Ross (1996) found that adolescents who reported perceiving that others saw them as rule breakers were more likely to engage in delinquent behaviour. Mead (1934) saw the self as divided into the “I”, representing the inner self, while the “Me” representing a product of social interaction. For Mead, the two parts of the self are involved in a constant dialectic; and this interaction is enacted on the intra-psychic level in terms of the distinction between the “me” and the “I”. Thus, mind and self are fundamentally a social phenomenon emerging out of the individual’s interactions with others and the individual dialogue in the mind between “I” and “Me”.

Cooley’s and Mead’s theories about the self were extended by Goffman (1959). Goffman presented a novel conceptualisation of identity development through the use of metaphors borrowed from dramaturgy (the art of dramatic composition and the representation of the main elements of drama on the stage). In his seminal work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman conceptualised individuals as actors, who “perform” in order to project a desired image, and makes the distinction between front stage and back stage behaviour. When in front stage, an actor is aware of his or her audience and will perform to those watching by considering certain rules and social conventions. Goffman (1959) argued that the front becomes a “collective representation” and is demonstrated through three components: setting, appearance and manner. Conversely, the back stage is where no performance is necessary and the actor’s behaviour will be different. Goffman makes a distinction between expressions that an individual *gives* and those that he/she *gives off*. Expressions given involve “verbal symbols or their substitutes” and are impressions that the individual intends to communicate (Goffman, 1959, p. 14). Expressions given off are impressions that the individual did not intend to be given and are received by the audience. Goffman argued that expressions given off embrace non-verbal communication, i.e. facial expressions, tone of voice and gestures and have a “more theatrical and contextual kind” (p. 16). Symbolic interactionism has been criticised for its focus on interaction and for not incorporating the broader issues of social structure (Serpe and Stryker, 2013). According to the critics, its focus on interaction is too broad and is difficult to empirically research (Stryker 2008; Serpe and Styker, 2013). Therefore, researchers have developed a broader conceptualisation, from the symbolic interactionist perspective, that includes recognition of structural influences (Hogg, Terry and White, 1995). The recognition of structural influences includes, for example, social roles, relations, networks, national policies and power distributions within society (Hogg et al., 1995).

1.3.2.2 Structural Symbolic Interactionism

Developed in response to the criticism outlined above, structural symbolic interactionism argues that “society shapes self, which shapes social interaction” (Serpe and Stryker, 2013, p. 231). Structural symbolic interactionism is based on the premise that organised society exists before the appearance of all new members, and includes two main variant theories (Stryker and Burke, 2000). Stryker’s (1987) identity theory, for instance, proposed a social structural version of symbolic interactionism, and accounts for the self’s internal dynamics that impact behavioural decisions. He suggests the self is “a structure of identities reflecting roles played in differentiated networks of interaction” (p. 91). From this perspective, an individual is considered to have multiple identities, “potentially as many as they have organised sets of role relationships in which they participate” (Serpe and Stryker, 2013). In the variant associated with Stryker (Stryker, 1968; 1980; 2001; Stryker and Serpe 1994) is the notion of “commitment” and “salience” (Stryker and Serpe, 2013, p. 233). Commitment is defined as the strength of an individual’s ties to an organised network of social relations in terms of a particular identity and that identity’s associated roles (Stryker, 1980). Stryker and Serpe (1994) identify two types of commitment: (1) *interactional commitment* and (2) *affective commitment*. Interactional commitment refers to the number of social networks an individual relates by virtue of a given identity. Affective commitment is defined by the emotional significance of others in an individual’s social networks. Identity salience is defined as the relative importance of a given identity for defining his or her self which, are organised into a hierarchy distinguished by the probability that they might be invoked in a variety of social situations (Stryker & Burke 2000; Serpe & Stryker, 2013). Further, an identity’s salience is itself shaped by “commitment to the role relationships requiring that identity” (Stryker and Burke 2000, p. 286). However, Stryker (1968) recognised that some identities are purely situational, such as the role of a parent being invoked when a baby cries, rather than, for example a political identity.

Another variant from the structural symbolic interactionism perspective is identity control theory; which focusses on more internal processes of meaning making (Burke 1991; Burke and Reitzes 1991; Burke and Stets 1999; Burke, 2004; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Burke (2004) uses the concept of “identity standard” to define an individual’s meanings that he/she holds which represents who they are as a person. This work led to what Burke defines as the self-verification process (Stryker and Burke, 2000). According to Burke (1991), people engage in a recursive process that begins with the enactment of behaviours that an individual perceives as congruent with his or her standards for a particular identity. Individuals then evaluate feedback received from others as either congruent or incongruent with their own assessment of their behaviour. Feedback that is considered congruent reinforces the enactment of the behaviour, whereas feedback that is incongruent causes distress and lower self-esteem (Burke, 1991). Thus, the individual has agency and his/her behaviour is “goal directed” (Stryker and Burke, 2000, p. 288). However, a limitation of Burke’s theory is that it does not take into account the manner in which social structures that are external to the individual constrain or encourage those internal processes (Stryker and Burke, 2000).

1.3.2.3 Social Identity Approach

In addition to the study of personal identity, a body of work has focused on the concept of social identity, through social identity theory (see for example, Abrams & Hogg, 1999; Brewer, 2003; Ellemers, Spears & Doosje, 1999; Tajfel, 1981). As in identity theory (e.g. Stryker and Burke, 2000), where the self is defined as a collection of multiple identities, social identity postulates that an individual's self is derived from the membership in social groups and the emotional significance and value attached to this membership (Tajfel, 1981). From this standpoint, Brewer (2003) notes that social identity "provides a link between the psychology of the individual - the representation of self - and the structure and process of social groups within which the self is embedded" (p. 480). Social identity theory includes three main points: 1) individuals are motivated to maintain and achieve a positive self; 2) the self derives from group identification; and thus 3) individuals establish positive social identities by comparing the in-group favourably against out-groups (Operario & Fiske, 1999). Spears (2013) summarises the three psychological processes involved in social identity construction: social categorisation, social comparison and the cognitive and emotional salience of an individual's membership of groups. Tajfel and Turner (1986) suggest, social categorisations "create and define the individual's place in society (p.16). Spears (2013) highlights that Tajfel was not claiming that social identities are more significant than other aspects of the self, but that social identities become important in "intergroup contexts" (p. 203). The author argues that "Tajfel wrote of an interpersonal-intergroup continuum to represent situations in which group identities would become more salient and relevant (Spears, 2013, p. 203).

The study of social identity highlights that group membership can have negative and positive implications for the self. The effects of group membership for self-esteem are dependent upon the negative or positive appraisal of the group in comparison to other groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Thus, when an individual is a member of a minority group, self-esteem should suffer. The idea that the self is relational is perhaps consistent with Cooley's (1902) "looking glass self" and Mead's (1934) concept of reflected appraisals. Tajfel and Turner (1986) suggest that individual's from minority groups, may engage in a process to negotiate the meaning and distinctiveness of his or her identity. Tajfel and Turner (1979) described three strategies which highlight how members of a minority group cope: (1) individual mobility (2) social creativity and (3) social competition. Individual mobility refers to the individual leaving the group. However, Spears (2013) argues that this may not be easy in the case of, for example, "gender" and "race". Social creativity refers to strategies that involve individual's framing their negative status more positively. Lastly, social competition is defined by the minority group fighting the system to change the hierarchy of group membership in society. Moloney and Walker (2007) argue that this perspective is more useful in understanding the relationship between an individual and their social world. Furthermore, social identity theory appears to complement Stryker's notion that the level of commitment to an identity is dependent on the "strength of one's relationships to others, while in a particular role identity (Burke & Reitzes, 1991, p. 241).

1.3.3 Summary

Despite the wealth of theories on identity and self, its application to LAC has been lacking. Several theoretical frameworks and concepts have been outlined which may be useful in enhancing understanding of the development of self and/or identity in LAC. The literature on self and identity spans multiple disciplinary and theoretical perspectives. Because of this diversity, there is seemingly an unwieldy assortment of terminology and definitions of self and identity. While each perspective offers insights into the identity, no single theory presents an ample picture of the concept. For example, research within developmental psychology has tended to focus on the development of ego-identity, while within sociology researchers have instead focused on social identities and highlight how identity can change within interpersonal interaction (Cote & Levine, 2002). Research within the narrative identity literature, for example, has focussed on an individual's reconstruction of past events into a life story (McLean et al., 2007; McLean & Pratt, 2006). Vignoles et al. (2013) argues that research within the narrative perspective highlights the "richness of the identity construct and of the need for both quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture this richness" (p. 14). Having critically reviewed the a range of theories it is tempting to agree with Breakwell (1987) conclusions that "such diversity in definition means that attempts at direct comparison across theories have nightmare qualities, and meaning is masked by its cloak of words" (p. 11). The next section examines the concepts of stigma and labelling, outlining the ways in which a stigmatising identity may impact on an individual's identity construction.

1.4 Theoretical Perspectives on Stigma and Labelling

The previous section summarised some of the major works and theories of self and identity. From these perspectives, the self is understood as a complex and dynamic structure that emerges through social interaction with others. However, the dynamic nature of self and/or identity processes may become especially salient in situations where the possibility of maintaining a desired sense of self is under threat. The following section explores the concept of stigma and labelling, with particular consideration of the ways in which a stigmatised identity may impact on an individual's sense of self. Stigma and labelling research from a variety of different areas will be addressed, as the literature specifically related to LAC is limited.

1.4.1 Conceptualisations of Stigma

Stigma is a powerful phenomenon, with a variety of definitions and conceptualisations (see for example, Crocker, Major and Steele, 1998; Link and Phelan, 2001; Major and O' Brien, 2005; Yang et al., 2007). The study of stigma has been heavily influenced by the work of Goffman (1963) in his classic book *Stigma: Notes of the Management of a Spoiled Identity*. In his seminal work on stigma, Goffman (1963) conceptualises stigma as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting" (p. 13) and reduces the individual "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (p. 3). Goffman (1963) notes a distinction between individuals whose stigmatising characteristics are concealable (termed discreditable) and those whose stigmatising characteristics are visible (termed the discredited). According to Goffman (1963) stigma then spoils the identity of the person and labels him/her as being different from "normal individuals" with whom s/he interacts (Goffman, 1963, p. 13). More recent

conceptualisations of stigma explicitly adopt a social constructivist frame. For example, Crocker, Major, and Steele (1998) have defined stigmatised individuals who “possess (or believed to possess) some attribute, or characteristic, that conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context” (p. 505). Critics argue that such conceptualisations are individualistic in focus, and fail to capture the meta-causes of stigmatisation such as exclusion from social life and power imbalances (Sayce, 1998). In response to such criticisms, Link and Phelan (2001) proposed a conceptual definition for stigma and described five components of stigma: *labelling*, *stereotyping*, *separation*, *status loss* and *discrimination*. Labelling is the acknowledgment of differences and the assignment of social salience to those differences. Stereotyping is the assignment of negative attributes to socially salient and/or labelled differences. Separation occurs when labelled individuals are placed into distinct categories that distinguish ‘us from ‘them’. Status loss and discrimination occur when individuals who are labelled, stereotyped and socially distanced experience unequal opportunities and treatment. A novel feature of Link and Phelan’s (2001) definition of stigma is the idea that stigma is dependent on social, political and economic power. The authors argue that an individual can actively use available resources to resist the stigmatising tendencies of the more powerful group but, to the extent that power differences exist, resistance cannot full overcome constraint.

1.4.2 Self-stigma and Internalised Stigma

Self-stigma or internalised stigma refers to the phenomenon of accepting the negative stereotypes that society relates to labels and applying it to oneself. Individuals can also assign this label to themselves based on their own view of their identity or behaviour as being deviant (Thio, 2007). A review of the literature highlights that self-stigma diminishes self-esteem, empowerment, hope and quality of life for people with mental illness (Livingston & Boyd, 2010). This can result in part because of the perceived reactions of others who find out about the perceived flaw. Thus self-stigma is “buying into” and/or believing the negative characteristics are true of the self. Poole, Regoli, and Pogrebin (1986) argue, that individuals “are not passive recipients of negative labels; rather, they are actively managing or coping with these labels” (p. 347). Everett (2006) notes that self-stigma can lead individuals to “adopt attitudes of self-loathing and self-blame leading to a sense of helplessness and hopelessness” (p. 4). This in turn, can lead those labelled to withdraw or disengage from meaningful opportunities and relationships (Corrigan & Watson, 2009). A related consequence of self-stigma is what has been called a “self-fulfilling prophecy”, in which internalised stigma leads to lowered expectancies of behaviour and achievement (Rosenthal, 2002). Similarly, Corrigan, Larson and Rusch’s (2009) “why try” model, illustrates how internalised stigma can diminish self-efficacy and self-esteem which undermine a person’s ability to tackle the exigencies of specific life goals. Corrigan et al. (2009) illustrate, for example, a person with mental health difficulties who internalises the view that “the mentally ill have no worth because they have nothing to offer and are only drains of society” might conclude “why even try” to live independently.

Thus far, stigma has been portrayed as having a unidirectional and negative effect on the lives of the stigmatised. However, Corrigan et al. (2009) state that “personal empowerment is a

parallel positive phenomenon conceived as a mediator between internalised stigma and behaviours related to goal attainment” (p. 77). The authors claim that personal empowerment involves feelings of optimism, control, power and activism and is associated with increased quality of life. Similarly, Shih (2004) argued that “many stigmatised individuals cite that they gain strength and learn valuable life lessons in confronting adversities caused by stigma” (p. 181). Shih (2004) proposed three processes that stigmatised individuals use to overcome stigma. The first is compensation, where an individual will become more assertive and pay more attention to how he or she presents his or herself. Second, is where an individual will make interpretations and comparisons with others in order to protect his or her self-worth. Thirdly, individuals may adapt their identity, accentuating valued identities and de-emphasising devalued identities in certain contexts. Thus, according to Shih (2004) some individuals have the resources to avoid the negative consequences of stigma. Further, Frost (2011) argues that individuals who engage in meaning-making processes that focus on attributing the source to a fault in society instead of an individual’s attributes can result in positive outcomes for marginalised individuals. Just as negative outcomes can perpetuate negative social stigma via self-fulfilling prophecies, positive outcomes may have the potential to change social stigma and structural inequalities for the better through social policy reform and collective action.

1.4.3 Stigma Management

Using Goffman’s (1963) concepts of discredited and discreditable individuals, researchers have explored how stigmatised individuals cope with stigma and negotiate identity. Stigma management refers to an individual selectively deciding when to disclose or conceal his or her stigmatised identity (Poindexter & Shippy 2010; O’Brien 2011). “Passing” or presenting the self as “normal” is a common strategy used to try and conceal a stigmatised characteristic (O’Brien 2011). Poindexter and Shippy (2010) suggest that individual’s tend to “pass” to avoid being rejected and/or treated differently by others. For example, Kyngas and Hentinen’s (1995) study of young diabetics found that they might eat and drink things that are similar to their peers, in order to conceal signs for their condition. Disclosing a stigmatised status is another stigma management strategy; with several disclosure strategies identified within the literature. For example, Charmaz (1991) discusses both protective (when an individual controls when they disclose his or her stigmatised status) and spontaneous disclosure (shock that an individual experiences from learning he or she has a stigmatised condition) in relation to individuals with chronic illness. Troster (1997) highlights preventative disclosure in relation to individuals who feel that they cannot control their stigmatised status. The author suggests that individual’s disclose based on his or her perception of the social consequences of the stigmatised status being revealed. Poindexter & Shippy (2010) highlight that stigma management is a complex and continuous process whereby individual’s must “revisit and revise” their decisions. Thus, an individual must reflect on the social situation and choose a management tactic, that he or she believes is most appropriate. However, despite its benefits, stigma management can have negative psychological consequences. For example, stigma management can involve psychological costs, such as, embarrassment (Goffman, 1963; Thorne, 1993), belief that one is maintaining the negative stereotype (Snow & Anderson 1987; Steele & Aronson, 1995) and risks related

to facing rejection and fear of losing control (Charmaz 1991). Although the literature on stigma and the management of stigmatised identities is expansive, it still faces some weaknesses and gaps. One such challenge is that literature on stigma pertains mostly to adults, and more work is needed to explore how stigma affects children. In addition, Link and Phelan (2001) argue that many social scientists, who study stigmatised individuals, ignore the lived experiences of the individuals they are researching and make inappropriate assumptions and/or use disconnected theories that bias their research. Link and Phelan (2001) argue that this leads to misunderstandings of stigmatised individuals and the perpetuation of stereotypes.

1.4.4 Summary

This section provided an overview of research into stigma and labelling with a focus on the impact of a stigmatised identity for the self. The literature highlighted that if an individual accepts and internalises stigma it can lead to lowered self-worth. Stigmas can also be recognised by the individual, which may result in placing a label on oneself. Stigmatised individuals have typically been portrayed within the literature as passive victims of others' negative stereotypes. However, research reviewed here demonstrates that stigma does not always have negative effects on the stigmatised. For example, theory and research illustrates that an individual's perceptions and interpretations also play a key mediating role in response to stigma. Does stigma affect LAC in the same way? As previously discussed, although existing literature reports elements of the stigma experience for LAC, research has been limited. Much of the available research data are drawn from anecdotal reports for which stigma was not the primary focus. The research lacks depth in its exploration and a comprehensive analysis of the concept of stigma as it applies to LAC is a current gap in the literature. Empirical research is needed in this area to identify the social psychological processes that underlie LAC stigma. Information about the experiences and psychological processes that underlie stigma in LAC is perhaps crucial to informing interventions to improve the lives of this population.

1.5 The Current Study

To date, research has not properly explored the development of self and/or identity processes within LAC (Kools, 1997; Schwartz, 2007; McKinney, 2011; Honey et al., 2011). Previous research on LAC has tended to focus on the demographics, mental health outcomes and educational attainment, almost exclusively adopting quantitative methods. Quantitative methods do not reveal insight into the personal experience of looked after children and thus lack the depth of meaning that may be ascribed by individual perspectives. Preliminary findings, for example, by Kools (1997) suggest that self and/or identity development is different in LAC from normative expectations. The foster care experience was reported to have a negative influence on identity development, for example, negative stereotypes and the label "foster child" led to feelings of diminished status. This echoes the literature on stigma, which suggests that experiencing discrimination leads to lower self-concept (Link & Phelan, 2001). However, as previously noted, due to a sample of largely African American children, Kools' (1997) study must be interpreted with caution when considering the relevance to the UK population. This was also the case for the other studies, including those by Schwartz (2007) and McKinney (2011), which reported similar findings. One study (largely

quantitative), undertaken in the UK, has suggested that LAC hold more positive self-perceptions than non-LAC (Honey et al., 2011). These findings can be interpreted positively, suggesting that, within the educational system, LAC reflect favourably on their experiences and self-concepts. Thus, this small body of research which examines LAC identity development is inconclusive, and warrants further research.

In addition, although this small body of research on the development of self and/or identity provides some empirical evidence of the development of self and/or identity processes within LAC, research has largely suffered from a lack of a conceptual framework within which to interpret findings. Whilst theoretical concepts such as ‘identity’, ‘self’ and ‘stigma’ were identified in the literature, these were poorly integrated with findings. Moreover, a number of authors have argued that whilst there is a substantial body of research in the field of LAC and care leavers, it tends to be atheoretical or pragmatist (Stein, 2006; Winter, 2006; Berridge, 2007). Such research is needed in order to improve knowledge regarding the psychological mechanisms understanding LAC development of self and/or identity. Thus, the current study aims to explore LAC’s perceptions of the development of self and/or identity and to address critique about previous research being ‘atheoretical. Additionally, despite the plethora of research on stigma, the bulk of the research has been conducted on adults and has been largely conducted by psychologists working in laboratories. Thus, it is argued that investigating the lived experience of LAC could lead to useful developments of the theory itself (Link & Phelan, 2007). The importance of doing such research stems from the fact that a negative self-concept may potentially be related to the poor mental health outcomes and low educational attainment that is widely documented in the literature in relation to LAC (e.g. Meltzer et al., 2003). Furthermore, this fits with the Government agenda of listening to children and young people and including them more readily in research (Department of Health, 2003).

1.5.1 The Current Study and Educational Psychology

It is argued that this area of research has important implications for educational psychologists (EPs). Jackson and McParlin (2006) reported that most EPs caseloads include a significant proportion of LAC. Indeed, a fairly recent Government funded study of EP work in relation to the ECM agenda, reported that 71% of EPs were involved in services to, or related to, children in care (Farrell et al., 2006). In McParlin’s (1996) paper about the “relentless decades of prejudice, disadvantage and appalling outcomes” he notes that EPs are well placed to support this group of young people (p. 112). Several studies have documented a range of roles with regards to EPs and LAC including; facilitating multi-agency meetings; delivering training; and helping carers, peers and teachers to support individual children (Bradbury, 2006; Dent & Cameron, 2003). The research highlights a key role for EPs in supporting LAC. In fact in a recent review of the work of EPs, Farrell et al. (2006) suggests that EPs could provide a distinctive contribution to LAC’s lives. Hughes (2006) also argues that EPs can contribute, through their research skills, to improve multi-agency work, an approach which will be exemplified in this study. This brief review highlights that LAC are a priority for many educational psychology services.

1.5.2 *The Research Questions and Aims*

The aim of this current study is to explore the development of self and/or identity in LAC, and to address critique about previous research being 'atheoretical'. The study will attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. What are LAC's perceptions of their self?
2. To what extent do LAC view themselves as different to non-LAC?
3. To what extent do LAC perceive others to view them as different?
4. How do LAC manage any perceived discrepancies between their perceptions of self and the views of others?
5. What factors do LAC perceive as influencing the development of self?
6. To what extent do LAC experience changes in their self across different situations and with different people?

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Part Two: Empirical Paper

6,353 words

(Excluding abstract, tables, references and appendices)

Part Two: Empirical Paper

1.0 Abstract

Looked after children (LAC) are some of the most vulnerable and socially excluded in society (McParlin, 1996). This qualitative study aims to explore LAC perceptions of the development of self and/or identity, and to address critique about previous research being ‘atheoretical’. Literature on ‘identity’ and ‘stigma’ from a variety of different perspectives are drawn on to provide a lens through which LAC experiences can be understood. A constructivist-interpretive approach was used, with semi-structured, face to face interviews as the method of data collection. Seven interviews (aged 13-17) were conducted, which were recorded and transcribed, with an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of data performed (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). The five superordinate themes that resulted from the IPA of the data were: Theme 1: SHATTERED SELF; Theme 2: FEELING DIFFERENT; Theme 3: DANCE WITH STIGMA; Theme 4: PIVOTAL MOMENTS AND MEANING MAKING; and Theme 5: RE-ESTABLISHING IDENTITY AND TURNING TOWARDS THE FUTURE. These themes are discussed in relation to extant literature and theoretical approaches to identity development and stigma. Results indicated that being taken into care profoundly disrupted a pre-existing identity and removed continuity and coherence in participants’ lives. For many of the young people, once they had entered care, they experienced daily struggles with themselves and others. Analysis revealed a sense of brokenness as well as transformation with many reporting personal growth as a result of their journey. The findings also highlight the importance of ‘meaning making’ in determining a more advanced identity development. Practical applications to the role of the EP and limitations are discussed with some suggestions for further research.

1.1 Introduction

The term looked after children¹ (LAC) refers to children and adolescents who are provided with substitute care, either on a voluntary basis to assist parents, or as the result of a court order (Children’s Act, 1989). Previous research on LAC has tended to focus on the demographics, mental health outcomes and educational attainment, almost exclusively adopting quantitative methods (McCann, James, Wilson & Dunn, 1996; Dimigen *et al.*, 1999; Meltzer, Gatward, Corbin, Goodman and Ford, 2002; Utting, 1997). Rostill and Myatt (2005) argued that research has tended to focus on LAC as ‘problems’ rather than considering the psychosocial explanations. To date, research has not properly explored the development of self and/or identity processes within LAC (Kools, 1997; Schwartz, 2007; McKinney, 2011; Honey, Rees & Griffey, 2011). Moreover, whilst theoretical concepts such as ‘identity’, ‘self’ and ‘stigma’ were discussed in extant literature exploring the development of self and/or identity in LAC, these were poorly integrated with findings. Moreover, a number of authors have argued that whilst there is a substantial body of research in the field of LAC and care leavers, it tends to be atheoretical or pragmatist (Stein, 2006; Winter, 2006; Berridge, 2007). The current study aims to explore LAC’s perceptions of the development of self and/or

¹ The abbreviation ‘LAC’ will be used from this point forward to describe ‘looked after young people’, including children and adolescents.

identity and to address critique about previous research being ‘atheoretical. The following section will go on to consider the limited literature that specifically addresses the development of self and/or identity processes within LAC. Following this, literature on ‘identity’ and ‘stigma’ from different perspectives are drawn on to provide a lens through which LAC experiences can be understood.

1.1.1 LAC, Identity Development and Stigma

The empirical research exploring the development of self and/or identity processes within LAC is minimal (Kools, 1997; Schwartz, 2007; McKinney, 2011; Honey et al., 2011; McMurray, Connolly, Preston-Shoot & Wigley, 2011). Kools (1997) applied a cross-sectional research design to interview 17 adolescents (aged 15 -19) living in long-term foster care, about their experiences and identity development. The foster care experience was reported to have a negative influence on identity development, for example, negative stereotypes and the label “foster child” led to feelings of diminished status. Kools (1997) concluded that “devaluation of self by others impacted three interrelated areas: the self, interpersonal relationships, and the development of independence” (p. 267). This was also the case for the other studies, including those by Schwartz (2007) and McKinney (2011), who reported similar findings. Due to a sample of largely African American children, Kools’ (1997) study must be perhaps interpreted with caution when considering the relevance to the UK population. This was also the case for other studies, including those by Schwartz (2007) and McKinney (2011), where samples were based on LAC from minority ethnic backgrounds. It could be argued that the predominant focus on ethnicity potentially confounds and limits the generalisability of findings to the UK LAC population (White et al., 2008; Phinney, 1990). Indeed, one study (largely quantitative), undertaken in the UK, has suggested that LAC hold more positive self-perceptions than non-LAC (Honey et al., 2011). Although this small body of research provides some empirical evidence of the challenges that being looked after presents to identity, there was very little integration with psychological models or theory. A number of authors have argued that whilst there is a substantial body of research in the field of LAC and care leavers, it tends to be atheoretical or pragmatist (Stein, 2006; Winter, 2006; Berridge, 2007). The study seeks to address this paucity in the research body and address atheoretical critique.

1.1.2 Theoretical Perspectives on Self and identity: A Critical Review

Identity is one of the most commonly studied constructs in the social sciences (Schwartz, Luyckx and Vignoles, 2013; Cote, 2006). Work on identity can be found in diverse streams of literature, with their origins in distinctly different theoretical traditions. For example, most developmental research of ‘personal identity’ is largely grounded in Erikson’s (1950) eight stage model of psychosocial growth and Marcia’s (1966) identity status model. Criticisms of Erikson’s writings include its lack of detail, rigor and theoretical precision, from which operational definitions are difficult to extract (Schwartz, 2001). Criticisms of Marcia’s identity status approach include its narrowness (Van Hoof, 1999) and lack of attention to broader dynamic relations between a person and their life context (Cote and Levine, 1987). Erikson’s theory of identity development has stimulated further theories that Schwartz (2001) labels as either “extensions” or “expansions” (see Schwartz, 2001 for a detailed review). For

example, a number of narrative approaches were introduced during the 21st Century, which conceptualise identity as a ‘life story’, which begins to form in late adolescence (see McAdams, 2011; and Singer, 2004, for reviews). Habermas and Bluck (2000) developed the concept of “autobiographical reasoning” (sometimes referred to meaning making) as “a process of self-reflective thinking or talking about the personal past that involves forming links between elements of one’s life and the self ” (p. 749). However, Prebble, Addis and Tippet (2013) argue that research within this field is “fragmented” with a “confusing array of self-related terminology” (p. 1). Aside from a ‘personal identity’ (e.g Erikson, 1950), there are also several distinct perspectives that emphasise relational and collective aspects of identity. For example, the symbolic interactionist perspective sees the self as emerging out of the mind, the mind as arising and developing out of social interaction, and patterned social interaction as forming the basis of social structure (Dewey, 1930; Mead, 1934; James, 1980; Cooley, 1902). In contrast, the social identity approach, largely grounded in the work of Tajfel and Turner (1986), has emerged almost as a separate tradition of work primarily focused on intergroup relations (Hogg, Terry and White, 1995). Although the literature on identity is diverse, all note the importance of considering the sociocultural context (Schwartz et al., 2013; Brubaker and Cooper, 2000). Considering this, how does an individual develop and manage a stigmatised identity? The following section examines how research around stigma addresses these questions.

1.1.3 Theoretical Perspectives on Stigma and Labelling

The concept of “spoiled” identity is central to the work of Goffman (1963) who defined stigma as an ‘attribute that is deeply discrediting’ (p. 3). Despite variability within the literature, researchers agree that stigma is a socially constructed phenomenon that is relationally and contextually specific and has a negative impact on the self (Crocker, Major & Steele, 1998; Link & Phelan, 2001; Major & O’Brien, 2005; Yang et al., 2006). Self-stigma or internalised stigma refers to the phenomenon of accepting the negative stereotypes that society relates to labels and applying it to oneself. These adverse consequences of self-stigma may also be conceived of in terms of the “why try” effect, in which internalised stereotypes and prejudice lead the person to give up on their personal goals (Corrigan, Larson & Rusch, 2009). Some writers have argued that the relationship between stigma and the self is far more complex than originally proposed (Corrigan and Watson, 2002). For example, Shih (2004) notes that “many stigmatised individuals cite that they gain strength and learn valuable life lessons in confronting adversities caused by stigma” (p. 181). Using Goffman’s (1963) concepts of discredited and discreditable individuals, researchers have explored how stigmatised individuals negotiate identity. ‘Passing’ (a phrase coined by Goffman) is a common strategy used to try and conceal a stigmatised characteristic (Joachim & Acorn 2000; O’Brien 2011). Another management tactic is ‘disclosing’; which refers to the selective and careful open admission of stigma (Poindexter & Shippy, 2010). Although the literature on stigma is expansive, it still faces some challenges. For example, the bulk of the research has been conducted on adults and researchers have studied stigma from a perspective that is informed by theories rather than by the lived experiences of the people they are studying (Kleinman et al., 1995; Link & Phelan, 2001). The current study seeks to address these limitations.

1.2 The Current Study

To date, research has not properly explored the development of self and/or identity processes within LAC. The majority of research has been conducted in the USA, which potentially confounds the generalisability of findings to the UK LAC population. In addition, whilst theoretical concepts such as ‘identity’ and ‘stigma’ were identified in the literature, these were poorly integrated with findings. Moreover, a number of authors have argued that whilst there is a substantial body of research in the field of LAC, it tends to be atheoretical or pragmatist (Stein, 2006; Winter, 2006; Berridge, 2007). Thus, the current study aims to explore LAC’s perceptions of the development of self and/or identity and to address critique about previous research being ‘atheoretical. It is argued that this area of research has important implications for educational psychologists whose caseloads include a significant proportion of LAC (Jackson and McParlin, 2006).

1.3 Research Questions and Aims

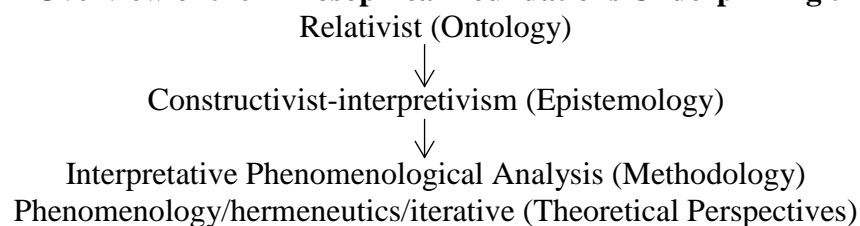
The aim of this current study is to explore the development of self and/or identity in looked after children (LAC), and to address critique about previous research being ‘atheoretical’. The study will attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. What are LAC’s perceptions of their self?
2. To what extent do LAC view themselves as different to non-LAC?
3. To what extent do LAC perceive others to view them as different?
4. How do LAC manage any perceived discrepancies between their perceptions of self and the views of others?
5. What factors do LAC perceive as influencing the development of self?
6. To what extent do LAC experience changes in their self across different situations and with different people?

2.0 Methodological Orientation

A Summary of the overall methodological approach adopted within the current study is broadly conceptualised in Table 1.

Table 1: An Overview of the Philosophical Foundations Underpinning the Research



In this qualitative study a constructivist-interpretivism perspective provided the general orientation for this study (Creswell, 2009, p. 8). A constructivist research paradigm assumes a relativist ontology (there are many realities) and a subjectivist epistemology (participant and researcher co-create understandings) (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p. 24). IPA was chosen in order to develop a rich understanding of LAC perceptions of the development of self

and/or identity and to address critique about previous research being ‘atheoretical’. Table 2 below summarises some key elements of IPA.

Table 2: Key Assumptions of IPA

- IPA is a phenomenological approach, in that it is focused on “exploring experience in its own terms” rather than attempting to fit experience in predefined categories (Smith et al., 2009, p. 1). The interest is in the exploring in depth of the experiences of an individual rather than the objective nature of the world (Willig, 2001).
- IPA is also interpretative and it employs what is known as a “double hermeneutic” in that the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of his or her experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 12).
- IPA is an idiographic approach; the aim is to explore particular cases rather than make generalisations within the population. Willig (2001) argues that it does not claim ‘truths’ or compare participants’ accounts to external ‘reality’. Instead, it seeks to provide “detailed, nuanced analyses of particular instances of lived experience” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 37). While the findings are somewhat bound to the participant group studied, Smith et al., (2009) state that, ‘an extension can be considered through theoretical generalisability’ (p. 4).

2.1: Participants

It is a general criterion of IPA that samples are relatively small, homogenous and selected purposively (Smith et al., 2009). Thus, seven participants (aged 13-17 years old) were purposively selected to form a largely homogenous sample. A full summary of demographic information and personal characteristics of participants can be found in Table 3. All names have been changed in order to ensure confidentiality.

Table 3: Demographics and Personal characteristics of Participants

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Number of Placements
Dean	17	White British	13
Kathryn	13	White British	3
Courtney	13	White British	5
Laura	14	White British	6
Zara	16	White British	2
Sophie	14	White British	2
Anna	17	White British	10

2.2 Data Collection Methods

Consistent with Smith, Flowers and Larkin’s (2009) recommendations, participants’ subjective experiences were explored through the use of semi-structured interviews (Appendix VII). Interview questions were neutral, not leading and/or value-laden (Smith et al., 2009). The use of a semi-structured interview approach allows the IPA researcher and

participants to engage in a dialogue whereby initial questions are modified, and the researcher is able to probe interesting areas that arise in light of participants' responses (Smith et al., 2009).

2.3 Procedure

The aim of the current study was to explore LAC perceptions of the development of self and/or identity and to address critique about previous research being 'atheoretical'. Each stage of the procedure is described in Appendix VIII.

2.4 Analysis of Data

Audio-recordings were transcribed verbatim and each transcript was analysed in accordance with Smith et al's. (2009) suggested stages of analysis for IPA. The process of analysis involves moving "from the particular to the shared and from the descriptive to the interpretative" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 79). Thus, IPA is 'bottom-up' and/or 'data driven'; codes come *from* the data, rather than using pre-existing theory to identify codes that might be applied *to* the data. Appendix X shows the IPA step-by-step analysis procedure.

2.5 Ethics

The nature of the research posed important ethical issues in accordance with the British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct (BPS, 2009). For a complete consideration of the steps taken in the ethics process and examples of the gatekeeper letters, consent forms and debrief sheet see Appendices I to VI.

2.6 Reliability and Validity Issues

The steps taken to demonstrate validity are outlined in relation to guidelines suggested by Yardley (2000; 2008) in Appendix XI.

3.0 Results

The following section outlines the key findings that emerged from the IPA of the data collected from 7 participants. Five superordinate themes and their constituent subordinate themes emerged that provide a rich and detailed portrayal of the LAC perceptions of the development of self and/or identity². This is summarised in Table 4 below. It is important to note, that whilst the nature of the phenomenon being studied was highly sensitive and emotionally laden, participants were able to talk freely and openly about their experiences. Participants eloquently described the psychological and emotional impact of being in care, which often included detailed descriptions of distressing and frightening events. Therefore emotive theme titles were used to reflect the magnitude of participants' experiences and life events – which may be considered by many as novel and shocking, inspiring feelings of awe and dismay. The use of emotive theme titles in the current study provides further insight into participants profound experiences of sadness and vulnerability as well as their strength to overcome adversity and to learn from their experiences.

² Each superordinate and subordinate theme is discussed and illustrated by relevant quotes. Words that have been added or removed to enhance understanding of the data are inserted within square brackets. Minor hesitations and word repetitions have mostly been removed. Dotted lines indicate that participant paused.

Table 4: Master List of Superordinate Themes and Constituent Subordinate Themes

Superordinate Theme	Subordinate Theme
SHATTERED SELF	ONE LIFE TO ANOTHER DAMANGED GOODS
FEELING DIFFERENT	
DANCE WITH STIGMA	US AND THEM MANAGING AND COPING WITH STIGMA
PIVOTAL MOMENTS AND MEANING MAKING	
RE-ESTABLISHING IDENTITY AND TURNING TOWARDS THE FUTURE	NEW NORMAL AND MEANING MAKING THROUGH ACTION PERSONAL GROWTH AND SELF-AWARENESS

3.1 Superordinate Theme 1: SHATTERED SELF

The first superordinate theme identified refers to the experience of being taken into care, which was perceived as a traumatic event. The sudden change in circumstances altered participant’s views of the world and themselves. Two subordinate themes emerged from the data: ONE LIFE TO ANOTHER and DAMANGED GOODS.

3.1.1 ONE LIFE TO ANOTHER

Participants gave rich and complex accounts of their experiences following their removal from their biological parents. The participants’ stories highlighted varied and contrasting experiences of why they were taken into care which included; drug and alcohol addiction; sexual abuse; mental illness; domestic violence; and physical abuse. Many of the participants reported feeling “confused” and “upset” as nothing appeared to be as it once was. An exception was one participant who talked about his excitement of the prospect of a new life. Dean notes:

“I like camping and stuff, so I saw it as a great adventure...to go to a different house and to live in a different house, with different people” (Dean, p. 1, par. 8)

However, for Dean the feelings of “excitement” were replaced with the harrowing realisation that he wouldn’t be returning. He went on to explain:

“I remember thinking about like consciousness and souls and stuff and I remember thinking why does it have to be me, in this particular body, in this particular predicament” (Dean, p. 1, par. 10)

Participants described feelings of “blame” and/or thinking that they had “done something wrong”. This was described very explicitly by one of the participants, Zara, who had experienced domestic violence and abuse:

“Like you see on TV like the police come and you associate with it that you have done something wrong. And you think why am I being taken away from my parents, why can’t I see them, it’s like why aren’t I able to be with them. It’s like my fault all the time” (Zara, p. 25. par. 12)

There was a sense from some participants, that as a result of their experiences they had “skipped a phase”, experienced a “loss of childhood” and and/or an “acceleration” of development. Sophie described going from “one life to another” and in contrast two other participants spoke of feeling “deep down...a sense of relief”. Similarly, Sophie described getting her “childhood back again” after caring for her sick mother. She recalls thinking:

“That I wouldn’t have to be the adult of the family because that was meant to be someone else’s job. And my job was just to be the daughter. And that role was taken from me and I had to replace the mum role which kind of...erm was a big task...but then that weight was lifted off my shoulders” (Sophie , p. 32. par. 12)

Sophie went on to explain that she felt like a “new person in an old body”. It appears that almost all the young people reported that they felt very much changed by their journey into care.

3.1.2 DAMAGED GOODS

Many of the participants talked about “anger” in relation to their sense of self during their childhood. They described their experiences as causing anger within them, leading to fighting and aggressive behaviours. For example, Dean described his past self as “rude” and a “crazy kid”. In Anna’s account, the word “mad” and “rebellious” was used to describe herself. She notes:

“Where ever I’ve been whatever foster placement I have been in I have been like I don’t want to be here I might as well break it down because I’m going to move anyway and that’s what I thought all the way through” (Anna, p. 41, par. 26)

One participant, Zara, described herself as really “aggressive back then”. Zara was able to reflect on how her early experiences of growing up in a violent home have profoundly shaped her sense of self:

“Because of all the violence that I had seen I thought it was normal to do”
(Zara, p. 27, par. 34)

She went on to explain that “now it’s like part of me but I am trying to control it”. In contrast, Laura described her past self as “obnoxious” but noted “that’s not all of me...I’m not like that all the time”. She reflects:

“That’s not actually me...that’s just the way I am at the moment because of the way I’m feeling [...] and everyone thought that was me and I wanted to be like that...but I didn’t. It’s as if your feelings control you” (Laura, p. 21. 52)

Three participants (Dean, Anna and Zara) shared how their early experiences have had a lasting impact on current perceptions of their self. For example, Dean described how he is unable to “cry” and that he “just can’t hit someone no matter how angry” he gets - suggesting perhaps a hardened sense of self. Whereas Anna described being “emotionally damaged” as a result of her experiences, noting that she “gets upset easily”. Finally, Zara spoke of her difficulties with being “touched” highlighting the enduring influence of the past:

“Even if I’m just sat at home I’ll be like, don’t touch me don’t touch me. I don’t like it when people like...like one of my friends went to accidentally give me a hug suddenly and I was like don’t touch me. If someone puts their hand on my shoulder...I accidentally smacked someone once. I hit them in the stomach. It was accidental but they touched me on the shoulder and I went smack. Just get off. I’s just like I can’t control myself at times.” (Zara, p. 30, par, 68)

3.2 Superordinate Theme Two: FEELING DIFFERENT

The second superordinate theme identified within the interview data was in relation to participants’ sense of “difference”. One young person, Dean, described that he had always felt “different” and “still feels different now”. Dean and Anna both highlighted the regime when professionals came to see them at regular intervals, which reinforced the differences they felt from their peers. For example Dean and Anna note:

“It doesn’t help that there is these parents’ meetings and social worker meetings and an educational psychologist turning up and this turning up and that turning up and a foster carer turning up...it’s like who are these people” (Dean, p. 3, par. 28)

“Like my teachers and stuff used to come home and have a meeting and I used to find it so annoying [...] I would get pulled out of class to go see the...what’s it called...the designated LAC person...” (Anna, p. 43, par, 58)

It appears that these two young people struggled to distance themselves from the status of having multiple professionals involved. Participants described how “normal people live with their brothers and sisters” and have “parents” and/or “families”. For example, Anna described how she “can’t exactly go hey Mam I’m sleeping out” at a friend’s house. Dean, Zara and Courtney when asked if they had three wishes (see Appendix VII), all described wishing “to be normal”. Kathryn who has lived with her current foster carers for six years noted:

“In one sense I’m normal, but I’m not exactly a normal child [...] I do have what others have...a family” (Kathryn, p. 12, par. 66/67)

Similarly, Sophie who referred to herself as “different but in a special way” spoke of how “most people who aren’t looked after have a family that knows them...from the minute they were born”. Dean describes a sense of psychological homelessness which he feels separates him from his peers:

“I’ve got really a really good girlfriend in college, I’ve got some good friends, but that doesn’t change the fact that I’m still not like them...because at the end of the day [...] I will come back to a children’s home [...] I almost feel homeless because it’s like a base that I go other places...it’s not where I live...I don’t live anywhere” (Dean, p. 4, par. 28/36)

Interestingly, Zara, the only participant who explicitly said that she didn’t feel different had been in kinship care with her aunty for several years. Although, Zara notes:

“I view myself as normal now...like if I don’t tell myself that I’m normal then I will go back to who I was” (Zara , p. 29, par. 50)

It appears that although Zara feels like a normal teenager now she has in the past struggled with her sense of difference.

3.3 Superordinate Theme 3: DANCE WITH STIGMA

The third superordinate theme, DANCE WITH STIGMA, describes the negative social responses that participants either anticipated or encountered as a result of being a LAC. This theme is spilt into two subordinate themes US AND THEM and MANAGING AND COPING WITH STIGMA.

3.3.1 US AND THEM

Other people, and in particular, negative social experiences, were central to many of the participants’ accounts. A major source of stress for participants was found to be the negative connotations associated with the label “foster kid”. Laura and Sophie explained:

“They think that we’re just trouble makers and we’re really naughty and stuff and actually were just...and most of the kids are only naughty because they have been through a lot, and it’s affected them and they haven’t had the right help” (Laura, p. 21, par. 44)

“I hate the reputation, I hate the fact that I could be called that. The words “looked after children” I’m not looked after. I’m loved” (Sophie, p. 37, par. 42)

Common themes included, being underestimated, teased, avoided, excluded, disliked and bullied. Several participants reported how others would be cruel and throw insults at them. Feeling judged in this way led many participants to feel “singled out”, “alienated” and socially “isolated” because of being different. Dean’s following quote describes how he, like other participants, felt in relation to society:

“I felt like no one wanted me really...I felt like reject of society if that makes sense” (Dean, p. 4, par. 36)

Within Laura’s account she described how other people’s reactions towards her led her to feel differently about herself:

“They just thought I was a big let-down. But...I did actually start to believe it at one point. I started believe what other people were telling me” (Laura, p. 21, par. 36)

In this example, the mechanisms through which a LAC might come to view him/herself in a negative way is clearly illustrated. A similar account was reported by Anna who reported that she “had felt worthless in the past”. These accounts suggest that participants felt rejected by peers and society. Many participants reported feeling “lonely”, “upset” and “powerless”. Sophie noted that she would “wish for people to see who I really am and not for whom I live with or my label”.

3.3.2 MANAGING AND COPING WITH STIGMA

Many of the participants recounted how feeling stigmatised led them to isolate themselves. Zara’s account illustrates how she created a physical shield to protect herself:

“I would shut my door, sit in the corner of my room as it was like the biggest room and pull all my toys around me. It was like if I was on my own nobody could hurt me...It was the only place I could be me”. (Zara, p. 27, par. 34)

Zara discussed, how behind closed doors she could be her “true self”, rather than a version that she presented to others. All participants reported that they had to make decisions about whether to inform other people or to conceal their status. Decisions regarding disclosure appeared to be closely linked to issues of identity and acceptance:

“Not many people know, and I wanna keep it that way. Because I think kids my age do take it the wrong way, if they don’t understand [...] But I think you have to make mistakes to learn from them, what to say, what not to say, when to say, not when to say it” (Laura , p. 23, par. 92/97)

One participant admitted to coping in a way that she identified as being more “self-destructive” and left her feeling “ashamed” of herself. Laura shared:

“It made me feel much...it helped me cope basically. I was little a bit ashamed as well” (Laura, p. 22, par. 64)

Laura saw self-harming as a release and a way of, “getting all of those negative emotions out of you”. Self-harm appeared to help her with her experiences of internal fragility by expressing her feelings and pain externally. A similar account was reported by Sophie who thought “that if they think that damaging me is going to help me then I thought damaging

myself will help me”. Interestingly, several participants made specific reference to having moved beyond stigma. This sentiment was articulated by Zara who initially felt worthless, but then “I stopped worrying about it...and now it doesn’t bother me.” Zara acknowledged that, she no longer allows the comments of others to tarnish her sense of self, instead she reported:

“I just take them and like digest them and mix em around like. Try and do something better with it. Because if people see me like that then that’s me”
(Zara, p. 30, par. 70)

On a similar note, Laura discussed her evolution from feeling “worthless” towards a more confident self where she can say “fair enough, if that’s what you think, you can think that, you can tell me that, I’m not gonna ignore you, but I’m not gonna listen to you either”.

3.4 Superordinate Theme 4: PIVOTAL MOMENTS AND MEANING MAKING

The fourth superordinate theme identified within the interview data referred to pivotal moments that were perceived to profoundly shape participants’ sense of self. All participants, with the exception of Courtney and Zara, described various turning points, for example, Dean recalled:

“I threw the cup at her head and it missed, by millimetres you know and I remember thinking...and that’s when I started to change because I had almost hurt a girl... I realised that I would never let myself get that angry again...that was like a major turning point from then on, from being really angry and stuff to being what I am now.... It made me realise that I don’t want to be like my father to be honest. And because I don’t want to be like my father and I will do anything to not be like my father...I think that’s made me change quite a lot...I just didn’t want to be like that” (Dean, p. 7, par, 64)

Dean’s account illustrates how he had the sudden realisation that he didn’t want to become his father. He recognised that he had some control over his emotional state. Kathryn’s account illustrates a pivotal moment in ending a relationship with her biological mother, through cutting of contact and gradually feeling able to exercise more personal power. Kathryn recalled:

“I stopped contact...because every time before and after contact I would have nightmares...I just said to myself ‘I’m worth more than this’” (Kathryn, p. 11, par, 38)

A similar account was recalled by Sophie who described “hitting rock bottom” and spoke of how she has been “rising ever since”. Sophie explained that cutting contact “changed [her] on the inside” reporting that she felt “bigger”. Laura, for example, experienced what she described as a “tipping point” associated with how her self-harm got worse before beginning to get better. She noted:

“I ended up in hospital which because the amount of time I self-harmed, which was on and off for about year like, none stop, I reached rock bottom and I’m surprised I didn’t kill myself...I was determined not to do that because I didn’t want it to end that way” (Laura, p. 22, par, 64)

Laura felt that she needed to reach breaking point and reported that she is “a stronger person for it”. Through the awareness of whom she could become and that she was “responsible” for her own future she was able to “get back on track”. Laura highlighted that she felt she was “a different person from the beginning of the year”. Although Laura acknowledged the emotional pain related to this experience, it is striking that she has not attempted to distance herself from it. Laura has fully embraced the experience and explored its meaning in her life. She has appeared to construct a story of self-transformation that is significant to how she perceives herself today.

3.5 Superordinate Theme 5: RE-ESTABLISHING IDENTITY AND TURNING TOWARDS THE FUTURE

Data gathered from interviews, suggested that for many participants being “normal” and leading a “normal life” were primary goals. Two subordinate themes emerged from the data: “A New Normal and Meaning Making through Actions” and “Fighting Spirit and Self-awareness”.

3.5.1 NEW NORMAL AND MEANING MAKING THROUGH ACTION

There was a pervasive positive feeling throughout the data, that being “looked after” had benefits in relation to personal growth. Some participants spoke of gaining a new perspective on life, reprioritising and becoming a stronger person. Kathryn and Dean believed that their experiences of being in care had increased their compassion for others:

“I help my friends through hard times...I’m supportive and encourage as much as I can”. (Kathryn, p. 11, par. 50)

“I think my experiences in my past have helped me to understand that it’s not wrong to help people” (Dean, p. 3, par. 26)

Dean indicated that he had become involved in voluntary work, which appeared to provide him with a sense of purpose and opportunity to establish a new role and also to develop a new identity. On a similar note, Laura and Sophie took pride in supporting others who self-harm:

“Because I have had a lot of experience, like when I’ve had friends who self-harm, and they ask me for advice now and that’s really nice, and that’s really nice because I wanna help them stop” (Laura , p. 22, par. 62)

“If anybody is upset or anything I do as much as I can [...] I mean somebody I knew who self-harmed [...] me and my friends went to see somebody about it...one of the teachers that could help him” (Sophie , p. 39. Par, 58)

Some participants talked about shifts in their priorities, goals, and dreams. For example, Laura, Zara and Sophie highlighted that they wanted to have a family:

“I want to get married and have kids and like keep them with me, and not let them go through what I’ve been through” (Laura , p. 24, par. 116)

“And like if I do end up with a family in the future then I know I can feed them I can look after them I can do what I need. As well as giving them all the love in the world I can.” (Zara, p. 31, par. 75)

“With my experiences I have had I feel that I can do a lot better with my children. Which I probably can if I don’t get ill like my mum. It obviously wasn’t her fault but...I don’t want to be like her. I want to be...me” (Sophie, p. 38, par. 54)

Laura and Courtney highlighted that their experiences had influenced their career choices; both wishing to be a Paediatrician. Zara highlighted that she actually “wanted to do something with [her] life like being a Police Woman”. Anna spoke of wanting to be a Child Protection Officer to help children who had been abused or neglected. Interestingly, when Kathryn was questioned about why she wanted to join the Army she reported that “nobody would bother with [her] otherwise”. She went on to explain that “people wouldn’t see me otherwise” which perhaps highlights an inner vulnerability. Participants appeared to seek roles that would give them a sense of purpose, belonging or fitting it and reinforce their value as a person.

3.5.2 PERSONAL GROWTH AND SELF-AWARENESS

Central to theme of RE-STABLISHING IDENTITY AND TURNING TOWARDS THE FUTURE was the development of “strength” with all but one participant describing they were a “stronger person”. For example, Laura notes:

“I think I’m just much more of a stronger person and open minded [...] I’m so open minded to what I was” (Laura, p. 22, par. 60)

Central to the participants’ understanding of what they had to do was the notion of a fight, of “proving people wrong” and “rising above” their experiences. Participants often conveyed a sense of achievement and accomplishment at having dealt with and overcome their circumstances:

“I’ve been brought up with this life and it hasn’t been a very good life perhaps, but I’ve taken it and made what I can of it, you know I haven’t gone out and taken drugs and smoked [...] I’m really proud of that actually, I find myself quite, like said confident and in control of my life at the minute” (Dean, p. 5, par. 38)

Laura gave the impression of being an extremely resilient individual who was constantly pushing herself to move forward. However, Laura often emphasised that she “did not do it alone” and frequently referred to the help she received from her current foster carer. Likewise, Sophie spoke of her foster carers as her “inspiration” highlighting that they “know what makes me rise and what makes me fall”. When reflecting on her inner strength she describes that she can “finally be the person [she] dreamed of”.

4.0 Discussion and Links to Previous Research

The aim of this study was to explore LAC perceptions of the development of self and/or identity, and to address critique about previous research being ‘atheoretical’. In the following section the key findings presented above will be considered in relation to existing literature and psychological theory. Findings highlight the complex nature of the development of self as a both private/individual and social phenomenon. For many of the young people, once they

had entered care, they experienced enormous daily struggles with themselves and others. This is illustrated in the superordinate theme SHATTERED SELF where participants were required to come to terms with a set of new life circumstances which were perceived to have lasting effects on their sense of self. The majority of participants described feelings of “blame”, “confusion”, “powerlessness” and explicitly highlighted an “acceleration of development”. Participants in the current study described having two separate identities, one of which belonged to the life before foster care and one to the life after. The subordinate theme DAMAGED GOODS portrayed how these early experiences led to significant social and emotional change with many describing themselves, for example, as “angry” and/or “rebellious”. Several of the participants illustrated how these early experiences had long lasting consequences for the self. For example, Anna described herself as “emotionally damaged” and Zara spoke of her “difficulties with being touched”. These results are generally consistent with previous research that documents the wide range of problem behaviours within the looked after population (McCann et al., 1996; Dimigen *et al.*, 1999; Meltzer et al., 2002; Utting, 1997). The current study therefore extends previous research because earlier studies have not covered in depth the experiences related to experiences prior to placement, removal from biological family and placement into foster care and the implications for the development of self and/or identity.

Consistent with previous literature, this study showed that labelling and stereotyping from others added a layer of complexity, and had consequences, with respect to how participants understood their sense of self (e.g. Kools, 1997; Schwartz, 2007; McKinney, 2011; Honey et al., 2011). The significance young people appeared to place on interactions with others complements the more dynamic conceptualisations of identity development that authors like Dewey (1930), Mead (1934), James (1934) and Cooley (1902) advocated. Consistent with the symbolic interactionist perspective participants’ identity in the current study can be conceptualised as a complex social construction evolving out of various interactions with others in multiple social contexts. This links back to the work of Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934) who suggested that people develop their identities within a system of social interactions and negotiations, where meanings about the self are developed and transmitted. For example, Laura discussed how the reactions of others towards her led her to feel differently about herself. This is also reminiscent of Corrigan, Larson and Rusch’s (2009) “why try?” model, where internalised stigma can diminish self-efficacy and reduce the motivation to pursue personal goals.

Issues highlighted by previous studies, such as feeling socially isolated and withdrawn, also emerged in the current study (Kools, 1997; McMurray et al., 2011). Zara, for example, highlighted that she could be her “true self” when in her bedroom, rather than a version she presented to others. This complements Goffman’s (1959) metaphor of front stage and back stage, the latter being more authentic and only revealed within trusting relationships. By adopting a “false self” Zara was able to avoid the rejection, invalidation and judgement from others. However, participants found a variety of ways to resist the negative consequences of these components. This was articulated, for example, by Zara who initially felt “worthless”, but she “stopped worrying about it...and now it doesn’t bother me”. Additionally, some

participants attempted to distance themselves from the stigma by distancing themselves from the label, for example, Sophie said “I’m not looked after...I’m loved”. This is compatible with Corrigan and Watson’s (2002) model of personal reactions to stigma where the consequence of stigma is moderated by the degree to which an individual identifies with the stigmatised group. Consistent with Poindexter and Shippy (2010) participants in the current study tended to “pass as normal” and conceal their status due to the fear of how others might react rather than shame about their LAC status. Whether this strategy has some advantages for LAC in certain circumstances is a question that deserves further research attention. The present study therefore offers an understanding of how LAC cope with the challenges posed by a stigmatised identity, an aspect that has been less well explored in prior studies.

The current study also highlights the development of alternative identities and strong aspirations for the future; as illustrated in the superordinate theme **REESTABLISHING IDENTITY AND TURNING TOWARD THE FUTURE**. In this particular study, participants who had reached this stage all spoke of engaging in meaningful activities (i.e. helping others), committing themselves to careers and imagining new valued roles (i.e. mother/father). Tajfel and Turner (1986) referred to this act as ‘individual mobility’. Individual mobility occurs when people attempt to alter their social identity by associating with a different social group. The findings of this study therefore conflicts with findings from Kools (1997) and McMurray et al., (2011) who documented that experiences related to growing up in foster care had negative impact of young people’s aspirations for the future and/or identity was described as being on ‘standby’. A possible explanation for this might be the different cultural setting of Kools (1997) and McMurray et al.’s (2011) study which was conducted in America. Underlying this superordinate theme was a sense of participants developing “personal strength”, which provided them with an opportunity to take control of their experience and to mask a more “vulnerable” self, depicted in the superordinate theme **SHATTERED SELF**. The search for identity and affiliation, and actively reengaging in life, perhaps resonates with what Erikson (1980) called identity versus diffusion; the fifth stage of Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development. Erikson (1980) argued that this stage occurs during adolescence, faced with imminence of adult tasks. Based on this theory, it could be argued that participants who had reached this stage had gained a perspective of the changes they had made over time. However, many of the participants often juxtaposed their new self (i.e. **A NEW NORMAL AND MEANING MAKING THROUGH ACTION**) with their old self (i.e. **SHATTERED SELF**). This suggests that identity can swing back and forth with aspects of the “vulnerable” self still remaining. Based on the current study, Erikson’s (1968) conceptualisation of identity as linear and uni-directional appears too simplistic to capture the complexity of participants’ experiences.

4.1 Contribution to Knowledge

The current study therefore builds and extends on previous research by highlighting that difficult times may be a catalyst for self and/or identity development in LAC. Notably participants who reached the stage of **NEW NORMAL AND MEANING MAKING THROUGH ACTION** all described pivotal moments as kick-starting a process of self-transformation. An interesting finding was that the meaning created around the event was a

primary factor in this process of self-development. While each young person described their own unique pivotal moment and meanings it appeared that each reflected similar emergent qualities such as feelings of fear, anxiety, anger and self-doubt. The exception to this seemed to be Courtney, who appeared to be at a much earlier point in the self development process than the other participants and appeared to find less meaning in her experiences. This was conveyed in the many hesitations in her speech and her short phrases and sentences. Thus, those participants who described pivotal moments and subsequently more meaning in their experience seemed to display a stronger sense of control, restored sense of self and strong aspirations for the future. Indeed, McLean and Pratt (2006) suggested that turning point memories are “usually events in which one learns something new about oneself or face decisions about different paths to take in life” (p. 715). Consistent with the aforementioned literature within the narrative perspective, where identity takes the shape of a coherent life story, participants in the current study integrated interpretations of the past with the present self and provided them with meaning and purpose (McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Pattern & Bowman, 2001; Singer, 2004; Singer & Blagov, 2004). Indeed, many of the young people explicitly linked their motivation to help others with their early abuse histories. Similarly, Erikson (1956) spoke of the synthesis of earlier identifications into a “coherent whole”, which provides the young adult with both a sense of continuity with the past and the future (p. 67-68). The young people in this study appeared to have reached the point where they had recovered their self-identity sufficiently to succeed against the struggles of daily life with themselves and others. All the participants were continually navigating this road in different ways.

4.2 Strengths and Limitations of the Research

IPA was adopted as the most fitting research method to address the research aims and could be considered a strength of the current study. Using IPA enabled an in-depth exploration of LAC perceptions of the development of self and/or identity. However, it is acknowledged that it is not possible to make generalisations from the small sample. Although, Smith et al., (1999) propose that, if done well, IPA studies do not require large sample sizes as their aim is to have theoretical rather than empirical generalisability. A second limitation relates to the homogeneity of the current sample. First, participants in the current study varied considerably in age and gender which may limit the generalizability and validity of the findings. The second limitation pertains to the duration of time spent in care and number of foster placements which varied from 2 to 10 with a mean of 5.85 placements. Likewise, participants varied considerably regarding types of placements with two living in a residential home, one in kinship care and three in foster care. Variations in types of placements could potentially influence the development of self and/or identity in LAC. Taken together, it will be important for future research to be conducted with a sample that is more homogenous; increasing the generalizability and validity of findings. For example, it is currently unclear what impact, if any, types of placements have on the development of self and/or identity in LAC. A third limitation relates to difficulties with recruiting participants, which is likely to have led to a biased sub-population of LAC. For example, recruitment efforts were hampered by concerns about the possible stressful nature of answering interview questions. Thus, significant

differences may exist between LAC who are and are not accessible. The important limitations highlighted mean that these findings need to be interpreted cautiously.

4.3 Suggestions for Future Research

The retrospective nature of the study may have resulted in participants' forgetting important aspects of their prior experiences. It is therefore recommended that future research addresses these concerns through conducting longitudinal studies using multiple interviews over a number of years. Furthermore, the research only captured those young people in main-stream educational settings and there may be a difference between the present sample and those who access alternative provision or who are, for example, seen by mental health services. It seemed the most important recommendation for future research relates to how LAC find "meaning" and purpose in their lives from significant event(s) that led to transformation or change and how it influences future aspirations. Likewise, studies could specifically examine the concept of "post-traumatic growth"³.

4.4 Implications for Educational Psychologists

Some recommendations can be made based on the findings of the current study that are relevant to EPs. For example, it is argued that EPs are well placed to carry out therapeutic work with LAC. Essential components of this work would include engaging LAC in conversations about their past and in particular encouraging them to draw 'meaning' from 'pivotal' events in childhood. Similarly, EPs are well placed to work with foster carers to support LAC to express and share feelings and memories about the past. By encouraging LAC to talk about their experiences they may be able to reframe, take control and draw strength from their unique experiences. EPs are well placed to work at a systemic level to ensure schools become more 'friendly' with the aim of tackling of stigmatisation. A deeper knowledge of psychological theories regarding the impact of stigma could lead school staff to acquire important insights into the impact of a stigma on the development of self; leading to appropriate interventions and support for LAC within the school setting.

4.5 Conclusion

This study set out to gain an in-depth understanding of LAC perceptions of the development of self and/or identity, and to address critique about previous research being 'atheoretical'. Based on its philosophical underpinnings and focus on lived experience, IPA was adopted as the most fitting research method to address the research aims. Analysis revealed a sense of transformation as well as brokenness, with many LAC reporting personal growth as a result of their journey. The study also highlighted the importance of meaning making in determining a more advanced identity development. It is hoped that this paper will serve as a catalyst and stimulate further theoretical research that explores the processes underlying self and/or identity in LAC.

³ Post traumatic growth is defined as "positive psychological change experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances or traumatic events" (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p. 1).

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Appendix I: Letter to Gatekeeper

Suzanne Horgan
School of Psychology
Cardiff University
Tel: 07736832204
mcsherrys@cardiff.ac.uk

Dear Principal Educational Psychologist,

I am a student training to be an educational psychologist at Cardiff University, and I have to undertake a thesis, an academic requirement of the course. I am interested in exploring LAC's perceptions of their self-concept and the factors influencing their identity development. This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What are LAC's perceptions of their self-concept?
2. To what extent do LAC view themselves as different to non-LAC?
3. To what extent do LAC perceive others to view them as different?
4. How do LAC manage any perceived discrepancies between their perceptions of self-concept and the views of others?
5. What factors do LAC perceive as influencing the development of self-concept?
6. To what extent do LAC experience changes in their self-concept across different situations and with different people?

I am writing to enquire whether you would be willing to assist me in recruiting looked after adolescents, aged 13-17, to participate in this study. I will be conducting semi-structured interviews, which will explore LAC's perceptions of their self-concept, and the factors influencing their identity development. This interview will last for about 40 minutes and will also be audio taped with participants' written consent. Participants' confidentiality and privacy will be respected, which means not disclosing what an individual said in interview. The data will only be handled by myself and will be destroyed in 10 years, in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998). During the transcription phase, all data will be anonymised with the use of pseudonyms. Please note that participants have the right to withdraw at any stage during the project, without reason, up until the point at which the data will be anonymised and amalgamated. After this point, the data will be untraceable.

Feedback regarding the major findings of the research study will be made available to you on request. Your help in this project will be greatly appreciated and will hopefully help professions to support children in care.

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. I can be reached on 07736832204 or by email on mcsherrysm@cardiff.ac.uk.

Yours sincerely,
Suzanne Horgan (Researcher)

If you have any questions relating to this study please do not hesitate to contact me at the School of Psychology, Cardiff University. You may also contact my supervisor, John Gameson (Professional Director) at the School of Psychology, Cardiff University. If you have any complaints you may contact Simon Griffey (Research Director) at the School of Psychology.

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Appendix II: letter to Gatekeeper

Suzanne Horgan
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mcsherrys@cardiff.ac.uk

Dear Guardian,

I am a student training to be an educational psychologist at Cardiff University, and I have to undertake a thesis, an academic requirement of the course. I am interested in exploring LAC's perceptions of their self-concept and the factors influencing their identity development. Specifically, I would like to explore how LAC currently see themselves, whether or not they view themselves as different to non-LAC and where they think their ideas about their self-concept has come from.

I would like to seek your permission, for _____ to participate in this study. I will be conducting semi-structured interviews, which will explore LAC's perceptions of themselves, and the factors influencing their identity development. The interviews will last for about 40 minutes and will also be audio taped, with participants' written consent. The participants' confidentiality and privacy will be respected, which means not disclosing what an individual said in interview. The data will only be handled by myself and will be destroyed in 10 years, in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998). During the transcription phase, all data will be anonymised with the use of pseudonyms. Please note that participants' have the right to withdraw at any stage during the project, without reason, up until the point at which the data will be anonymised and amalgamated. After this point, the data will be untraceable.

Feedback regarding the major findings of the research study will be made available to you on request. Your help in this project will be greatly appreciated and will hopefully help professions to support children in care.

If you have any further questions before completing and signing the reply slip, please do not hesitate to contact me. I can be reached on 07736832204 or by email on mcsherrysm@cardiff.ac.uk. If you are willing to participate in this study, please complete and sign the attached form, *using the stamped address envelope provided.*

Yours sincerely,
Suzanne Horgan (Researcher)

I would like _____ to participate/not participate in your research study

Signed..... Date.....

Print name.....

Contact details.....

If you have any questions relating to this study please do not hesitate to contact me at the School of Psychology, Cardiff University. You may also contact my supervisor, John Gameson (Professional Director) at the School of Psychology, Cardiff University. If you have any complaints you may contact Simon Griffey (Research Director) at the School of Psychology.

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Appendix III: Guardian Consent Form

Guardian Consent Form

Dear Suzanne Horgan

I agree for _____ to participate in the research study, "Perceptions of Who I Am? An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of LAC's Perceptions of their Self-Concept, and the Factors Influencing their Identity Development". I understand the purpose and the nature of this research study and I am participating voluntarily. I agree for _____ to be interviewed and recorded and I am aware that the recording will be will be destroyed in 10 years, in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998) and university policy. I understand that the transcript of _____ interview will be stored on a password protected computer that only the researcher will have access to. I understand that the data will be transcribed and anonymised with pseudonyms. I understand that I can withdraw _____, at any time during the project without reason, up until the point at which the data will be anonymised and amalgamated. After this point, I understand that the data will be untraceable. I grant permission for the data collected to be used in the process of completing a paper, a requirement of the Doctorate in Educational Psychology at Cardiff University. I understand that actual names and places will not be used in order to preserve confidentiality. Participants may have access to the draft and final paper, upon request.

I, _____(NAME) consent for _____(CHILD) to participate in the study conducted by Suzanne Horgan, School of Psychology, Cardiff University with the supervision of John Gameson (gamesonj@cardiff.ac.uk/02920 875474) Professional Director of the Doctorate in Educational Psychology (DEdPsy).

Signed: _____

Date: _____

If you have any questions relating to this study please do not hesitate to contact me at the School of Psychology, Cardiff University. You may also contact my supervisor, John Gameson (Professional Director) at the School of Psychology, Cardiff University. If you have any complaints you may contact Simon Griffey (Research Director) at the School of Psychology.

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Appendix IV: Invitation Letter for Children

Hi!

My name is Suzanne and I want to talk to you about my study I am undertaking, 'Perceptions of who I am? An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Factors Influencing LAC's Identity Development'. Your guardian has given their permission for me to ask you to be in this study.

If you don't mind, maybe we could have a 40-minute chat, where I ask you some questions about your perceptions of how you view yourself, whether or not you view yourself as different to non-LAC and where you think your ideas about yourself have come from. I would also like to record our conversations.



I want to write down some of your ideas for other people to read and think about, but they won't know who you are because I will give you a pretend name.

The answers that you give and the things we talk about will be kept private and they will not be shown to other people except if you tell me that you are unsafe.

Your interview is private and that means that I will not be telling your parents/carers /guardian's or other family members what you have said unless you ask me to.

If you change your mind during the study, you can choose to leave at any time, without reason, up until the point at which the data will be anonymised and amalgamated. After this point, the data will be untraceable.

If you don't mind doing this, you can sign and date the special form, and give it to your teacher. Please ask me any other questions that you may have about the study.

Yours sincerely,

Suzanne Horgan (Researcher)

I agree to be involved in the study/ I would not like to involved in the study

Signed..... Date.....

Print name.....

If you have any questions relating to this study please do not hesitate to contact me at the School of Psychology, Cardiff University. You may also contact my supervisor, John Gameson (Professional Director) at the School of Psychology, Cardiff University. If you have any complaints you may contact Simon Griffey (Research Director) at the School of Psychology.

Suzanne Horgan

John Gameson

Simon Griffey

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Appendix V: Assent Form for Children

I agree to take part in the research – ‘Perceptions of Who I Am? An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of LAC’s Perceptions of their Self-Concept and the Factors influencing their Identity Development’.

I understand what the study is about and Suzanne has explained what I will be asked to do. I have been given the opportunity to ask any questions I have.

I agree to do short interview where I will answer some questions for Suzanne and I understand that all my answers and results will be kept strictly private/confidential.

I understand that the interview will be taped.

I agree to let Suzanne use my interview that will be recorded in her paper - but only when all my personal information has been removed.

I understand that my participation is up to me and I can choose to leave at any time.

Name _____ Signature _____

Date _____

If you have any questions relating to this study please do not hesitate to contact me at the School of Psychology, Cardiff University. You may also contact my supervisor, John Gameson (Professional Director) at the School of Psychology, Cardiff University. If you have any complaints you may contact Simon Griffey (Research Director) at the School of Psychology.

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Appendix VI: Debrief Form

Perceptions of Who I Am: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Factors Influencing LAC's Identity Development

About this Study:

This research project aims to contribute additional information in the research literature by exploring LAC's perceptions of their self-concept and the factors influencing their identity development. This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What are LAC's perceptions of their self-concept?
2. To what extent do LAC view themselves as different to non-LAC?
3. To what extent do LAC perceive others to view them as different?
4. How do LAC manage any perceived discrepancies between their perceptions of self-concept and the views of others?
5. What factors do LAC perceive as influencing the development of self-concept?
6. To what extent do LAC experience changes in their self-concept across different situations and with different people?

Yours sincerely,
Suzanne Horgan

Thank you for your participation!

Appendix VII: Interview Schedule

Introduction (to include):

- Explanation of the purpose of the interview.
- Explanation that they may skip any questions that they find uncomfortable or end participation in the study at any time.
- Explanation about use of a tape recorder and confidentiality and anonymity (names and identifiers to be changed).
- Ask if the young person has any questions before starting the interview.

General information:

What is your age? Are you currently at school? At what age did you enter your first foster care placement? Could you tell me a little about your experiences of being taken into care? How many years have you been in the foster care system? How many foster homes have you had? Do you have contact with your biological parents?

Interview questions:

1. Could you tell me a little about how you view yourself in comparison to non-LAC (*Prompt: Could you tell me about why you see yourself as different? How do you know you are different from non-LAC? Is this important to you? How does that make you feel? Could you tell me about why you see yourself as similar/same?*)
2. To what extent do you think of yourself as 'looked after' when you think of your identity? (*Prompt: Is the label part of your identity?*)
3. How would you currently describe yourself? (*Prompt: What are you like? How does this make you feel? What are you especially proud/not proud of about yourself? Why is that important?*)
4. How would you describe what you are not like? (*Prompt: How does this make you feel?*)
5. In what ways have you changed from past to present? (*Prompt: Can you tell me about a time when thought about yourself differently? Do you think you will be the same in 5 years or different Why is that important?*)
6. Could you tell me how you think other people would describe you, for example, peers, family, foster parent, social worker and why you think this? (*Prompt: How do you know they think of you like that? What don't other people understand about you? Do you feel accepted by others? How does this make you feel? Do you feel you need to change?*)
7. How do you respond to negative/positive ideas from others about yourself? (*Prompt: What is the impact of significant others views and judgment on how you feel about yourself? Can you tell me about an experience you have had to support this idea?*)
8. Could you tell me about how you have got to be the way you are? (*Prompt: Could you tell me how particular people and/or your experiences in your life have influenced how you are?*)
9. If you had three wishes, what would they be and why?

10. Is there anything you would like to tell me that I have not already asked you, that you think may be important for me to hear?

Appendix VIII: A Summary of the Research Procedure

September – November 2012

Research of the literature.

December - January 2013

Development of research proposal and specification of research methods (including development of information sheets, consent forms and data collection) and submission to Cardiff University Ethics Committee.

February 2013

Ethics Proposal accepted.

March 2013

A pilot study was conducted by the researcher on one LAC, who was known to the researcher. Subsequently, a few minor changes were made to the interview questions, which mainly included re-phrasing.

April 2013

Following ethical approval from Cardiff University Ethics Committee, permission to conduct the research was obtained from the local authority where the researcher works as a trainee educational psychologist. Gatekeepers (guardians and/or social workers with a duty of care for the child) were contacted using the attached information sheet (Appendix II) and opt in consent form (Appendix III).

May 2013

Following written consent, the young people were approached individually and consent was sought using the child-friendly information sheet and opt in consent form (Appendix IV & VII).

July – September 2013

Data collection – the researcher held individual, semi-structured interviews with seven participants. The interviews were audio-taped with permission from each participant, to ascertain an accurate account of the interview, which could be replayed for analytic purposes. Confidentiality was assured during the course of the recordings. All data was anonymised, with the use of pseudonyms, during the transcription phase. Participants received a debrief form thanking them for their involvement (Appendix VI).

October 2013

All semi-structured interviews were transcribed.

November 2013

Analysis of data following Smith et al., (2009) step by step guide to IPA (Appendix X).

December 2013- January 2014

Write up of draft literature review and empirical paper.

May 2014

Thesis submission.

Appendix IX: Ethical Considerations

Informed consent

In line with the BPS (2009) Code of Ethics and Conduct informed consent was obtained from all participants. Gatekeepers (guardians and/or social workers with a duty of care for the child) were contacted using an information sheet (Appendix I & II) and opt in consent form (Appendix III). Following written consent, the young people were approached individually and consent was sought using the child-friendly information sheet and opt in consent form (Appendix IV & V).

Confidentiality

Participants were informed of their rights to confidentiality and privacy. Participants were informed that all data would be anonymised with the use of pseudonyms, during the transcription phase. All consent forms with identifying features were kept securely and separately from anonymous research data. The data was only handled by the researcher and will be destroyed in 10 years, in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998).

Rights to Withdraw

Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage during the project, without reason, up until the point at which the data will be anonymised and amalgamated. After this point, they will be made aware that the data will be untraceable. All participants were provided with contact numbers in case of complaint and/or any queries they may have.

Debriefing

Participants received a debrief form thanking them for their involvement (Appendix VI), together with contact details of the researchers, the research supervisor and the Cardiff School of Ethics Committee, if they wished to discuss any concerns.

Appendix X: Outline of IPA Procedure Followed

Step 1

In keeping with IPA's idiographic commitment, each interview was first read several times enabling the researcher to actively engage and familiarise herself with the text. Initial thoughts and reflections were recorded and written in the left-hand margin of the transcripts. In doing so, the researcher began to identify categories.

Step 2

The researcher explored the language and semantic context of each transcript and recorded reflective comments noting anything of interest. This process helps to "identify specific ways by which the participant talks about, understands and thinks about an issue" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 83). Exploratory comments were recorded as by Smith et al. (2009), for example, descriptive comments (describing the content of what participants said), linguistic comments (focussed on the specific use of language) and conceptual comments (focussed on engaging at more interrogative and conceptual level). Reflective comments were written in a wide margin on the right of each transcript. Appendix XII provides an extract of a transcript which outlines step 1 and 2 of data analysis.

Step Three

This involved the researcher attempting to reduce the volume of detail, which Smith et al. (2009) described as, "an analytic shift to working primarily with the initial notes rather than the transcript itself" (p. 91). Smith et al. (2009) describe that at this stage the researcher is looking to draw together the emergent themes and to "point to all the most interesting and important aspects" (p. 96). The researcher listed the emergent themes in the order they appeared on the transcript to be able to better identify commonalities. Appendix XIII provides an example of the emergent themes in chronological order for participant 6. Following this, the researcher either discarded or grouped the themes by looking for the connections between them. The researcher used the hermeneutic circle process, by oscillating between the whole data and particular aspects of the data to create broader clusters or subordinate themes. Appendix XIV provides an example of abstraction leading to the development of one superordinate theme for participant 6.

Step 4

The researcher presented the subordinate themes within a table together with relevant transcript extracts and the locations in order to evidence and illustrate each theme. This helped to capture the most important things the researcher wanted to say about the participants' experience.

Step 5

In accordance with Smith et al., (2009) the researcher analysed each transcript completing steps 1 to 4. The researcher produced 7 summary tables. A list of recurrent superordinate themes was compiled by the researcher; looking at patterns across transcripts that reflected the participants' shared experiences. The superordinate were checked against the transcripts to ensure that they remained grounded in the data. Appendix XV provides a master table that contains details of each superordinate theme and respective subordinate theme and the respective line numbers for each participant. In addition, a thematic map of superordinate themes and subordinate themes is provided in Appendix XVI

Appendix XI: Criteria for Evaluating Validity of Qualitative Research (Adapted from Yardley 2000, 2008)

Sensitivity of Context

The researcher identified a specific gap in the empirical literature and formulated a research question that could address gaps in knowledge.

Commitment and Rigour

IPA offers clear guidance on how to plan, gather and analyse data (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher demonstrated commitment and rigour through applying ideographic methods; enabling rich and vivid accounts of participants' experiences. The current study has followed such guidance and documented each step in great detail.

Transparency and Coherence

A detailed description of the study design and procedure has been provided in the paper. Verbatim extracts are presented to illustrate participants' experience. Both convergences and divergences are presented, illustrating the differences found in their experiences. Transcripts and audio files will be available on request for those wishing to evaluate how the methodology was applied.

Impact and Importance

A detailed description of the study has been discussed in the abstract together with a discussion of contribution on knowledge and implications of professional practice.

Appendix XII: Example of a Transcript with detailing Exploratory Comments and Emergent Themes

Emergent Themes	Original Transcript	Exploratory Comments
<p>Blame/my fault</p> <p>Great adventure – new life</p> <p>Extremes of emotions</p> <p>Angry self Vivid memory</p> <p>Angry self Losing control</p> <p>What had I done He experienced a drastic change. My fault</p>	<p>1. My name is Suzanne Horgan and I am a trainee educational psychologist. I am undertaking a research project on LAC perceptions of the development of self and/or identity. Could you tell me a little bit about how you came into care?</p> <p>2. Erm...my mother when she was younger she was an alcoholic and couldn't look after me and my family...she couldn't look after me because I was too much of a handful. So they put me into care.</p> <p>3. Ok. How old were you at that time?</p> <p>4. I'm not sure. There are lots of different stories about it actually. Some people tell me I was three. And some people tell me I was five. So...I'm pretty sure I was five, because I remember a lot of it.</p> <p>5. Can you remember how you felt at that time, when you were taken into care?</p> <p>6. Excited actually.</p> <p>7. So you saw the positives of it?</p> <p>8. No. I was excited because I was looking forward to having a better life. And you know, I like camping and stuff, so I saw it as a great adventure. To go to a different house and to live in a different house, with different people. And I didn't realise that it was gonna be forever, so to speak, so that's why I was a bit excited. And then I remember I realised obviously, that was a few months into placement, that it was, that I wasn't gonna see my mother again, or at least I wasn't gonna live with her again. I got upset and angry.</p> <p>9. How did you feel about self?</p> <p>10. I remember...I don't know whether it's relevant or not, but there is this memory I've got, when I was in... I was in my second foster placement, because I had messed up the other foster placement because I got angry. And I was on a scooter with my friends and I remember thinking about like consciousness and souls and stuff and I remember thinking why does it have to be me, in this particular body, in this particular predicament, and why can't it be someone else. I remember thinking like...what had I done...to get to this place and how could I get out of it and live back with my mother. I remember, remember thinking, why does it have to happen to me. And I remember thinking that...and like...and I didn't like it...I always thought it was my fault to me honest.</p>	<p>He hesitates when explaining is background. Maybe he feels guilty?</p> <p>He is confused and uncertain about his past.</p> <p>Initially excited. He is articulating his mixed emotions regarding being taken into care. He has a sudden realisation that being taken into care is permanent.</p> <p>It appears that his reactions are embedded in a general lack of understanding about what was happening to him. Lots of questioning about his self and his reality. He articulates a sense of powerlessness to change the situation.</p>

Appendix XIII: An Example of a Chronological List of Emerging Themes (Sophie)

Emerging Theme

Vivid memories
Confusion
Fear of unknown
Extremes of emotions
Seeking comfort
Coping is isolation
Confusion
Relief
Role as adult vs role of child
Right to be a child - unfairness of the situation
Childhood back again
Taking control
Upset
Fragility
Unwanted self
Rejected
Feeling unimportant
Flooded with emotions
Pivotal moment
Turning point
Hurt and anger
Transformation
Social judgement
Stigma challenging normal self
Status of LAC
Making the mistake of disclosing LAC status
Trying to forget
Pain
Facing fears
Shut of self
Profound change of self
Feeling bigger
Taking control
Emotional roller-coaster
Vulnerable self
Life changed in a flash
The meaning of "home"
Accelerated development
Life as a struggle
One life to another
Getting the self back
Confused
Feeling safe
Stronger self
Standing up to others
Strength and belief in self
Feeling different

Inspired by foster carer – the power of support
Social judgement
Feeling different
Weaker self
New person in an old body
Others think I'm different
Stigma challenging normal self
Feeling loved
Life as a struggle
Rejection from others
Standing up to others
Self-harm and coping
Coping in isolation
Numb self
Explosion of feelings
Pain as an assault on self
Hidden part of self
Hitting rock bottom
Rising self
Better person
Helping others
Determination
Thinking of the future
Taking control of self
Choosing who to be
A wish to be accepted
Status of LAC label
Feeling judged

Appendix XIV: Example of Abstraction Leading to the Development of a Superordinate Theme for Sophie

Superordinate Theme 1: The Psychological Consequences of Being Taken into Care

Vivid memories
Confusion
Fear of unknown
Relief
Childhood back again
Right to be a child – unfairness of the situation
Fragility
Vulnerable self
Life changed in a flash
Accelerated development
One life to another
Getting the self back
New person in an old body

Appendix XV: Master Table of Superordinate and Subordinate Themes for Group

Superordinate Theme 1: SHATTERED SELF

ONE LIFE TO ANOTHER

Dean: “why does it have to be me, in this particular body, in this particular predicament”	p. 1, par. 10
Dean: “I was excited because I was looking forward to having a better life”	p.1, par. 8
Dean: “I always thought it was my fault to be honest”	p. 1, p.10
Kathryn: “I was really really really excited to be honest”	p. 10, par. 8
Courtney: “worried about where I was gonna go”	p. 15, par. 11
Courtney: “Upset”	p. 15, par. 13
Zara: “Like I had done something wrong. Like you see on TV like the police come and you associate with it that you have done something wrong. And you think why am I being taken away from my parents, why can’t I see them, it’s like why aren’t I able to be with them. It’s like my fault all the time”	p. 25, par. 12
Sophie: “one life to another”	p. 35, par. 30
Sophie: “ a new person erm in your old body”	p. 38, par 37
Anna: “I don’t really know if I have liked blocked it out because I don’t really remember or I just can’t”	p. 40, par , 4
Anna: “It was fabulous”	p. 40, par , 18
Anna: “I was really upset obviously because I had been removed from my family”	p. 40, par , 20
Anna: “It felt as though nobody wanted me. And I remember thinking that I had done something wrong, what I had I done wrong”	p. 41, par , 22

DAMAGED GOODS

Dean: “like angry issues and crazy kid really”	p. 2, par, 23
Dean: “I’m not very good with people to be honest”	p. 1, par, 8
Dean: “Can’t cry”	p. 1, par, 8
Courtney: “Because of the past it still affects me a lot”	p. 15, par, 34
Laura: “wouldn’t back down...like, wouldn’t listen to people, quite quite obnoxious to be honest”	p. 20, par, 20
Laura: “but, that’s not all of me. It’s not like...I’m not like that all the time”	p. 20, par, 22
Laura : “like I’m not gonna change completely, there are gonna be bits of me that are gonna stay with me for my whole life”	p. 22, par, 58
Zara: I have a lot of anger... I think it’s part of me now”	p.28, par. 48
Zara: I turned around and retaliated like my dad I’m trying to control that, like I am trying to control that at the moment...but at the time I didn’t know how to control it and I would turn around and react and because of all the violence I had seen I thought it was normal to do	p. 27, par, 34
Sophie: “matured the wrong way”	p. 35, par, 32
Sophie: “weaker and vulnerable because your so used to the life you had”	p. 37, par, 38
Anna: “I still think like know I am emotionally damaged by it”	p. 44, par, 66
Anna: “Since then I have been really rebellious”	p. 41, par, 26

Superordinate Theme 2: FEELING DIFFERENT

- Dean: "I felt really different going through school. And I felt really different going through, even college now you know..." p. 4, par, 28
- Dean: "I felt like no one wanted me really...I felt like reject of society if that makes sense" p. 4, par, 36
- Katie: "Well... I don't think I do feel different...well sometimes I do because others saying stuff and being mean to me like...but in one sense I am normal, but I'm not exactly a normal child" p. 12, par, 64
- Courtney: "*Do you see yourself as different from non-looked after children? Yeah*" p. 15, par, 14
- Courtney: "*To what extent do you think of yourself as 'looked after'? ...erm...part of me*" p. 16, par, 55
- Courtney: "*If you had three wishes, what would they be? To be normal*" p. 17, par, 143
- Laura: "In a way I feel different...but it depended upon what placement" p. 20, par, 30
- Laura: "Like normal kids live with their parents...their lucky to live with their parents, even if you hate them, I think why don't you appreciate them, you got em" p. 20, par, 30
- Zara: "I would have wanted to be totally somebody else. Because you see yourself and then you see other normal families like" p. 31, par, 81
- Sophie: "I'm different but in a special way" p. 36, par, 38
- Sophie: "normal people have their brothers living with them" p. 38, par, 44
- Anna: "Sometimes I do feel different" p. 42, par, 48

Superordinate Theme 3: DANCE WITH STIGMA US AND THEM

- Dean: "Yes I used to be bullied quite a lot in school" p. 8, par, 78
- Dean: "had more life experience, I seemed to be older than them and people used bang his mother has gone and that really upset me and used to...my mother wasn't gone she was still there but they always used to say that she was gone and I never see her, and they knew...when...when my taxi turned up to college and now one else had a taxi and buses and parents picked them up and I had a taxi and they say...where is your mother then? And that used to really upset me" p. 8, par, 78
- Kathryn: "because people are like a bit mean like" p. 11, par, 56
- Kathryn: "upset and lonely...isolated..." p. 12, par, 62
- Kathryn: "people have avoided me" p. 13, par, 115
- Courtney: "Sometimes when people say, when I'm in an argument they say she is in foster care..." p. 16, par, 79
- Courtney: "Call me...me names and my mother names, because most people no in this school" p. 16, par, 87
- Courtney: "They call my mother names...that she is a drug dealer and stuff" p. 17, par, 137
- Laura: "I think they thought that I couldn't do it and achieve" p. 21, par, 36

anything with my life. They just thought I was a big let down. But...i did actually start to believe it at one point. I started believe what other people were telling me”

Laura: “I see signs and things, I see signs for like foster websites and on the radio and I think kids shouldn’t live like that... I really don’t like it, that label of foster kid” p. 21, par, 42

Laura: “I think, they think that were just trouble makers and were really naughty and stuff and actually were just...and most of the kids are only naughty because they have been through a lot, and its affected them and they haven’t had the right help” p. 21, par, 44

Zara: “he actually swore at me and like he said your and orphan you don’t belong here” p. 27, par, 32

Zara: “everyone was just so nasty” p. 27, par, 30

Zara: “I think being bullied at primary school changed who I was” p. 27, par, 36

Sophie: “you are looked at as vulnerable and weak because you come from a weak family. Erm...I hate that reputation. I hate the fact that I could be called that. That the words “looked after child... im not looked after...Im loved” p. 37, par, 41

Sophie: “The only thing that I would wish for is for people to see who I really am and not for who I live with or my my label” p. 39, par, 64

Sophie: “People have...told me that...I am different. That erm I’m strange and I’m weird. And that I’m appalling and that...I I shouldn’t take my life seriously because I’ve been ripped away from who I am” p. 38, par, 46

MANAGING AND COPING WITH STIGMA

Dean: “It’s only recently that I told people...events that happened in my past to be honest. Im not goonna mention them now, but its only recently that I did tell people about certain aspects of my past that happened that perhaps they can now o we can now understand that now and I didn’t tell them then...no one new...all they knew was that my mother couldn’t look after me...and that’s all they knew. Now...people who have found out most of the full story...people are saying...” p. 2, par, 24

Katie: “I don’t want them to know...but I do if you see what I mean” p. 13, par, 100

Katie: “but when people have I just say it’s none of your business if I’m in foster care or not” p. 12, par, 78

Courtney: “No. I didn’t cope. Upset a lot” p. 17, par, 98

Courtney: “Sometimes I just get upset and go home and feel angry” p. 16, par, 75

Laura: “*How did self-haring make you feel about yourself? It made me feel much...it helped me cope basically.*” p. 22, par, 64

Sophie: “I stand up for myself if I’m being offended or I tell people what I think. I’m not scared of that anymore.” p. 36, par, 36

Anna: “ in the past believed that I was worthless” p. 45, par, 76

Superordinate Theme 5: PIVOTAL MOMENTS AND MEANING MAKING

- Dean: “through the cup at her head and it missed, by millimetres you know and I remember thinking...and that’s when I started to change because I had almost hurt a girl and to me that’s one thing I would never ever do, but I got, but I realised that I would never let myself get that angry again. I almost, you know...seriously hurt a girl or a women or whatever so...that was like a major turning point from them on, from being really angry and stuff to being what I am now. And from that point on, from the foster placement in wales, from that point on I got better and better and better, and know people can annoy me as much as they want and I will never get that angry again, . It made me realise that I don’t want to be like my father to be honest. And because I don’t want to be like my father and I will do anything to not be like my father.”
- Kathryn: “That I gave contact up...because I didn’t deserve to be ditched all the time. And I was 8 when I stopped contact”
- Kathryn: “I faced my fear...because I’m a bit afraid of mother and I didn’t stop it for all those years. I got more self-confidence from doing that”
- Kathryn: “ because I stopped contact...because every time before and after contact I would have nightmares”
- Laura: “but I was lucky I never went to deep but I did end up in hospital because of the amount of time I self-harmed, which was on and off for about year like, none stop, im surprised I didn’t, but I had...but I was determined not to do that because I didn’t want it to end that way.
- Sophie: “because when you hit rock bottom you have to rise back up again”
- Sophie: “that I just stopped all contact because I couldn’t bear to see her face”
- Sophie: “I had had enough of the pain and the scars so I said something and I just let it out. I would scream and then I would cry and then I would scream and then I would cry. And that let out all the emotion that I had been trying to hide for so long.”
- Anna: “I ran away and I drunk so much and I didn’t even no what was happening and I put myself in such a risky situation...it petr...I’m just petrified know...omg this could of happened because I was just so drunk”
- Anna: “it just come to me I shouldn’t be doing this...why am I doing this”

p. 2, par, 24

p. 12, par, 82

p. 12, par, 84

p. 22, par, 64

p. 38, par, 52

p. 34, par, 22

p. 38, par, 50

p. 44, par, 68

p. 44, par, 66

Superordinate Theme 6: RE-ESTABLISHING IDENTITY AND TURNING TOWARDS THE FUTURE

NEW NORMAL AND MEANING MAKING THROUGH ACTION

Dean: “happy person...in the respect that...I like looking after people...I think my experiences in my past have helped me to understand that it’s not wrong to help people” p. 2, par, 24

Kathryn: “to go into the army...so I’m not sitting around the house and eating Crips and all that..” p. 13, par, 111

Kathryn: “*Why is that important to you?* Because nobody would want to bother with me otherwise. People won’t see me otherwise” p. 13, par, 113

Laura: “I want to get married and have kids and like keep them with me, and not let them go through what I’ve been through” p. 24, par, 116

Laura: “Because I have had a lot of experience, like when iv had friends who self harm, and they ask me for advice now and that’s really nice” p. 22, par, 62

Laura: “I wanna go be a Paediatrician. So I wanna, so I can help kids when I’m older, but in the medical way and I can still help them in other ways, because its more than like one qualification. p. 20, par, 26

Zara: “I actually want to do something with my life like in public services. Its mainly public services that’s, and I’m really good at it and I’m getting A’s in it. And like if I do end up with a family in the future then I know I can feed them I can look after them I can do what I need. As well as giving them all the love in the world I can” p. 31, par, 75

Sophie: “finally be the person I dreamed of” p. 36, par, 36

Sophie: “If anybody is upset or anything I do as much as can” p. 39, par, 58

Anna: “its took me so long to get to where I am know form being the child...the needy child...who believed that she was worthless...its took me so much to just to get where I am...that I think...im doing fine” p. 46, par. 84

Anna: “I want to be a child protection officer and I wanna find out why people do things...all of that” p. 44, par. 62

PERSONAL GROWTH AND SELF-AWARENESS

Dean: “what changed my aspirations for the future is me. I’ve p. 13, par.95

decided that I want to make something of my life it’s not because...of something that’s happened...I’ve decided like...it might change the fact that I don’t want to be like my father...like that...that was an experience that changed me, I’m not gonna take drugs and im not gonna be like that”

Kathryn: “I want to prove them wrong” p. 24, par. 104

Laura: “it has made me a stronger person and more open minded. So im glad like, compared to other people, it could be a good thing” p. 24, par. 106

Laura: “I like the way I have turned out, because im so p. 22, par. 70

determined”

Laura: “And I like proving people wrong”

p. 20, par. 28

Laura: “And I think if you put your mind to it, you can do anything”

Zara: “Believing in myself and putting my mind to I can do it.”

p. 30, par. 64

Sophie: “whole lot stronger. I used to be a twiggy six year old who couldn’t do much who couldn’t say much. I couldn’t read or write. But know I’m...I’m a completely different person. I’m stronger I’m...better off in my life I’m educated”

p. 36, par, 36

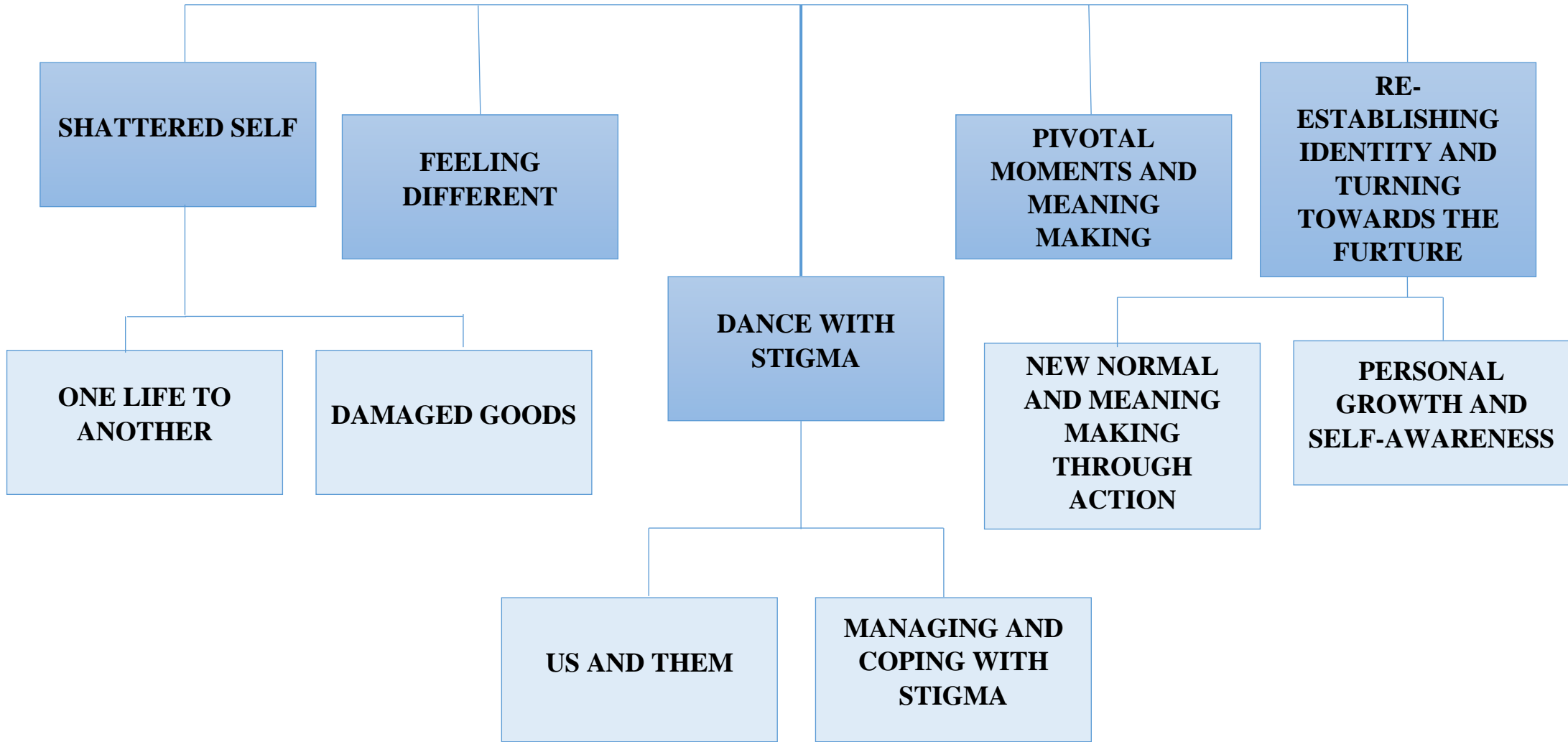
Sophie: “And that is gonna...erm...I think that’s gonna be a big step as that’s gonna help me choose who I want to be”

p. 39, par, 62

Amy: “I think I’m quite determined”

p. 45, par, 74

Appendix XVI: Thematic Map of Superordinate Themes and Subordinate Themes



Part Three: Reflective Summary

6,379 words
(Excluding references)

Part Three: Reflective Summary

1.0 Introduction

The current study contributes to the existing research on the development of self and/or identity within looked after children⁴ (LAC). This reflective summary is intended to provide a critical appraisal of the research process. The philosophical assumptions underpinning the current study will be critically discussed. The rationale for the design, measures, methods of analysis, including a critical appraisal against available alternatives will be argued. The strengths and limitations of the research are considered, as well as discussion about the distinct contribution to knowledge and future directions for research. Arguments are made for the novelty and relevance of the current study. There will also be a personal reflection of the research process and how this has impacted on my professional development.

1.1 Rationale for Topic

The main aim of this research was to explore LAC perceptions of the development of self and/or identity, and to address critique about previous research being ‘atheoretical’. Initially, LAC were identified as a target population due to personal interest, and my motivation to explore an area that would be novel and contribute to educational psychology practice. For example, Jackson and McParlin (2006) reported that most educational psychologists (EPs) caseloads include a significant proportion of LAC. Similarly, Farrell et al.’s (2006) interesting study highlighted that 71% of EPs were involved in services to, or related to, LAC. I conducted a thorough review of the literature, which was an essential component of planning the research. I found that previous research on LAC had tended to focus on the demographics, mental health outcomes and educational attainment, almost exclusively adopting quantitative methods. I felt that quantitative methods do not reveal insight into the personal experience of LAC and thus lack the depth of meaning that may be ascribed by individual perspectives. I only identified a handful of previous studies exploring LAC perceptions of the development of self and/or identity (e.g., Kools, 1997; Schwartz, 2007; McKinney, 2011; Honey, Rees & Griffey, 2011). The majority of research had been conducted in the United States of America (USA) and there were very few studies that had been conducted in the United Kingdom (UK). Whilst the majority of studies suggest that self and/or identity development is different in LAC from normative expectations (Kools, 1997), this was not always the case. For example, one study by Honey, Rees and Griffey (2011) suggested that LAC hold more positive self-perceptions than non-LAC. Furthermore, whilst theoretical concepts such as ‘identity’, ‘self’ and ‘stigma’ were identified within the literature, these were poorly integrated with findings. Indeed, a number of authors have argued that whilst there is a substantial body of research in the field of LAC and care leavers, it tends to be atheoretical or pragmatist (Stein, 2006; Winter, 2006; Berridge, 2007).

Further review of relevant theoretical perspectives (i.e. ‘identity’, ‘self’ and ‘stigma’) was conducted with the aim of enhancing understanding of the development of self and/or identity in LAC. It is important to note, that the research presented in the literature review is limited

⁴ The abbreviation ‘LAC’ will be used from this point forward to describe ‘looked after young people’, including children and adolescents.

in multiple ways. In particular, the body of literature on self and identity can be found in diverse streams of literature, with their origins in markedly different theoretical traditions. As previously noted, Burke (2003) argues that the concept of identity cuts across a variety of disciplines, which makes a common discourse difficult. Due to the sizable literature on identity, I decided to limit the review to theories and frameworks within the discipline of psychology and social psychology. Thus, it recognised that there exists a wealth of related literature on the development of self and/or identity that could have been reviewed but was beyond the scope of this study. In light of aforementioned gaps in the literature, I designed the key research questions. Patton (2002) argues that the nature of any research questions should provide suitable guidance for the research design that is to be utilised. Therefore, once I had established the research questions, the appropriate research method was determined. An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was chosen as a suitable analytic strategy given that the aim of the study is to enhance understanding how LAC make sense of their experiences (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Moreover, Smith and Osborn (2003) suggest that IPA can be particularly useful where the area under study is a novel or complex one. Further details of the methodological decisions are critically discussed below.

1.2 Critical Discussion of Methodological Decisions

1.2.1 Research Paradigm and Philosophy of Science

The aim of this research was to explore LAC perceptions of the development of self and/or identity, and to address critique about previous research being ‘atheoretical’. In order to address the research aims, I chose to pursue a qualitative framework to inform my choice of methods. A qualitative research paradigm was chosen as it allowed for a detailed exploration of the experiences and perceptions of LAC. As noted by Creswell (2009), “qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). First, it is necessary to note the distinction between qualitative and quantitative research, which are assumed to be separate and polar opposites (Newman & Benz, 1998). Quantitative methods rely heavily on, for example, the use of standardised instruments and representative samples. The current study was exploratory in nature, which aimed to explore LAC perceptions of the development of self and/or identity. Therefore, adopting a quantitative approach would have not fitted with the research aims. However, Clough and Nutbrown (2007) suggest that categorising research approaches into distinct paradigms, is not always helpful as it can lead to artificial or uncritical characterisation. The authors suggest the terms refer more to the treatment of data than the methods of data collection. The key is to demonstrate that the methodology suits both the context and purpose of the enquiry. There should be ‘fitness for purpose’, as it is often termed (Cohen & Nutbrown, 2007).

According to Bassey (1990) a paradigm is “a network of coherent ideas about the nature of the world and functions of researchers which, adhered to by a group of researchers, conditions the patterns of their thinking and underpins their research actions” (p. 13). Paradigms are distinguished on the basis of their beliefs about reality (ontology), the relationship between the inquirer and the accepted (epistemology), as well as methodological decisions (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Thus, the choice of data collection methods is more

than a technical exercise, and is concerned with understanding how the researcher views the world (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). In this research the constructivist-interpretive paradigm is adopted. The constructivist interpretive paradigm reflects a belief that there are multiple realities and a researcher is concerned with developing an understanding from within (Cohen et al., 2007). A constructivist-interpretive approach is consistent with the research aims, which sought a rich and detailed portrayal of LAC perceptions of the development of self and/or identity. Therefore, the ontological assumption adopted in this study was relativist (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Adopting a relativist approach means “there is no objective truth to be known” (Hugly and Sayward, 1987, p. 278). From this stance, the researcher and participant co-create understanding of the phenomenon through dialogue. This approach was chosen over, for example, a positivist approach which views the world as deterministic, objective and quantifiable (Robson, 2002). Positivism is usually associated with quantitative methodologies and experimental methods of data collection and analysis. In addition, positivists believe that research should be valid and reliable through being able to replicate results. In which, ‘facts’ serve the basis of scientific knowledge (Coleman and Briggs, 2002). As the research was interested in exploring LAC perceptions of the development of self and/or identity, conducting research from a positivist perspective would not have been appropriate. I felt that this approach wouldn’t allow for the exploration of personal meaning and provide a true insight into the ‘lived’ experience of participants. Thus, reflecting on the advantages of each approach led to the adoption of a relativist approach, which could focus on the subjective accounts of LACs experiences. It is acknowledged, however, that this approach is not necessarily the ‘correct’ epistemological and ontological approach. I could have adopted a different approach that would have led to a different methodological approach and research design. The following section will critically discuss the methodological decisions made during the research process and justify why alternatives were not used.

1.2.2 Choosing IPA

IPA appeared to be particularly suited to this exploratory study because it was consistent with the research aims, which were concerned with exploring how participants experience and make sense of their world (Smith and Osbourne, 2003). IPA is “informed by concepts and debates from three areas of philosophy of knowledge: phenomenology, hermeneutics and ideography” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 11). IPA was chosen over, for example, Grounded Theory (Glasser and Straus, 1967) for a number of reasons. Firstly, grounded theory was developed for the purpose of constructing theory about a particular phenomenon and is useful in research where little is known about a topic. In contrast to IPA, where the research informs the research questions and interview questions, Grounded Theory involves initial data collection and preliminary analysis prior to a literature search. In a similar way to IPA the approach offers a systematic and sequential guide to qualitative fieldwork of analysis. However, this approach often requires work of considerable scale, in comparison to other qualitative approaches and a particular approach with regards to sampling. I believed that IPA was likely to offer a more detailed and nuanced analysis of the experiences of LAC with an “emphasis on the convergence and divergence” between the testimonies provided (Smith et al., 2009, p. 202). I also considered using thematic analysis as it is generally considered to be a relatively straightforward means of carrying out qualitative analysis. However, the use of

thematic analysis has often been considered a ‘poor’ method, as there is no clear agreement on how thematic analysis is analysed (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Discourse analysis was discounted because its focus is on how people use language to maintain or construct their own identity and/or version of an event, as opposed to finding out their perceptions and experiences (Silverman, 2010). I was confident that IPA was a well informed choice; the epistemological assumptions and methodological procedures of IPA were believed to be complementary to, and consistent with, the research aims. This approach offered a richness and depth that would have been more difficult to achieve with less idiographic methods. Moreover, the focus that IPA has on the idiographic was attractive given the fact that the research was based upon a potentially hard to reach population. In addition, I had also anticipated that access to LAC would potentially be problematic. Thus, the small sample sizes typically used in IPA was appealing. Finally, I was also aware that the topic of the research was potentially highly sensitive and I was keen to make sure that an approach was used that enabled me to have regard to ethical practice. For example, I felt that it would have been unethical to use certain direct questions when exploring LAC’s experiences. I believed that it was more appropriate to use interpretation, and the hermeneutic aspect of IPA offered the interpretative element that I felt was necessary.

Despite the attractiveness of IPA, I was mindful of potential limitations. Firstly, Willig (2001) argues that IPA may not fully capture participants’ experiences, as it is often dependant on the verbal expressiveness of participants. However, Smith and Osborn (2003) argue that the researcher’s job is to interpret and ask critical questions about what is unspoken. Moreover, this critique would arguably apply to other qualitative methods. Secondly, Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty & Hendry (2011) argue that, IPA is unavoidably subjective as no two researchers analysing the same data set are likely to come up with an exact replication of the others’ analysis. This raises questions of validity and reliability. In order to address issues of validity and reliability steps were taken in relation to guidelines suggested by Yardley (2000; 2008) which are summarised in Appendix XI. For example, peer review and supervision were a means of establishing reliability and credibility. Despite attempts to be rigorous and transparent, I acknowledge that the results from the current study are based on my interpretations. It is possible that other researchers may have found other factors salient. Therefore, it is acknowledged, that despite attempts to be rigorous and transparent, the results from this study are based on my interpretations. In retrospect, the current study would have benefitted from a participant validation strategy (Caldwell, Henshaw & Taylor, 2005). For example, the credibility and validity of results could have been strengthened further by completing feedback sessions with each participant, where he or she could be given the opportunity to comment on the themes to see if the findings accurately represented their experiences.

1.2.3 Ethics

The nature of the research posed important ethical issues in accordance with the British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct (BPS, 2009). A research proposal was approved by Cardiff University’s Ethics Committee prior to data collection. Following ethical approval from Cardiff University Ethics Committee, permission to conduct the research was

obtained from one local authority in Wales. Gatekeepers were contacted and following written consent, the young people were approached individually. I experienced a number of difficulties with recruitment; therefore, I obtained permission to recruit further participants in one local authority in England. Participants were informed of their rights to confidentiality and privacy, rights to withdraw and provided with contact details in case of complaint and/or any queries they may have. All consent forms with identifying features were kept securely and separately from anonymous research data. It was made clear to participants that confidentiality would only be breached in exceptional circumstances where there was concern regarding the safety of a participant or others, which related to child protection issues. If child protection disclosures occurred, I would have dealt with them in accordance with the local authority service and school policy guidelines. I was particularly aware of the sensitive topic and the possibility of individual distress that could be caused unwittingly. In order to address this, gatekeepers and participants were informed in advance of the general areas that would be conducted in the interview. I also carried out the semi-structured interviews on a one-to-one basis as this was perceived as being suitable for personal discussion (Smith et al., 2009). During the interviews I was sensitive to the needs of participants and explained that they could decline from any of the questions if they wished. As a TEP I felt I had experience of dealing with people in distress and I endeavoured to conduct the interviews as sensitively as possible.

1.2.4 Participants

In accordance with the underlying philosophy of IPA, participants were purposively selected from a largely homogenous sample (Smith et al., 2009; Smith and Osborn, 2003). Seven participants (aged 13-17) were recruited which is in accordance with Smith et al. (2009) who suggest that between four and ten interviews is sufficient for professional doctorate research. As an idiographic method, Smith and Osborn (2003) argue that large data sets may result in the loss of “potentially subtle inflections and meanings (p. 626). The inclusion criteria included those young people who are looked after by the local authority under a voluntary care order or under a care order (Children’s Act, 1989) and had been looked after for a least one year. Four young people were in foster care, two in residential care and one in kinship care. All of the participants had been looked after for at least 8 years. It is acknowledged, however, that homogeneity of sample is complex and can never be guaranteed due to individual differences. For instance, in the current study, there was variation in the number of foster placements and length of time spent in care amongst participants. In retrospect, these factors could have had a significant impact on the individual’s development of self and/or identity. More consideration could have been given to this during the selection process in order to make the sample as uniform as possible.

1.2.5 Measures

In deciding how to explore LAC perceptions of the development of self and/or identity, I felt that semi-structured interviews were a suitable method for eliciting responses. When designing this research, a number of qualitative methods to collect data were explored. I decided not to use a questionnaire as it may have limited the richness of the data. However, I did consider this method due to its simplicity and versatility of data collection. I rejected the

use of a structured interview as they lack flexibility to seek further detail following participants' responses. The use of a focus group (Horowitz et al., 2003) was rejected: due to the interactive nature of focus groups, and the nature of participants, it was believed that the presence of other young people would have unwanted effects on the participants' responses. When conducting focus groups, the role of the researcher is that of a moderator who observes, asks questions, listens and keeps the participants on track (Horowitz et al., 2003). Although, using a focus group methodology may have reduced the demand characteristics, associated with conducting one-to-one interview's between an adult and a child (Kennedy, Kools, & Krueger, 2001). The following section will discuss the development of the semi-structured interview schedule which was relevant to the study aims.

I followed the recommendations from Smith et al. (2009) when designing the semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix VII) for the current study. The authors note, "the plan for IPA interviews is an attempt to come at the research question sideways" (p. 58). As a result, the following stages were undertaken:

1. The broad area of interest was identified, along with the range of topic areas that were perceived to be important and which aimed to expand on past research. These broad topic areas included, for example, LAC's perceptions of their self and the factors influencing their identity development, the impact of the label "looked after child", how LAC view themselves in comparison to non-LAC, how they perceive others view them, experiences of stigma and how LAC manage and cope with any feelings of difference and/or stigma.
2. As suggested by Smith et al. (2009) these topic areas were ordered into a logical sequence. The authors recommend considering an appropriate sequence for the topics, for example, identifying the most logical or sensitive order. It seemed logical to explore the demographic characteristics of participants at the beginning of the interview schedule as this seemed a straightforward way to start the interview and would help build rapport. This provided contextual information in relation to participant's age of being taken into care, number of foster placements and whether he/she currently has contact with their birth family. This was followed by a general question asking participants to reflect on their experiences of being taken into care before moving on to the slightly more difficult topics (i.e. perception of self, feelings of difference and/or stigma). Asking very general questions first allowed the participants to habituate to the interview process, and aimed to set up a reflective process.
3. Questions relating to each topic area were compiled with ten questions in total. I used open-ended questions which were designed to elicit in depth participant responses. This allowed me to conduct the interviews in a naturalistic manner, in the hope of facilitating "a detailed account under investigation" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 61). I was also careful to avoid the use of leading questions (i.e. a question that encourages a participant to respond in a particular way) and was

mindful of not asking questions that might also be stress provoking. Questions were reassessed several times by myself and following submission to Cardiff University Ethics Committee; any questions that were leading, too closed, complicated were revised. Finally, a solution focussed question towards the end of the interview schedule was considered to be useful in eliciting participants to envision and describe in detail what they would like to be different in the future. This was followed by a final question where participants were invited to make any additional comments to ensure their experience had been sufficiently covered.

1. Finally, Smith et al. (2009) recommend the development of prompts and probes to aid further discussions, and prevent confusion regarding possible abstract questions. For example, these included probes such as can you tell me more about that? How did you feel? What impact did that have on you? More specific prompts were developed in order to address participants who may have been more hesitant and less verbally fluent. It is important to note, that despite efforts to avoid using leading questions, it is acknowledged that some of the more specific prompts may have encouraged participants to respond in a particular way.

A pilot of the interview schedule was used to facilitate the development of the semi-structured interview. This resulted in a few small amendments and I was able to rehearse the interview procedure. It is important to note that the semi-structured interview was designed to guide rather than dictate the interview direction. This flexibility allowed me to engage in a dialogue, where initial questions were modified in light of participants' responses. Thus, I was able to explore any areas that were interesting and/or perhaps novel as they arose (Smith et al., 2009).

I was mindful of potential limitations of using semi-structured interviews. For example, Baker (1994) asserts that, 'people are not always truthful' and may deceive the researcher or themselves. It is also important to bear in mind, that people do not always know what influences their behaviour, and can be influenced by a universal source of bias grounded from the social psychological perspective of attribution theory - the actor-observer effect. For example, people have the tendency to say that their behaviour is caused by situational factors, and the behaviour of others is caused by dispositional factors (Fiske and Taylor, 1991, as cited in Baker 1994). Likewise, it is acknowledged that participant's may have been influenced by my presence as a researcher and answered in a manner that would be socially desirable. In order to address this, I explained to participant's that there are no right or wrong answers and avoided using leading questions in such a way that there is only one acceptable answer. O'Kane (2000) advocates addressing issues of power imbalance through the use of participatory techniques, i.e. allowing young people to have more control over the research agenda. I adopted a range of strategies in the current study to minimise the power imbalance during interviews e.g., allowing participants to choose the time and place of the interviews, thanking participants for their time and minimising the authoritative image of myself as researcher by using informal language. Moreover, the use of open-ended interview questions can produce large variability in the quantity of data. Participants who are verbally fluent may

provide very rich and detailed answers in contrast to others who may find open ended questions difficult to answer (Baker, 1994). However, as previously discussed, prompts were constructed for each question to address this critique.

1.2.6 Analysis

All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed for analysis. The process of transcribing the interviews was lengthy and incredibly time consuming. However, I was able to familiarise myself with the data, which made it easier when it came to identifying emergent themes. The transcripts were analysed using the step-by-step analytical process described by Smith et al. (2009) which is summarised in Appendix X. In contrast to many other qualitative methodologies, the interpretative role of the researcher in terms of data analysis was made explicit. According to Creswell (2009) a researcher is likely to be influenced by his/her background, assumptions and experience and these may affect or bias the interpretation of data. Thus, in order to see the phenomenon as clearly as possible, it was important for me to “bracket” any preconceived ideas and prejudices about the phenomenon of interest. This allowed each participant to present the researcher with a fresh perspective through his or her own reality (Creswell, 2009).

1.3 Distinct Contribution to Knowledge and Originality

This study set out to gain an in-depth understanding of LAC perceptions of the development of self and/or identity, and to address critique about previous research being ‘atheoretical’. As previously discussed, previous literature has consistently focused on documenting the poor educational achievement and mental outcomes for LAC. The current study makes a valuable contribution to the literature in this area as the literature review identified only one study which was conducted in the UK that investigated self-perceptions in LAC (see Honey et al., 2011). In addition, no other studies to date, have specifically applied an IPA approach to the development of self and/or identity in LAC. For this alone, the current study adds to the evidence base. The current study also has therefore expanded on previous research, by drawing upon greater methodological transparency through the use of IPA. A clear description of methods, procedures and analysis was provided to ensure replication by other researchers. In contrast, previous studies within the literature were considered not to be replicable. For example, a review of literature highlighted that very few studies described the process of designing the interview schedule and gave few examples of prompt questions. Without details of the interview construction or a copy of the interview schedule in the appendices it is difficult for a reader to judge the quality of the interview and the impact that this might have on the data subsequently obtained.

The main findings are consistent with previous research that achieving identity is potentially problematic for LAC (Kools, 1997; Schwartz, 2007; McKinney, 2011; Honey et al., 2011). However, the current study builds and extends on previous research with further connection with theory, which provides a lens through which LAC experiences can be understood. This is the first time that existing theory on identity and stigma has been comprehensively explored in relation to empirical data on the LAC development of self and/or identity. The study demonstrated the need to maintain a broad and multi-disciplinary perspective in

accounting for LAC experiences. For example, the study supports other theorists such as Mead (1934), James (1980) and Cooley (1902) and highlights that identity is a cyclical process between self and other. The findings highlighted that being taken into care profoundly disrupted a pre-existing identity and removed continuity and coherence in participants' lives. For many of the young people, once they had entered care, they experienced daily struggles with themselves and others. In particular, the current study highlighted that problems with stigma and labelling were two factors that significantly threatened the development of self and/or identity in LAC. Unlike previous studies exploring identity development in LAC, the results of this study provided further insight into how young people cope and manage a stigmatised identity in relation to existing theory. The current study reaffirms many themes prevalent within stigma literature, such as loss of identity, sense of exclusion, and various methods of coping. For example, participants in the current study tended to "pass as normal" and conceal their status due to the fear of how others might react rather than shame about their LAC status (Poindexter and Shippy, 2010). The present study therefore offers an understanding of how LAC cope with the challenges posed by a stigmatised identity, an aspect that has been less well explored in prior studies.

The current study is also unique, in that analysis revealed a sense of transformation as well as brokenness, with many LAC reporting personal growth as a result of their journey. The study also highlighted the importance of "meaning making" in determining a more advanced identity development. Consistent with the literature within the narrative perspective (e.g. McAdams, 2001; 1993), participants in the current study, appeared to integrate interpretations of the past with their present self; providing them with meaning and purpose. Indeed, many of the young people explicitly linked their motivation to help others with their early abuse histories. Similarly, Erikson (1956) spoke of the synthesis of earlier identifications into a "coherent whole", which provides the young adult with both a sense of continuity with the past and the future (Erikson, 1956, p. 67-68). The young people in this study appeared to have reached the point where they had recovered their self-identity sufficiently to succeed against the struggles of daily life with themselves and others. These findings have not been found in previous research in this area which is a point of originality for the study.

Future Research

Future research could usefully replicate this study with LAC, and with further connection with theory to provide a lens through which LAC experiences can be understood. A longitudinal perspective would be interesting to research. It is recommended that further research follows children from their entrance in to care and throughout their entire stay in care. This may provide a better understanding of what factors influence identity development. The retrospective nature of the study may have resulted in participants forgetting important aspects of their experiences. Furthermore, the research only captured those young people in main-stream educational settings and there may be a difference between the present sample and those who access alternative provision or who are, for example, seen by mental health services. Consistent with Poindexter and Shippy (2010) participants in the current study tended to "pass as normal" and conceal their status due to the fear of how others might react

rather than shame about their LAC status. A study that explores whether this strategy has some advantages for LAC in certain circumstances would be beneficial.

It seemed the most important recommendation for future research relates to how LAC find “meaning” and purpose in their lives from significant event(s) that lead to transformation and/or change and how this influences future aspirations. McAdams (1993) argues that individuals make sense of experiences by the stories that we tell, providing a vehicle for identity construction. He also suggested that individuals make meaning of events in such a way that allows individuals to make sense and regain coherence to their lives. Indeed, primarily research by Mclean and Pratt (2006) suggests that meaning making may be representative of more advanced identity development. Likewise, studies could specifically examine the concept of “post-traumatic growth” among LAC who might be considered ‘success stories’. Post-traumatic growth has been defined as the “positive psychological change experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances” (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004, p. 1). Post-traumatic growth is usually accompanied by high levels of psychological distress (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), and a fundamental change in the individual as a whole (Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). Additionally, despite the plethora of research on post-traumatic growth, the bulk of research has tended to focus on single traumatic events (e.g. cancer) and has not taken into account the vastly differing levels of cumulative adversity. Thus, it is argued that investigating the concept of post-traumatic growth among LAC could also lead to useful developments in theory in itself. Cumulative adversity is defined as a high occurrence of normatively undesirable life events that an individual has experienced throughout his or her lifetime (Turner, Wheaton, & Lloyd, 1995). What is the relationship, if any, between highly challenging life circumstances and the level of post-traumatic growth among LAC? Further research is needed to clarify under what circumstances adversity may promote post-traumatic growth among LAC.

1.5 Personal Reflections of the Research Process

This reflective summary has provided a critical appraisal of the research study. This section is intended to provide a personal reflection of the research process. The process of conducting this research has enabled my development as a research-practitioner, providing a valuable opportunity for designing, implementing and reflecting on a piece of real world research. In doing so, it has also highlighted how EPs can make unique and valuable contributions to the EP evidence base. I have also built my skills of evaluation and reflection (HPC SoP 2b.1.5) by acknowledging strengths and limitations in the literature review and empirical paper. In particular, I have developed a critical understanding of research designs, including qualitative and quantitative approaches. In previous research, I have tended to use thematic analysis as an approach to analysing qualitative data. I actively selected IPA, as I hoped to challenge my researcher skills and to develop new skills in using different qualitative approaches. One of the most challenging phases of completing the research was when I was analysing the data. The step-by-step guide to analysing data offered by Smith et al. (2009) was invaluable in guiding me through the complexity of this approach. The process of analysing took a considerable amount of time and the step-by-step guide broke this process down into

manageable steps. However, I often felt overwhelmed and felt anxious about meeting the standards in order to produce a 'good enough' piece of research. Supervision was invaluable and created a space to reflect on my uncertainty about the analysis through sharing and explaining the data. As a novice to IPA I recognise that there is scope for me to build on my skills when conducting future research adopting IPA. Conducting this research has been one of my most challenging experiences to date. In particular, I found it very difficult to develop a comprehensive understanding to the complex concepts of 'identity' and/or 'self' and 'stigma'. I often felt overwhelmed by the amount of research in this diverse field. However, once I acknowledged that this dissonance was arguably an inherent part of any research process, I was able to move forward with my research. In addition, the process of completing the interviews whilst meeting the demands of working on placement as a trainee EP was difficult.

I have learnt the importance of starting the process early as well as careful forward planning to try and overcome potential problems that I experienced. For example, it was surprising how long it took to recruit participants for the study and the challenges encountered through having to work through other people. Consent was required from a range of people including one head of social services, social workers, teachers, foster carers and some of the young people themselves. The number of consent givers identified for each participant ranged from two to five. The difficulties I experienced with regards to recruitment in this study also resonate with prior research. For example, Jackson, Gavrielli, Tunno and Hambrick (2012) and Gilbertson and Barber (2002) highlight the difficulties faced with researching LAC. The authors highlight several problems that can be encountered in gaining permission to interview LAC such as; negotiating with agency administrators, social workers, lawyers and carers. Hood, Kelley and Mayall (1996) refer to process of seeking consent from any adult who decides whether or not a child or young person can participate in research as the "hierarchy of gatekeeping" (p. 120). In response to a limited uptake, it became clear in September 2013 that I was going to have to extend my search for participants as a number of gatekeepers perceived that it would not be appropriate for them to participate in the research. The major issue I encountered during the recruitment process was the tendency for gatekeepers to protect children from their perceived vulnerability and/or adverse effects that participation in the research may cause. As noted by Alderson (2004), although this process is designed to protect those children and young people within their care, it may at times also "silence and exclude them" (p. 105). Protecting children from genuine harm is obviously crucial; however, overprotection could also be seen as harmful (Alderson, 1995).

Whilst gaining informed consent from individual's being researched is central to ethical research, the decision to include/exclude children and young people was often made without even them often knowing about the research in the current study. Komulainen (2007) argues, that "in this way, children are too often denied 'agency' and subjecthood in society because they are deemed vulnerable and incompetent" (p. 12). Indeed, research has identified that LAC would like the chance to participate in research, have a chance to speak about their experiences in care and to be involved in any decisions that is likely to affect their wellbeing and/or lives (e.g. Gilbertson and Barber, 2002; Community Services Commission 2000). This

is a particularly poignant argument when reflecting on the participation of children and young people with disabilities in research; where beliefs about their ability, maturity and competence have historically led to their exclusion from research. For example, Morris (1999) highlights stereotypical beliefs that children and young people with disabilities are not viewed as capable of making their voices heard in a comprehensible way and be able to act in their own best interests. In this way, children and young people with disabilities are being judged on the basis of what they can or cannot do instead of who they are (Thomas, 2004). However, there are legal responsibilities to uphold children and young people's rights. For example, the key tenet of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) highlights children's views should be taken into account on matters that affect them. Despite these legal recommendations, for example, by the UNCRC, there continues to be an absence of children's voices in research (Bell, 2008). Researchers have suggested that these rights need to be reflected into workable ethical guidelines specifically for child research (Bell, 2008).

1.6 Conclusion

This study set out to gain an in-depth understanding of LAC perceptions of the development of self and/or identity, and to address critique about previous research being 'atheoretical'. The current study builds and extends on previous research with further connection with theory, which provides a lens through which LAC experiences can be understood. The overall process of completing this study has given me a greater understanding of the inevitable challenges faced when carrying out research. In conclusion, the process of completing the current study has been highly thought-provoking and rewarding. One of the most rewarding aspects of completing this study was the experience of interviewing the young people. I felt great admiration for the way they reflected on their extremely difficult experiences. I was also inspired by the strengths and resources they gained from their experiences.

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