An Exploration of Mental Health Issues in Independent Education: Undergraduates' Memories of their Secondary Schools (2021)

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ABSTRACT

Aims: This research investigated the lived mental health experiences of six university undergraduates as they looked back on their lives at their independent secondary schools. The results will inform culturally specific counselling practices and school pastoral care programmes which support the psychological health and wellbeing of students, and it will contribute to further research into the mental health of young people within privileged secondary school environments.

Methods: This epistemologically pluralistic study juxtaposed two different methods of investigation:

1. Semi-structured interviews were used within an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis methodology to explore the observations, attitudes, and feelings of the participants, then all transcripts were analysed phenomenologically to produce a richly detailed interpretation of the participants' mental health experiences. An analysis of the data generated a number of themes and superordinate themes.

2. A survey of recent research in the field of sociology placed the participants' experiences within a wider social context.

Results: Three superordinate themes were revealed: 'Needing the help of others', 'Feeling pressured', and 'Ambivalence'. The participants' said their mental health depended on the safety of their close bonds with friends, parents, and teachers, yet their statements also suggested that the competitive natures of their school communities, together with overly demanding academic standards, sometimes caused damaging stress levels which overwhelmed students' ability to cope. Extreme time pressure compromised their ability to sleep, spend time with friends, or enjoy learning. They were ambivalent about having privileged advantages, and they felt guilty when they did not achieve 'success' by providing their parents with the 'value for money' of top grades. Even though the participants supported the need for more mental health education and counselling services within schools, they implied that asking for help was culturally discouraged, so they had not themselves utilised school counselling.

[This document is a summary of my doctoral research. The original thesis is held in a repository at the Metanoia Institute and Middlesex University, London, UK. In this reduced version, sections have been excised which detail my specific methods and methodology, my research philosophy, ethical stance, the limitations of the research, as well as a discussion of my personal engagement with the material and the difficulties of accessing research participants in schools. Anyone wishing to view the deleted material should access the university repository or contact me directly via my website or email address: leslielund20@gmail.com. All literature resources used to inform this research remain in total within the reference section at the end of this summary.]

INTRODUCTION

This piece of research explored the mental health experiences of a social subset of young people: those who attend independent secondary schools. In particular, it analysed the memories, observations, opinions, and feelings of six academically successful young people who, at the time of their interviews, were second-year undergraduates at prestigious, top-tier British universities. As they looked back on, and tried to make sense of, their school experiences, the young people themselves defined the concept of 'mental health' and shared what it meant to them personally.

The original inspiration for this research grew out of my twenty years of experience in working as a psychotherapist with privileged, but unhappy, young people, 12 to 18-year-old students who attended private British or International schools. In my experience, these young people show a worrying array of emotional and behavioural symptoms which betray their increasingly pressured and complicated lives. Although materially advantaged, they are often highly anxious, insecure, depressed, and overwhelmed by everyday life, developing significant symptoms of stress from as early as 10 years of age. The present study examines why this might be.

When originally searching through the various research data bases for information on 'young people', 'students', 'mental health', and 'independent schools', the results predominantly showed the mental health of all secondary students and did not differentiate those who attended independent schools. However, studies from a small group of researchers in America have specifically investigated the mental health of young people in 'privileged' communities and schools. They found that adolescents from privileged communities suffered high levels of psychological ill health despite their many advantages[1]. This present study addresses the need for more research in this area.

[1] Luthar, 2003; Luthar & Latendress, 2005; Luthar & Sexton, 2005; Luthar, 2013

Why investigate educationally 'privileged' young people?

As a psychotherapist working with socioeconomically privileged young people, most of whom attend independent secondary schools in Britain, it is my belief that independent school students have numerous advantages and disadvantages which are fundamentally different from those of other young people, but that, as members of a significantly privileged cultural subgroup, their experiences and concerns are virtually invisible. Although there is an extensive history within sociological theory of studies which evaluate the lives of elites[2], interest in the 'privileged classes' has languished for several decades, and it has only recently been revived by a small cohort of dedicated researchers. Among them, Savage and Williams (2008a) have remarked on the 'glaring invisibility of elites' within present research, particularly with respect to schools[3]. In a study by Brooks and Waters (2015), the researcher said:

> *'It is striking to note then that to date elite schooling has largely evaded academic scrutiny. Elite (and particularly high-fee-paying independent) schools are far less likely than their state-funded counterparts to be involved in, and the subject of, critical social science research. This situation is a difficult one to redress, not least because much research on schools requires schools' participation and co-operation, and this is far harder to achieve when dealing with the relatively small number of schools at the top.'* (Brooks & Waters, 2015, p. 96)

Fortunately, the tide, in this respect, seems to be turning and there has been a wave of new research which promises valuable insights into the world of elite education, information which will help us to tease apart the social forces which act on all young people, privileged or not, by juxtaposing important variables at each end of the class spectrum. Having said this, most of the existing studies which investigate the psychological consequences of school socialisation processes have looked at environments within the state sector, and many have understandably been focused on those at the very bottom of the socio-economic spectrum. Yet, a significant proportion (7% of schools in Britain) are elite private schools which are independent of this sector. Unfortunately, not only are studies into the split nature of the British education system effectively non-existent, but there is also a significant lack of information about how young people are faring personally within elite educational environments.

Most adolescents spend the majority of their waking time in school and, as such, these environments are crucially important in shaping the interactions which help young people to develop a sense of themselves apart from their families. The value systems that young people internalise, and the nature of the relationships they build

[2] Foucault, 1994; Bourdieu, 1984; 1986; 1996
[3] Ball, 2015

with teachers, peers, and other parents therefore play a central role in forming them as people.

Young people in private schools are expected, above all, to be 'successful', and students are offered a vast array of resources to aid them on their paths to an exceptional future. How they make use of these gifts, and how they make sense of their experiences within these privileged environments, has a fundamental effect on their ability to function in the adult world. It is also likely that, given the history of elite education in Britain, many privately educated young people will become future leaders of industry, religion, politics, and the arts, so it follows that their collective mental health will have huge ramifications for all of us[4].

It is impossible truly to understand the experiences of young people who are formed through educational privilege without understanding the cultural container in which they develop, just as a view of their elite environment alone gives an incomplete picture of how these environments are created, sustained and experienced by all the individuals within them. My study is a small but significant contribution to this important body of work. I hope it will go some way toward filling a gap in our knowledge of the individual voices of these young students: voices which have, to my knowledge, never been heard so clearly.

The world of education is becoming ever more competitive so there has never been a more important time for understanding the effects of academically rigorous private education on the psyches of young people. Schools are struggling to understand and deal with increasingly severe symptoms of psychological distress in their students, despite their seemingly cossetted lifestyle. The general public are also curious as to why adolescents with so many advantages seem unable to cope in the modern world. Although the media are noticing the highly pressured lives these young people lead, to my mind there is neither sufficient understanding of the reasons for this state of affairs nor much thoughtful discussion about how to better the situation.

Suniya Luthar (2013), a USA-based psychologist, is one of the most vocal advocates for increasing public knowledge about the developmental risks to young people which are inherent in contexts of affluence and privilege. She believes it is crucial to acknowledge the special needs of advantaged youths so that caregivers at home and at school are able to provide them with the emotional support they need. I would add to this that psychological professionals who work with these young people should also take a particular interest in the special needs of this demographic population, so they are able to help these privileged but pressured youths to thrive within the bounds of the culture they inhabit. Indeed, choosing to hear the voices of the participants in this study as they describe their experiences within independent

[4] Duffell, 2014

schools provides new insights which may improve therapeutic provision for all young people within these privileged spaces.

An exploration of the goals and values of schools and parents, the intrapsychic effects of school socialisation practices, as well as recognition of the confusing mixed messages that result from a multitude of competing social forces, is also crucial when hearing the concerns of these young people. Only by truly listening, and attempting to grasp the whole picture, can we provide the support they need and help them to gain a healthy perspective about their place in the world.

In addition, this study will make recommendations about the structure and function of therapeutic counselling in schools. Awareness of how young people feel about counselling within these environments should help pastoral care professionals to tailor services by attending carefully to their own observations and experiences. In particular, information about the underlying social messages within their subculture will help to sensitise school counsellors and psychotherapists to the culturally specific social imperatives against advantaged students exposing personal vulnerability or seeking counselling within their privileged spaces.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

I begin this chapter by examining the current statistics on the mental health of young people in Britain, then explore studies which investigate the mental health of privileged young people in Britain and America. In doing so, I will attempt to define the nebulous concept of privilege, then look at the nature of privileged schools in Britain and ask whether young people in private schools can be considered a cultural subgroup with important aspects in common. I note some sociological theories of power and privilege which may be applicable to processes of independent education, then turn my attention to the influence that parents have during adolescence.

I will explore school as a developmental context and describe the effects of academic stress, then examine the provision of counselling in schools and the role of a school counsellor. There is very limited information available about the mental health of young people within independent education anywhere in the world, but I will most often concentrate for this review on the current state of knowledge in Britain and North America.

General prevalence of mental health problems in UK adolescents

It is arguable that the global nature of our world[5], together with a media and technology-saturated culture, changing sexual mores, and the emphasis on individualism and competition have all had a detrimental effect on the emotional wellbeing of today's youth[6]. The developmental stage of adolescence is a particularly sensitive time for young people, and any emotional problems which begin at this time are likely to persist throughout an individual's later life. In fact, research indicates that over half of all mental ill health in adulthood begins before the age of 14 years[7], and 75% of adult mental illness begins before 18 years of age[8].

The human cost of mental illness to each individual person and his or her community is undoubtedly immense, but the legacy that this ill health bequeaths to the nation is also considerable. Overall, it is estimated to cost the English economy approximately £105 billion annually[9]. Poor mental health has also been found to have a deleterious effect on physical health as well as on total life span. Life satisfaction, educational achievements, work prospects, and future earnings are all

[5] Lechner, 2009
[6] Smith, 1995; Robbins, 2006
[7] HM Government, 2011
[8] Murphy & Fonagy, 2012
[9] NHS England, 2011

reduced, and the likelihood of involvement in the criminal justice system is increased[10].

As early as 2004, UK statistics found that one young person in every ten was estimated to have a diagnosable mental health disorder, rising to approximately one in five by 25 years of age[11], yet it has also been estimated that 70% of those affected were not offered appropriate interventions at a sufficiently early age[12]. Recent statistics[13] have also noted a slight, but steady, increase over time in the rates of mental disorders experienced by 5 to 19-year-olds, and percentages increase from the early childhood years (5.5% of 2 to 4-year olds) to adolescence (16.9% in 7 to 19-year olds).

In a recent report by the UK Office of National Statistics (2017), symptoms of anxiety and depression amongst young people aged 16 to 24 years are high and increased substantially from 18% in 2009-10 to 21% in 2013-14. In particular, the most recent increase was due to more young women reporting symptoms, with 25% reporting anxiety and depression compared to 15% of young men. The recent NHS survey[14] also confirmed the vulnerability of girls, saying that boys were more likely to suffer from mental ill health until 11 years of age, and both sexes were equally likely to have problems from 11 to 16 years, but girls had more than twice as many instances of diagnosable mental health disorders as boys between the ages of 17 and 19. Within this age range, one in four girls had a diagnosable disorder and half of those said they had self-harmed or attempted suicide.

Research on the mental health of privileged young people in Britain

When this present project was conceived, no research had been conducted in the UK which specifically investigated students within the special environment of independent education. Since then, one notable exception, a Department of Education longitudinal study[15] of 30,000 Year 10 students, found a slightly higher, but statistically significant, risk of psychological ill health in young people from 'privileged' environments. Although the direct causes of this ill health were not discernible from the design of the study, the authors noticed that increasing levels of parental academic qualification had the largest statistical impact on increased psychological distress in children.

[10] Murphy & Fonagy, 2012; Goodman et al, 2011; Layard, 2013
[11] Green et al, 2004; Kessler et al, 2005; McGorry et al, 2007
[12] Children's Society, 2008
[13] NHS, 2017
[14] NHS, 2017
[15] Lessof, C. et al., 2016

Research on the mental health of privileged young people in America

The term 'mental health' has been used differently by researchers, but it is most often defined as a measure of emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing which affects how we think, feel, and act. It denotes an ability to cope with normal, everyday stresses and it reflects both an ability to work productively and to contribute to community life. To my knowledge, Suniya Luthar was the first researcher to define and investigate the mental health of 'privileged', 'affluent', or 'wealthy' young people in America. Although the social circumstances determining educational privilege in America are, admittedly, somewhat different from those in a country such as Britain, the initial body of Luthar's research began to illuminate some troubling trends that should be a cause for concern everywhere.

According to her research, which investigated the mental health and behaviour of young people within wealthy neighbourhoods, there were hints that teens at the top of the socio-economic ladder were, despite their economic and social advantages, less happy and psychologically healthy than their peers within less socio-economically advantaged communities[16]. In addition, the more recent studies confirmed that wealthy boys and girls were at higher risk of a range of mental health problems, showing on average more than twice as much depression, anxiety, and deliberate self-harm as the US national average[17].

As early as 1999, Luthar's studies have investigated the 'internalising' of psychological distress by girls and boys from financially above-average families. An extensive study of affluent 12 to 18-year-olds in 2005 found that 30-40% experienced 'troubling' psychological symptoms[18], and approximately 22% of the young people surveyed suffered from serious depression[19]. By the age of 18, one third showed clinically significant anxiety symptoms, three times the US national average, and the total amount of illegal substances they used also seemed to differentiate socio-economic populations. In an additional study, McMahon and Luthar (2006) studied children from well-educated, white, high-income families and found they participated in more substance abuse than their lower socioeconomic peers, and as many as 10% had very serious emotional and behavioural difficulties. Luthar and Ansary (2005) also found that 45% of the affluent young people they studied engaged in problematic behaviour indicative of poor psychological adjustment, and 23% reported active drug use.

In a more recent study, Luthar (2013) again looked at substance misuse in young teens and found that, by 13 years of age, approximately 7% of the affluent boys she

[16] Luthar, 2003; Luthar & Latendresse, 2005; Luthar & Sexton, 2005; Luthar, 2013
[17] Luthar, 2013
[18] Luthar and Sexton, 2005
[19] Luthar and D'Avanzo, 1999; Luthar and Sexton, 2005

studied were using marijuana and getting drunk at least once a month. She noted that they typically expected alcohol and drugs to be available at social events and had easy access to the money needed to purchase them. To date, there is little information on why young people feel the need to use alcohol and drugs in this way but, in a comparatively early study[20], privileged adolescent boys admitted to binge-drinking, marijuana use and the abuse of 'hard' drugs in order to self-medicate against depression.

There have been some notable attempts to describe the value system which exists within wealthy communities in America. In an ethnographic study of suburban high school students, Clark (2004) found evidence that life can be considerably more pressured for privileged children than for lower-class adolescents, particularly when their parents hold high-status, highly pressured jobs themselves. Luthar and Sexton (2005) have documented the psychological damage young people can suffer by living within a 'cultural context of affluence': communities populated by teachers, schools, coaches, and peers who disproportionately value the star status of personal success and are highly critical of failure.

Whereas Luthar and Ansary (2005) found initial evidence of serious rule-breaking and criminal behaviour, such as widespread cheating, stealing, and random acts of delinquency, Madeleine Levine (2006), an American psychotherapist familiar with the lives of affluent youths, believes these adolescents' highly privileged circumstances create a host of unusual dilemmas for them which explain their apparently dysfunctional behaviour. Using alcohol and breaking rules helped them to achieve high status within their peer group, and they engaged in a variety of high-risk activities to relieve the stress of their heavy academic burdens and over-scheduled lives. Most disturbingly, she believed their highly pressured environments eventually created passive, unmotivated, disconnected, overly compliant, and depressed young people because of the intense external pressure to 'succeed'.

Defining privilege

The majority of studies which examine the concept of privilege have been conducted through the lens of sociology, in which the term is defined as a level of social status which gives economic, social and cultural advantages to members of distinct social groups[21].

[20] Luthar & D'Avanzo, 1999

[21] Bourdieu, 1986; Gaztambide-Fernandez et al, 2013; Savage et al, 2015; Ball, 2015

Because the definition of words like 'elite' and 'privileged' are not entirely synonymous, these concepts are exceedingly difficult to define, so researchers and theorists have attempted to describe their own versions of the terms. In addition, the boundaries of definition depend entirely on which field of study is being investigated or compared: wealth, education, class, status, power, etc. Hence, a literature review of the relevant research on privileged youths tends to identify them as belonging to a socially advantaged group. Terms such as 'elite', 'affluent', and 'advantaged' sit alongside the more popular term 'privileged' and, in most cases, are used interchangeably.

> *'Both in a technical and semantic sense the word elite is a problem for social researchers – what exactly do we mean when we use it? ... There is clearly no single or agreed usage or definition of the term – the chapters slip between wealth (economic), lifestyle (culture), exclusivity (social) and power (political) as the basis for identifying elites. ... elites are different and differently constituted and understood in different places.'* (Ball, 2015 p. 234)

Modern privilege theory states that every member of a society is embedded in a complex, multi-layered matrix of contexts, each of which either enhances privilege or decreases it[22]. Rocco and West ((1998) use the term 'polyrhythmic realities' to refer to interlocking forms of advantage and disadvantage which enable a person to be dominant in one setting but marginalised in another. Crenshaw (1989) coined the phrase 'intersectionality' to describe these interactions and her theory delineates three main spheres of privilege: structural, reciprocal, and psychosocial.

Crenshaw's 'structural' realm concerns how the norms, policies and language of privilege are institutionalised within societal mechanisms which maintain and reproduce privilege. For example, Savage (2015) and his colleagues describe how achieving 'privilege' depends on having access to different forms of social, economic, and cultural 'capital' which set a particular social class apart from others and give them distinct advantages.

Crenshaw's 'reciprocal' realm portrays how an individual's underlying assumptions about their social role and status are expressed in their behaviour. She acknowledges that internal experiences of 'self' shape intimate interactions with other individuals as well as responses to entire societal groups of 'others'.

In Crenshaw's 'psychosocial' sphere, the nature of being privileged is not only an objective truth, but a subjective experience as well. Psychosocial privilege refers to the formation of an individual's core identity and unconscious way of being as they internalise the powerful socialisation processes around them. In general, psychologists tend to focus more of their attention on these subjective experiences

[22] Khan, 2012; Twine, 2013

as well as how an individual's personal assumptions, goals and values are acted upon within their personal relationships and family systems.

It is possible to identify each of these three aspects of privilege within the comments made by the participants in this present study. When initially identifying a study population and recruiting participants, I chose to investigate private secondary education as a possible structural realm of privilege by reasoning that these environments might provide similar types of socialisation for most students. The type of methodology I used specifically targeted Crenshaw's psychosocial realm, and, during the analysis, I also commented on aspects of her reciprocal realm.

It is important to note, though, that simplistic categories of privilege such as these have been criticised for ignoring the relative differences within each category of privilege[23]. While a more extensive investigation of the complex intersectionality of privileges within the participants' lives is beyond the scope of this research, it must be acknowledged that schools are, by nature, complex, multi-dimensional entities. Students who attend independent schools inevitably have different personal histories and family backgrounds. They belong to different races and genders, and have different cultural backgrounds, social status and economic resources. In addition, not all private schools are privileged environments, and not all people who have been socialised within these environments think of themselves as privileged.

Definition and prevalence of independent schools in Britain

According to the Independent Schools Council (ISC), there are about 2,500 independent schools in the UK, 1000 of which belong to the ISC. In total, about 7% of all British school children and approximately 18% of young people over 16 years of age are educated in private institutions. As of 2017, 78% of ISC schools are co-educational, 14% are girls' schools, and 9% are boys' schools. Day schools make up 62%, while 38% include all or some boarding students[24].

UK boarding schools

Within the ISC, 38% of their constituent schools have boarding programmes (about 400 schools) and 14% of all students board in school. Predictably, the ISC's attitude to their residential care is entirely positive, with their 2016/17 report stating, *"the standard of pastoral care is outstanding, and boarding provides a safe and consistent environment with a well-structured and healthy social life".* Yet there has been little

[23] Coston, 2012
[24] Independent Schools Council, 2017

research which specifically investigates the psychological consequences of boarding programmes or the socialisation processes found therein.

Some recent studies[25] have investigated the academic and non-academic consequences of attending residential education abroad and have concluded that the more modern versions of boarding are much more focused on the psychological development of young people, as well as on providing extensive academic support. A longitudinal study by Papworth (2014) investigated life in twelve Australian boarding schools through self-report surveys. The subsequent quantitative data analysis found no significant differences between day and boarding students in all respects, including aspects of academic achievement and measures of psychological wellbeing, such as meaning and purpose, life satisfaction, and emotional stability. Be that as it may, the history of Australian boarding is not strictly equivalent to that of the independent sector in Britain because the demographic makeup of the student populations there reflects the lack of secondary schooling opportunities in many remote regions of the country.

Boarding schools undoubtedly represent a unique socialisation setting when compared to day schools. Typically, advertisements for boarding schools portray boarding programmes as providing positive benefits for students, such as the opportunity to acquire advanced academic skills. But some researchers have pointed to the psychological difficulties associated with this type of institutional living. In particular, Duffell (2000) and Schaverien (2015) have noted the serious harm which can result from being institutionalised during childhood and adolescence, and both authors have identified a typical group of personality traits and psychological defences which are used when young people attempt to cope with boarding before they are developmentally ready to individuate. This is especially true when students also suffer systemic abuse in these environments, or experience severely ruptured family attachments. As a result, the researchers have each identified many aspects of psychological rigidity and dysfunctional relational patterns which they call a 'Survival Personality' or 'Boarding School Syndrome'.

Yet it seems that boarding schools are becoming more popular than ever. As internationalism and a global economy have become the norm, and as the proportion of aspiring middle classes continues to grow in much of the developing world[26], British education is increasingly seen as the gold standard for achieving access to elite levels of business and culture. Caletrio, (2012) believes that an exploration of the norms and practices around transnational mobility is essential for understanding social privilege and argues that mobility is a key feature of being elite. In line with this, economically elite parents in countries such as Russia, China, and

[25] Wheare, 2006; Martin et al, 2014; Papworth, 2014
[26] Anglionby, 2018

India are choosing to send their children to international institutions, such as those in the UK, for their secondary and tertiary education[27].

Schools in the UK have a long history of educating global elites[28] and, at present, British schools provide a number of popular, globally recognised curricula such as the International Baccalaureate[29]. Independent schools in the UK are increasingly competing for pupils on the world stage as the global education market becomes ever more internationally oriented[30], and a growing number of specialist international schools have established themselves in recent years.

The general lack of rigorous research and theory in this area points to the need for much more information, but this situation may be about to change as schools reach out for quality research to inform their academic and pastoral care networks. Gaztambide-Fernandez (2009) and Khan (2011) have recently produced extensive ethnographies of elite American boarding schools which give valuable depth to our understanding of the many powerful cultivation processes by which elite establishments create a new generation of leaders, *'a group of people socialised into particular orientations toward the self, others, and broader society'.*[31]

Private schooling as a 'privileged' environment

The academic, economic and social advantages for students who are educated in independent schools in Britain is undeniable. Recent studies have measured the differences in academic achievement between state and independent school students. Attendance at a selective school increases the educational outcomes for both female and male students[32], and these advantages persist even when the variables of background and cognitive skills are taken into account[33]. In a recent report by researchers at Durham University[34], the cumulative differences in educational attainment equated to an accelerated achievement of approximately two years by 16 years of age.

In Britain, private schools are not required to follow the national curriculum, yet higher levels of academic attainment are evidenced in, for example, twice as many A level entrants in 2016 achieving an A* or A grade than entrants from state schools (48% as opposed to 25.8%). At GCSE, the number was three times greater than in

[27] Brooks & Waters, 2011; Kenway et al, 2013; Kenway & Fahey, 2014
[28] Duffell, 2000; Brooks & Waters, 2015
[29] Brooks & Waters, 2015; Hayden, 2011; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010
[30] Brooks & Waters, 2015; Hayden, 2011
[31] van Zanten, 2015 p. 20
[32] Dearden et al, 2002
[33] Sullivan & Heath, 2002
[34] Ndaji et al, 2016

state schools: 61.9% as opposed to 20.5%[35]. In addition, whereas the average ratio of students to teachers in state schools is approximately 17 to 1, the ratio in independent schools is about 8 to 1, and about 17% of teachers in independent schools are Oxbridge graduates. 92% of students in independent schools move on to higher education, and 82% of pupils gain a 1st class degree or 2.1 compared with 73% nationally.

In an early study by the Sutton Trust (2008), just 100 elite private sixth forms and sixth form colleges accounted for a third of all admissions to Oxbridge during the previous 5 years[36]. By 2018, the Universities and College Admissions Service had calculated that students who attended private schools were seven times more likely to win a place at Oxford or Cambridge than those in non-selective state schools[37]. At present, the large majority of independent school students (56%) achieve acceptance at Russell Group universities, while 6% go to Oxbridge[38].

Once students graduate from elite universities such as Oxford and Cambridge, they can expect to achieve professional and managerial-level employment in the public and private sectors[39], as well as more economic remuneration than that received by individuals from lower ranked universities[40].

In addition to providing excellent standardised academic results, independent schools are also increasingly focused on providing training in character, resilience, and the 'soft skills' which provide further educational advantage, such as 'confidence, control, and commitment'[41]. These attributes are all defined as constituents of 'mental toughness', a personality trait which determines how individuals deal effectively with stress and challenge[42].

Sociological theories of power and privilege

At the moment, the field of sociology is asking some fundamental questions about the societal effects of privilege in the lives of 'elites', and researchers have explored some nascent ideas about the possible consequences for young people of being part of an advantaged social class, especially within elite education. A number of sociological theories have been used here to inform my discussion of the position of independent schools within society, as well as the socialisation processes existent

[35] ISC, 2017
[36] Ndaji et al, 2016
[37] The Guardian Newspaper, 2018
[38] ISC, 2017
[39] Karabel, 2015; Stevens, 2009; Allouch, 2013; Parel & Adams, 2013; Weis & Cipollone, 2013
[40] Green, et al, 2010; Van Zanten, 2015; Savage et al, 2015; ISC, 2017
[41] Ndaji et al, 2016; ISC, 2017
[42] Clough and Strycharcsyk, 2015

within them. Pierre Bourdieu[43], a French sociologist and philosopher, examined the dynamics of power in society. He coined the term 'social capital' to represent the intergenerational reproduction of elite status and the acquisition of behaviours and attitudes which signal privileged repositories of knowledge.

Faubion (1994) and Ball (2013) have both commented on the theories of another French philosopher, Michel Foucault (1927-1984), who was primarily concerned with the hidden sources of power which, he believed, discipline our appetites, limit our thoughts, and structure our entire society. Unlike 'repressive power' structures which are codified and therefore easy to see, the more nebulous interactions of 'normalising power' are essentially hidden everywhere and have the effect of making us want to do what we are required to do in order to fit in with the powerful social forces around us.

These socialisation processes inevitably mould the goals, values, and behaviour of all individuals, including schools and students, by determining what specific human qualities are valued and rewarded[44]. Foucault felt strongly that we should all strive to be aware of these forces so that we may eventually resist them, and only in doing so can each of us achieve some personal freedom.

The sociology of elite education

Most 'elite education' research tends to concern itself with the social processes which set some schools apart from others in a socially stratified society. Admittedly, this is a relatively new field of research, with most researchers working in isolation from one another. Yet fortunately, elite national and international education systems are increasingly becoming the focus of collaborative research[45]. Much of this explores the concept of privilege as it relates to the reproduction of social advantage, or the 'bubble of privilege'[46].

Recently, a number of social scientists have attempted to document the many elements which interact during the development of elite status and opportunity. Undoubtedly, highly resourced families have better access to elite, academically rigorous schools[47], and private education offers aspiring families much more now than in the past because it provides a 'safety net', or supportive scaffolding, for a

[43] Bourdieu, 1984; 1986; 1996
[44] Ball, 2013
[45] Karabel, 2015; Maxwell & Aggleton, 2014; Maxwell, 2015; Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009; Brezis, 2011; Khan, 2011; Koh & Kenway, 2012; McCarthy & Kenway, 2014, van Zanten, 2015
[46] Maxwell & Aggleton, 2010
[47] Gantambide-Fernandez, 2009; van Zanten, 2009; Draelants & van Zanten, 2011

child's academic success as well as significant competitive advantages when accessing further elite education[48] and professional careers[49].

Annette Lareau's concept of 'concerted cultivation' (2003) explains how advantaged families engage in specific processes of socialisation to shape their children's success in a range of privileged arenas. These cultivation processes are all focused on winning admission to a top ranked university, a rite of passage which demands not only a demonstration of exceptional grades during secondary school, but an equally impressive list of personal accomplishments. Whereas sociological research into elite education to date has focused to a large extent on the methods by which students are moulded and directed toward these 'value added' experiences, researchers are becoming aware there is also a need to focus attention on the subjective experiences of these students in order to understand more fully the collective social forces that shape their lives.

> *'Reflecting on the affective relations structuring our research allows us to (i) consider the ways in which our identities and those of our participants were negotiated within the research moment, (ii) offer insights into the broader relations and dynamics shaping the local private education market which we were studying and (iii) describe some of the viscerally experienced practices of inclusion and exclusion encountered within the privileged spaces of elite schools.'* (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2015, p. 3)

A knowledge of how the processes of 'concerted cultivation' impact young people within privileged academic environments seems crucial if we are to understand and support their development and emotional needs, yet a surprisingly small amount of research has been carried out on the personal effects of these cultivation processes. The present study will provide an initial exploration of the needs of these special young people and will perhaps inspire other researchers to take forward the quest for more information in future.

The influence of parents

Although attachment needs during adolescence undoubtedly change as young people individuate from their parents, Armsden and Greenberg (1987) have shown that a secure parent-child attachment at this stage of life predicts better non-attachment outcomes such as self-esteem, life satisfaction, college adjustment, and greater perceived social support.

[48] Van Zanten, 2015
[49] Savage *et al*, 2015

Positive family involvement has been found to promote both academic and non-academic achievement[50]. A study by Wang and Sheikh-Khalil (2014) has stressed the crucial importance of active and attentive parenting for facilitating the healthy development of secondary school-aged children. In this study, parental involvement was found to improve both academic attainment and emotional functioning, evidenced by both behavioural and emotional engagement. In particular, maternal acceptance and emotional support has been associated with a wide range of optimal emotional regulation strategies[51]. Maternal sympathy and observed responsiveness have also been seen to lower negative emotions in children[52].

Yet, Luthar (2013) and Levine (2006) both cite the tendency of affluent parents to be highly critical of their children as well as being supportive and loving. The researchers found that a significant proportion of parents in wealthy communities pressured their children to achieve very high academic standards and demanded that they also excel in extracurricular-activities and social popularity.

In a further study of 1,300 adolescent children of highly educated, suburban, 'white-collar' [upper-middle-class] professionals[53], nearly a third were found to self-harm regularly, and the researchers believed this behaviour was a response to the young people feeling academically pressured while also being required to hide their emotions[54]. They noted that parental alienation and criticism were especially associated with these high rates of self-harm, particularly for boys.

However, Levine (2006) found that affluent parents seemed to be generally under-involved in monitoring and managing some of their children's social experiences, particularly the riskier aspects, while also displaying the highly competitive, intrusive, and anxious behaviour mentioned above. Yet, research on parent-child autonomy and relatedness also suggests that young people who remain overly dependent on their parents show higher rates of internalising symptoms, such as depression, while those who have difficulty maintaining their close relationships with parents show more problematic externalising behaviour[55]. Steinberg & Morris (2001) found that parental involvement and behaviour monitoring were crucial aspects of preventing anti-social behaviour, but they stressed the need to balance appropriate levels of supervision with adolescent needs for autonomy.

Research has not yet identified the most effective types of parental involvement for healthy adolescent development within particularly stressful academic environments[56]. Too little is known about the inter-relational mechanisms which

[50] Hill & Tyson, 2009
[51] Kliewer, Fearnow, & Miller, 1996; Hardy, Power & Jaedicke, 1993
[52] Fabes *et al*, 1994
[53] Yates et al, 2008
[54] Luthar & Becker, 2002
[55] Allen, Hoauser, Eickholt, & Bell, 1994
[56] Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014

underlie parental effects on academic achievement or mental health[57]. Admittedly, there are many variables involved in parental care, including involvement at school, relationships at home, and academic socialisation practices[58], all of which involve complex and multi-layered interactions.

Social referencing in families

The term 'social referencing' refers to the process of developing a personal viewpoint in response to observing someone else's behaviour or emotions. Originally, standardised tests, such as the 'Strange Situation Test', focused on identifying individual differences in infant attachment behaviour by measuring how often a child responded to the behaviour or emotions of their mother in order to judge whether a given ambiguous environmental situation should be reacted to either positively or negatively[59].

However, the normal socialisation behaviour of parents inevitably changes as children develop, so more recent studies have reflected the need to explore a multitude of situations and developmental contexts. Psychological studies which focus on the role of emotions in this process[60] are juxtaposed in the literature with social psychology research which investigates the role of social referencing in particular types of social situations[61]. In particular, increased emphasis on relational and social contexts in the study of emotion have pointed to social referencing, or 'social appraisal'[62], as a particularly powerful interpersonal mechanism which informs and regulates an individual's relationship with their environment.

Whereas theoretical discussions of social referencing typically focus on the active evaluation of emotional information based on the reactions, such as facial expressions, of others, research has also investigated the emotional contagion, or resonance, which can be an unprocessed product of social referencing[63].

Although adolescents typically show increased levels of conflict with parents and decreased warmth toward them[64], parents and siblings remain potent influences throughout much of an individual's life cycle, including during adolescence[65], when family members can shape the opinions and reactions of young people. Since adaptive social functioning relies on the ability to appreciate and utilise information

[57] Li & Lerner, 2011; Wang & Holcombe, 2010
[58] Hill & Tyson, 2009
[59] Dickstein et al, 1984; Klinnert et al, 1983; Lamb et al, 1984; Thompson & Lamb, 1983
[60] Parkinson & Manstead, 2015; Manstead & Fischer, 2001; Parkinson, & Simons, 2009
[61] Latané and Darley, 1968; Parkinson *et al*, 2012
[62] Walle, Reschke, & Knothe, 2017
[63] Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994; Coyne, 1976
[64] Steinberg, 1998; Laursen, Coy, & Collins, 1998; Steinberg & Morris, 2001
[65] Morris *et al*, 2017; Walle, Reschke, & Knothe, 2017

from the emotional and behavioural reactions of significant social partners, the attitudes of teachers and peers also affect the appraisals which young people make of their surroundings[66], and aspects of this are evident in the present study.

Schools as a developmental context during adolescence

Studies by Lazarus *et al* (1984) and Bronfenbrenner (1989) describe schools as social macro-environments of influential interactions in which each student's personal development takes place. Schools act as agents of social regulation: all-encompassing environments which both influence and challenge students based on the provision of specific educational tasks, and on how schools evaluate student performance[67]. Within this transactional space, 'coping' is defined as the ability to find adequate responses to the demands of the environment.

In an overview of school contextual issues during the middle years of adolescence, Roesner *et al* (2000) referred to Erikson's belief (1968) that adolescents need to be grounded and nurtured within the social conditions of their environment. Unlike Freud (1936), who saw adolescence as a time of tumult when young people inevitably experience psychological problems, Erikson believed that problems during adolescence signal an environment which fails to provide appropriate care and support. In Erikson's life-span theory (1973), the main task of adolescence is to build a positive psychosocial identity by deciding what to do and who to be, yet he believed the ultimate responsibility for healthy adolescent development lay squarely in the hands of the collective: parents, teachers, school organisations, and members of the wider community. The task for young people is therefore '*to cocreate and perpetuate society in conjunction with their elders, and, sometimes, to reshape the future direction of society in spite of them*'[68].

Studies by Roeser et al (2000) and Eccles & Roeser (2011) both supported and extended Erikson's ideas. Their studies suggested that the ultimate decision to engage in learning depends on whether a young person feels able to meet the challenges they face, whether they see value in that engagement, and whether they feel safe and cared for. Eccles and Roeser's research (2011) focused specifically on how teachers, academic tasks, and classroom environments played a role in the intellectual and social-emotion development of adolescents. They found that school environments influenced every aspect of development for young people, and that the personal and professional qualities and skills of teachers were the most influential of all.

[66] Jacobs, Manstead & Fischer, 2001; Yamamoto & Suzuki, 2006) Hendrickx *et al*, 2017
[67] Popkewitz, 1997
[68] Erikson, 1969, as in Roeser et al, 2000

Academic work was found to affect what students learned about themselves and their world, and it profoundly influenced their interests, passions, morals, and ethics. In other words, close relationships with teachers helped to make the work personally meaningful. A study by Ruus et al (2007) investigated the social climate of a group of schools to determine which types of educational environment supported or undermined students' academic success and coping strategies. Detailed data were collected about the views of students, parents, teachers, and school administrators to determine each student's developmental context.

School value systems and teacher attitudes were found to significantly affect the level of optimism which students felt, as well as their physical and psychological well-being and academic success. And the researchers[69] suggested that schools could be categorised based on their value systems. Those which were most supportive of student coping strategies balanced the competitive aspects of academic achievement with the pro-social, humanitarian values necessary for relational well-being, such as the need for trust and affection, respect for difference, co-operation, the strengthening of communal structures, social justice, and personal accountability. According to Kennedy and Kennedy (2004), teachers can provide valuable opportunities to form attachment bonds which protect a young person's mental health, especially when these relationships are sensitive, responsive, and emotionally supportive.

Teacher-student relationships, as well as teachers' attitudes toward students, have also been found to have a profound effect on students' ability to cope with school stress[70]. However, the researchers believed that teachers were often in danger of absorbing the 'authoritative' power dynamics of Western individualism which, they believed, tended to promote conservative 'market values' over relationships[71]. Under these circumstances, teachers might find it difficult to create healthy attachments with students or a sufficiently warm and friendly school culture.

Finally, ideas about the importance of these attachment relationships have recently been expanded to include the significance of care giving by peers during adolescence[72], although the research regarding these attachment relationships is still very limited[73]. Studies by Jacobsen and Hofmann (1997) and Swenson Goguen *et al* (2011) have found evidence that secure peer attachments facilitate positive academic results, and recent research has begun to examine the importance of peers for providing social and emotional support[74].

[69] Ruus et al, 2007
[70] Ruus et al, 2007
[71] Tuffin, 2005
[72] Ainsworth, 1989; Pianta et al, 2003; Allen, 2008
[73] Scott et al, 2011; Verschueren et al, 2012
[74] Kerns, 2008; Gorrese & Ruggiere, 2012; Laible, 2007; Laible et al, 2000; Wilkinson, 2010

The effects of academic stress

A certain amount of stress is necessary for the physical and mental well-being of adolescents[75]. However, the emotional consequences of differing levels of stress during this stage of development are a neglected topic amongst researchers[76]. The few studies which do exist usually document the effects of stress using either physical, environmental, or psychological models[77]. These studies find that psychological stressors that fall within a normal, or moderate, range are essentially adaptive, while intense or chronic stress is correlated with significantly diminished life satisfaction[78]. The person-environment model of Misra and McKean (2000) describes stressful events in school as either challenging, when stress brings a sense of competence, or threatening, when stress causes feelings of hopelessness and loss which result in less successful coping strategies and lower academic achievement.

High levels of academic stress are well known to affect students' psychological health and ability to cope, in fact, it has been the most common factor cited as affecting students' quality of life, life satisfaction, and academic performance[79]. A study by Stoppler and Marks (2010) showed that effects of excess stress are not only harmful to the physical and emotional health of adolescents, but these effects persist into their adult lives.

External stress caused by adverse environmental conditions has been linked to a variety of psychological conditions, such as anxiety and depression, aggressive or destructive behaviour[80], and substance abuse[81]. Recently, in an attempt to further define stress during adolescence, psychological models have focused on 'perceived stress': an individual's personal estimation of their stress level, as well as their cognitive, emotional, and behavioural responses to both environment factors and experiences of bodily distress. However, very few studies have attempted to integrate these definitions of stress, especially when determining why some young people cope well with stress and others do not.

Overall, the social-emotional functioning of students within academically challenging secondary education has received little attention in educational research[82]. Having said this, an innovative study by Suldo et al (2008) has explored the different strategies which high-achieving adolescents use to cope with internal stress, caused by the developmental challenges of puberty, as well as a variety of external pressures in their environment. The researchers examined what kinds of stresses caused

[75] Rajan, 2003
[76] Lin & Yusoff, 2013
[77] McNamara, 2000
[78] Mayberry & Graham, 2001; McKnight et al, 2002; Suldo et al, 2008
[79] Misra & McKean, 2000; Dwyer & Cummings, 2001; Dusselier at al, 2005; Lin & Yusoff, 2013
[80] Jaser et al, 2005
[81] Galaif et al, 2003
[82] Shaunessy & Suldo, 2010

problems and how different types of individuals negotiated them. They found that adolescents who attempted to cope by using negative strategies, such as venting their angry feelings, smoking, or using alcohol or drugs, actually exacerbated their stress[83], while those who used positive strategies, such as talking to parents, strengthening their relationships with friends, having optimistic thinking styles, and cognitively strategising to overcome setbacks, experienced better overall mental health[84]. Using proactive time management skills and task strategies also supported coping skills[85].

Identifying the needs and coping strategies of students within academically rigorous education seems particularly important because of the increasing popularity of highly demanding programmes of study, such as the International Baccelaureate (IB). According to Conner (2008), the IB is a very challenging '*curriculum designed to cultivate advanced content knowledge, global awareness, intercultural sensitivity, social competence, inquiry, and problem solving*' in students[86].

Only two of the participants from this study completed an IB diploma in their senior schools, yet it is interesting to speculate whether its general rigour, educational philosophy and its focus on academic achievement can be considered broadly similar to other types of rigorous programmes offered by independent schools. The IB is a time- and labour-intensive programme of study[87], involving frequent examinations, the completion of independent research projects and additional extra-curricular activities. As a result, IB students report having little time for sleep, social interactions or personal reflection.[88].

School-based counselling provision in Britain

As a result of the prevalence of mental health problems in young people, government policy has recently focused on the role of schools in providing early mental health education and counselling interventions. Since young people spend approximately 7,000 or more hours in school[89], it is hoped that these institutions will capitalise on a valuable opportunity to identify and respond to nascent psychological symptoms by proactively promoting good mental health and wellbeing. This is particularly important since research suggests that in a typical class of 30 students there will be three pupils who have a diagnosable mental health disorder[90], ten

[83] Galaif et al, 2003; Suldo et al, 2008; Lin & Yusoff, 2013
[84] Einberg et al, 2015; Suldo et al, 2008
[85] Shaunessy & Suldo, 2010
[86] Conner, 2008, as in Shaunessy & Suldo, 2010, p. 128
[87] Andain et al, 2006
[88] Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008
[89] Burgess, 2013
[90] Green et al, 2004

pupils who have separated parents[91], six who may be self-harming[92], and seven who are likely to have been bullied[93].

The 2008 Children's Plan also emphasised the role of schools as a vital community resource with an important responsibility to promote wellbeing[94], and the UK government has identified schools as appropriate locations for reducing the stigma associated with mental health as well as increasing access to services[95]. To achieve this, a government Green Paper has mandated[96] that, by 2025, all UK schools should have a designated Mental Health Lead who will coordinate mental health services, train teachers to identify mental health difficulties, and refer students when necessary to other outside public and private agencies such as the National Health Service Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Most importantly, national policies have encouraged primary and secondary schools to promote consistent, 'whole school' approaches to mental health and wellbeing which hopefully will affect all aspects of school life in future[97].

School-based counselling in the UK is one of the most important and prevalent forms of counselling available to young people. It is defined by the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy as *'a professional activity delivered by qualified practitioners in schools. Counsellors offer young people a valuable opportunity to talk about their difficulties, within a relationship of agreed confidentiality' [98]*. Within a counselling interaction, a student may explore any issue which feels personally relevant, including family difficulties, friendship issues, worries about grades, and other experiences at school and in the wider world[99]. Most young people who ask for emotional help prefer to access counselling in school[100], but since there are at present no established criteria for determining which students should be offered school-based counselling, counsellors tend to work with many different levels of distress, ranging from 'normal', through 'borderline', to 'abnormal' levels[101].

Student-focused, person-centred approaches to counselling[102] emerged in UK schools during the 1960s and 1970s[103] to support pupils with behavioural, personal, family, or health issues[104], but changes to government priorities in the 1980s and

[91] Faulkner, 2011
[92] Brooks et al, 2015
[93] Langford et al, 2014
[94] Foresight Mental Capital and Well Being Project, 2008
[95] NHS England, 2015; NHS England, 2016; Frith, 2016; Department of Health & Department for Education, 2017
[96] DH & DfE, 2017
[97] NICE 2008, NICE, 2009; Weare, 2015; Lavis & Robson, 2015
[98] BACP, 2015, p. 1
[99] Cooper, 2013. p. 3
[100] Quinn & Chan, 2009; Cooper, 2006
[101] Cooper, 2013
[102] Rogers, 1961, 1980
[103] McLaughlin, 1999; Baginsky, 2004
[104] Howieson & Semple, 1996

1990s[105], and general confusion about the purpose and usefulness of counselling, resulted in poor service implementation, less emphasis on psychological support, and more emphasis on academic results and the management of student behaviour[106].

Fortunately, more recent changes in government policy[107] have meant that school-based counselling is increasingly valued[108], although at present, recent government policy does not make an explicit financial provision for increasing school-based counselling[109]. It is estimated that between 61%-85% of secondary schools in England and Scotland now provide in-school counselling services[110]. Since 2007, Northern Ireland has established school-based counselling in all its secondary schools and, since 2008, Wales has offered counselling to all children in public education from 10 years of age.

Although schools and service users generally report happiness with their school counselling experiences, there is as yet little definitive evidence of its effectiveness. Nonetheless, there are a few small-scale studies which have found positive results[111]. When Cooper (2013) completed a comprehensive review of existing school counselling programmes, he found that students overwhelmingly reported satisfaction with the counselling they received, with approximately 80% of respondents saying they had been helped 'quite a lot' or 'a lot'. In addition, a more recent study by Pearce et al (2017) has suggested that levels of distress were significantly reduced as a result of counselling since students felt it helped them to work toward their goals.

Yet researchers also found that a significant number of young people do not ever seek help for their mental health, whether inside or outside of school[112]. Although students say they value the organisational 'independence' and 'confidentiality' of a dedicated school counsellor, some young people are reluctant to access services because they feel too embarrassed about needing help or worry that their personal problems are not 'real' or 'normal'[113]. It seems that the stigma around mental health, the fear of being seen by others, and students' lack of knowledge about what counselling is and how to access it, mean that only about 8% of students actively request the help they need[114].

[105] UK Education Reform Act of 1988
[106] Lang, 1999; Robinson, 1996; Baginsky, 2004
[107] DfES Every Child Matters, 2003; DfES Children Act DfES, 2004; Department for Children Schools and Families, 2007; DH & NHS England, 2015; DfE, 2016; DH & DfE, 2017
[108] Polat & Jenkins, 2005; Cooper, 2013
[109] DH & DfE, 2017
[110] Cooper, 2013
[111] Fox & Butler, 2007; Kavanagh et al, 2009; McArthur, et al, 2012; Murdoch et al, 2012
[112] Gulliver et al, 2010; Smith, 2012; Cooper, 2013
[113] Biddle et al, 2007
[114] Cooper, 2004; Chan & Quinn, 2012; Cooper, 2013

The role of a school counsellor

The UK government and researchers alike have encouraged 'whole school' wellbeing programmes which incorporate psychological knowledge and skills into all levels of school organisations. Yet, according to Cooper (2013), most school counsellors in England are independent practitioners or agency counsellors contracted for only a specific number of one-to-one sessions with students per week. Funded through the school's budget, these sessions concern the student alone. Unfortunately, that being the case, it is likely that these counsellors may have very little influence on school policies or procedures. Thus, it is evident that much more research is needed to identify the most effective roles for school counsellors, the types of provisions which are necessary for the wellbeing of an entire school community, and the specific types of counselling which provide the most help for individual students[115].

Hanley *et al* (2012) found that, of those counsellors who are part of a school community, about 80% of school counsellors were identified as carrying out their singular role within schools, but just over 20% of them were reported to hold other positions as well, such as teacher, nurse, or chaplain. According to the authors, the responsibilities of these roles sometimes clashed but, even when the role of counsellor was well defined and integrated, counselling tasks were defined differently when viewed from each separate section of the organisation.

Kimber and Campbell (2013), have researched the inevitable ethical conflicts that arise when counsellors have different goals and values from those of administrators, parents, or teachers. For example, when making decisions, administrators typically preference the economic stability of their organisation and the complex needs of the entire school community, whereas counsellors focus primarily on the needs of individuals within these systems. Issues of confidentiality, informed consent, safeguarding, and the use of counselling for identifying 'problems', all create clashes and moral dilemmas for those concerned. Studies show that head teachers, teachers and counsellors have difficulty resolving these conflicts[116], yet Bond (2000) encourages counsellors to see these conflicts as ubiquitous and systematic and to reflect on, and take ownership of, the ethical decision-making processes necessary for 'good enough' solutions.

Psychotherapeutic theories which have informed this research

As a psychotherapist for young people, my therapeutic perspective has been significantly coloured by a number of important psychological theories which have

[115] Cooper, 2013

[116] Cranston et al, 2006; Lyons, 1990; Campbell, 2003; Duignan & Collins, 2003; Eyal *et al*, 2010; Langlois & Lapointe, 2007; Norburg & Johansson, 2007

underpinned the analysis of my participants' transcripts during the present study. The seminal theory of attachment developed by John Bowlby (1973) and Mary Ainsworth (1974; 1989) is valuable when considering an individual's primal need for strong and reliable caregiving, and thought is given here to how these initial relational patterns also affect adolescents[117].

I have relied heavily on Donald Winnicott's theories of child development (1958, 1965; 1971), particularly his ideas on the mechanisms of the early attachment between a mother and her child. I believe that a wider focus on this type of relationship can also be useful for understanding developmental aspects of identity formation during adolescence. Important concepts such as 'good enough mothering', the 'facilitating environment', and the development of a 'True Self' and 'False Self' will be discussed in relation to the participant's comments in order to explore and interpret their thoughts. In addition, Winnicott's recognition of the necessity for rest, play, and friendship, as well as the perils of too much compliance, will be noted when examples of these issues are identified within the participants' narratives.

Another influential theorist, Erik Erikson (1968), believed that only psychoanalysis and social science together can eventually illuminate salient aspects of humanity's common life cycle. His theories explored the ways in which communal social organisation co-determines the structure of a young person's family through the tastes, standards, and traditions of the social class in which they live. In particular, he noticed how minute displays of emotion, rather than words used or meanings intended, transmit to a child the outlines of what really counts in his world.

Like Winnicott (1959, 1980), Erikson also believed that the basic needs of infancy and childhood are revisited and reworked during adolescence in relation to the adult roles and responsibilities a young person must eventually assume. Erikson presents human growth as a series of normative inner and outer crises which

> '*the healthy personality weathers, emerging and re-emerging with an increased sense of inner unity, with an increase in good judgement, and an increase in the capacity to do well, according to the standards of those who are significant to him'* (Erikson, 1959/1980:52).

Whereas the psychosocial crises which predate the adolescent phase include dilemmas such as 'trust versus mistrust', 'autonomy versus shame or doubt', and 'competence versus inferiority', during the adolescent stage, the main conflict concerns 'identity formation versus identity confusion', as an individual must develop their own personality characteristics and values. In a healthy individual, the inevitable tensions during this crisis are resolved, and growth is achieved, by developing the capacity to make choices and self-determine, albeit within the

[117] Howe, 2011; Bifulco & Thomas, 2013

individual opportunities and limitations of the surrounding culture. As such, Erikson's themes echo those of modern theorists who have studied the personal qualities of successful adolescents, and their need for trust and care in relationships, autonomy, challenge, self-expression, choice, decision making, and competence[118].

As the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (1915) developed his theories about personality during his early career as a neurologist and based his assumptions on his therapeutic interactions with clients. He believed in the existence of an unconscious aspect of the psyche which contains a repository of personal thoughts, feelings, urges, and appetites which are too painful or unacceptable to be allowed to enter conscious awareness. The recognition of these unconscious processes forms one of the pillars of my own psychotherapeutic understanding of clients' experiences, particularly of pain, anxiety, and conflict. But I have found that Freud's concepts can also be valuable when unpicking some of the more paradoxical and troubling aspects of school environments, such as the organisational 'defence mechanisms' which underpin a school's structure.

I also adhere to many of the theories of psychoanalyst Adam Phillips (1998; 2007) and the educator Tamara Bibby (2018) since they both comment on Winnicott's work. Bibby's Winnicottian perspective is particularly valuable when she reflects specifically on the unconscious interactions between teachers and students. Salzberger-Wittenberg *et al* (1983) have also focused on emotional experiences in the classroom from a psychoanalytic perspective. Together, their detailed descriptions illuminate the positive relational factors which are vital for the growth of young people within educational environments, as well as the multiple psychological pressures which are inevitable in all types of learning.

Lastly, one of the most definitive issues in the very existence of independent schools is the fact that parents must pay for the education of their children, and I mention it here because of the consistent attention it received from the participants in this study. Although a full discussion of money exchange is beyond the scope of this study, it is interesting to note that it is also a rare, but burgeoning, topic for research among psychoanalysts[119]. For the purposes of the present study, it may well be possible to equate the consequences of payment for psychotherapeutic services to the somewhat similar effects of payment for specific types of 'learning' in schools, but more research is needed to illuminate this crucial subject.

[118] Eccles et al, 1993

[119] Amar, 1956; Dimen, 1994; Klebanow & Lowenkopf, 1991; Heron & Welt, 1992; Hirsh, 1992

RESEARCH DESIGN

Participants

This chapter presents the results of an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of six verbatim interviews with university undergraduates who described their mental health experiences while at their independent secondary schools. The participants had been recruited through purposeful sampling with the help of professional colleagues. All were enrolled in their second year of study at one of the top four ranked universities in England at the time.

University students are often used by researchers simply as proxies for the general population, but my choice of undergraduate participants for this study was strategic and very specific. Unfortunately, I was not able to access young people while they were in school. My original thesis gives a full account of my three failed attempts and what this eventually taught me. Yet, I also had ethical concerns about talking to young students about mental health issues which might inadvertently magnify any difficulties they were experiencing, particularly since I was not in a position to minister to their psychological needs or alter their circumstances in any way.

I therefore decided to ask more mature university students to look back on their time in secondary school. I needed participants who were close enough to their pasts to recall their experiences yet far enough away to have allowed themselves time to reflect on their lives: in this case, two years post-secondary education. I chose to recruit participants from a small number of top-echelon British universities in order to represent the population of students to which I normally provide therapy. Although this inevitably narrowed my opportunities to explore the mental health experiences of students who moved on to other types of universities, I believed my criteria would provide a sufficiently defined and homogeneous population for the purposes of an IPA study. Although I had originally intended to choose only undergraduates who had previously attended British secondary schools, those who volunteered came from a wide range of independent schools, including a private European international school. They presented an eclectic mix of backgrounds, yet all had been privately educated in fee-paying secondary schools.

Demographic information about the participants:

	Suki	**Gabriela**	**Lydia**	**Frances**	**Ulrike**	**Tamsin**
Nationality	British	American	European	European	British	British
Mother tongue	English	European	European	European	English	English
Type of school	British	International	International	International	British	British
Size of school	Small	Medium	Medium	Large	Small	Large
Curriculum undertaken	British (GCSE and A-Level)	International Baccalaureate (IB)	International Baccalaureate (IB)	American Advanced Placement (AP)	British (GCSE and A-Level)	British (GCSE and A-Level)
Organisation of school	Day only	Day and Boarding	Day and Boarding	Day only	Day and Boarding	Day and Boarding
School attendance	Day	Day	Day	Day	Day	Day
Parental career status	Mother and father are professional	Mother and father are professional	Father is a professional (Mother?)	Father is a professional (Mother?)	Mother and father are professional	Mother and father are professional
University	Russell Group	Russell Group	Russell Group	Russell Group	Oxbridge	Oxbridge
Subject at university	Business	Science	Arts	Engineering	Arts	Politics

The names of the participants have been changed in order to mask their identities, as have features of their families and schools. For instance, only one of the participants identified as male, so in order to insure he could not be identified, a decision was made to present all the participants as female.

RESULTS

Introduction

The analysis of the participants' narratives resulted in the emergence of three superordinate themes: 'Needing the help of others', 'Feeling pressured', and 'Ambivalence'. Consistent with the goals of an IPA analysis, a number of verbatim quotes in this results section will familiarise the reader with important examples of what was actually said during the interviews. My comments after each quote show my own individual understanding of what was said in line with an IPA methodology which attempts to make sense of each participant's narrative as they are attempting to make sense of their own experiences. However, it is important to state that the results of this study, and any comments or conclusions made my me, should be considered an exploration and not firm evidence of fact. They are simply stepping-stones on a path to deeper understanding of the lives and mental health of these students.

Theme #1: Needing the Help of Others

This first superordinate theme captures the participants' attempts to know and develop themselves by reaching out to others, make nourishing connections during the difficult stage of adolescence during which young people need support and encouragement to develop their academic prowess, learn valuable life skills, and build a new sense of identity. The participants were all aware that they had been gifted an exceptional education which they believed would provide a firm base for their future advancement. For the most part, they were grateful to their own parents for giving them the resources to engage with school on their own terms, and they praised their teachers for helping them to take advantage of the opportunities they were given. However, many of the statements they made also evaluated how well adults related to them and understood their needs: whether they were, or were not, attuned to them as people.

Relationships with teachers

Teachers are undoubtedly enormously influential in the lives of young people. Students in private schools can spend up to 12 hours a day, 6 days a week at school, and much of this time is spent interacting with teachers. The participants described what they considered to be 'good' or 'bad' teachers and what types of relationships

hurt or helped them. The consensus was that teachers who knew their students well and responded to their individual needs were the most supportive of both mental health and academic development. As an example, Ulrike said one of her teachers had had a very significant effect on her entire time at school.

> U: *A lot of the experiences you have at school are because you're in such a close relationship with your teacher, and a lot is going to depend on that because it's so intense the whole time. I was very lucky with that, that I had a really great teacher, and I think a lot of people's experiences are quite swayed by that.*

Ursula's phrase, 'a lot is going to depend on that' suggests that she will rely in future on her good sense of self which this important teacher helped her develop. Her gratitude reminded me of a book by Tamara Bibby (2018), *The Creative Self*, where Bibby describes the crucial need for good relationships between teachers and students. She relates the enormous power of teachers to their role as attachment figures who, like parents, build a young person's trust in their own personal strength and the benevolence of the world. Winnicott also believed that trust is a fundamental condition for growth, saying *'[Trust] can be looked upon as sacred to the individual in that it is here that the individual experiences creative living.*' (Winnicott, 1971, p. 139)

Needing encouragement and guidance

Suki described the beneficial effect that her school, and all her teachers, had had on her confidence and willingness to try new things. All in all, she sounds as if she had weathered her educational challenges quite well thanks to the relaxed support of her teachers and their belief in 'having a go'.

> S: *At [my school] the teachers just encouraged us to do everything and try everything and speak in public and try new things. So nothing was strictly 'you had to do this'. It was more 'try this, why not?' I'm quite a relaxed, sort of, quite social person but I like to work hard so I think [my school] suited me perfectly.*

Suki's school seemed to have had a somewhat gentler and less competitive school environment when compared to the other participants. Her comments alluded to the personal courage it took to try new things and 'speak in public'; to put herself out into the world. Suki's evident joy at being allowed to explore freely may reflect Winnicott's belief that, in order for an environment to be considered benevolent, it should place 'objects' in a child's path so that they might 'find' them and claim them as their own discovery. In his theory, this is an important condition for building a sense of 'self'.

Teachers who protected the freedom to learn were also valued by Tamsin, as was the willingness of those adults to be flexible and sensitively responsive to her emotional needs.

> T: *Sometimes people didn't have to say I'm having a hard time; the teachers just knew, which creates quite a good level of trust between people and the teacher…What was nice was that, if I had too much work, I could email the teacher and say, 'Please can I have an extension?' and they would say yes.*

Tamsin constructed a way of coping with her heavy workload by relying on the personal relationships she had forged with teachers who she trusted to react to her as a capable individual, trusting that she, in turn, would follow through with her promises.

All the participants recognised that, as adolescents, they could not have thrived without the generous support and guidance of parents and teachers who they knew truly cared about them, and they actively sought out these benevolent individuals wherever they could find them.

> F: *I had an English teacher that was amazing. We just really had a close connection with him. He just knew what he was talking about, and whenever we asked questions, he was always really knowledgeable about the subject and things.*

Frances seemed to have loved being challenged by her teachers and here she hints that her whole class bonded with each other over her teacher's warm personality and infectious enthusiasm. She described the personal characteristics of this particular teacher as having had a big effect on the development of her passions, particularly since he was generous in providing her with the intellectual knowledge she craved.

Friendship as protection for mental health

Throughout all the interviews, each participant talked often of their need for deep and reliable peer friendships. They believed these relationships were crucial for maintaining their wellbeing and protecting their mental health.

> L: *I also had great friends at school. I had people that I still consider my best friends and I think I was very lucky as an adolescent girl to have some really strong and deep, meaningful friendships. And if I didn't have that at the time, I think it would have been completely different, my takeaway from school, because then it just would have been like a very hard environment to be in.*

In this quote, Lydia seemed to imply that it is naturally difficult to make good friends during adolescence when young people are still developing new relational skills.

Other participants also said that friendship had offered them the chance to truly be known and accepted, and the trust involved seemed to counter the more competitive and image-building elements of their school environments. All of the participants considered having good social skills and a full social life to be the core requirement for happiness and they emphasised the need to be able to trust those around them, both teachers and peers, if they were to survive the more rigorous and challenging aspects of their highly pressurised lives. Solid friendships allowed the participants to relax and gave them a valuable group identity.

Friends as therapists

Friends could make these young people feel good about themselves and act as impromptu therapists, helping them to process difficult feelings or make personal plans. Most of all, however, they acted as islands of pure joy when the rest of life seemed full of demands and deadlines.

> G: *I know in my case a big thing was talking to my friends, even if just one really great friend who you just understand each other, you can talk about anything. And you know, I've realised on so many occasions how much that has helped me, and I've grown because of it. And even if it can be hard because you become aware of how much you're struggling, you're aware of it which is better than not having anywhere to address it with, or anyone... We often joked that we were each other's therapists.*

Gabriella made a strong case for the ultimate value of friendship when she described the curative effect of being truly known in a relationship. It was interesting to me that, indeed, her personal philosophy also seemed to echo the general ethos of psychotherapy.

Safety and belonging

All the participants compared their own schools to other institutions at some point during their interviews, and the topic of small schools versus large schools brought up many different ideas about the need for friendship, safety and belonging. Ulrike's school offered her a small community with an intimacy and level of tolerance which, she believed, was difficult to find in larger schools, but here Tamsin described how she and her friends carved out a small and intimate environment within her much larger one.

T: *There were quite a lot of groups... and there wasn't that much interaction between different groups... They became quite like territorial which was quite interesting to watch. Certain people in certain groups had certain places and you could feel uncomfortable being in the wrong place. A group identity was quite important... You wanted to be in a group, and you wanted your group to have a name so that you felt like you belonged to something.*

By contrast, Suki had a safe and supportive school experience where inclusiveness was the norm. She put this communal generosity down to her community's underlying social and academic philosophy of charity which, she believed, ultimately influenced the behaviour of all the students.

S: *I think a lot of other schools are very academically focused. They want grades. But in my school, there was a lot of diversity. In my year, there were definitely some people that were on headmaster's scholarships and bursaries. It didn't make a difference at all. [The school] supports a lot of people from underprivileged backgrounds. We interacted the same, like, we're all friends. No one cared. No one had any sort of prejudgement and I think that's the type of school it was. Everyone was sort of equal and everyone was encouraged.*

In this quote, Suki juxtaposes the rigid judgement of grades with the seeming lack of judgement involved in 'a lot of diversity'. It is difficult to know to what Suki referred when she said this. Was it the level of academic rigour required of students, or differences of race, class, status or background? She seemed to be saying that, to her, one of the most important things about her school was its acceptance of everyone into an equal community, and that 'no one cared' how much money an individual had, so people were free to interact with anyone and everyone in a spirit of togetherness.

Self-regulation as a method of coping with stress

Relationships were also of central importance to the participants' ability to relieve stress. They recounted some of their attempts to self-soothe, listing the positive and negative methods which they relied on in their daily interactions with others. On the positive side, being able to talk about mental health with adults and openly sharing with peers were seen as the most effective and enjoyable methods of processing stress or emotional problems. Sports of all kinds also provided a welcome rest from school responsibilities and gave the participants a chance to be physically present in their bodies. Most importantly, inclusion in cohesive social groups could nurture a sense of belonging and act as safe havens, and parties were particularly enjoyable and necessary for helping students to relax and bond.

S: *It's sort of a skill of learning to regulate that [the stress] and knowing when to stop and when to feel, yes, I've done enough today. I think it's sort of getting*

out and socializing rather than staying in, going out and playing something with my mates. I hate staying in and just sort of [pause] not moping but feeling really sorry for myself. I'd rather be proactive. I would work, but if I'm really stressed about something or upset, I think work is just bad for me. I can't concentrate. I think sport helps me quite a lot in terms of giving me something to focus on where I'm not thinking about work and academics. It gives me a nice break.

It is interesting that, even though I had asked Suki about her experiences in school, this statement is in the present tense, so she may be referring to the continuation of these experiences from then until now. Although she said she was a very accomplished student, it was clear from her interview that her friends were by far her primary focus while in school. In this quote, she turns to those friends for some fun and a rest from the pressures of schoolwork, but I also wondered about her phrase 'bad for me'. She implied that failing to regulate her stress levels made her feel somewhat immobilised or emotionally vulnerable ('moping'). The antidote, for her, was doing something physical instead of mental. Being able to proactively recognise her own heightened stress, then knowing how to self soothe, helped her to regain personal control.

Negative methods of coping

The participants all said their school responsibilities had overwhelmed them at times and, although no one personally admitted to using 'bad' behaviour to deal with stress, they all witnessed their peers using a variety of negative coping strategies such as drinking, taking drugs, and breaking rules, to relieve the pressure they felt. They said they needed to maintain strong relationships with each other as a matter of urgency, even when they believed some of their 'underground parties' were looked on unfavourably by adults. These occasional social interactions seemed to offer a variety of licit and illicit coping methods that were relatively common in their schools.

According to Tamsin, breaking adult rules, such as sneaking out of the dorm at night or transgressing sexual boundaries, gave students a valuable sense of power over their own lives. She gave an example of the more risky and self-destructive side of her friends' activities which, she believed, were meant to serve this purpose.

T: *I think people needed ways of sort of getting things out, I think. Yeah, I think some of the boys in particular I would say one of their reactions to sort of a lot of stress would be more to break a rule. The popular kids were definitely linked to kind of going out, doing drugs, drinking, sex, those kinds of things. That was always kind of how we were when growing up. It quantified what's cool.*

I wondered if Tamsin was using the term 'getting things out' to mean that there was a kind of psychic pressure which built up when her peers were stressed, and it needed to somehow be expelled. She simply equated 'breaking a rule' – presumably an adult one – with feeling better. But to me, this seemed to represent a sublimated form of anger or aggression. Tamsin believed boys were more willing to use this form of relief than girls, perhaps because they were more reliant on externalising their emotions. This observation echoes the many studies of student behaviour by Luthar (2013), Levine (2006), Galaif et al (2003), Suldo et al (2008), and Lin and Yusoff (2013).

Tamsin also suggested that social popularity hierarchies determined what kind of coping activities were sanctioned by the group. The 'cool' kids – those at the top of the social ladder – were able to define which behaviours were not only socially acceptable, but laudable. In her statement, she hinted that she may have also been one of these students.

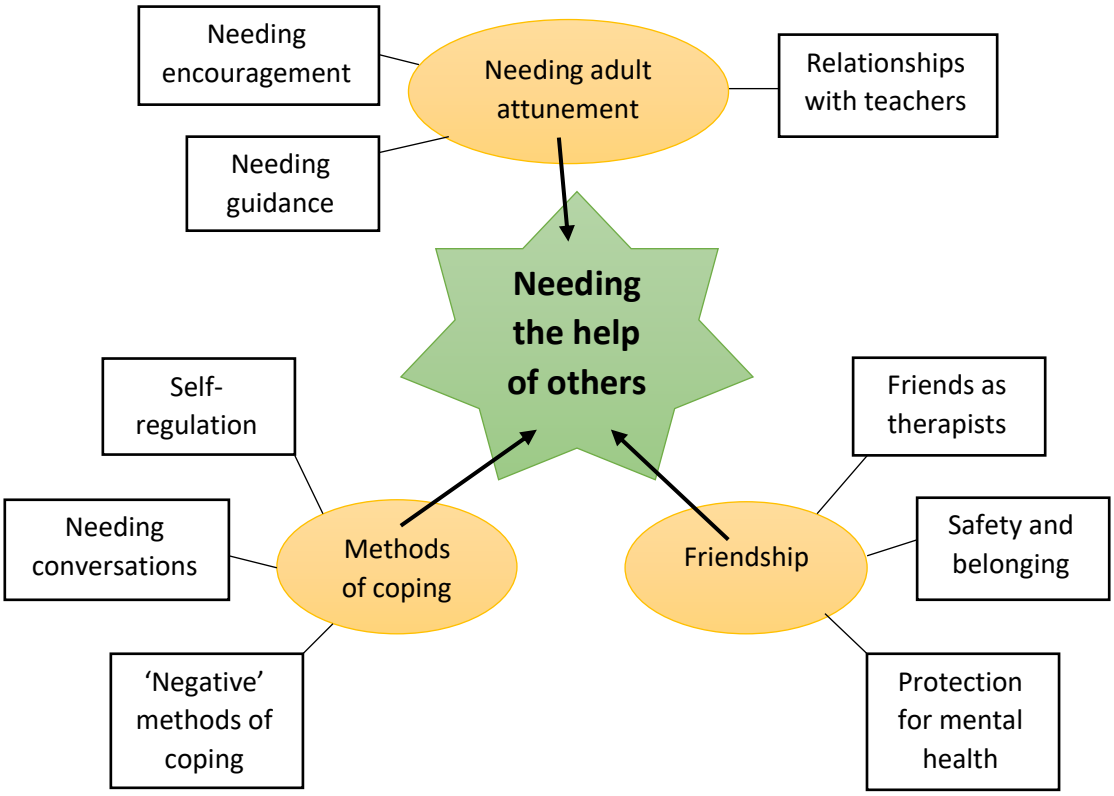
Needing conversations

The participants described situations in which they wanted much more open discussions about mental health and an acknowledgement from adults about the importance of their social and emotional lives. They said that teachers and housemasters were appreciated by students when they showed the capacity to understand mental health issues, especially if these adults were relaxed and knowledgeable, and the ordinary, everyday mentoring they offered was an extremely valuable source of support. Ulrike gave examples of how her teachers' emotional intelligence directly affected her mental health.

> U: *I feel like there were members of staff, particularly the house masters at one point who were really, really good and tried to have more natural conversations about things rather than the very [contrived] classroom setup of 'this is mental health', which just never really sinks in. It doesn't feel personal... it felt like people were very awkward about these kinds of things, and that obviously makes an impression on how the students feel about things because you kind of learn from the adults. So, I would just wish that some of the staff would come and really openly kind of talk about what is normal and what is not.*

This quote supports the recognition that teachers are important role models who have a profound effect on students' attitudes toward their own mental health.

The figure below shows a summary of the topics from Theme #1



Theme #2 - Feeling pressured

Whereas the first theme, 'Needing the help of others', explored the participants' experiences of their relational needs, this second category showed what they felt when those relationships went wrong. In particular, it presented the participants' views on the many pressures they felt, as well as their musings on why they were exposed to so much stress. They reported feeling intense pressure to succeed in their daily lives, and four of the six participants made explicit statements that independent schools were in danger of stressing students to the point of damage as a result. When remembering their senior school experiences, and especially their busy schedules, they identified many different kinds of pressure – some good, but mostly bad – which they said were caused by the unreasonably high standards and restrictive expectations of the adults around them.

It is interesting to note that, most of the time, the participants spoke of others rather than themselves. Although their emotions were still very evident in their narratives, this method of talking about their schools may have provided them with a way of distancing themselves from the emotionally evocative topics they touched on: their own sense of achievement, their vulnerability, anger, or confusion, and their individual needs within relationships with parents, teachers, and peers.

The mental health of all young people

At an early point during the interviews, I asked all the participants what they thought about the mental health of young people in general in order to allow me to reflect on their experiences in relation to those of youths in other circumstances. All the participants said they thought emotional health was steadily deteriorating for all adolescents and young adults. The explanations they offered for this were informed, they said, by their use of social media, online forums and news articles.

On a more personal level, the participants all gave many examples of psychological distress in fellow students or close friends, many of whom were taking prescribed medication to control their conditions. Everyone had considerable knowledge about the symptoms which typically signal psychological problems, such as anxiety, depression, and substance abuse. When they were asked about the causes of poor mental health for youths, they spoke of increasing levels of competition throughout all levels of society, the difficulty of maintaining a good sense of self when using social media, and the challenges of starting a career in the present precarious job market.

The participants agreed in principle that good mental health, or the lack of it, underpins every relationship in one's life, as well as one's personal and academic achievements in school and beyond. Yet each participant implied that independent schools, being different environments from their state counterparts, negatively affected the mental health of students more often than in state-funded schools. In particular, they all believed they had been exposed to a host of special pressures which other young people did not experience.

Privileged young people are invisible

It is particularly interesting to note that, although the participants said they had enjoyed many of their school experiences, a large proportion of their comments about mental health focused on its darker side, in particular, the anxiety and anger in their fellow students. Tamsin thought the special problems of students in independent schools were essentially invisible because the world wrongly assumes that privileged young people don't need anything.

> T: *There is a different kind of set of problems for privileged private school students. When we think a group is privileged, we turn a blind eye, and we say they've got everything. They've got money. They've got a glitzy lifestyle. They've got a great education. They don't need attention on this matter! And they do! So, I think yeah, this is important.*

Tamsin may be implying that she identifies with both sides of this interaction, hinting that 'we' human beings can be intellectually lazy. Although she did not identify herself directly in this quote, I thought I could feel her underlying vulnerability at the time. In particular, she seemed to fear the envy of people who make comparisons between her wealth and theirs, and she showed her anger that their judgemental attitudes, and their unwillingness to look behind the falsity of the 'glitz', resulted in the 'blindness' of them ignoring her needs and those of her peers.

Overly demanding parents

An important category of response was generated by the topic of parents. None of the participants had felt their own parents were too unreasonably 'pushy' or demanding, but each gave copious examples of other parents who were. It is noteworthy that, very often, the parental behaviour they witnessed seemed to upset them, and they were especially critical of parents who were insensitive to their children's needs for love and care or who pushed them much too hard to achieve. The participants were careful, however, to distinguish between 'lovely' parents who appropriately supported their children and unhelpful ones who undermined them.

> U: *There were some very lovely parents as well but some of the most driven, in a really nasty way, people that I've ever come across in my life are, like, parents of people at school.*

Ulrike chose to comment on the very darkest side of parental behaviour when she mentioned the quality of being 'driven'. It seemed she was criticising the rigidity and single-mindedness of parents who wanted something and would do anything to get it, including hurting others. Being 'driven' toward a goal implied that these parents were not amenable to listening to others or compromising. Several of the participants wondered aloud what would make parents behave this way, and Gabriela focused on parents' view of the world being a very difficult place.

> G*: I also think parents tended to be very high achieving and even sometimes outright famous, and they sometimes onset huge expectations on kids, which was tough. It's extreme. I think they were aware of how competitive it is out there, and the level of efforts needed to get to wherever because they've been through it, so they would place that on their kids.*

Gabriela focused on parents' needs for their children to be like themselves, and I wondered whether the 'huge expectations' she mentioned referred only to academic activities or to deeper identity issues as well. She believed these parents were trying to be benevolent since she thought they might possibly have good advice to give. They seemed to want to prepare their children for a critical, but invisible, task: a future test of their strength or ability. But what strength or ability, Gabriela does not say. If she was actually speaking about herself, which she may have been, 'It was tough' and 'It's extreme' conveyed a poignant sense of anxiety at having to meet an immense challenge.

Each participant had mentioned their own parents at some point during their interview, but only two talked about them at length. Gabriella believed both her parents, but particularly her mother, understood some of the pressure she was under, but Lydia seemed not at all surprised when her parents had not understood her situation. They simply could not empathise with her because they could not even imagine her world.

> L: *My parents for example were really there for me but they didn't really know just how hard - they hadn't been through it themselves. I think there are a lot of parents as well that have all these expectations for their kids, like 'you have to get this grade on your exam', but they don't know the amount of work that would take. They also don't know what their kids' mental states are. In my family, it was not really talked about, you know. If I got a bad grade on a test, my dad wouldn't be like, 'Are you feeling okay?' or 'Is there something going on in your life?' It was very much like, 'Why didn't you get this grade?'*

Although she was reluctant to criticise her parents, Lydia also implied they made things worse by always focusing on her schoolwork, especially when she had 'failed'

to get good grades; something which they believed should have been easy. She explained their behaviour by saying that feelings were never discussed in her house, but this implied that her parents could not truly meet her in her reality. She pointed to the importance of listening to her own inner voice, an illustration of what Winnicott called a 'True Self'.

In a further example, Tamsin was somewhat forgiving of 'pushy' parents when they were attempting to gift to their children what they themselves had not had, but she also seemed critical if, instead, they simply wanted to have control over their children. She believed that parents who were too demanding damaged their children by micro-managing them or being too emotionally involved in their children's lives, and this hypervigilance and control, she said, seemed to be growing ever more ubiquitous and intense.

In fact, each participant gave examples of overly demanding parents who not only pushed their children relentlessly but damaged the school community by pressurising teachers into giving students extra attention or high grades which they did not deserve. Tamsin gave the impression that this type of behaviour was an entirely typical occurrence.

> T: *A lot of parents were constantly in the office of the head teachers. 'My child needs more this, more that, more lessons, more concepts, more academic help, more everything'. If parents are really pushing one teacher, then quite often the Head would have to give in just for the sake of them not leaving [the school]. I think there was a sense that you complain enough, you get what you want.*

Tamsin believed that parents in this situation were very powerful in getting what they wanted, even bending the administrators to their will, and it seemed from her comments that the teachers were generally powerless.

On the other hand, Gabriella focused on the consequences for the children. She empathised with students who internalise their parents' harmful ideals, especially when they mirror their parents' negative behaviour.

> G: *There was definitely a culture of parents coming in and having an argument with one of the members of staff about a grade or 'my daughter'. I witnessed it with the kids too. I would see them get so mad and rude and disrespectful to the teacher about the grade that they got, B+ instead of an A. I think these kids were so pressured in different ways and also like [parents] expected certain results and if they didn't get it, it was a big problem.*

Because of this parental attitude, she implied that young people were in danger of developing an overblown sense of entitlement or becoming arrogant and demanding themselves, but she also seemed to have sympathy for them since the consequences of not conforming to the expectations of their parents seemed so dire.

Giving parents 'value for money'

All but one of the participants specifically said that the act of their parents paying for their schooling put an invisible, but powerful, pressure on them to recompense their parents for their financial investment, and it seemed to me that the consequences of this money exchange explained many important aspects of the participants' experiences. I had experienced Suki as a generally upbeat and optimistic young woman who said she had had little to complain about during her somewhat idyllic school years, but this next statement suggested that she also recognised the underlying pressure of 'value for money' at the heart of her independent schooling.

> S: *I think some parents who send their kids to an independent school are, can be, very, very pushy in terms of they want their kids to get the best grades. They feel like they are paying for it, so they feel like there's got to be value there.*

Suki does not specify what exactly this value is, but she suggests that students are required to satisfy the desires of their parents. Tamsin challenged this assumption that money can buy a dream.

> T: *Parents think, okay, if I pay X amount of money a year that means my child will go to Oxbridge. Of course it doesn't! And what does that tell as well?*

Tamsin seems to be commenting on an entire system of interrelated mechanisms when she asks, 'What does that tell?' Was she referring to parental gullibility? Or the assumption that Oxbridge is a good destination for everyone? Perhaps she is inferring that students have to walk a single path to get to university? Money in this quote has a simple transactional quality which, as well as being a practical form of barter, also points out its symbolic value for parents: the possibility of eliminating risk and the need to obtain psychological certainty and safety.

Feeling abandoned

Although the participants observed parents who controlled their children too much, in their view, there were also others who were not involved enough to recognize, and minister to, their children's needs. Some of the participants felt abandoned themselves by well-meaning but neglectful adults who misjudged how much stress or responsibility they could bear. Because these adults had no real understanding of the pressured lives they led, they and their peers were left woefully unsupported at times. Tamsin and Gabriela both made specific references to 'workaholic' parents who were neglectful of their children because they were frequently away from home or preoccupied with their work.

> T: *I think one of the biggest things is neglect quite often, which is a weird one because you might not necessarily associate it with privileged backgrounds.*

But often you have, like, high-flying parents who aren't at home. So it's like… It's a different kind of neglect. It's a whole host of different problems.

Here, Tamsin described how invisible neglect could be, and she suggested that there were other hidden layers of consequence as well.

Overly demanding teachers

All the participants in this study remarked that, when teachers' standards were too impossibly high, this had the potential to wound a student's self-esteem and affect their ability to move forward in life.

S*: The teacher would be much more focused on the people who did well because, if you got a low grade, [he thought] that was just because you weren't trying, or you hadn't worked hard enough, and then that support would be cut off from there.*

Suki expressed this idea when she said that teachers' opinions and behaviour were so powerfully influential that students were highly sensitive to them. A teacher's attention and support seemed to signal respect, but Suki also observed that their help could easily be withdrawn if a student did not achieve the teacher's goals. This suggested that praise was conditional and control oriented, and Suki seemed to experience this as an abandonment and a betrayal of trust.

Time pressure

For the participants, time pressure was a constant source of stress which they each dealt with in their own way. They felt it was important though to distinguish between the actual academic tasks they were set, which were often reasonable and achievable, and the conditions under which they were expected to carry them out. They did not say their academic work was too difficult. In fact, they said just the opposite. All of them had worked extremely hard at school, and each of them had often enjoyed this intensity, but sometimes their psychological equilibrium was compromised.

Too much work!

The participants said portions of their workload were challenging but wonderfully invigorating. Yet having too much work to do could easily overwhelm them. Their overly full schedules meant they had little time off, so they rarely felt completely relaxed. The time pressures at their schools had been intense and relentless, so they

suffered from not having enough time to complete daily homework, to relax, or even to sleep. Opportunities to pursue their individual interests were severely limited and they had had to jettison some of their favourite activities in order to prioritise what would keep their grades up and the adults around them happy.

Each of them reported feeling unhappy when adults expected them to work constantly to improve themselves. Because of this, Gabriela sounded as though she became totally incapable, at times, of contemplating her situation or putting her immediate goals into perspective. She said her behaviour was entirely controlled by outside forces, so her self-care inevitably suffered.

> G: *They would make these very oversubscribed schedules for their kids for example where it's like, you know, 'you're gonna do this and this and this and this' and sign up for all of these different things. The academics just take up your time completely, and it can feel like there's no way you can do all of this. It's like you're just blinded by a constant hum of 'you gotta do this, you have to do this' where you really barely ever actually have time to yourself, or to pause.*

There seemed to be a feeling of anxiety and utter despair in Gabriela's quote when her responsibilities felt never ending and she was 'blinded' to her own internal being. Erikson (1968, 1973) would have recognised the failure of Gabriela's environment to provide her with the support she needed as she attempted to 'pause' and listen to her own needs and motivations.

Other participants also said that the continual pressure to 'do' sometimes made gaining a personal perspective on their experiences nearly impossible. Their statements illustrated the theories of Winnicott who had much to say about the effects of 'doing' rather than 'being'. He believed a state of rest, or what he called 'play', is a vital circumstance for growth because it allows an individual to commune with their 'True Self'. Lydia said she was denied this space and, as a result, her own internal voice was eventually lost to her.

> L: *Then you base yourself off of what everyone else is and what everyone else thinks you should be. My desires were very much in line with I think what the school was promoting, what parents were promoting. So there really isn't time for self-discovery. I feel like a lot of my peers, when I was graduating with them, really did have still a very delicate self-identity, a fragile sense of self. We didn't have much time to develop ourselves as people, as human beings. What is it that I like? What do I want to do? Do I agree with this or do I disagree?*

Lydia's statement put me in mind of Winnicott's belief that, as a result of needing to comply with the 'impingements' of a hostile environment, the creation of an external 'False Self' is necessary in order to protect an inner 'True Self' from harm. Lydia showed how she created this 'False Self' by internalising, or absorbing, the goals and

values of the adults around her, and she implied that her entire development was affected as a result.

No time for relationships

As previously mentioned, the sheer number of hours spent in school meant the participants had few opportunities to sample activities outside of school or to experience potentially valuable relationships within the wider world. Tamsin believed the time pressure could even prevent her from building close relationships with family and, thus, she felt her emotional life sometimes suffered. In a similar vein, no matter how much enthusiasm Frances brought to her education, she said there was often a relational price to pay for having such limited time. She articulated her internal conflict when she stated:

> F*: I really liked school in general, but it was a lot of pressure, a lot of work…really a lot of work. I couldn't go out on weekends. I didn't even talk to my family anymore! I really liked it though. It was so stimulating, and our teachers were great.*

Lack of sleep

Neurologists advise that, during adolescence, young people need to sleep well in order to facilitate healthy brain development[120]. However, in my experience, students from academically rigorous schools often sacrifice a considerable amount of sleep in their efforts to complete homework or manage their busy schedules. Lydia gave a good example of this when she said:

> L: *I am quite weak in the sense that if I reach a certain part of the night I can't study anymore, but I would sometimes set my alarm for, crazy, like 4 a.m. so I could continue to study, or to get that thing finished. So, there was definitely a lot of sleep sacrificed during those years.*
>
> Researcher: *Why didn't your parents say 'Books down. Bed'?*
>
> L: *Maybe your parents talk to your friends' parents. And they say 'Oh, my kid was up until 4 a.m.' 'Oh, mine too.' Like, it's very normal. [But] I think that parents also had this concern because, you know, those are your kids. They are concerned by the fact that they're staying up so late and stuff, but it wasn't something you would stop because it's, kind of, it's the norm.*

Lydia seemed to consider the dilemma alternately from a child's, then a parent's, point of view, while also asking me to imagine myself in both positions. Although she

[120] Walker, 2017

commented on parents in general, I sensed that her own situation had been similar. Through speaking of her friends' parents, she tangentially conveyed that her own parents loved her and were concerned for her welfare, but she also implied that it was difficult for them to enforce appropriate boundaries around eating well or getting enough sleep because, she said, the dominant imperative to excel academically had numbed them to the physical and psychological cost of her overexertion. Interestingly, Lydia seemed entirely used to this situation. On the one hand, she gave the impression it was not the least bit unusual to sacrifice self-care in this way. On the other, she also sensed that her own behaviour was unhealthy and 'crazy'.

Pressure to grow up too fast

In his book, *Play and Reality*, Winnicott states that *'immaturity is an essential element of health at adolescence. There is only one cure for immaturity and that is the passage of time and the growth into maturity that time may bring (Winnicott, 1071, p. 198).* The psychoanalyst Adam Phillips (1998) also believes that the modern world leaves little time for human development to unfold naturally. He describes the present-day process of growing up as a manic rush toward rationality, independence and self-control. Several of the participants described this pressure to develop too quickly. They talked about adolescence as a time of confusion and experimentation where adult capacities are not yet fixed. Yet, they said, being successful in their schools had required the very early development, and skilful use of, sophisticated organisational and time-management skills.

Suki, Tamsin, and Ulrike felt this organisation was something they could do quite naturally, but Gabriela, Frances, and Lydia had found the skills necessary to organise their priorities very difficult to learn and even harder to maintain. Lydia was articulate about the pressure to 'produce' as she pointed out that she was not yet developmentally ready to take on many of the challenges she was given.

> L: *You're not going to be some really skilful worker at the age of 15, 16, when, you know, you just got Facebook for the first time and it's a temptation. You're not going to be your most professional self at such a young age, and you shouldn't be, really. To have a social life and academic life, it really took a lot of skilful deliberation and organisation of time. You really have to become a manager of your own life. And to be thrown into a really rigorous academic system plus being an insecure teenage girl, I really doubted that I had the capabilities of succeeding and I had a lot of performance anxiety so I would study SO much and then I'd get a test and I would be like, Ah! I had forgotten everything! I constructed this reality that I wasn't able to perform, and that was really hard.*

Lydia noted that being an insecure teenager was entirely natural, yet she also seemed to think her level of performance anxiety and self-doubt had been above the norm. Who or what was to blame? Throughout her interview, she said her academic and social challenges had been immense. She believed the need to perform on demand had compromised her ability to think, yet here, she also implied that the stress was a direct result of her own attitude. She made herself responsible for her own insecurity when saying, 'I constructed this reality'. But Winnicott might have recognized Lydia's difficulties as the result of having to comply with an overly harsh external reality.

> *'... the world and its details being recognized but only as something to be fitted in with or demanding adaption. Compliance carries with it a sense of futility for the individual and is associated with the idea that nothing matters and life is not worth living* (Winnicott, p.87).

The primacy of grades

Most of the participants complained bitterly of their school's emphasis on top grades as the single signifier of 'success', because they said this exclusivity negated their other 'more human' aspects. Frances believed her school had not paid enough attention to students as unique individuals, and Lydia put it very succinctly when she said:

> L: *There is one definition of success, which is grades. It's not like what you can achieve emotionally or... I don't know. It's very much black and white. You get this grade, you're this type of person. You're doing well, you're doing badly.*

In reference to this black and white judgement, Lydia insinuated that adults who judged the worth of students so simply were doing them a grave injustice, but I wondered why they would do so. This put me in mind of Bibby (2018) who recognised the powerful anxieties which are hidden beneath the safety of quantifiable exam success, when the act of grading students '*may cover over an older terror: the impossibility of education itself and the uncertainty of knowledge'*[121].

Competition: Having to be 'the best'

Throughout their narratives, the participants noticed there were good and bad types of competition. Sometimes a feeling of competitiveness would be motivating, but often it was another significant source of pressure, especially when everyone was competing for the same recognition. In the next quote, Frances conveyed the all-

[121] Bibby, 2018, p. 151

pervasive nature of competition within her school. She described how much she was affected by the success or failure that resulted from being continually compared to others.

> F: *For a student that's doing good it's nice because they always praise you, but... if you're not, then it's just, it just brings you down and you can never get up, back up afterwards. That's the thing. It was very, very competitive. I don't think that was very good.*

The situation which Frances described felt so dangerous to me. To her, failure meant 'you could never get up again'. Then the damage to self-esteem and the inability to function would be permanent.

Other participants also discussed the need to compete in order to succeed, as well as the continual demand to improve themselves. Gabriela made sense of this by describing an underlying subtle, but powerful, assumption which shaped the goals and values of parents and children: the cultural imperative to always strive, compete, and never rest.

> G: *Because parents believed they [their children] 'could', then they automatically 'should'. Because they [parents] think it's important in the competitive world. It's a really big phenomenon. I feel like the competition aspect of it is huge.*

This aspirational attitude seemed to directly mirror the results of a study by Luthar *et al* (2013) which reflected on the anxieties of middle-class parents with respect to their children's futures. It may also speak to what Gee (2000) believes is the capitalist world culture's effect on 'elite' young people who tend to see themselves as 'products to be developed'. In relating the development of people to the development of things, he says:

> *'…our thinking about thinking, learning, and schools is, in turn, coming to be aligned with our thinking about new capitalist businesses… In a hyper-competitive world, everyone is producing high quality products or going out of business.'* (Gee, 2000, p. 47)

Valuing Oxbridge

In my experience, the intense competition to achieve admission to a 'top' university is a personal ordeal which many students within private schools must face. When considering universities, all of the participants said that Oxbridge, the Russell Group, and the American Ivy League schools were promoted above all others. Although the opportunity to access these universities might be entirely welcomed by some students, the participants remarked on their schools offering them much too narrow

a band of choices. In Suki's next comment, she sounded as though she thought it was all just hype.

> S: *We had to go on this evening to a sort of presentation about Oxford and Cambridge, and why we should pick them, and why they are the BEST universities in the whole world, and all that.*

In four of their schools, the more academically able students were separated out from the rest of their schoolmates to be specially tutored for entrance to Oxbridge. Frances was separated from most of her school mates and educated differently than the rest of her class. At first, she enjoyed the lofty social position she achieved as a result, but when she then did not receive an offer from Oxford, her fall in status was immediate and she became socially marginalised.

> F: *The school selected this group of students that would be able to apply to Oxford and suddenly it gave me this really big status that wasn't I think very healthy because we just became a group of really cool and interesting people. But then at the same time when some of us didn't get in [to Oxbridge] or didn't get what we wanted, the students who weren't successful were just looked down on and no one really cared about them anymore. I don't think it was healthy, because then when I ended up not getting an interview and then not getting in, suddenly I just didn't know what to tell people anymore because they all expected me to go and now I didn't. It had brought my expectations up way too high.*

In the statement above, Frances' grammar changed suddenly from 'them' to 'us'. Her pain was palpable when she recalled falling dramatically from the top of the social and academic tree to the very bottom. Frances implied that it was the system that had unrealistically inflated her dreams and she felt it was naïve of her to have counted on success.

Two of the other participants eventually won places at Oxbridge universities but, as happy as they both were with their new environments, they were also somewhat cynical about the system they had had to negotiate in order to get there. Tamsin was one of the successful ones, but she still had great sympathy for those students who would not be able to join her. In addition, it seemed to her that, even when a student did become one of the chosen few, they too had suffered terrible pressure to succeed. In her opinion, no one actually won.

> T: *At schools like this, the Oxbridge mentality is extraordinarily harmful on students. It's incredibly hard for all those not applying to Oxbridge because it's basically saying we value you less. But it's also the amount of pressure then put on the Oxbridge candidates. It's crazy as well.*

Parents wanting 'safe' success

Lydia was particularly articulate in naming the push for an elite university as 'safe success'. Even though she eventually achieved her goal, she reflected on her achievements differently now that she was at her university.

> L: *I think that, you know, teachers and parents want you to go to these schools because it's a safe success. It's seen that if you go to X or Y University you are always going to be able to put that on your CV and maybe you can get a job that earns you a lot of money. If you've gone to a really great school it will definitely help you up, but it was a really 'cookie-cutter' definition of what a top school was. Oxford, Cambridge, the Ivy Leagues, all the top ones. I think that parents and kids alike enjoy saying 'Oh, I went to Cambridge!' or 'My son went to Oxford!'. There is definitely a big element of image at my school, [but] it completely disregards all the complexities of life, and if you'll like university or not, or if it's the best place for you.*

Lydia put parts of this statement in the present tense, which signifies how much her school experiences still affected her. Here, she said the opportunity to look back on her schooling had allowed her to see the status and image-building elements of what she had been through. She herself had consulted the league tables in order to choose her university, but now she seemed to see the situation differently. She sounded disappointed in the adults around her when they could not be trusted to support the individuality of their children. It seemed the lure of promised 'safety', to an elite job and to financial success, was too enticing to contemplate any alternatives.

Conforming to an image

The participants said that having to be 'a certain kind of person' within their schools and family systems required them to continually conform to the cultural ideals of personal strength, dedication, and excellence. Tamsin also remarked on private schools' need to advertise a particular image of themselves within the educational marketplace in order to entice parents to enrol their children. As a result, she said, each school must construct a public image that promotes its own particular brand of elite education. Lydia talked about this image building with considerable disdain. In particular, she resented that her school took credit for the success of students instead of acknowledging the hard-won achievements of the young people themselves, as if they were just products to be advertised.

> L: *When you look up [a school] online, what they put on their webpage is what the IB results were from last year and all the statistics about X amount of students go to these colleges and blah-blah. So I think that there is an element of schools, especially private schools that you have to pay for, wanting to push*

this certain agenda that they are, you know, producing, creating these kids that are successful and going to these incredible academic institutions.

Tamsin said her own behaviour in school fulfilled the aspirations of her parents and teachers, but she also said the severe pressure to be 'elite', had limited the type of career options or lifestyles available to her. In the following quote, she put herself in others' shoes, imagining the guilt and fear they might feel if they rejected the adult-constructed paths which had been mapped out for them. Again, as she spoke of others, I wondered if she was describing her own life too.

T: *When you go to these kinds of schools, you're expected to leave school and become 'successful'. So I think there's also a fear of 'what if I'm not someone who's gonna grow up and have two-and-a-half children and a white picket fence house? It's tricky if you've been given this enormous privilege and had thousands of pounds spent on your education to kind of finish it and think 'I don't want to go to university! I don't wanna be a banker!' Like, that can be quite a scary feeling and very damaging, because that guilt must be enormous. And certainly I've had friends who had thought 'I'm gonna go [to university] even if I'm unhappy because otherwise it's a waste of the resources and the privilege I've had.*

Tamsin seemed to be fighting for her own sense of self and the right to make future lifestyle choices which would feel personally worthwhile. Her identification with 'scary' feelings and 'enormous guilt' suggested that she too had felt these feelings and, perhaps, suffered this dilemma. Although she habitually spoke of others rather than herself, her parents had undoubtedly made the same sacrifices for her. Could she justify 'wasting' their resources in this way?

Fear of failure

The possibility of failure seemed to be one of the most painful topics for the participants. In her interview, Tamsin presented herself as an entirely confident young woman who very rarely failed at anything, but she also reflected often on the external social mechanisms which she felt determined an individual's failure. When the very worst happened, who would really be responsible for failure? Did students simply not work hard enough? Did adults set them unreasonably high competitive hurdles? Or were they encouraged to expect far too much?

T: *One of my really close friends was told, stupidly, from a very young age, 'You're an Oxford girl' in inverted commas. 'You're very clever. You're talented. You're just what they're looking for. You're the right sort of person'. Then she didn't get in and she didn't know what to do with herself. She was depressed and stopped eating because everything that her schooling had been building up to was taken from her... She'd failed her school because her school had said 'you're gonna get in' and then she didn't. And then, you know, you think well,*

is that my fault? Why? So I think that is one of the biggest problems, that kind of pressure.

As in Frances' case, Tamsin's friend had been encouraged, but failed, to reach for the top and the consequences had been dire indeed. She seemed angry that students like her were set on a seemingly straightforward path which was, in reality, highly risky. I wondered whether her friend's shocking self-destruction was a suppression of her rage at the betrayal of her trust.

Perfectionism

It was particularly striking that all the participants noted the very high incidence of serious eating disorders amongst their close friends and peers. They described in rich detail the development of typical symptoms and what their schools did or, more often, did not do to help. Although they recognised that the paralysing symptoms betrayed a powerful underlying need for control, they also believed their privileged environments actively promoted a destructive image of perfection which ultimately contributed to the condition.

F: *She started dropping all of her friends... she started really closing in and - I mean she was celebrated by the school as this huge genius you know? I know that the school didn't do anything really to address that when there was clearly an issue. All [the teachers] were doing was giving her good grades and saying 'You're an amazing student. You could go to a great university!' and so I think that didn't really help because she was just encouraged to continue.*

This brought to mind Bibby's (2018) discussion on perfectionism and eating disorders. She describes how teachers can 'collude' with a young person's 'false self' by ignoring concerns about their health and, instead, focusing exclusively on their grades. She believes this encouragement of 'precocious' abilities in students poses a serious threat to a student's 'being', even risking their internal 'annihilation'[122].

Guilt

The participants knew that their parents and teachers had invested significant amounts of time, effort, and money in helping them to be successful, and they felt guilty if, in their own judgement, they 'wasted' any of these resources or failed to give their parents sufficient 'value for money'.

U: *I remember a lot of people have talked about this... you have this kind of constant feeling of guilt because you always could be working. It's not like*

[122] Bibby, 2018, p.100

completing something that has a set endpoint. You are just constantly bettering your skills and it's a very much broader thing to do. So you never feel satisfied in the sense of like 'Oh, now I've perfected this' because it's impossible to perfect... You always feel like there could be more that you're doing. I guess there is always the feeling like 'Oh, we could get in trouble because we're not working when we should be!'

It seemed to me that Ulrike was discussing both the internal psychic forces which motivated her to excel and the external social forces which influenced her out of fear of punishment. Ulrike's life was unusual in that she was training as a professional artist while also attending her academically rigorous school. She was obviously dedicated to improving her skills, but I was pleased she realised that perfection was unrealistic. Not feeling satisfied was then a sign of dedication rather than harmful self-criticism.

Having no right to complain

Most teenagers complain about the severity of adult constraints, since normal adolescence is a transition period in which young people attempt to increase their autonomy and redefine their dependency needs[123], but the participants described a number of times in which their attempts to self-determine aspects of their lives were either misunderstood or harshly judged by the adults around them. When the participants looked back on all their experiences at school, there were so many circumstances where they had wanted to effect change in the world, but they simply lacked enough understanding of themselves or their situations to be able to convey what they were thinking or feeling at the time. Most importantly, they were not quite sure they were legitimately entitled to complain. Their tremendous advantages, and the obvious successes they had achieved as a result, seemed to negate their right to ask for anything more. Gabriela explained the issue clearly.

G: *I witnessed it with a lot of my friends, where they felt almost like they couldn't have issues or struggle or something because they were, you know, obviously lucky and privileged and, you know, I think there was - I mean, I'm thinking specifically with my friends but, like, a lot of guilt. I feel like if you had an issue or you felt really stressed there was a very big chance that the person right next to you was just as stressed so maybe you wouldn't really feel like you should speak up because it's kind of like the general feeling.*

[123] Erikson, 1968, 1973

Resilience

Although the participants gave examples of the many circumstances which undermined their ability to cope, it is also important to recognize that they had enjoyed being challenged and had thrived on moderate amounts of stress which helped them to focus on their work.

> U: *I think it depends on the person. I personally have never had any problems with mental health, and that kind of environment suited me. I enjoyed being pushed and stretched. I enjoyed the system. School was an interesting place to be because you could really see how different people react to stress. I don't know how much of that is something that you can learn as a skill at school, or whether it even should be something you learn at school, but I think you definitely could see a difference within people how they handle it. I think I came away with a lot of self-awareness of my abilities because you're pushed. For me it was the right amount. I learned what I was capable of in a way.*

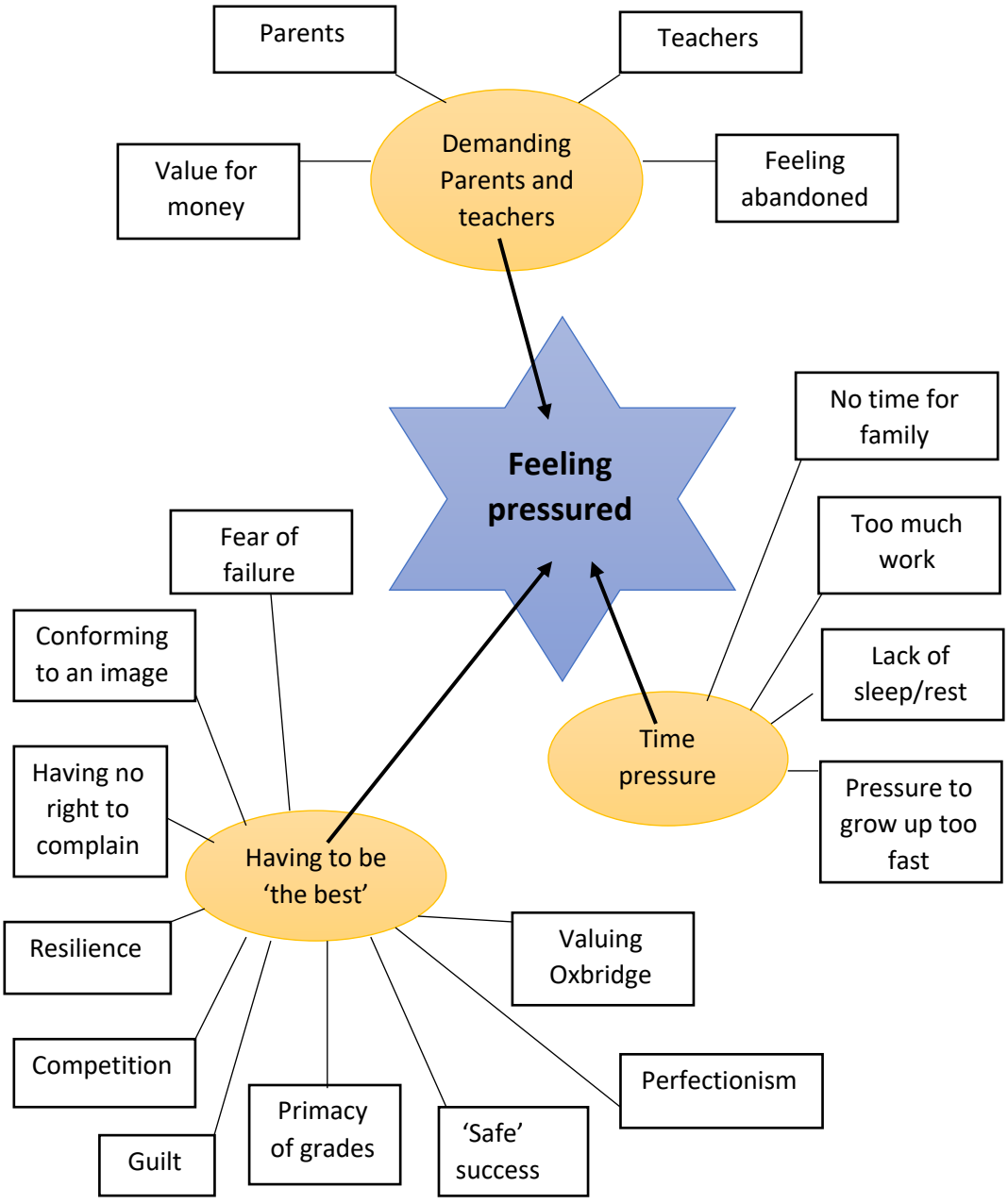
Like many of the other participants, Ulrike seemed to believe that good stress taught her to be resilient and facilitated a good sense of self by defining the true boundaries of her abilities. However, she made the distinction between this good stress, which could be a potent motivator, and bad stress which could overwhelm a student's ability to cope. Ulrike also recognized that her peers had different natural tolerances for stress. Perhaps she is wondering what would happen if everyone were 'taught' to be resilient? Would the nature of competition change?

A focus on the future

When Tamsin looked back at her time in school from her position as a university student, one of the last things she said took in the whole landscape of her school experience.

> *Tamsin: I think it's really sad that school has become a stepping-stone rather than enjoying it while you're there. When you go to school, you shouldn't always just be thinking about university and getting somewhere else. You should enjoy school for being in school.*

The figure below shows a summary of the topics from Theme #2



Theme #3 - Ambivalence

Overall, I believe this superordinate theme captured the most important elements of the participants' recollections since it portrayed the moral dilemmas and clashes of feelings which resulted from their school experiences. An analysis of their transcripts suggested that they had struggled with a variety of confusing feelings, such their desire to reconcile their gratitude with their anger at having to conform to the cultural norms of their group. Although each person saw their past schooling differently, I was left with the impression that these older and wiser versions of themselves still carried a sense of ambivalence about their school years which lived inside them each day and shaped their present reactions to the world.

Feeling grateful but feeling damaged

All the participants described their circumstances in school as 'privileged', although they described that privilege in different ways. They all talked about having had access to resources, such as wealth and special opportunities which others had been denied. But more subtle ideas emerged as well, such as the advantages that high social status affords, and the individual care and support they had been able to rely on to help them develop their personal potentials. Ulrike felt she had been 'noticed' in a way which other people were not. She believed she had been bequeathed an autonomy and power which others did not have, and she recognised her family legacy – what sociologists call 'cultural capital' – as having made her path much easier.

> U: *if you say privileged education to me it would be kind of the care that goes into it. [Whereas] you might get left to your own devices, you [instead] have a kind of a system in place and you're looked after. I guess a feeling of not being one of the masses and masses is quite a privileged feeling. And I think also just having resources available to you.*

Suki mentioned the wonderful facilities available in her school and the exclusivity that separated her from the mediocrity of unmotivated or unproductive groups of people. Frances talked about having been given more respect and deference because of her privileged position, and Lydia was simply thankful for having been born with 'privileged' traits; innate abilities, such as curiosity, which had helped her to thrive in school and at university.

Too much of a good thing

There were obvious feelings of ambivalence in the participants' attempts to explain how different types of parental or teacher attention had helped or harmed them. At times they felt abandoned by those they needed whereas at others they felt invaded and over-controlled, but rarely could they articulate what it was that made these experiences so confusing for them. How could they feel justified in criticising the people who so obviously intended to help them? They struggled to articulate how having 'too much' of something valuable could destroy the very thing it was meant to protect: too much attention, too much independence, too much help all resulted in too much pressure. Yet the participants also sympathised with the caring concerns of the adults around them. They realised their parents loved them and that their teachers pushed them hard so they could succeed. They could see that even administrators struggled to balance the routine systems of their schools with their desire to truly educate each child individually.

Lydia encapsulated this dilemma very well when she described the personal consequences of her rigorous IB programme.

> L: *I learned discipline, self-discipline, and how to really work for something over an extended period of time, which is something that is so valuable and that is really amazing that I had the opportunity to do something like that, but I did think it was traumatic when, right at the end, the stress I felt during that time was really, I'm not exaggerating, like, crazy! And that wasn't just me. Everyone was so stressed. I worked so hard, but I take away from it a level of discipline, but that has to be kept in check. I've had to mould it into something desirable. When I was finished with the IB, I told my parents I will never let my children do the IB. I would never put them through that.*

This quote suggested that Lydia was continually caught between the two poles of feeling strong and feeling weak. She seemed to believe her hard-won self-discipline had to be softened somehow and kept under control so that it did not undermine her ability to live her life well. Lydia had conveyed the feeling throughout her interview that she wanted to be able to relax - to be kind to herself - but here she stated that she must instead be continually vigilant, and actively 'mould' her attitudes to maintain her balance.

Good and bad wealth

Independent schools are, by nature, schools where parents have enough personal wealth to pay yearly school fees. As such, these institutions are, for the most part,

made up of people who have a certain level of wealth which is above the norm[124]. In the next quote, Lydia compared her wealth to others' at her school while attempting to decide when using wealth was legitimate and when it was not.

> L: *I was surrounded by extreme wealth and that would allow you to travel. It would allow you to go to my school in the first place because it's really expensive. But we were surrounded by people who could spend a lot of money on clothes, or they could go out and spend crazy amounts of money every night.*

Lydia explained here that spending money for educational experiences could be acceptable but that more conspicuous consumption might denote greed or irresponsibility. When, she wondered, is having 'crazy amounts of money' too much? It is interesting to note though that, compared to all the other participants, her family's wealth level was considerably higher, and this may have caused her to be particularly sensitive to public censure or envy. It is interesting to note that her particular attitude toward wealth was also noted by Sherman (2017) who researched the values and behaviour of wealthy couples in New York.

More guilt

When I began this doctoral project, I had expected the participants to feel more 'entitled', or at least to be oblivious of their many advantages. Yet, although they clearly took full advantage of their many privileges, at no point did I get the sense they felt they deserved the tremendous gifts they had been given. Instead, they were keenly aware of social inequalities and believed 'everyone should have the opportunity to get a great education'. Yes, they felt enormously lucky, but they also spoke in great detail about the guilt they carried as a result of their exceptional circumstances. The experience of being judged in university by other students from more humble backgrounds was painful for Tamsin and this made her consider the morality of her privileged position in the world.

> T: *It's really hard because you're often made to feel guilty for having that privilege, I think. And when you come to university there's a lot of judgement around 'Oh you went to a private school' from people who didn't because… well how is it fair, in a lot of ways? Like, education should be equal, one would hope.*

Tamsin's phrase, 'made to feel guilty', suggested there was something about the outside world which forced itself into her psyche unbidden. But, later in her interview, she used her 'unearned privilege' to 'do good' in the world, and perhaps this was an attempt to redress some of the inequality. These thoughts again

[124] Savage et al, 2015

reminded me of Suki's description of her inclusive school where everyone had had the opportunity to participate and everyone was treated equally.

Emotional wellbeing versus academic wellbeing

The participants seemed to believe their elite schooling had given them the opportunity to hone crucially important academic and social skills which would increase their confidence and help them to succeed. However, they also appeared to suffer from internal conflicts as they struggled to reconcile opposing personal values: wanting to stand out while also to fitting in; wanting to be exceptional while embracing their 'good enough' qualities and vulnerabilities; and presenting a polished image of success while also connecting to their own unique developmental needs and allowing their true selves to unfold.

Mixed messages from adults

The participants' transcripts showed that their ambivalent feelings about their past schooling were often a direct result of the mixed messages they received from adults who were themselves trying to accommodate the opposing goals of developmental wellbeing versus academic wellbeing. The teachers who set strict homework schedules were also the concerned adults who worried about the stress and fatigue they saw in their students. Parents who cared about their child's sense of self and emotional stability could also be hypercritical if exam grades were at stake. Lydia recognised this when she said:

> L: *I had this one history teacher who was amazing. I love her. She always said, 'just enjoy life' and 'don't get too caught up in this', but then she gave a lot of notes to do... There were all sorts of adults and teachers that would say you need rest, but then they would assign ridiculous amounts of homework. So, there is kind of this double-standard.*

In this case, it seemed the need to 'do' trumped the desire to 'be', and I was aware that this 'crazy' situation went against my own value system as well as Lydia's. Mixed messages such as these are sometimes call 'double binds' in psychology. They are recognised as especially painful and paralysing dilemmas which cannot be resolved, only balanced. It seemed Lydia had been left to her own devices to grapple with these issues.

Avoidance of mental health issues versus engagement

Whereas all the participants said they were concerned about the poor mental health of their peers, and they supported making mental health services freely available in schools, none had ever considered asking for counselling themselves. In fact, they said they would never have sought therapeutic help in school, no matter how emotionally distressed they were.

This was surprising and, given their self-descriptions and the high levels of stress they said they had experienced, it is possible they might have actually benefitted from some sort of personal therapeutic support. Frances had suffered a significant bereavement during her last year in secondary school but, although counselling was offered to her and she could see at the time that it might have helped her, she decided against it, saying that her mental health issues were much too personally sensitive to share with an adult. In a similar vein, Gabriela had this to say about discussing her mental health, even with her parents:

> G: *I don't think I was ever that open with my parents about my own mental health. I think we had a close relationship and I think more recently that I've shared more, but I didn't then because it can feel very private so maybe I didn't want to. I think they had to work into it and just attune.*

Gabriela was not quite sure why she needed to hide her vulnerability from her parents, but she did want them to know her by 'attuning' to her deeper self. Her statement gave me insight into my own research task as well. The participants had implored me to pay attention to their experiences, but I was seldom given direct access to their sensitive inner worlds. Instead, I had to intuit and interpret the things they felt from their statements about others.

Societal taboo

Every one of the participants had identified a general, underlying, societal 'taboo' against seeking specific psychological support in their schools, even when they could see their fellow students were in need of professional help. Students simply learned to cope on their own and got on as best they could with everyday life. The following statement from Tamsin, and similar ones made by each of the participants, pointed to the possibility of a systemic social imperative in private schools against admitting vulnerability.

> T: *I've seen that a lot amongst my friends, of people who were going through difficult periods in their life and feel like it's wrong to talk about it, or they can't talk about it for some reason. And I think it's particularly great that you've worked quite a lot with private schools, and I think that there is definitely a kind of a stigmatization in those kinds of environments.*

So, it seemed that the participants were not alone in rejecting available help. Many of them said it was the fear of being seen as weak or unsuccessful which forced them to hide their true feelings behind a façade. But, the implication was that hiding was both protective and potentially destructive because the need for psychological care could not then be recognised or attended to.

Feeling exposed

Tamsin believed that young people become exposed emotionally when disclosing mental distress. The ambivalent feelings she conveyed seemed to speak to the heart of why these young people seemed so apprehensive about counselling.

> T: *I think there are a lot of young people having issues with their mental health and, for a whole number of reasons, they are not getting the right kind of treatment, or they don't have the right vocabulary to even voice that they're going through these things. I do think people treat them differently [when they identify with mental health issues], which might be a good thing because being careful with people who are more vulnerable is never a bad thing, but they might feel like they are being treated differently because they've been labelled in some way, and people make assumptions that might not be true.*

Tamsin's image of not knowing the right words implied both an inability to understand the internal language of the psyche and an inability to communicate its subtlety and depth in a way that would guarantee its correct interpretation by others. In thinking about Erikson's life stage theories (1968), her cautious attitude may have reflected a general adolescent mistrust of adults, but it may also have been rooted in her own experience.

Accessing mental health services

Frances' school had neither a school counsellor nor procedures to assess the pastoral care needs of students, but all of the other participants' schools had at least some sort of provision. Most had staff or prefects who were officially responsible for the general wellbeing of students, and there were widely differing standards of pastoral care ranging from casual, everyday interactions with teachers to therapeutic consultations with highly trained psychological professionals.

Five out of six participants had had school counsellors of some sort, although most were available only very occasionally. Suki said her school had benefitted from a part time counsellor, but that the woman was not at all a familiar face to most students.

S: *There was a school counsellor but I'm not really too sure how - I think you would have had to go through your tutor to talk to her. I never spoke to her personally, but I did notice her around the school a few times. There may have been more people seeing her than I knew but my interpretation was that everyone was, or most people were quite content, quite happy. They had someone to support them, someone to talk to. You could go to the Head or the Deputy Head but there were Sixth Form Prefects and a House Prefect as well... [But] I think it wasn't necessarily advertised... I think if you had issues, I think you would have had to sort of maybe ask what to do.*

It sounded as though Suki was worried that a young person would have to identify themselves as vulnerable before the access road to help would be revealed. The phrase 'sort of maybe ask' makes this whole process sound very tentative indeed. In fact, going to the Headmaster or the Department Head sounded quite frightening to me and I doubted I would have been capable of doing it at her age.

Gabriella and Lydia had each known family friends who were counsellors, yet, surprisingly, this familiarity had still not convinced them to use services themselves. In Gabriela's next comment, she gave a reason.

G: *I think there was a taboo at my school against the counsellor. It was considered maybe a bit weird. I don't know, because I'm so pro, you know, talking to a counsellor or a therapist and like that. But I think among teenagers that's weird, you know? That's not something you do. That's like considered weak or you can't handle it.*

There seemed to be a split here between what Gabriela 'knew' about the benefits of counselling, and what she 'felt' about accessing help in this way. This attitude was also found in a number of research studies[125], all of which determined that individuals in wealthy communities do not consider counselling because of their concerns about disclosing vulnerability. In my experience, this is also a reflection of the general stigma surrounding mental health in schools, as well as difficulties schools have in guaranteeing students confidentiality while also making counselling more visible, understandable, and approachable[126].

As mentioned previously, the participants' personal refusal to seek any form of talking therapy conflicted with their evident distress at the thought of other people being denied mental health support. In contrast to the negative opinion Gabriela expressed above, she mused on the ultimate value of being able to talk about emotions and personal problems, and it describes well the curative effect of both friendship and counselling.

[125] Puura, 1998; Luthar, 2003; Wolfe and Fodor, 1996
[126] Cooper, 2013

G: I think where you get a lot of value is when you're in an environment that you feel comfortable enough that you can be vulnerable. Put down your guard, which is really hard to achieve. That's like when you can have those conversations where you're really exploring with someone and maybe you're realizing things in the moment about yourself, about why you're feeling that way. That's what you want. That's huge. That's really the curative effect.

A clash of values

Whereas the participants showed signs of having great respect for counsellors, they also seemed to distrust many of their values, motives, and actions. In many ways, school counsellors advocate self-care and the acceptance of vulnerability, but I wondered whether the promotion of these mindful or introspective attitudes might have confused the participants since, in their schools, personal strength, independence, academic excellence and an image of success were so highly valued. In a typically succinct comment, Lydia said:

L: *It was an internal thing. Our school had the counsellor and she would talk to me sometimes, but she would tell me things that I would only later realise myself, like 'it doesn't matter', or 'do your best'. I wouldn't really believe it.*

Lydia appeared to be struggling with the two opposing, and sometimes irreconcilable, values of caring for her emotional wellbeing versus the personal sacrifices she needed to make in order to achieve academic excellence. The participants had all said that the demand for top grades had sometimes overwhelmed them, yet if they made the decision to care more for themselves psychologically, this would entail giving themselves more permission to rest, an attitude which might also relax their desire to strive and their subsequent ability to excel.

Unfortunately, the participants said their teachers seemed totally unaware of this fundamental conflict, since they insisted the students work non-stop, then simply encouraged them to share their concerns with counsellors as a way of 'solving their problems'. In a final blow to counselling, Ulrike believed her school counsellor was mostly used for either very serious mental health conditions, or as a disciplinarian.

U: *I think normally a person would see a school counsellor as a result of being in trouble for something or already sort of quite major difficulties having already come up, so it was discipline, and it seemed very much more retrospective than pre-emptive.*

It is hard for me to imagine volunteering to make use of a counsellor under these circumstances, but unfortunately, according to Cooper (2013), the use of counselling for disciplinary purposes is a relatively common experience in British schools.

Mental health education

Four of the participants said they regretted their schools had not been more proactive in teaching them about their own mental health since they believed it would have helped them to cope better with both adolescence and the pressure of school. Even when their schools tried to provide occasional psychoeducational events, the participants were often not willing to take part because they felt the topics were not personally relevant to them. Ulrike was quite dismissive of her school's attempt to provide something of value.

> U: *They would have people come to the school during lunch or something and give a talk about some mental health issue, but I don't think they ever made the effort to involve the kids... It didn't feel relevant and I think that was like the only way they really addressed mental health.*

It sounded as though Ulrike felt 'talked at' rather than 'talked with', and, given her core values of making connections and having conversations, the events described above would hardly have counted as significant encounters. It is also likely that a speakers' sincere attempts to engage busy students during their free time at lunch would inevitably have failed.

Optimism and pessimism: an uncertain future

Finally, there were many statements in the narratives which I believe were particularly poignant since they betrayed the conflicted feelings participants had toward their futures. Although I believe Erikson would have seen their anxiety as developmentally normal, I experienced many of the participants' comments as quite pessimistic about the world.

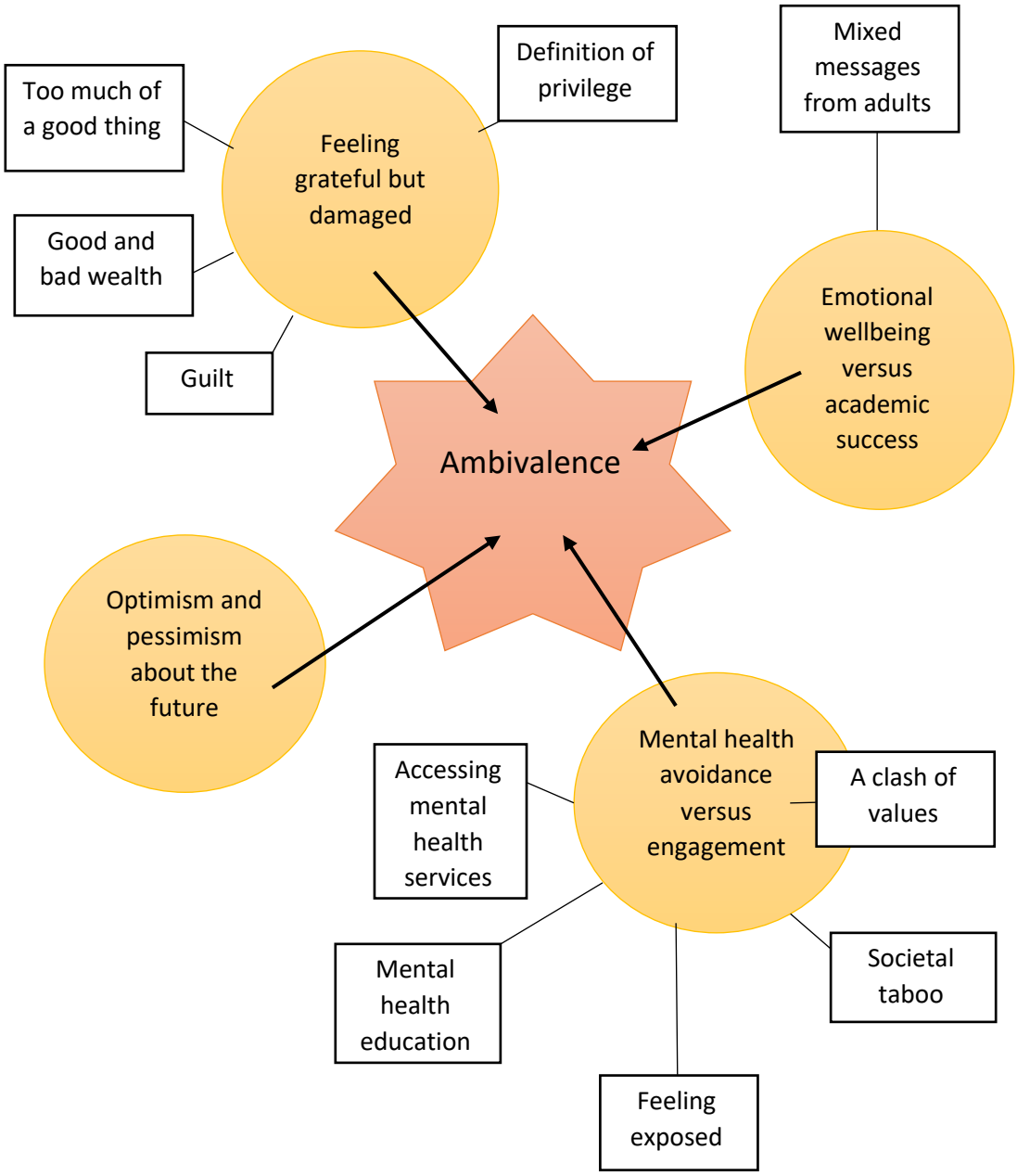
In her final thoughts, Gabriela took a dark view of the future which may have reflected how difficult her school life had been for her. Although she admitted that she had been given many wonderful opportunities, and that she felt truly grateful for them, the ordeals she imagined ahead seemed to fill her with anxiety instead of excitement.

> G: *I get anxious thinking about what people expect in the long term because I don't really know what I want to do and I'm happy to just kind of take things slowly and explore and enjoy living, but I sometimes feel anxious about that because I feel like I'm almost not allowed to. And kids are thinking about university so much younger, doing all these extra things. Where is the limit in terms of the growing competitive nature of schools and the schooling system, and then going to university? I just think it seems to be getting more and more extreme.*

Although Gabriela said here that she wanted to slow down and take her time, she seemed to worry that competition was increasing, and her challenges would grow more and more difficult. In contrast, Ulrike presented a much more optimistic view of life ahead. I experienced her as a very competent and vibrant young woman who felt she was ready to meet the challenges of her future. Yes, she worried about the vast societal changes she and her peers were experiencing, but these were countered by her general optimism and feelings of hope that young people could fashion positive changes in the world by sharing and supporting each other.

> U: *I think recently there has been a lot more talk about mental health and awareness and communities coming together with young people sort of trying to help each other out, so for me that's a change. You hear a lot more about it in social media and that kind of thing. People share their experiences all the time which is definitely interesting I think with my generation.*

The figure below shows a summary of the topics from Theme #3



SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Introduction

Although the previous results of this IPA study are interesting in themselves, taking a second look at the participants' quotes from a sociological perspective gives us the opportunity to view the experiences of these young people through a different lens, one which will lend additional depth to the analysis. Sociologists such as Annette Lareau (2003) typically use qualitative research techniques such as Grounded Theory in order to map social phenomena and develop theories. Not all of the superordinate themes and subthemes which are listed below are suited to a sociological critique because they are primarily psychological in nature, but those which are relevant will be discussed further here.

Theme #1: Needing the help of others

School as a developmental context

Michel Foucault[127] coined the term 'normalising power' for the invisible social forces which shape our ideas of what is, and is not, considered 'normal'. This, for him, was the most important type of power because it ultimately influences everything we want to 'do' and 'be' as we attempt to fit in with the people and situations around us. He believed that we incorporate powerful collective values so deeply that we cannot easily identify or rid ourselves of them.

Schools use normalising power when authority figures determine what student qualities are valued. However, the adults who judge these qualities are also themselves influenced by the powerful, but hidden, social forces around them, so they are, in turn, equally moulded by the prevailing cultural norms. In this way, society reproduces and reinforces communal social structures and systems of power within an endless, repeating cycle. Yet in Foucault's view, it is critically important that we are aware of how these forces create our desires so that we can examine them and eventually rid ourselves of their influence. Only in this way, Foucault states, will we be free to determine our own values and goals.

Foucault's theories seem particularly important when exploring the participants' narratives and the ways in which these young people were struggling to articulate the personal consequences of the socialization processes which had shaped, and sometimes damaged, them. When discussing the theories of Foucault in relation to

[127] Faubion, 1994

schools, Ball (2013) states the critical importance of looking under the surface of things by putting the focus on individual lives.

> *'Power only remains tolerable by hiding itself within the everyday, the mundane and the intimate. One task of the intellectual… is to make people aware of how intolerable taken-for-granted exercises of power actually are and show them that things could be different… This involves working on and caring for the self.'* (Ball, 2013, p. 145)

In the 1970s and 80s, Pierre Bourdieu developed his theory that both state education and elite schools are a major force for the cultural transmission of elite ideals because they reproduce power and wealth differentials in favour of the privileged sectors of society. Like Foucault, he believed the top socioeconomic classes define which personal qualities, actions, and goals have 'worth', particularly in relation to their adoption by the global business world.

When we consider the superordinate themes that resulted from this study, we can see these forces at work in the participants' lives. What they notice about the behaviour of parents and teachers, their descriptions of their personal relationships and the ways in which these everyday interactions created and sustained their school environments, give some clear examples of these social processes.

One of Bourdieu's other major contributions to the study of elite schooling was his theory on the acquisition of 'social capital', or networking skills, which provide crucial insider knowledge for young people, helping them to feel at ease within an elite subculture. Students in independent schools are taught sophisticated 'people skills' – how to make connections, how to gain entry to certain institutions or seats of power, how to dress, speak, and behave – attributes which then identify them as belonging to a privileged sector of society. Being 'the right kind of person' was considered an important task by all of the participants.

> T: *One of my really close friends was told, stupidly, from a very young age, 'You're an Oxford girl' in inverted commas. 'You're very clever. You're talented. You're just what they're looking for. You're the right sort of person'.*

Other sociologists, such as Gee (2000), have since built on Bourdieu's theories to explain what 'the right kind of person' is at present: a global citizen.

> *'Ensembles of family, peers, communities, and schools are networked with others in ways that enhance the possibility that [students] will move through them into a global world.'* Gee, 2000, p.62)

Friendship

The environments of privileged schools have been described in recent research[128], and the specific parenting practices found within advantaged communities are beginning to be mapped and understood[129]. As part of this, researchers have started to examine the social interactions between peers. While the protective power and healing nature of friendship became a central theme in the present study, the time pressure which threatened these vital relationships was also noted.

These two topics have been similarly addressed within ethnographic studies by Khan (2011) and Gaztambides-Fernandez (2009). They note that elite schools have become increasingly overburdened with 'value-added activities' which severely restrict students' opportunities to socialise away from the gaze of adults. As a result, the intimate friendships which are so vital to adolescent development become much more difficult to maintain. They suggest that, although social volatility is amongst the many hallmark attributes of normal adolescence[130], recent cultural changes have turned up the heat on social and academic competition. They believe this pressure may make it increasingly difficult for young people to maintain loyal, supportive friendships as they compete with each other for distinction[131]. As a result of these changes, young people may be in danger of becoming socially isolated from one another at a time when they should be learning about themselves within close peer relationships.

[128] Maxwell & Aggleton, 2010, 2013; Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009; and Khan, 2011
[129] Lareau, 2003
[130] Pipher, 1994; Luxmoore, 2006, 2008, 2010; Coleman, 2011
[131] Clark, 2004; Levine, 2006; Luthar, 2006; Luxmoore, 2010; Wiseman, 2002

Theme #2: Feeling pressured

Overly demanding parents

The participants often mentioned parents who demanded too much of their children: too much hard work, self-control, self-sufficiency, and productivity. Sherman (2017) found that, in the eyes of her participants, these personal qualities, goals and values defined 'good' people who had earned their right to be privileged. The participants were aware that they were required to embody these qualities but, as immature adolescents, they felt they could not always live up to these standards. Even though they looked and sounded like adults, they knew they were still highly dependent on those around them. They needed continual guidance and support, firm but flexible boundaries, help to control their impulses, and role models who were actively engaged in their lives without exerting too much control[132].

Aspects of elite education which create privilege

The primary value of a study such as this is the opportunity to see the experiences of young people through their own eyes, from the inside out. They are the ones who know intimately what their world was like and the effect it had on them. I was impressed when they had some understanding of the institutional tensions which were created as the goals and values within their school communities clashed, yet they seemed to be generally unaware of the circumstances in the wider world which had shaped these important interactions within their homes and schools.

Based on sociological evidence, I believe that numerous social factors conspire with each other to continually escalate the pressure which privately educated young people feel, and these forces shape the formidable hurdles which students must overcome in order to secure their place at university. Looking for the specific societal reasons why young people within independent schools are put under such pressure is a bit like asking about the 'chicken and egg' conundrum. The situation is complicated, to say the least, but it makes sense to start the present overview with an investigation of the nature of elite universities.

[132] Kastner and Wyatt, 2002; Apter, 2001

Valuing Oxbridge: Competition between universities for high status

Globalisation and the growing aspirations of middle classes everywhere have increased competition to reach all forms of higher education[133], and universities are responding to this trend by increasing their brand recognition. This, in time, increases the competition for status between all universities. In his ground-breaking work on elite practices, Bourdieu (1984) argued that, as educational opportunities increase, the goalposts are moved to ensure that only a highly selective group of universities can facilitate access to further elite positions in society.

A recent study by Wakeling and Savage (2015) compared different students' paths through the traditional secondary and tertiary education process in England to determine the eventual job opportunities and social status that young people can expect to receive upon graduation. They showed that attending privileged educational institutions at a secondary or higher education level significantly increases the likelihood of entering the global elite. They also found considerable internal stratification which distinguished amongst even the most prestigious universities, such as the Russell Group, as those universities at the very top conferred even more advantage than those which were slightly below. A very small group of universities, including Oxford, Cambridge, and a select few University of London colleges, emerged as a kind of 'super-elite'. Attendance at one of these institutions, especially those considered 'world-class', significantly increased one's future economic and cultural advantages.

Increasing university requirements: The pressure to achieve

As competition for 'world class' status between universities increases, it inevitably forces up admissions standards. Secondary schools that feed into these universities then respond by raising their own standards for students, and the pressure to achieve academically increases. Minor variations in the number and type of student accomplishments differentiate them from one another. Van Zanten (2015) says that, even though independent schools are not required to follow a standard national curriculum,

> *'the relative homogeneity of elite institutions encourages the development of very limited frames of reference within which young people can position themselves, so that small differences in degrees of accomplishment and merit between them and close peers loom larger than wider social differences.'* (Van Zanten, 2015, p.8)

[133] Anglionby, 2018

Concerted cultivation

Gaztambide–Fernandez (2009) and Khan (2011) have used extensive ethnographies of American students to illuminate some of the multi-layered feedback systems which teach young men and women to become 'highly accomplished' people: 'the best of the best'. Annette Lareau (2003) uses the term 'concerted cultivation' to describe the socialisation processes by which parents and schools inculcate students with the academic and social capital which will allow them to compete for success on a global stage.

The participants in this study knew they needed to work extremely hard to achieve the excellent grades which would satisfy their parents and teachers. Top grades had undoubtedly helped them to enter their elite universities, but they had also been required to project just the right image. Zimdars (2009) agrees that, in addition to students' classroom grades and examinations results, 'cultural capital', or the knowledge of elite systems and ways of being that students acquire at home and school, still play a major role in admission to Oxford.

Schools teach 'soft skills'

In addition to academic goals, schools have started to focus on a variety of 'soft' skills which are highly valued in the labour market[134]. The websites of independent schools generally highlight these qualities, such as 'control', 'challenge', 'commitment', 'confidence', 'resilience', 'determination', 'persistence', 'adaptability', 'courage', 'self-regulation', 'leadership', 'creativity', and 'perseverance'[135]. Whereas these soft skills undoubtedly serve the purpose of helping students to develop their academic and social skills, their advertisement on school websites show their popularity with parents.

Parents use their resources

The participants said they noticed parents in their schools using their considerable economic and 'social capital' to pressure teachers and administrators to overly attend to their children's needs. Van Zanten believes *'elites have recently developed new and very powerful ways of securing educational advantages for their children through their skilful use of both economic and private resources'*[136]. She sees this behaviour as an integral part of 'concerted cultivation' in which parents demand

[134] Stephansen & Aarseth, 2011; AQR International, 2017
[135] Forbes & Weiner, 2008; Wardman et al, 2010, Vincent & Maxwell, 2015, ISC, 2017
[136] van Zanten, 2015, p.5

support from teachers and administrators to resolve issues which their children are experiencing, and they manage their children's school careers very carefully[137].

In a slightly cynical vein, Duffell (2000) believes that the British aspiring classes simply do not trust that children will develop into capable adults without 'concerted cultivation' processes[138] being brought to bear. Whether or not this is true, this study should make us wonder if the messy, unpredictable, and emotional characteristics of normal adolescence are valued in some situations. Parents who feel that they are totally responsible for the development of their child's 'intellectual, social, cultural, physical, and emotional skills' may worry that their child will be left behind if they themselves are at all passive[139].

Parents who participate in the more radically interventionist strategies within 'concerted cultivation' may be highly anxious about their child's future as they attempt to instil in them the same drive and ambition that they themselves have internalised. Yet, the participants stated, not all children naturally conform to this level of ambition and many are unwilling to follow the particular route to success which their parents envision.

Individuals who criticise 'helicopter' or 'snowplough' parents use these terms to dismiss their behaviour, as if parents are somehow simple-minded or selfish. Whereas their actions may indeed be unhelpful or counterproductive, I believe they are also equally understandable given the somewhat homogeneous social conditions in which these parents live. My professional experience, together with the participants' statements, suggest that parents are generally unaware of the wider social processes which drive their feelings and behaviour, so they are often unable to choose alternative paths for themselves or their children which are outside of their cultural norms.

It therefore seems crucial that we, as researchers, search for the immense complexity behind this seemingly simple, but deceptive, situation. It makes sense that parents love their children and want the very best for them and, if they see opportunities to further their child's interests, they make use of them. Yet, based on the participants' reactions in this study, the consequences are not always what parents anticipate or intend.

Very little research has been carried out to investigate the parenting styles of affluent or socially advantaged parents, what choices they make when raising their children, and what effect these choices have on their child's psychological development, but Maxwell (2015) believes we need to dig much deeper into the elite practices, such

[137] Lareau, 2011; Lareau and McCrory Calarco, 2012
[138] Lareau, 2003
[139] Vincent & Maxwell, 2015

as educational choices, the orientation towards transnational mobility, and the consumption of goods which make privileged groups distinct from others.

Enrichment activities

Although the specific use of enrichment activities to further the school careers of young people cannot be considered an entirely classed pursuit, the researchers suspect that elite or 'aspirational' parents make more use of 'added value' activities than other groups. For sociologists Vincent and Maxwell (2015), the parental insistence on providing children with enrichment activities is a prime example of this classed behaviour. Parents are now expected to offer their children continual, 'value-added' opportunities to develop their natural talents and skills. According to the researchers, these parents also take primary responsibility for helping their children to secure future employment opportunities by actively 'sculpting' their children into leaders who will assume positions of power.

The 'responsibilitisation' of motherhood

Vincent and Maxwell (2015) see these enrichment activities, including the use of tutoring, as evidence of a growing 'responsibilitisation' of parents, mostly mothers. They believe the current cultural template for 'good' mothering is an all-consuming process which requires copious amounts of time, energy, and effort.

> *'This is an approach that is child-focussed, with the mother (rather than the father) having the responsibility to care both intensively and extensively for all aspects of the child's physical, moral, social, emotional, and intellectual development. Even if mothers do not, will not, or cannot mother in such a way, Intensive Mothering Expectations (IME) (Johnson & Swanson, 2016) have become pervasive...Thus [mothers] have to think, plan, and be purposeful in relation to that task – what Arendell (2001) calls 'intentional parenting'.* (Vincent and Maxwell, 2015, p.6)

In other words, parents who engage in 'concerted cultivation' are 'good' parents who are intent on keeping a very high level of control. Lareau (2000, 2003) also found that the middle and upper-middle class parents she studied were typically 'hands-on', intervening in all aspects of their children's lives, and they behaved in very similar ways, regardless of their race or ethnicity. They organised activities for their children which were 'constructive' as opposed to simply letting their children 'hang out'. In this way, parents controlled everything their children did, and where, when, and with

whom they did it. These observations resonate with many of the participants' experiences in the present study.

Beck (1992) has commented on the neoliberal attitude of 'individualism' which is behind these practices, in which:

> *'parents are responsible for generating their children's biographies through the development of the children's intellectual, social, cultural, physical and emotional skills... Bringing up children within this paradigm becomes a risky process where children are positioned as investments for the future, needing to be nurtured and protected (Smeyers, 2010). Thus, parents are required to be pro-active, and passivity therefore denotes a lack of effort.* (Vincent & Maxwell, 2015: 6).

Suissa (2006) suggests that these types of parents 'do' things for their children rather than 'be' with them, which may explain why the participants in this study felt parents could be over-involved while also being absent.

Class anxiety

Weis, Chipollone, and Jenkins (2014) believe that increasing globalisation and deep economic uncertainty have resulted in significant 'class anxiety' for aspirational parents. As the economic dominance and influence of the middle class gradually erodes[140], privileged families must now 'win' elite status and class position for their children rather than bequeathing it to them through a type of social inheritance[141]. In response to this threat, parents mobilise all their available resources, and the extreme competition that results fuels much of the increased demand for high levels of educational achievement. This, in turn, affects the behaviour of parents and the nature of their family relationships[142], as well as the characteristics of university entrance requirements, which are constructed to give advantage to some students over others[143]. Although top universities have instituted new admissions policies to increase student applications from state schools, a small number of elite independent schools still contribute a disproportionate percentage of successful candidates[144].

[140] Savage *et al*, 2015
[141] van Zanten, 2015; Maxwell & Aggleton, 2013a, Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009
[142] Varrenne & McDermott, 1998; Stevens, 2007; Demerath, 2009
[143] Stevens, 2007
[144] Weale, 2018

Increasing demand for higher education

In a UK government report on the wellbeing of young people, Lessof *et al* (2016) commented on the increasing seriousness of all students and their desire to go on to university. The proportion of young people planning to study A-levels after year 11 rose from 59% in 2005 to 65% in 2014. Whereas fewer than 60% of year 10 students said they had intended to apply to university in 2005, an impressive 71% intended to apply in 2014, and the figures seem to be rising still. Even though tuition fees have increased substantially during this time, it seems there are many more students vying for places now than there were in the past.

Universities are also contributing to this upsurge in aspiration. Most top-ranked universities are now specifically targeting students from disadvantaged or less well represented populations, with outreach programmes intended to inspire many more school students to apply[145], and their admissions officers say they are intent on selecting only the 'very best students' from this increasing number of candidates. This statement then becomes an official endorsement of worth for all those who succeed in securing a place.

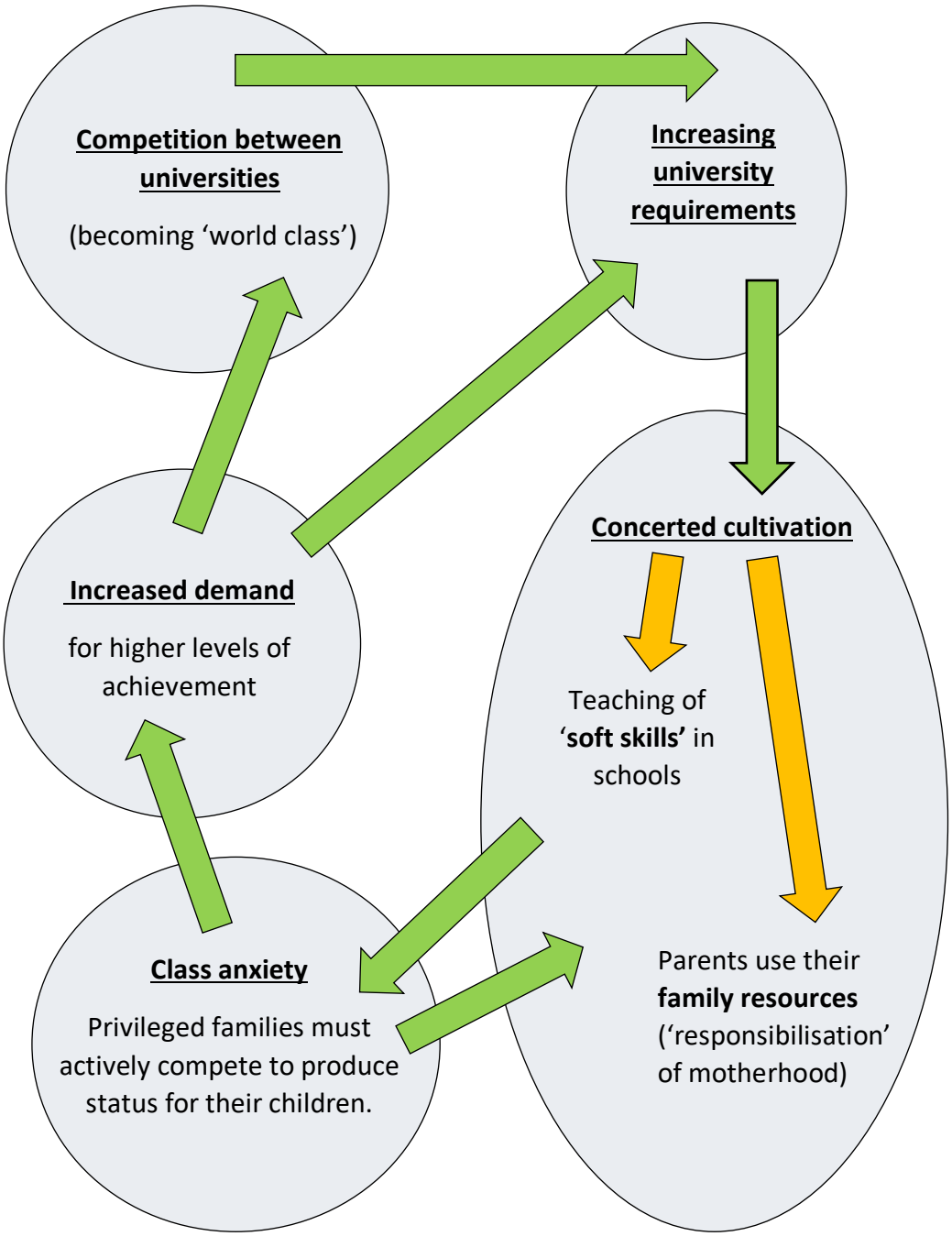
The cycle intensifies

As the competitive nature of our world increases, Vincent and Maxwell (2015) have argued that every level of society is moving generally toward the normalisation of 'concerted cultivation' as a parenting strategy. If this is indeed true, then the participants in this study may be describing a set of circumstances - and typical emotional responses - which will become much more prevalent everywhere as the need for all young people to compete makes these achievement-oriented socialisation processes grow more intense throughout all levels of society. As a result, it is likely that many more young people will be affected by competitive stress in future, no matter whether they are educated privately or in the state sector.

The following drawing shows the interactions of the secondary and higher education processes which were described above. The directions of the arrows denote the causes and effects of the social phenomena which shape the continual evolution of high academic and extra-curricular standards.

[145] Cambridge University, 2018

The figure below shows the cycle of competition between universities, parents, and schools



Parents passing values to children

As previously stated, Attachment Theory reminds us that parents are powerfully influential in passing parental values to their children via the physical and psychological nurturing they provide in childhood and adolescence[146]. Social research has confirmed that the surrounding community and wider culture also significantly influence how children behave and what they believe[147], so at both the micro and macro level, children are encouraged to fit into the existing personal, familial, community, and cultural expectations of the adults around them.

In a recent study, Sherman (2017) found that parents within economically advantaged environments expressed a strong wish to pass on their own values and behaviours to their children, and many of them said they hoped their children would turn out to be 'nice people' who work hard, are non-materialistic, and kind. They discouraged feelings of entitlement and encouraged their children instead to look at themselves as 'just like everyone else', ordinary individuals who are no better than others. Of course, some families who place their children in independent schools are neither wealthy nor particularly socially advantaged, but for those who have much greater economic resources, Sherman believes the need for privacy becomes a significant issue, especially as people struggle to define their legitimate entitlements and obligations.

> *'My conversations [with the research participants] reveal the challenges of managing privilege in a society that prides itself on egalitarianism and meritocracy at a historical moment of extreme and increasingly visible inequality.'* (Sherman, 2017, p.230)

It is interesting to note that this attitude was also evident in the participants' ambivalent feelings toward their privileged status and advantages.

Parental support for mental health services

The term 'social referencing' refers to a child's sensitivity to the verbal and visual cues from their parents about what they should believe when responding to emotionally charged situations. This process is considered by many researchers to be one of the major mechanisms by which a child comes to understand the world around them. With this in mind, it is possible that the young people in this study may also have looked to their parents for guidance on the ultimate value of mental health services, such as counselling.

[146] Winnicott, 1965; Bowlby, 1973; Ainsworth, 1974; Ainsworth, 1989; Bretherton, 1992; Bibby, 2018
[147] Golombok, 2000; Lechner, 2009

The participants were all disinclined to take advantage of counselling services in their schools, but this may have in fact reflected their parents' views on the usefulness of therapy. Puura *et al* (1998) found that, in general, parents tend not to seek psychological help because of their concerns about disclosing personal vulnerability and protecting their family's privacy, attitudes which have also been noticed by Luthar (2003) and Wolfe & Fodor (1996).

Having no right to complain

It was clear from the participants' comments that aspects of their schooling, and some parental behaviours, caused them emotional distress which they could not fully understand and were powerless to change. Of particular note was their comment that it did not feel 'legitimate' to complain about their situation because of their obvious privilege. Sociologists believe that western culture at present is centred around the values of individualism and meritocracy[148]. In other words, one can only 'own' or deserve success if one has achieved it on one's own. Yet reliance on these concepts alone can greatly obscure the reality of the lives of young people and compromise their fundamental ability to see themselves as necessarily linked to others.

In the case of independent schooling, these cultural ideas throw a veil over attempts to acknowledge or investigate the advantages, as well as the disadvantages, which young people may experience. In my experience, schools often chafe at the insinuation that their students are 'privileged'. To them, the term seems to negate the fact that students work extremely hard for their successes. But if we are to make progress in looking at the mental health of young people within independent education, we must be able to look at their privileges, as well as their pressures, and recognise the complicated picture which emerges.

[148] Sherman, 2017; Gaztambide-Fernandez; and Khan, 2011

Theme #3: Ambivalence

Privilege

Striving to balance the individual experiences of participants with knowledge of the socially constructed attitudes which surround them helps us to recognise the dilemmas in which these young people find themselves without invoking justifications for or against the 'fairness' of their advantaged education. Given the painful consequences of social inequality in our present world, it is easy to see why the circumstances around privilege are so hard to discuss. The danger, when we talk about 'privileged people', is that we see them as 'other' and lose our empathy for them. Words like 'entitled' or 'wealthy' can be critical terms which imply greed or an abuse of power.

According to Sherman (2017), the truly privileged don't often refer to themselves as such, but she believes this attempt to place themselves in the middle rather than on the extreme is fraught with difficult moral conflicts. This partly results from a sensitivity to the harsh judgements of those outside their social set, but she believes it is also evidence of their genuine wish to see themselves as 'good' rather than 'bad' privileged people.

The participants felt a certain amount of guilt because of their privileged position in society. They all recognised themselves as having had exceptional access to resources and they had all noticed the plight of other young people who, in an 'unjust' world, were not as fortunate as they have been. The evidence of this struggle can be found throughout the participants' interviews.

> T: *It's really hard because you're often made to feel guilty for having that privilege, I think. And when you come to university there's a lot of judgement around 'Oh you went to a private school', from people who didn't because… well how is it fair, in a lot of ways? Like, education should be equal, one would hope.*

According to Sherman (2017), working hard, consuming prudently and giving back to others were the central qualities which her participants believed legitimated their privilege. In a reflection of this, several of the participants in this study said they distanced themselves from their more materialistic peers whom they believed were flaunting their wealth and consuming irresponsibly. In contrast, Tamsin spoke of her desire to balance the scales by 'giving something back' to society.

T: 'When you come from a privileged background, it's how you use that for the benefit of other people. You know, while there are charities to help, really awful things are happening across the world.'

It is interesting to note that the participants' heartfelt personal reactions closely matched those of Sherman's young, economically advantaged couples in New York who were highly anxious about their economic and social advantages. They were aware of, and grateful for, their wealthy lifestyle. They were self-deprecating and modest, and they did not feel as though they deserved more than others. However, they took full advantage of their considerable privileges while also believing themselves to be middle class and 'just like everyone else'. Although Sherman shows a great degree of empathy for her research participants, she also believes their attitudes were, ultimately, impediments to our ability to comment on, and change, the deep and growing inequalities of our world because they take our attention away from the complex reality of social inequities of all kinds.

Like Sherman's interviewees, the young people in this study were struggling to position themselves in relation to others who had fewer advantages. As Sherman implies, they may simply have been reproducing the typical discourses within their privileged sector of society, but I believe this should not take away from their genuine desire to develop identities as good people or to live honourably with their privileges. The private sector in education exists in order to give young people a 'leg up', and parents pay dearly for this advantage, but the participants' ambivalence about their privileged lives reflects our society's general ambivalence about privilege, and this circumstance makes all conversations around its consequences, at an individual and societal level, extremely difficult.

DISCUSSION

Introduction

My longstanding curiosity about the lives and mental health of young people in private education originally inspired this project and provided a focal point throughout all the tasks involved. Being able to hear the voices of the participants as they remembered their personal experiences illuminated a wide variety of themes, and although many of the participants' experiences in their independent secondary schools were uniquely personal, it was striking how similar some of them were.

The participants identified their privileged school environments as fundamentally different from state-funded schools. Because of their highly pressured lives, they believed their mental health needs were different from those of other students and they hoped this project would publicise their situation. Now that they were attending university, they looked back on their schools as very small homogeneous communities. Researchers, such as Ruus *et al* (2007), have categorized school value systems and teacher attitudes by the degree to which they support student interests and coping strategies. They found that environments which effectively balance the competitive academic aspects of schools with pro-social, humanitarian values more positively affected the mental health of students and, indeed, the participants' comments about their own health and development reflected this.

Because my interest in conducting this study grew out of my psychotherapeutic work with clients, and because I was familiar with only a few schools in my immediate area, I was particularly interested in what the participants' stories might say about their experiences in other school communities. As I had expected, many of their statements very closely matched those of my clients: the pressure they felt, the parental and teacher relationships which had helped or harmed them, and the effects their school environments had on their sense of self. Yet the participants also contributed novel ideas which I had not anticipated, insights which have since helped me to relate better to my clients and their families. I had known that peer relationships are highly prized by all young people, but I was surprised by the participants' strong emphasis on the enormous power of their close friendships to both heal and protect their mental health. As a result, I now consider social isolation to be one of the most important contributors to mental health problems in young people, and my present goals as a therapist reflect this.

Other results from this project surprised me as well. When my research began, I had not yet become aware of the many mixed messages which the participants described – difficult paradoxes and dilemmas which seemed to stem from the need to engage with, and balance, their personal wellbeing with demands for academic success. I was particularly struck by their keen awareness of, and ambivalent feelings toward,

the many 'privileges' which their wealth and private education had gifted them. I had expected them to be heedless of their advantaged position in society, but they instead showed a mature social consciousness which was focused on issues of fairness, inclusiveness, and kindness toward others. From the design of this study, there is no way of knowing whether these particular participants were unusually concerned with these issues or whether their sensitivities would also be representative of the attitudes of other independent school students. Further studies could illuminate this issue.

An IPA methodology acknowledges that participants construct their stories subjectively according to their own individual agendas. When asked about their mental health, the participants in this study, like my clients, focused primarily on the potentially destructive elements of their school communities. We cannot know from their comments just how ubiquitous these circumstances were; whether they made up the majority of the participants' school experiences, or whether their emphasis on the negative was simply a result of their desire to bring these seldom discussed topics out into the open. Again, further studies are needed.

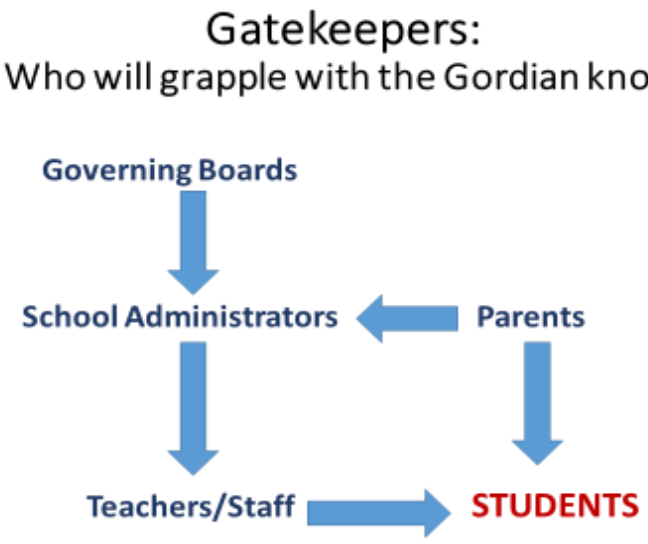
Implications for parents and schools

Emotional wellbeing versus academic wellbeing: the Gordian Knot

It seems to me that there are no obvious solutions to the tensions created when adolescent developmental needs for experimentation, failure, nurture and acceptance are juxtaposed with the imperative to excel socially and academically, but the necessity of finding methods for accommodating both aspects of wellbeing is undoubtedly a central finding of this research. I have come to think of this dilemma as a 'Gordian Knot': a system in which, if one tries to untangle a knot simply by pulling, or focusing on, one side of the equation, the knot binds together tighter and blocks progress on both fronts.

I also find the concept of 'gatekeeping' useful when considering the crucial need to consciously 'hold' these two important, but opposing, goals. The following schematic drawing shows the opportunities which exist in schools for balancing the two types of wellbeing inherent in the Gordian Knot. It maps the hierarchies of engagement which are necessary for protecting students from the confusing, sometimes destructive, tensions which can exist between academic excellence and a healthy sensitivity to individual emotional and physical needs. It expresses the need for adult gatekeepers to make minute to minute, flexible decisions which continually dance

between the two poles. The figure below shows the hierarchy of engagement needed when searching for this balance.



As is illustrated above, if a school community is to engage with both mental health issues and the demands of 'concerted cultivation', schools need to encourage constructive conversations about the Gordian Knot at all levels. In this model, if governing boards have a keen awareness of the often paradoxical need to incorporate both emotional and academic aspects of wellbeing, they can take the opportunity to give their explicit permission for each member of their school community to make the difficult decisions needed to balance them.

If, however, they abdicate this responsibility by electing to support one side over the other, individual administrators must then take up the task of holding, and dealing with, the tensions. If, again, those people fail to engage, teachers must make painful individual choices of whether to 'nurture' or 'demand' when facing students and parents. Equally, as the results of this study suggest, parents who understandably desire both types of wellbeing for their children, are also caught in this confusing bind, so they must become aware of, and assume responsibility for, how they respond.

Finally, if the adults in a school community cannot actively engage in shaping the ethos of that environment because they are unconscious of the conflicting goals they serve, it is the young people themselves who must attempt to balance their own academic and mental health needs when they are undoubtedly the individuals least likely to be capable of doing so.

In my experience, independent schools wish, above all, to educate young people extremely well, and these institutions shape their pedagogical systems very carefully in order to offer students the best possible chance to excel. Unsurprisingly, fee-paying independent schools have evolved to have the best facilities, provide the most 'value-added' activities, and produce the best exam results when compared to other types of schools.

All these systems are put in place to help young people to be 'the best they can be', but, as the results of this research imply, they may also, under certain circumstances, compromise the mental health of their young students[149]. Schools take on a difficult struggle when they attempt to reconcile the emotional and developmental needs of young people with the requirement that they also excel academically. Yet it is only by identifying and engaging with the incompatibility of these two aspects of wellbeing that concerned adults will truly be able to 'take care of the whole child'.

Pastoral care

I was pleased that the participants in this study were willing to seek emotional support from the adults they knew and trusted, yet the participants still wished these adults had been more aware of mental health issues so they could talk more freely about emotions and relationships. Given the central place these adults typically hold in student's lives, it seems important that parents and schools also recognise the mental health needs of teachers. In addition, if pastoral care networks, such as house parents or tutors, are used to support students, the quality of their care will depend on how psychologically mature these adults are, as well as the type of training they receive which will allow them to take on, and succeed in, the challenge[150].

The wonderful common sense of young people themselves so often goes unrecognised, yet the participants in this study implored us to listen to their views about mental health and consult with them about their care. Although it is important to state that the results of this IPA study are not strictly generalizable, their value is in making us stop for a moment to carefully consider what these individual young people had to say. The participants were obviously highly capable and motivated students, yet they told us that the academic pressures in school, and the constant demands for high achievement, caused them considerable distress. It follows then that schools wishing to reduce anxiety in students must find creative ways to support their self-esteem, feelings of efficacy, and emotional intelligence, while giving serious thought to limiting the pressures their systems place on students.

[149] Salzberger-Wittenberg et al, 1999; Bibby, 2018
[150] Dept for Ed, 2016

Having time to develop deep friendships seemed an essential priority for the participants, but the crucial need to connect interpersonally is often given a low priority by schools. Studies such as mine suggest that schools should consider putting more time aside for students to nurture these valuable relationships, and young people should also be offered some privacy in which to explore them. Unfortunately, recent changes to government rules on child safeguarding may be making this less, rather than more, likely. Ofsted (2018) have recommended that schools increase their vigilance as a way of minimising 'risk' to students. I believe it is likely that this attitude has increased the anxieties of parents and teachers, making them even more reluctant to leave young people to their own devices. Finding the right balance between safety and privacy will continue to be a major challenge, yet it is evident from the participants' comments that too much vigilance and too much control can be highly problematic.

Whereas the competition in schools, even when quite intense, is not necessarily destructive, the participants saw a need to balance the intensity of competition with much more communal ways of thinking. I feel confident that schools can indeed find creative methods to bolster a cohesive sense of community and promote inclusivity, perhaps by providing opportunities for non-competitive team-building activities which specifically decrease individualism and increase a sense of group identity.

Fortunately, the participants have given us useful guidelines about what they think these new practices should include. Informal and inclusive team sports were mentioned by Suki as an obvious example, but the rest of the participants also suggested changing the formal ethos of their classroom settings by, for example, by sitting on the floor, studying outdoors, and encouraging organised, but informal, student-led discussions. Overall, the participants wished for a greater say in how their schools were run and the decisions which were made on their behalf.

If schools are to make use of psychological knowledge in order to address the mental health of young people, I am confident that counselling professionals will be able to contribute, but only if they are integrated into the fabric of school life, with psychoeducational support made consistently available to all levels of these communities. It is my belief that school environments are ripe for this sort of change since the steadily rising levels of emotional distress in students are motivating parents and administrators to search for new insights and solutions. As a result, pastoral care professionals of all kinds have a growing opportunity to develop better care for all school-aged children, whether or not they are privileged.

It is likely that, as the competition for top grades within and between independent schools intensifies, the academic and social pressures on their students will increase. As schools search for dependable methods of supporting the development of effective coping strategies, researchers must start to identify the myriad reasons why

some young people seem naturally able to cope while others founder, and schools must be willing to use this research to support students' academic, emotional, and developmental needs.

Implications for school counsellors

As stated previously, the participants in this study were highly ambivalent about accessing school counselling, so it follows that counsellors who want to offer their services should be more consciously aware of these sensitivities, particularly in independent schools where a high level of personal privacy may be the cultural norm, and a strong image of success is valued. In my experience, school counsellors generally respond to the privacy concerns of young people by offering them individual therapy within the confidential space of their consulting rooms, and most counsellors in independent schools have been trained according to theoretical models which indeed favour this one-to-one therapy[151].

However, for teachers and administrators, school policies which require the sharing of personal information about students are now standard practice. As a result, schools may have difficulty understanding one-to-one counsellors' concerns about the need for client confidentiality. These new policies have recently reduced the level of privacy which school counsellors can offer students, possibly making young people feel even less confident about asking for help. Under these circumstances perhaps more holistic, systemic forms of therapy might be more appropriate, since systemic ideas consider an individual's thoughts and behaviour to be the products of the communication between all of a community's parts[152]. As such, the causes of problems are deemed to be multi-dimensional and circular rather than discrete[153], so their resolutions are the responsibility of the entire system rather than of just one individual.

Counsellors who are familiar with systemic ideas have the opportunity to bring together the personal explorations of students with equally important conversations with parents, teachers, and friends. Because these conversations are co-created, visible and active, they may counter the self-protective and isolating cultural imperatives in some independent school communities. But, before setting up these types of services, it is my belief that counsellors should carefully investigate a

[151] Rogers, 1961; Clarkson, 1995; Cooper, 2013
[152] Minuchin, 1974
[153] Penn, 1982

school's willingness to develop a holistic wellbeing programme by assessing the attitudes of stakeholders at all levels.

As difficult as this may sometimes be, the ultimate challenge for a counsellor is to develop the courage to step out of the therapeutic shadows and ask for honest conversations about counselling with teachers, parents, and administrators, taking every opportunity to promote their expertise while also understanding, and working within, the complicated systemic processes around them. I believe it will be especially important then for counsellors to understand the special nature of privileged independent schools, so they are able to tailor their services to fit these special environments[154].

Impediments to change

There are a number of issues which I believe limit the existence of counselling services in independent schools. The effective provision of mental health services is undoubtedly economically costly, so boards of governors may be ambivalent about commissioning them. At the moment, counsellors in schools are often peripatetic professionals who are recruited from the private sector to see a small number of students[155]. As a result of this limited provision, it is highly unlikely that counsellors will be able to contribute to whole-school, psychologically oriented programmes.

Also, as tangential members of a school community, counsellors can be mistrusted as outsiders, and marginalised when they are unconsciously co-opted to represent the psychological problems, or the 'dark side', of a school community[156]. The recognition that educational systems which are put in place to help students might also hurt them is a powerfully subversive message which can easily be relegated to the unconscious underground of a counsellor's office, and this may be why counsellors are often asked to 'fix' a student rather than engage with the circumstances which caused their distress.

Realistically, counsellors themselves are the most likely people within a school community to recognise this dynamic, so they must process their feelings with the help of clinical supervisors. Then they must actively engage with the forces which may isolate and co-opt them by developing clear strategies which use their professional positions to advocate for transparency and collaboration. While counselling services in independent schools are not yet universally existent[157], there

[154] Kirkbride, 2017; 2018
[155] Cooper, 2013
[156] Young-Eisendrath & Dawson, 1997
[157] Cooper, 2013

is undoubtedly an enormous opportunity to decide what kinds of counselling these schools wish to provide, who should do it and who will be allowed to access it.

Implications for the provision of effective therapy

The results of this study suggest that all school counsellors, regardless of their particular counselling methods or theoretical orientation[158], should offer educationally privileged young people the chance to recognise and cope with the unique aspects of the elite culture in which they live[159]. These aspects may include the pressures and ambivalences they feel, the mixed messages they have internalised and the confusion or damage they may feel as a result. This 'consciousness raising'[160] should also contextualise their experience of being 'privileged', as well as identifying the personal elements of their histories and family circumstances which can create an intense pressure to succeed. As Foucault (1994) states, it is only in this way that privileged youths will be able to choose their personal positions in relation to the cultural narratives which surround them while reconciling some of the dilemmas they face internally and externally.

Implications for the psychotherapy profession

The young people who have contributed their personal observations here have had many valuable things to say about elements of their lives which may differentiate them from their less privileged peers. Throughout this methodologically pluralistic project, I have alternated my focus between the personal experiences of individual participants and what other research tells us about the wider sociocultural patterns inherent in privileged families and elite schools. On the global stage, society is moving inexorably toward increasing academic competition and socio-economic inequality. As a result, the psychotherapy profession has a vitally important part to play in engaging with issues around privilege[161].

There is no doubt we are seeing an unprecedented increase in serious symptoms of mental distress amongst all British young people, yet the specific solutions we seek are wholly dependent on where we choose to locate the causes of this situation: either within the young people themselves, or within the social situations around

[158] Rogers, 1961; Freud, 1931; Minuchin, 1974; Beck, 1975
[159] Markus & Kitayama, 2010; Cooper, 2013
[160] BACP, 2019
[161] Reeves, 2015; Cooper, 2015; BACP, 2019

them which determine the day-to-day rhythms of their lives. Training in mental toughness and 'soft skills' – such as resilience, mindfulness, control, and commitment – undoubtedly have a valuable part to play in helping young people to thrive individually but, if psychological professionals also wish to reduce the pressure on all young people, we must first incorporate knowledge of the social processes involved into our therapeutic models and become much more vocal about the public need to change potentially harmful attitudes and practices[162].

The results of this study, as well as my experiences as a psychotherapist, have led me to believe that students within fee-paying, independent schools can sometimes suffer significant psychological damage when they are pressured by overly demanding academic and social standards, by a lack of time to rest, and by having to conform to rigid images of success. Yet it is likely that my participants have presented a particularly extreme version of what is happening to all young adolescents in Britain today as parents and schools throughout Britain pressure students to compete for university places and jobs within the global marketplace. In advocating for privileged youths, and in searching for a deeper understanding of the interpersonal and social forces which affect their mental health within independent schools, it is my hope that young people at all levels of society will eventually benefit.

CONCLUSIONS

This research has investigated the experiences of former students who received a fee-paying, independent school education. Although all the participants were academically successful students, they spoke of their secondary school experiences with a mixture of gratitude, anger, and anxiety. Their elite schools had given them valuable opportunities to excel academically and had provided them with the cultural capital to win places at top-ranked universities, but when they were asked about their mental health experiences and those of their peers, they recalled the emotional consequences of their over-busy schedules and their experiences of overly demanding parents and teachers. Although they were enormously grateful for their many advantages, they were also ambivalent about the personal price they had had to pay for their privileged education.

Of particular note was the participants' belief that neither they nor their peers would have used counselling services to support their mental health while they were in school. Instead, other adults, such as teachers and tutors, had been informally enlisted as pastoral supports, but only if those adults were psychologically healthy themselves and could be trusted to understand a students' mental health needs.

[162] BACP, 2019

Sociologists have identified the special privacy concerns of 'elite' populations, as well as the social proscription against disclosing vulnerability in environments which promote polished images of success, and their research places the experiences of these young people within a wider socio-cultural perspective.

This has important implications for the future of school counselling in privileged environments, such as independent schools, where specific social imperatives may discourage students from asking for emotional help. As questions mount about the deteriorating mental health of all young people, academically rigorous schools must seek methods of reducing the stress levels of their students. Furthermore, as schools attempt to balance the two opposing forms of wellbeing – the need for academic success and the need for developmentally appropriate nurture – they will have a valuable opportunity to redesign all aspects of their pastoral care to include a full range of mental health services for their students and teachers. Parents must also play their part in understanding the many damaging forms of pressure their children experience and the possible consequences of leaving them to cope alone.

Finally, the psychotherapy profession must begin to see these young people, who are at the pinnacle of achievement-oriented education, as a particularly ‘at risk’ group who experience multiple stresses which threaten their mental health, undermine their enjoyment of life, and thus, compromise their ability to learn. I therefore encourage psychological professionals to engage in conversations with students, parents, school administrators, and the wider world about the global effects of competitive educational strategies on all secondary school and university students.

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