

**What's it like to come to college:
Exploring the experience of female students
in University**

by

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When we separate our thoughts from our emotions, we retain the capacity to solve logical problems but lose ability to register experience and navigate the human social world

Gilligan (2014, p.89)

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Abstract

This thesis set out to examine the experience of female students in university and how their experience impacts on their understanding of their concept of identity. This qualitative research study explores, through in-depth interviews, the experience of five current undergraduate female students in Maynooth University. The themes of the interviews included; transitioning to university and role of family and peer support.

Erikson's life span personality development theory provides the foundation in understanding these students experience of university. Marcia's four Identity statuses are used in interpreting the student's reflections on their university life. The data from the interviews highlights the importance of friendships and peer relationships. This significant factor is present in various identity statuses and circumstances.

My aim for this study is to highlight the importance of the non-academic university experience. I hope this enquiry will raise a deeper awareness of the personal development and life transitions that students experience during their university life.

Chapter 1

The concept of Identity and the role it plays in the University Experience

My Research

In this thesis I explore the experience of five current students attending Maynooth University through in-depth interviews. I place my study in the context of identity development. Young adults make meaning from the world around them. Educational institutions are a prominent environment in which young adults, who are students, spend a significant amount of their time. Bearing this in mind, one may assume that educational environments are a contributing factor in the meaning students make from the world around them. In this research I consider one particular educational environment; Maynooth University. As a researcher I am interested in exploring the area of student development. While many theories exist regarding student development, I focus on the psychoanalytical development of the concept of identity, particularly Erik Erikson's life-span personality development theory. I was first introduced to Erikson's theory as part of my Higher Diploma in Arts (Adult Guidance and Counselling). This concept, while being completely new at that time, resonated deeply with me. I feel it provides a comprehensive outline or map on how we develop throughout our lives and now informs my practice.

Marcia (2014) describes Erikson's theory as "a succession of developmental crisis in ego growth accompanying approximate chronological ages.....at each stage, there is assumed to be an articulation of individuals' needs and abilities with societal rewards and demands"(p.165). Identity vs. Identity diffusion is one of these stages and Erikson (1968) believes that identity is an amalgamation of individual and social meanings. This concept of individual and societal meanings informing identity development, sustains my practice today. It is with this understanding of Erikson's theory that I begin my exploration.

Issues in the Irish Education System

According to recent research (Department of Education and Skills 2013) 62.2% of Ireland's young adults are progressing onto further education from secondary school. In addition to this, the Higher Education Authority (2010) reports a drop out rate of 15% on average across all the educational institutions from first year students. The Minister for Education set up a working group on the transition between secondary school and higher education¹. This working group is looking at various aspects of the academic gap between secondary school and higher education institutions. While this initiative is worthwhile and relevant, it is not necessarily addressing the emotional and psychological issues that students may face in transitioning to university. In order to support student transition holistically, I believe that we need to consider, not only the academic elements but also the social and personal components of university life.

My role as a Schools' Liaison Officer

I work as a Schools' Liaison Officer with the Admissions Office of Maynooth University. My role involves liaising with approximately 130 secondary school communities. When I am visiting schools I speak to an average of one hundred Leaving Certificate students² each day in both group and one to one settings. I regularly encounter students experiencing an extremely difficult academic year. In addition to the already immense pressure of the Leaving Certificate examination, there is the expectation that major career decisions for life must be made. Recently there are tentative steps being taken to address resilience and emotional wellbeing in schools. At the #Lets talk Wellbeing symposium which took place in November 2015 Conor Cusack identifies that "our schools are not about producing employees for the economy but about producing well rounded, confident citizens for society"(Guideline, 2016 p.26). The main preoccupation with the Leaving Certificate students that I encounter as part of my role, is gaining entry onto their desired course. In my

¹ Details of the working group available at <http://www.hei.ie/en/policy/policy-development/transitions-reform>

² The Leaving Certificate is the state examination that Irish Secondary School students take on completion of their secondary education. Students use their results from this examination to compete for places in Higher Education such as; Universities, Institutes of Technology and Colleges of Further Education.

experience very few seem to take the time to stop and reflect on what university life might actually be like and how prepared they are for it.

I find that the students I meet have very little awareness of the differences between secondary school and university education. They seem to think that college³ is just a larger version of school without a uniform. I believe there may be a lack of recognition given to the importance of preparing these students socially and personally for this next phase of their lives. These young adults are at crucial stages in their personal development. I feel the university should support and facilitate, as a duty of care, personal development in conjunction with academic progression. A comprehensive study presented at the 40th Annual Conference on University Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults, proposes that “with the marketisation of HE (Higher Education) and the push for a vocational emphasis on degree courses, the social and educational benefits of learning are being neglected by government and policy makers” Field, J., Fleming, T., West, L., Merrill, B., Holliday, M., MorganKlein, N., & Finnegan, F. (2010).

Initially I begin my research believing that there may be a ‘gap’ in support for students who are leaving secondary school and beginning their university education. In my work with students over the years I am aware of a lack of engagement from students, with the educational experience. Hodge, Baxter Magolda & Haynes (2009, p.18) describe a student, who is engaged in the learning process, as working through tensions to view knowledge as contextual and viewing identities as socially constructed. My exploration of this ‘gap’ as part of my research, develops into an understanding of the concept of identity among adolescents transitioning to university. Baxter Magolda (2014) proposes that “today’s college students are challenged to think critically in order to weigh relevant evidence to make sound decisions, craft a sense of identity that honours and balances their own and other’s needs”(p.25). In my experience these are new expectations for the students and they may need support in meeting these expectations. Research (Hodge et al 2009; Tinto 1997; Baxter Magolda 2014) suggests that students in a supportive environment will more readily engage with the learning process and benefit from personal development. At a

³ The term ‘College’ refers to University. This term is used colloquially by the students participating in my interviews. It is also used in American research on student development which I reference during this thesis.

Scholars awards evening in November 2015 Professor Nolan, the President of Maynooth University (as cited in University News, 2015) stated in his key note address that:

During your time at Maynooth University you will gain both a deep subject knowledge and the critical thinking and working skills that employers value. Building on our strengths, we are adapting what we teach and how we teach to ensure you graduate with the skills and qualities you need to thrive in a world where change is a given and adaptability is essential. (p.5)

The adaptations, to which Professor Nolan refers, are amendments within the university curriculum. The aim of these curriculum amendments is to provide a more rounded academic student with additional knowledge and skills from outside their chosen area of study. Giving students more choice and flexibility in what they study, may result in a more rewarding academic experience. An integral part of the skill set, outlined by Professor Nolan, is a well rounded individual who is comfortable with their concept of identity and engaged in the learning process.

My Education Transformation

The experience of university is one of significant importance to me on a number of levels. Firstly I believe that coming to university was a pivotal moment in my life. I immensely enjoyed the experience and I feel my university education was transformative. Mezirow (as cited in Dirkx, Mezirow & Cranton, 2006) describes transformative learning as “application of critical thinking that transforms an acquired frame of reference” (p.124). My university education allowed me to explore my beliefs and values. It gave me skills relevant to the world of work and instilled an interest in the world in which we live. It was the bridge which linked me from my childhood and adolescence to young adulthood. I believe without this time to explore and learn, I would have missed out on an experience which has greatly shaped who I am today. I am passionate about others receiving the opportunity to study at university if they so wish. Currently, the conversations I encounter in my professional life regarding education focus on employability. From my personal experience of education and from my professional experience, I believe that there is much more to education than

employability. Baxter Magolda (2014) describes the need for university students to develop self-authorship, which is “the internal capacity to determine their beliefs, identities and social relations” (p.26). When I reflect on my experience of university I remember it as a time of developing my own beliefs and my own identity. I also believe that the development of these skills were advantageous in my employability, while not being the sole focus of my university experience.

Feminism

When I was a student in university, I felt that I was equal in Irish society. I assumed that gender inequality was an issue in the past, but I never fully considered or reflected on it. I did not feel this was an issue in modern Ireland. The significance of gender equality remained a dormant theme in my life until I became a mother of a little girl. It was then that I realised how vigorously our society perpetuates gender stereotypes. Now I feel an acute responsibility to constantly swim against the tide and provide balance to gender bias. This comes in the form of gender neutral clothes, gender neutral toys and gender neutral experiences. I want my daughter and my son to experience the world as individuals, not defined by their gender but rather accepted on the basis of who they are. Gilligan (2014) warns that “by splitting human qualities into masculine and feminine the gender binary forces dissociation” (p.95). One particular example of my aim for gender balance is our bedtime versions of the classic fairytales I loved as a child. On this night like any other, I am snuggled up with my two children and we begin to read the bedtime story “Snow White”. Very soon into this tale I am compelled to make my own edits. I do not want my children to hear the overt gender stereotypes within Snow White. So in our version she does not marry any prince but rather goes to university to become a doctor. Gilligan (2014) writes about reframing conversations about difference and she explains that “we have been telling a false story about ourselves, falsely gendered and false in its representation of human nature” (p.90). I believe these stories and gender stereotypes are significant because they can contribute to our socially constructed identities. As a woman and a mother, I feel compelled to push back against societies gendered stories at every opportunity.

While I have been conscious of the portrayal of gender stereotypes in my home since I became a parent. It is now, in this Masters that the true significance of feminism in my life is clear. One of our lecturers remarks that even the word 'Masters' has male connotations and I am recognising my passion for this topic. Now that my eyes are open I begin to see how feminism and the issue of gender permeate every aspect of my life and the society in which I live. I realise that feminism is a core value to me. With this new transformative learning I recognise that my research may include an element of gender separation. As a researcher it is important for me to be sensitive to the concept of identity from both male and female perspectives. While the issues of gender are live issues for me, I want to encourage inclusiveness in my research rather than separation and division. I aim to remain connected with Erikson's concept, that identity is constructed from both the individual and social meanings, and gives voice to the individual as well as the society in which they live.

Chapter 2

The Development of the concept of Identity

Introduction

In this section I present an overview of some of the literature concerning the development of identity among adolescents. My focus is on research and findings pertaining to concepts of identity development. I concentrate on exploring the complex processes involved in establishing an understanding of the concept of identity.

Identity Development

Identity as a concept is explored by many disciplines e.g. Sociology, Psychoanalysis, and Feminism. All of these disciplines contribute to an understanding of the development of the concept of identity. In my research I focus on psychoanalysis and in particular Erikson, who informs my practice. I examine how psychoanalysis informs our understanding of identity. Josselson (1996) outlines the complexities of identity and articulates its presence in everyday lives:

Living our identities is much like breathing. We don't have to ask ourselves each morning who we are. We simply are.....Identity is never fixed; it continually evolves. But something in it stays constant; even when we change, we are recognizably who we have always been. Identity links the past, the present and the social world into a narrative that makes sense. It embodies both change and continuity. (p.29)

Adolescence is identified as being a time of change and transition. Klimstra, Schwartz, Luyckx, and Duriez (2013) highlight that constructing a strong identity represents a core developmental task during adolescence. Identity therefore, can be considered integral to the student experience of university. Marcia (2014) proposes that "identity refers to a sense of oneself as having continuity with the past, active direction in the present and a future trajectory" (p.168).

Erikson

Psychoanalytical definitions of identity centre on an understanding of the self. Erikson, who comes from the Freudian psychoanalytical tradition, develops a life-span personality development theory⁴. Erikson (1968) proposes that at different stages of our lives, from infancy to old age, we experience different crisis and while each crisis is best situated in a particular stage this is not exclusively the case. He also acknowledges that his development theory is epigenetic, that each stage of personal development occurs within a social context and expectation. Torres, Jones & Renn (2009) concur that development is “governed in part by the epigenetic principle, a combination of genetic and environmental influences that governs the direction and timing of development” (p.578).

The stage of development I am most interested in within Erikson’s theory is Identity versus Identity diffusion which according to Erikson (1968) usually occurs in adolescence. Marcia & Josselson (2013) consider that “issues of identity first become predominant at late adolescence because this is when the necessary physiological, cognitive, and social expectational factors are present” (p.619). However, there is some debate around the duration of this stage and the age of the individuals. Arnett (2000) explores the idea of emerging adulthood and argues that “most young people now spend the period from their late teens to their mid-twenties not settling into long-term adult roles but trying out different experiences and gradually making their way toward enduring choices in love and work” (2007, p.69). According to Marcia & Josselson (2013), Erikson’s theory suggests a “synchrony between individual growth and social expectations” (p.617). Therefore it may be assumed that in order to keep Erikson’s theory relevant, the timing of the various developmental crises may become less important and the outcomes becomes more significant.

When we use the term crisis it can be associated with a painful experience, however this is not the intention of Erikson’s development theory. For Erikson this term refers to the

⁴ Please see Appendix A for overview of Erikson’s Life-span Personality Development Theory.

struggle the individual must go through in order to reach positive attainment of a development stage. The positive attainment for the Identity vs. Identity diffusion stage is the understanding of one's own identity after a period of self reflection or crisis. Even though the term crisis is used, this does not mean that each stage is a conscious, life altering crisis for the individual. Widick, Parker and Knefelkamp suggest (as cited in Jones & Abes, 2013) crisis as a time for decisions rather than panic; these important decisions which will steer a life course in one direction or another. The positive attainment of a development stage, for example Identity vs. Identity diffusion, may appear seamless. However, it would be naive to suggest that this is always the case.

The use of the word, stage, to represent identity has come under question in recent research. Torres et al. (2009) draw attention to the concern of a stage being "rigid, stable and defined externally to the individual" (p.582) and does not consider how identity is socially constructed and reconstructed. However, Flum & Kaplan (2012) describe Erikson's view of how identity is constructed as encompassing "individual and social meaning and is considered in terms of the interplay between individual and society" (p.240). This supports my understanding of Erikson's development theory.

Erikson (1968) is also critiqued for his views on female identity development "much of a young women's identity is already defined in her kind of attractiveness and in the selective nature of her search for a man" (p.283). Josselson (1996) defends Erikson and argues that he was reflecting on "social reality as he saw it at the time rather than inscribing how women must be in society" (p.275). In spite of these critiques Erikson paved the way for understanding the development of identity and much work since then has built on his original ideas.

Marcia

James Marcia (1966) takes Erikson's concept of identity and expands on it. He develops an instrument called the Identity Status Interview and from these interviews establishes a more fluid model of identity statuses⁵ building on Erikson's developmental stages.

Essentially Marcia & Josselson (2013) propose that:

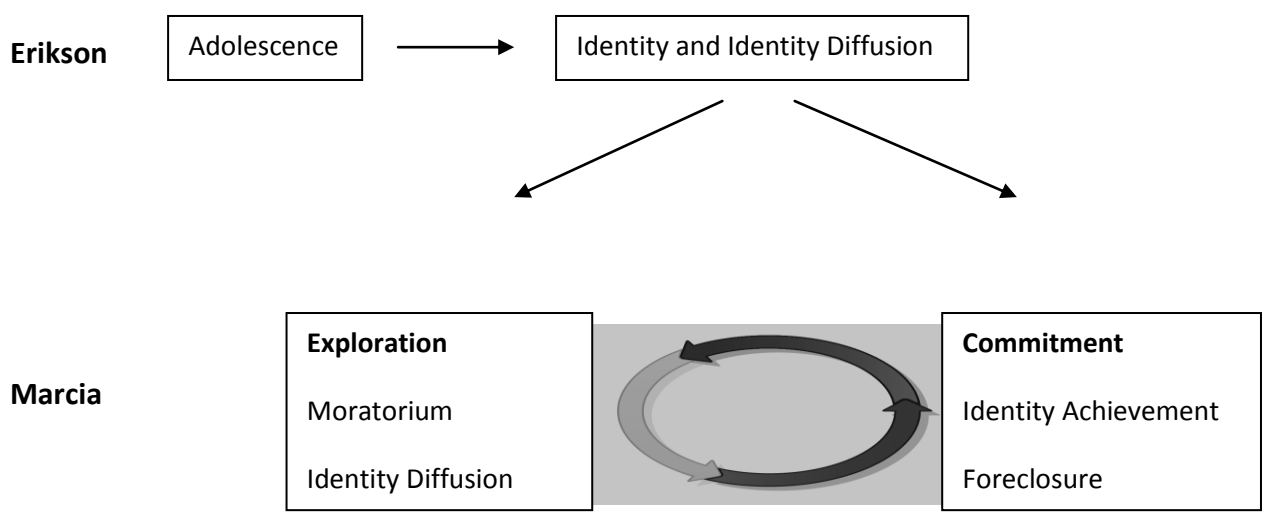
The four identity statuses are based on the dual criteria of exploration (active search among alternatives) and commitment (demonstrated investment) in important life areas including occupational choice, ideology (religious and political beliefs), and ideas about relationships (sexuality, sex roles etc.). (p.619)

Marcia & Josselson (2013, p.620) describes the four statuses of the identity stage as (1) Identity Achievement, (2) Moratorium, (3) Foreclosure and (4) Identity diffusion. Identity Achievement is where the individual has explored alternatives and made occupational, ideological and relational value commitments. Moratorium is the identity status in which people are currently in crisis. This period may involve anxiety or depression as the individual struggles to find positions to commit to. Young people in moratorium may go on to make meaningful commitments or they may close down the process and embrace a foreclosed position. Foreclosures are strongly committed to their identity positions, but they have unquestioningly adopted beliefs and values that have been bestowed upon them by authority figures. The final status is identity diffusion and there are two types of diffusions, the carefree and the disturbed. Young people in states of identity diffusion can find it impossible to locate themselves meaningfully in a social matrix and may drift from one endeavour to another, unable to integrate a sense of purposefulness or coherence. Their reaction or conscious awareness of this drifting may lead them to being carefree or disturbed.

The ideal status is identity achievement and following Erikson's timeline most young adults should achieve this by the end of their formal education. Identity achievement is usually preceded by a period of moratorium. Marcia & Josselson (2013) explain that "the process of identity formation requires sufficient personality structuralization and management of

⁵ Please see Appendix B for Marcia's Identity Statuses.

internal conflict for the individual to be able to attempt joining the self to a larger purpose” (p.620). University education can be a fruitful environment for young adults who are in the middle of an exploratory period with commitments only forming. Arnett (2000) describes that when emerging adults are still in university, they are granted more freedom to explore various social roles, and postpone enacting firm identity commitments. By helping to facilitate this meaningful, though possibly uncomfortable crisis, universities may encourage and facilitate emerging adults to engage with the exploration and move to identity achievement. It would be naive to assume that just because someone is of a certain age and in a certain environment that they are in a moratorium identity status. The Maynooth University annual undergraduate intake is 2800⁶ students and keeping in mind Erikson’s theory, one can assume that a proportion of those students experience different statuses in their identity development. Whichever status is being experienced depends on the internal and external realities of the individual. However, all identity statuses may impact, both positively and negatively on the student experience of university. Flum & Kaplan (2012) highlight the importance of identity as an integrative concept by explaining that identity “is developed in the space between the individual and the social context. It is a source of meaning as well as a product of meaning-making” (p.244).

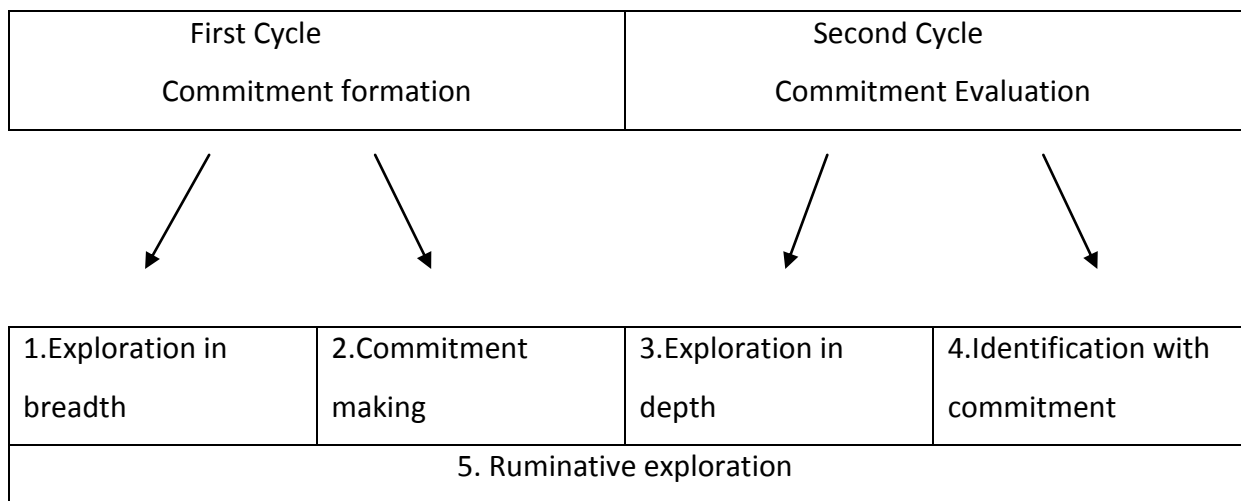


Marcia's four statuses of Identity

⁶ Maynooth University student intake 2015; Admissions Office.

Further exploration of Marcia’s four statuses of identity becomes more complex when there is interplay between exploration and commitment. Grotevant (as cited in Meeus, van de Schoot & Keijsers 2012) first argues that commitments are formed and then revisited. This understanding has been applied to the Meeus-Crocetti model. Meeus et al. (2012) explain that “the Meeus-Crocetti model assumes that identity is formed in a process of continuous interplay between commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration” (p.1009).

Luyckx et al. (2013) support Grotevant’s proposition and they present a substantial understanding of the movement that may occur for an individual within these identity statuses. They suggest that there are two cycles in identity formation. One is commitment formation and the second is commitment evaluation. Within these two cycles there are five dimensions. These dimensions tell the story of how a young adult might process their identity journey. Understanding not only the identity status of a young adult, but appreciating where they are on their journey to identity achievement may inform more meaningful student supports. The dimensions are as follows:



Luyckx et al. (2012) cycles of identity formation

The fifth dimension according to Luyckx et al. (2013, p.223) is ruminative exploration. This may occur in either the first or second cycle. This is essentially a delaying tactic, where a young adult is troubled or anxious as to the perceived lack of progress towards their personal identity goals so they avoid making any decisions, explorations or indeed commitments. They keep asking themselves the same questions but have little faith in their answers.

Hardy & Kisling (2009) suggest that identification with identity commitment and the maturation of identity “enables individuals to better form interpersonal connections, develop other-oriented concern, and increase their desire to contribute to their community and society” (p.368). They highlight the importance of a young adult’s personal identity development and how this impacts on their engagement with the world around them as well as their academic studies. I believe that all five of these dimensions may impact on a young adult’s engagement with the concept of identity during their university experience. It contributes to their sense of belonging to their new learning environment. Identity as a concept is viewed as a partnership of individual and social meaning. Essentially the meaning gained from the experience of university will inform these five dimensions which in turn contributes to the concept of identity.

Chickering

Arthur Chickering (as cited in Chickering & Reisser, 1993) took the Eriksonian concept of identity development and restructures it to specifically look at university student identity. He recognises the unique environment that university education brings to an individual’s identity formation and from this he develops his seven vectors of development⁷. As Chickering & Reisser (1993) noted:

Since the stabilization of identity was the primary task for adolescents and young adults, it [Erikson’s work] was a logical anchor point for Chickering’s attempt to synthesize data about college student development into a general framework that could be used to guide educational practice. (p.22)

⁷ Please see Appendix C for an overview of Chickering’s Seven Vectors of Student Development.

What is useful in Chickering's analysis is that he continuously has an awareness of the context or social environment of university life and he looks at how the individual can make meaning in this environment. He believes that young adults should not only gain academic knowledge from a university education but that they also should develop who they are and how they cope with life. Chickering in a way takes the sometimes abstract concepts of identity exploration and commitment and reframes them in the university context.

Chickering & Reisser (1993) rework the Student Identity Development theory to focus more on dimensions of identity (race, gender, sexuality) in the more contemporary context of a radically changed student body. Torres et al. (2009) suggest that identity is "commonly understood as one's personally held beliefs about the self in relation to social groups and ways of expressing that relationship" (p.577). The student body represents a notable social group, Kaufman & Feldman (2004) acknowledge the significance of the college arena in the formation of identity:

The college as an arena of social interaction in which the individual comes in contact with a multitude of actors in a variety of settings, emphasizing that through these social interactions and other social influences the identities of individuals are, in part, constituted. (p.464)

Torres et al. (2009) recognises the role of university and "emphasize the role of higher education institutions in creating contexts for the development of situated felt identities" (p.579). Côté (2002) suggests that identities are the result of processes of culture and individual agency. Individual agency is an important element to the development of identity. Klimstra, Duriez, Luyckx, Schwartz & Vanhalst (2012) consider the importance of an individual's coping strategies and problem solving ability in developing their sense of identity. They suggest that personality traits⁸ impact on an individual's ability to achieve any of Marcia's identity statuses or indeed to cope with Chickering's seven vectors of development. These personality traits have shown themselves to be meaningful in

⁸ Please see Appendix D for an overview of Costa and McCrae's (1997) five personality traits.

establishing coping strategies. It supports my position that a young adult's identity is a product of their internal selves and the world they engage with. Many theorists acknowledge that identity formation is influenced by group interaction and memberships. Torres et al. (2009) highlight that "those who study identity typically understand that positive self-esteem from belonging to groups contributes to individual wellbeing, a sense of community and belonging" (p.580).

Coping and Personality Traits

Kilmstra et al. (2012) outline that coping can be classified into engagement coping which is active problem solving and disengagement coping which is linked with avoidance. I have observed this on numerous occasions with Leaving Certificate Students. These young adults become overwhelmed with the enormity of the Leaving Certificate examination and the competitive process which will allow them to gain entry to university. The Central Applications Office (CAO) is the organisation that oversees the system by which Leaving Certificate results are converted into points. Once students are deemed eligible for a programme of study in university they will compete for their place using their points score. The more points students obtain, the more likely they are to get a place in their chosen course. This system, while admirable in anonymity, is strict in its rules and regulations. This complex process, in addition to the stress of the Leaving Certificate examination, can be overwhelming for these young adults and quite regularly I see them completely disengage from the process. It is not enough to understand that young adults are developing their sense of identity; I suggest we should look deeper at the individual's personality traits and also their current method of coping, as these two factors greatly influence their ability to engage with their experience of university and establish their concept of identity. Kilmstra et al. (2012) suggest that "processes of identity exploration seem especially to be intertwined with both engagement and disengagement coping strategies over time" (p.1237).

Students who have engagement coping skills will inevitably seek and receive the support that is available. Erikson (1968) proposes the identity development stage, which is known as a crisis, is made up of the individual and their environment. So if they experience their environment as supportive and facilitative, this will encourage a positive crisis resolution. However, students whose coping strategy is dis-engagement coping, may not seek to problem solve but rather ignore the situation. These students may struggle with the transition from secondary school to university and in turn struggle with the overall university experience. The university needs proactively connect with these students and encourage them to reengage so that they can progress with their academic studies and even more importantly with their personal development.

Coping skills and personality traits contribute to the understanding of Marcia's moratorium identity status. Meeus et al. (2012) conduct a study on Marcia's Identity Statuses and the complexities and variations, especially within the Moratorium Identity Status. They propose two main types of moratorium; classic and searching. These moratoriums are distinctly different from each other and can result in either a negative view of moratorium or contentment in moratorium. This view of moratorium may be informed by Costa & McCrae's (1997) personality traits and how one can cope with various identity development processes. Moratorium status, as proposed by Marcia, is not presented solely as a joyful exploration, but one that can be fraught with fear and anxiety. In considering this, it might be useful to be mindful of personality traits and how these may inform coping skills. This would in turn influence the experience of a moratorium identity status to being a period of contented searching or a period of anxiety and uncertainty.

Conclusion

In reviewing the relevant literature, this research highlights the complexities in understanding the concept of identity. The literature builds on the understanding of identity explored by Erikson's life-span personality development theory. It supports Erikson's epigenetic understanding of identity formation. Marcia and Chickering support Erikson's view that identity is influenced by personal and environmental factors.

Four statuses of identity are developed by Marcia as a result of his understanding of identity exploration and identity commitment. The labyrinth of interplay between these identity statuses conveys the fluidity of identity formation, and re-formation. As Kilmstra et al. (2012) explain "identity exploration may resemble problem-solving behaviour on the pathway to an achieved identity" (p.1226). The experience of identity exploration and identity commitment may impact on young adults differently, depending on their personality traits and their coping skills. Considering the vast variables involved in understanding the concept of identity, it is important to remember that identity emerges as a result of the internal reality of the individual and the world in which they live.

Chapter 3

Focus Groups as a Method of Enquiry

Aims

The aim of my research is to gain an understanding of the experience of students in university education. In order to gain this understanding I feel that qualitative research methods are best suited. Mason (2002) describes qualitative research as exciting and important “it is highly a rewarding activity because it engages us with things that matter, in ways that matter” (p.1). Mason (2002) goes on to clarify that “qualitative researching is grounded in a philosophical position which is broadly ‘interpretivist’ in the sense that it is concerned with how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced, produced or constituted”(p.3). This links in with my research where I am exploring the experience of university students and through understanding their experiences, gaining insight into their social world. This supports Oakley’s (2000) comprehension of qualitative research when she explains that qualitative research includes (usually) more than one case and that what we seek are patterns, generalities, associations, that help us to understand what is going on.

The voice of the researcher is important when conducting qualitative research and being conscious of my own experience as a female university student cannot be ignored. Denzin & Lincoln (2011) explore the role of the voice of the researcher within different research paradigms and they draw attention to its presence in all types of research both positivist and post-positivist. Guba & Lincoln (2005) caution researchers on the balance between the voice of the researcher and the voice of the students. It is important to present knowledge through our own personal paradigm but remaining true to the input and contributions of the students. This calls for a reflexive research approach where the inquiry process is transparent and accessible.

When we combine the desire to understand our students and be true to our own voice we develop a more holistic form of analysis which Mason (2002) points out is necessary in establishing validity. Creswell (2013) summarises the inquiry process as beginning with

assumptions or a worldview and ending with the final written report which includes the voice of the participant, the reflexivity of the researcher and a complex description and interpretation of the issues.

Ontology: Reflections on my Reality

Developing my personal paradigm requires reflection and consideration. Reflecting on my position is enlightening. Maxwell (2015) highlights the importance of this by stating that “any view is a view from some perspective, and is therefore shaped by the location (social and theoretical) and lens of the observer” (p.46). My ontological position is that university education needs to be multi-dimensional. The transition to university education coincides with a time of significant personal development for adolescents; we need to consider this personal development and how it can be incorporated into university education. Erikson (1968) theorises that during adolescence there is crisis for individuals in relation to their identity as part of their personal development⁹.

In order to gain this understanding and produce new knowledge I adapted a constructivist approach. Denzin & Lincoln (2011) describe constructivism as constructing knowledge through our lived experiences and through our interactions with other members of society. Denzin & Lincoln (2011) illustrate that, “as researchers, we must participate in the research process with our subjects to ensure we are producing knowledge that is reflective of their reality” (p.103). Building on my constructivist approach, I draw on feminist approaches. My interest in social injustice within our society and especially the issue of gender inequality informs my feminist research paradigm. Giroux (as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) details the values that a feminist researcher must have, “researchers seek data that can be transformative and useful in imparting social justice” (p.109). Deepening feminist research values is about seeking societal change. The desire to include personal development as core to university education drives my beliefs and my ontological position.

⁹ Please refer to the Literature Review for a more in-depth exploration of Erikson’s Life-span personality development theory.

Epistemology: How is knowledge created?

A combination of the views adopted by Constructivism and Feminist research informs how I know the world. Hesse – Biber & Leavy (2004) maintain that:

Epistemologies ask questions about knowledge itself: How can we know what we know? This encompasses questions such as the following: who can be a knower? What things can be know? How is knowledge created? The research process begins with conscious and unconscious questions and assumptions that serve as the foundation for an epistemological position. To bring this on further it is a question of what do we want to know, what is it we value enough to find out about and how open are we to review our conscious and unconscious assumptions. (p.2)

Denzin & Lincoln (2011) clarify that constructivists believe that “we are shaped by our lived experiences, and these will always come out in the knowledge we generate as researchers and in the data generated by our subjects” (p.4). I agree with this belief. My lived experience of university has shaped my world view but also the knowledge generated in my research has reshaped my view because it is a new lived experience. Hesse-Biber & Leavy (2004) explain that “if you are seeking to understand the meaning or worldview of a particular subject, you want to listen to the subjective experiences of others and somehow make sense of them” (p.4). This is what I am seeking to do in this research.

Denzin & Lincoln (2011) suggest that our lived experiences are socially constructed. Likewise, Kilgore (2001, p.55) believes that “learning, in the critical worldview, is reflecting on and challenging what we know and how we know it, and perhaps acting to change material and social conditions of oppressed people as well as the commonly held assumptions that reinforce their oppression”. In order to inform change, one might best adopt a reflexive research approach, so as to have meaningful change.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is an essential part of my research. As I practise reflexivity in my professional working life, it helps inform my research. In parallel to this, in applying a reflexive approach in my research, it informs, develops and improves my work as a Guidance Counsellor. Mason (2002) proposes that “reflexivity in this sense means thinking critically about what you are doing and why, confronting and often challenging your own assumptions, and recognising the extent to which your thoughts, actions and decisions shape how you research and what you see” (p.5).

Reflexivity allows for an analysis of your research and tries to identify why you are making particular decisions and selections regarding data. Mason (2002) argues that researchers must “be able to think themselves into the research process, using their own examples, because most of the key decisions about research are made by researchers contextually” (p.2). This is not necessarily an easy practice however; embracing reflexive practice brings about new learning and sometimes new perspectives. Hillier (2005) suggests that “when we reflect, we not only challenge our assumptions about why we do what we do, we can also help ourselves identify where we feel lacking and why we may be setting ourselves unnecessarily unachievable standards. How can we reflect on our approaches to our practice? What can we do? What can we uncover in the process?” (p.7). Asking these questions of ourselves allows us to be more empathic to the experiences and context of our students. While we are asking them to share their experiences, in turn we are joining them in that process and co-constructing new knowledge together.

Focus Groups as a Research Method

Conducting a focus group as my research method seems an appropriate and straightforward decision when I begin my research. Kitzinger (1995) explains that “the method is particularly useful for exploring people’s knowledge and experiences and can be used to examine not only what people think but how they think and why they think that way” (p.299). In my research I want to connect with the students and hear their own stories of university. I want to explore with them the differences and similarities in their stories and from that gain an

understanding of the phenomena. Moustakas (1990) explains that the researcher should be attuned to all facets of one's own experience of a phenomenon and allow comprehension and compassion to mingle. Bearing this in mind I am also aware that my experience of university may not be similar to others and it is important for me to actively listen to the students own stories.

Focus groups have become an increasingly popular and accepted method in qualitative research. Parahoo (2007) acknowledges that group conversations are a common feature of human interactions and that they can be a useful way of generating knowledge. I am confident of the breadth and depth of experience that exists within the students attending Maynooth University and I believe that a focus group can provide the ideal environment to explore their personal experiences of university.

I decide to conduct my focus group early in the second semester. I feel this timing will suits the students' best, it is also good timing for me on a professional basis. The students have completed their first semester examinations and have recently started second semester. This allows time for the students to settle into the academic year without having exam pressure dominating their thoughts. Personally I am not under as much pressure in my work and I feel there is room for me to pause and shift focus completely to my thesis and more importantly to my focus group. When setting up focus groups it is important to consider the students and the group dynamics. Parahoo (2007) draws attention to the dilemma of working with existing groups compared to creating new groups for the purpose of the study. I am aware that among the student population that I am going to invite, there may be established friendships or acquaintances but my intention is to create a new group which will allow individuals to offer new and different perspectives that they may not articulate with their established social circles. Kitzinger (1995) highlights that focus groups rely explicitly on group interaction as part of the method and I am conscious that creating a new group may take more time to establish the relationships, interactions and dynamics than I am hoping for. However being conscious of this and allowing time at the beginning for the group to create their own connections should hopefully compensate for the lack of previous

relationships. Krueger (2006) supports creating new groups for focus groups but advises that as the moderator you must find some commonality, some connection to help establish relationships at the beginning.

Establishing these relationships contribute to the dynamics of a group and the contents of the discussion. Serrant Green (2007) believes that focus group discussions mirror discussions about issues and concerns that may happen outside the research arena if the dynamic and flow of conversation is strong. Kitzinger (1995,) proposes that “when the group dynamics work well the students work alongside the researcher, taking the research in new and often unexpected directions” (p.300). The researcher must be attuned to these movements and follow cautiously. Kitzinger (1995) goes on to warn of the downside of strong group dynamics where “the articulation of group norms may silence individual voices of dissent” (p.300). The researcher needs to facilitate the group to support and echo the individual voices whilst encouraging strong group dynamics. Krueger (2006) believes it is important “to avoid pressure for participants to come to agreement” (p.363) but to allow the group to have one voice when it occurs organically.

Communicating with University Students

In my naivety I decide to email students from the Admissions Office Student Ambassador’s database, which is a list of current students who are interested in working for the Admissions Office. This work involves giving campus tours to potential applicants, attending Open Days and working at the Summer School. While I know some of these students professionally I am not overly familiar with them. I feel ethically that I am not breaching any confidentiality or gaining their information inappropriately. The email¹⁰ I send outlines my research and invites them to participate and share their stories. I eagerly email forty five students on the 2nd February. I receive seven responses that day, one of which is a yes. By the response deadline given, I only receive ten responses, two of which replied yes. At this stage I have a significant amount of anxiety surrounding my decision to conduct focus

¹⁰ Please see Appendix E for copy of email sent to students.

groups. I nervously follow up with an email to an additional thirty eight students and tentatively wait for a response. As I advance with my focus group preparations my certainty of it being the best method for my research, lessens significantly. Barbour (2005) cautions that “in order to gain the full benefits from using focus groups, it is important to consider carefully their appropriateness to the study in hand”(p.746). I am concerned that asking young adults to openly discuss a possible sensitive topic in a group of peers may not be an attractive prospect.

The question of ethics is an important one when conducting focus groups. As the researcher, I cannot guarantee confidentiality therefore anonymity may potentially be a concern for students. One way I deal with confidentiality is by introducing it to the group as a question; trying to elicit responses; encouraging discussion; allowing the group a chance to come to a consensus. I email the two students who have agreed to partake in my focus group an informed consent form¹¹. Informed consent allows the researcher and the students to reflect on the boundaries surrounding the focus groups. Details such as duration, whether the discussions will be recorded, whether their input will make them identifiable within the research can make a significant difference to participant’s involvement. However informed consent as a respectful measure in the research process does not end upon the signing of the consent form. Follow up with the students after the focus group is important. Checking with the students that the quotes you select are an accurate representation of what they wanted to say is a vital part of a constructivist approach.

The Perfect Location and the Perfect Focus Group

It is important to locate an appropriate space to conduct the focus group. The rooms we use as part of our M.Ed. lectures are ideal. I have given presentations in various rooms around the University campus and I feel there is a power structure in the layout to these rooms which I do not want as part of my focus group. I do not want to be on a podium nor do I want people sitting around a big table. I want to recreate the sense of equality that I feel exists in our M.Ed. lectures. I speak with my supervisor regarding booking the room for the

¹¹ Please see Appendix F for copy of consent form for Focus Group.

afternoon and confirmed the date as the 16th February and the time 1.30pm until 3.00pm. I am getting excited at this stage and really looking forward to the discussions that the focus group are going to have. Kitzinger (1995) believes that “group discussion is particularly appropriate when the interviewer has a series of open ended questions and wishes to encourage research participants to explore the issues of importance to them, in their own vocabulary, generating their own questions and pursuing their own priorities” (p.299).

I decide in conjunction with my supervisor that I will not record the focus group but rather do a flipchart of the comments and write up my notes based on the flipchart information. In my Higher Diploma in Adult Guidance and Counselling I studied a module on Group Work and this was how my supervisor conducted those sessions. I like the sense of security and cohesiveness it gave the group. The class always got a chance to review the notes before the next session and I found the detail and observations insightful. I am conscious that recording my focus group may impede on the flow of conversation and may prevent some topics from being discussed. I am aware that some people may know each other and that the presence of a recording device might stifle the dynamic. Beuthin (2014) highlights that “the very presence of the device as part of the interview acts to influence and introduce a performative aspect for the interviewer and participant” (p.125).

I realise that not recording the focus group challenges my counselling and listening skills in a new way. I have not done anything like this before and as I reflect on my role within this focus group my angst grows. When I consider my new roles as researcher and facilitator I realise that I need to engage my full skill set. I envision that this is not just about me hearing the stories of student’s experiences but rather exploring the layers of complexity involved in group discussions. Oakley (2000) articulates that what people look for, they will find and that what they are not looking for will probably escape them. This is a real concern for me. I am aware of my very fond university memories and I do not want to miss hearing some nugget of insight which I have not yet considered. As a researcher, I now need to reflect on my new identity as a facilitator. This aligns with my reflexive research approach.

I am conscious of creating a safe space for the conversation, listening to the spoken and unspoken themes and controlling my own fears and concerns surrounding this new role. In my position as a Schools Liaison Officer I speak in front of large groups of secondary school students daily. I could be in classes of up to 200 students and I am very comfortable with this situation. This role in the focus group however is different and daunting for me. I want to make sure that I do not default to “teacher mode” and start giving the students what I think is the answer. I also do not want to miss some issues that might be new, or not recognise an aspect of the university experience that I have not contemplated. I am doubtful of my skill and ability to facilitate a focus group as it is a new experience for me. I am also aware of the parallels that may exist between my anxiety over this new role and the student’s possible anxiety over their new role as university students, which is a world apart from their previous role as secondary school students. Progression and moving forward in life can stir up emotions of fear, anxiety, uncertainty and discomfort for me and the students. Kilmstra et al. (2012) talk about how individuals in moratorium identity status can be quite anxious while in the midst of the search for identity. Hunt & West (2006 p.169) agree that our engagement with new social networks as well as experiences of learning frequently lead to a questioning of who we are and might want to be, and whether we are able to embrace change.

How my Focus Group became Semi-Structured Interviews

The morning of the focus group I hope that more than two people turn up. I have come through a period when I experienced anxiety and am in a strangely calm place. I am beginning to open up to other possibilities in relation to my research methods and approach. I feel this may be very similar to students leaving secondary school and the world they know, opening themselves up to the new possibilities and new experiences at university. When I enter the room I begin to feel nervous again. It is a room that I have sat in for many lectures over the years but somehow sitting at the front of this room I feel as though I am in this space for the first time. This is a small intimate classroom but I am experiencing it from a totally different perspective both physically and psychologically. This prompts me to wonder how intimidating the large lecture theatres may appear to new students. It is interesting

how I have given presentations in some of these large theatres but I certainly feel more exposed and vulnerable waiting for my focus group to begin. Salzberger-Wittenberg (2013) highlights the anxiety people can face in new beginnings and facing the fear of the unknown.

Space and environment is so much more than the physical make-up. Each student who enters a classroom can bring with them fear, hope, anxiety, excitement, knowledge, uncertainty and potential. As I sit and wait for my focus group I still harbour some hope that more than two students will arrive, although they did not respond to my email. I realise more than ever that it is what the individual brings to the room of themselves rather than what the room provides that's important. In essence I believe that if we fill our classrooms with the best of technology and the best of teachers but ignore the student who enters, the room may as well be empty. Each and every student arrives with their own history, which includes both conscious and unconscious memories of their educational experiences.

Promptly at 1.30pm one female student arrives for my focus group and unfortunately she turns out to be the only one. I honestly discuss with her my difficulty in getting students to participate and I explain that I did not want to cancel in case someone turned up unexpectedly. I propose to her the possibility of conducting a semi-structured interview and she agrees to participate. I default to traditional research methods of semi-structured interviews. In my personal need for re-assurance I decide at the last minute to audio record this interview. We discuss how this interview will differ from a focus group and mutually agree to stick to the five original themes¹² of the focus group. We decide that the interview will last approximately forty five minutes. I talk her through the changes to the informed consent form which I have amended as a result of the change to semi-structured interviews¹³. I explain that this conversation will now be audio-recorded but that I will follow up with her directly via email with any quotes that I may use, she signs the form and we begin our conversation.

¹² The five themes of my enquiry are; 1. Matching expectations with reality, 2. Family support, 3. Peer support, 4. Identity and 5. Advice they felt would be helpful to new university students.

¹³ Please see Appendix G for copy of consent form for Interviews.

Narrative Approach to Interviewing

Motivated by the richness and knowledge created in this first interview I enthusiastically get in contact with the ten students who responded to my initial email. I trust that some students were interested in partaking in my research but just not available on the particular day the focus group was taking place. I contact each of these students individually to see if there is any time during the next couple of weeks where they would be available to come and chat about their experience of university life. Four female students respond and we arrange times to conduct semi-structured individual interviews. Chase (2005) apprises that “the interview is a conversation- the art of asking questions and listening. It is not a neutral tool, for at least two people create the reality of the interview situation” (p.643).

In total five students engage and I conduct five semi-structured interviews. Each interview take between forty five to fifty minutes and apart from the first one they take place in my office. I am conscious in how I set up the office and make sure that the chairs are moved away from the desks. My aim in doing this is to recreate in as much as I can an equal power dynamic. Power dynamics form a complex part of the interview process, Kvale (2006 p.485) argues that a research interview is not an open and dominance-free dialogue between egalitarian partners, but a specific hierarchical and instrumental form of conversation, where the interviewer sets the stage and the scripts in accordance with his or her research interests.

Whilst my method in gathering my data has changed, the principles which underpin my methodologies remain the same. Before each interview I prepare by reflecting on my five themes and engaging in my identity as a researcher. Josselson (as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p.106) reminds us that “the essential message of hermeneutics is that to be human is to mean, and only by investigating the multifaceted nature of human meaning can we approach the understanding of people” (p.106). This allows me to refocus and remember that I am trying to get an understanding of students lived experience. Gemignani (2014) reaffirms that “the position of the narrative and constructionist interviewer is that of being a facilitator, collaborator and travel companion in the exploration of experience” (p.127).

After I complete each interview I spend some time writing on the personal process and the internal feelings that I am experiencing. This helps me understand and process the interview that has just taken place, and also see what I could improve on for the next interview. Kvale (2006) explains that “in qualitative interviews, social scientists investigate varieties of human experience. They attempt to understand the world from the subjects’ points of view and to unfold the meaning of their lived world” (p.481). As a guidance counsellor I believe it is extremely important to reflect on and make sense of the interviewees (or client’s) point of view in the interview process and my own as researcher.

When I reflect on my five interviews I am struck by my researcher presence in the interview. Beuthin (2014) discusses the tensions in narrative interviewing. She understands and articulates my personal feelings in the actual interview, preceding the interview and following the interview. She explains that there are six different tensions that arise in the lived interview and the first one is the struggle between presence and performance, which I experienced in my interviews. While I struggle to maintain presence and engagement with the interviewee I am distracted by my need to perform. I concentrate on my need to conduct a “good” interview and have a “good” performance for my thesis. Beuthin (2014) acknowledges her own fears, “my presence at times seems to walk a faltering line between authentic genuineness and a metaphoric performance for this hidden audience” (p.128). I empathise with this useful analogy.

The power dynamic is something that I am conscious of before I begin my interviews. I have previously referred to this in relation to creating an appropriate space. Kvale (2006) outlines qualitative research interviews as “hierarchical relationship with an asymmetrical power distribution of interviewer and interviewee. It is a one-way dialogue, an instrumental and indirect conversation, where the interviewer upholds a monopoly of interpretation” (p.484). My experience illustrates the impact of the audio recorder on my performance. In preparing for the focus group, I did not plan to use the audio recorder. However when I changed my method to interviews, I defaulted to the security of the traditional audio recording. I did not realise that the audio recorded would feel to me like the most powerful

presence during the interview. If I engage in narrative interviewing again I believe there could be more richness without the audio recording. I feel it is an interrupting presence. Reflecting on myself and how I speak during the interviews I can hear the nerves, the uncertainty. Each time I relax once the interview is over and the recorder is turned off. Sometimes it is in these moments where I become more open, the conversation has more flow and connections. Riessman (2008, p.24) explains that while relations of power are never equal in the interviews there are ways in which it can be diminished. She goes on to clarify that the specific wording of a question is less important than the interviewer's emotional attentiveness and engagement and the degree of reciprocity in the conversation. I feel perhaps my engagement is hampered by self-consciousness around the recording. Each conversation brings a unique insight into the experience of university life. While there are some very prominent themes that emerge my overall sense is the students are discovering, with me, their own experiences of university through the meaning making narratives of the interviews.

Chapter 4

Exploring the Conversations

Introduction

In this chapter I explore the conversations with the five students¹⁴. I give a brief overview of each of these students and their particular circumstances. I review the role of identity development in their lives and how it may impact on their university experience.

In the previous chapter I explain how my use of the method of semi-structured interviews emerged. I outline how I sourced my five female students ethically from the Admissions Office Ambassador's Database. When arranging the interviews students were emailed with an outline of five themes which we may cover during the interviews and a copy of the updated consent form. In keeping with the ethos of qualitative research we agree that I will email them for their approval with any quotes that I may use. Selecting quotes can be a delicate process and I want to remain congruent with the participant's voices. Within each interview there is a multitude of things happening at once. As Gilligan (2005) suggests "listening for different voices, following the stream of consciousness and breaks in a narrative, tracing the interplay of inner and outer worlds" (p.729) are the goals of the interviewer.

In the time following the interviews I gather the quotes I connect with and I feel most accurately represent the students story. I email the students a transcript of their quotes for agreement to use in the research. Interestingly one of my students finds it quite difficult to read her quotes and asks to amend some of her statements. She uses the word 'like' a lot in her conversation and was uncomfortable with how it portrayed her. She explains that she feels that:

I am just not making any sense.

Together we amend the quotes to remove some of the use of the word 'like'. The other four students also gave their consent to use their quotes from the conversations.

¹⁴ Please see Appendix H for details on the students interviewed.

Personal Profiles of the Students

In this section I introduce the female university students who participate in my research. It is important when presenting the students that I portray an accurate representation. An interviewer needs balance when considering the complexities of hermeneutics. The role of researcher I feel is to encompass both the hermeneutics of faith and of suspicion. Josselson (2004) summarises hermeneutics:

The point of view of a hermeneutics of faith, the interpretive effort is to examine the various messages inherent in an interview text, giving “voice” in various ways to the participant(s), while the researcher working from the vantage point of the hermeneutics of suspicion problematizes the participants’ narrative and “decodes” meaning beyond the text. (p.1)

My aim with these conversations is to find balance between both the hermeneutics of suspicion and the hermeneutics of faith. I want to allow the voice of the students to be heard. Jones & Abes (2013) acknowledge that “students bring multiple identity stories with them to campus every day, also depending on the time and space in which they tell them, some of these stories are visible, and some are not, both to others and to themselves” (p.17). I hope to look deeper into the story underneath the conversations. I aim to beyond what the student’s are saying to try to gain an understanding of where they are in their college experience.

Emer

Emer is a second year student studying Spanish and Music in an undergraduate Arts degree. She is nineteen years old and describes herself as a shy person who was intimidated at the thoughts of going to university:

I am not going to lie, I was petrified at the notion of college, absolutely petrified like, emm... for the leaving cert year. I knew I would go to college, I knew I wouldn't back out of going to college and all that cause I knew it would affect my future if I didn't.

But I was absolutely mortified at the idea of it because I am quite shy and it was just like I was afraid of fitting in.

Emer took a year's break from her studies after completing her Leaving Certificate Examination in order to work and save some money. For her first year of university she commuted on a daily basis which on reflection was quite difficult for her:

I am way happier this year compared to last year. Feeling like I actually fit it to college if you get me. Looking back on last year I didn't really click as much. I was just there whereas this year I feel.....engaged.

She now feels much happier in second year of her degree. She is currently living in Maynooth and can walk to university every day. This has allowed Emer to become more involved in university life especially engaging with her new friendships:

This year I found that I'd be more willing like more open to talk to people.....I am way happier in college this year than I was last year. I do feel so much happier in college now, I do feel like I have settled in.

Elaine

Elaine is a nineteen year old Arts undergraduate student. She is in second year of her degree studying English and History. Elaine is from the midlands and is the second youngest in a family of five. Elaine found choosing a course at university difficult and the experience of starting university daunting:

I was kinda, not unsure about going to college but, unsure about where I wanted to go. I didn't really have the excitement I think so emm... it wasn't as if I arrived with huge expectations. I was nervous then when I did eventually arrive and you know it's very daunting.

Elaine made the move to Maynooth in first year where she stayed in on-campus accommodation. This was a difficult change for Elaine and she missed her familiar surroundings of home, friends and family:

It was more just emm... moving away from home I suppose and just moving away from being so comfortable you know, you spend, you spend six years in secondary school and you're so comfortable with everything there. Just when you're really comfortable with it you are gone then and you have to start again somewhere else so that in itself I suppose it takes a lot of getting used to.

Elaine was reflective during her interview and had some insightful observations regarding friendships and peer relationships. She spoke about how important her faith is to her and how it has been a help during her university experience:

It's something [my faith] I have always been grateful for in my own life, because emm... it's helped me time and again and comforted me.....Wherever you're drawing that comfort from is totally fine but I think that it was important for me, cause that was my source of comfort or whatever. I do think it is important to have something that gives you strength and comfort and for me that happened to be my faith, for somebody else, whatever it is, I just think it definitely made things easier for me.

Amy

Amy is a second year undergraduate Arts student who is studying German and Music. Amy is twenty years old and comes from the south of the country. Amy was extremely excited about coming to university and university really has met with her expectations:

I expected a hectic social life which is kinda what I got so I am happy with that.

Amy did have to stand her ground at home with her mother in relation to course choice at university. Her mother wanted her to study Medicine at Trinity College Dublin because academically she was capable of it. However, Amy stood firm regarding her decision. She feels that she now has her mother's full support. Amy loves her studies at Maynooth and dreads university ending:

I went against what she wanted I suppose, she really wanted me to go to Trinity. You should go to Trinity it has a really good rep. You should go medicine, just study medicine. So I was like should I be going the way she wants me to go, should I be

doing my own thing, should I be doing what I want to do. It wasn't really a big deal when I said no she was always like its fine at the end of the day it is your decision and I respect that.

Amy came to Maynooth with a close friend from home who is studying Music and this was a great support to Amy, who feels that her friend was better at making those first connections with new people:

I don't really have lots of friends but the friends I have I am close with that kind of way you know. She made friends quicker than I did you know, so I suppose for the first few weeks I kinda latched onto her and her friends and that helped me. I did make an effort to be friendly but the pressure wasn't as great.

Overall Amy came across as someone who loves every moment of university however during the course of the interview she opened up to her struggles with peer relationships:

If you just wanted peace and quiet you would be just sitting in your room and sometimes that was I don't know, it was a bit lonely in ways. Even though you are in a houseful of people it can be a bit lonely.

Sandra

Sandra is a third year Primary Teaching student. She is an engaging and enthusiastic individual and is passionate about her chosen career. Sandra, who is twenty-one, has wanted to be a teacher for as long as she can remember and had no doubt that she will one day reach her goal:

In relation to what I wanted to study, I have known that for as long as I can remember, I have never wanted to do anything else. The only question in me not going would be if I didn't get what I wanted I would repeat and do it again. It wouldn't have been a case if I didn't go but more if I had to take few years out to get to where I wanted to be.

Sandra is from the midlands and is the first in her family to go to university. She moved to on-campus accommodation for first year and had high expectations of the university experience however, for Sandra it was not what she expected and in order to for her to stick with her goals there were a number of sacrifices to make:

Everyone thinks college is great, you get to move out, you get to go out all the time, you don't have to come into lectures, it's a real freedom do what you want, you're your own person now experience. Whereas actually coming to college that's not how it is at all, so I suppose in that sense my expectations did not come through at all in that regard to having my complete freedom, doing what I want when I want.

Sandra is extremely driven to become a teacher and almost sees university as getting in her way. She is the most vocal of my students on how university is a means to an end and she sees herself as an adult. She also talks about how the dynamics and her position in her family have changed since she moved away to university:

I say I became more of an adult. I kinda see the consequence of things that I do now. I would have been living more in the moment. I like it [responsibility] because it makes me feel more independent but I do despise it when I go home. I feel really out of place at home after moving out of home. I was the oldest child and now I feel I am the youngest adult. I do like to come home but on a Sunday night I am ready to come back.

Alice

Alice is a second year Media Studies student. She is the youngest of two in a family where education is extremely important. Alice commuted to Maynooth for first year and found that it hindered her university experience:

I did not enjoy it at all [commuting]. I really really wanted to move into Maynooth for second year. I just felt like I was missing out on so much I wanted my own independence I wanted to be able to decide that I can go to that event during the evening...and I say to everyone that I know coming to Maynooth try and live in Maynooth. It's part of the college experience to move out, to move out of home. It is very different when you're at home.

When she was making her decisions for university study Alice was quite unsure. However, now she loves her course and especially loves that she is in a small class group of forty students:

I am also very lucky that everyone in my class are so lovely, they are incredibly nice and I couldn't ask for a better group and because there is only forty in media it was a lot easier to make friends with them because I feel like my whole class is my group of friends.

Alice is zealous about the social learning that has occurred for her since coming to university. She came from a single sex girl's school and explained that prior to university she would have been quite closed to discussions about sex or sexual activities. She feels that university has opened her mind:

It does definitely develop you as a person [Social Learning] and it opens your mind to maybe not being so judgemental. I found that, that I've kind of become more understanding the more people that I meet in university. The more experience that I hear of and just listening to other people and other people's backgrounds. You do, you become more kind of understanding which I think is great.

Main Themes emerging from the Interviews

Friendship and Peer Relationships

The single most predominate theme throughout each of the five interviews is the importance of friendships and peer relationships. The role of friendship was a theme for consideration in my original email but I completely underestimated its significance. Josselson (2004) explains that "the interviewer provides a window on psychological and social realities of the participant" (p.5). Each of the student's use their situation with their peers and friends as the main indicator of how they are experiencing university. Buote et al. (2007) describe making new friendships and establishing positive peer relationships as being strongly related to social adjustment and successful first year in university. They suggest that the "significant relationship with students' feelings of attachment to university, and

even their academic adjustment” (p.685). Wise & King (2008) agree and believe that there is a “crucial role that friendships play in the growth, development, and psychological adjustment of young adults in general and college students in particular” (p.830).

Understanding the role and the meaning of friendship goes back to the great minds of Aristotle and Cicero who believed that friendship was only achievable between ‘good men’ who according to Doyle & Smith (2002) are both good absolutely and useful to each other. There has since been much research on the phenomena of friendships in both psychological and sociological disciplines. And unsurprisingly, its importance has remained a steadfast in our human nature. Doyle & Smith (2002) describe friendship as:

Friendship can be viewed as personal and freely entered into – but it is formed in particular social, economic and cultural circumstances and this has a very significant impact upon the people we meet, and our ability to engage in different activities. It is of profound social, as well as individual significance. Through friendship we gain practical and emotional support and an important contribution to our personal identities. (<http://infed.org/mobi/friendship-some-philosophical-and-sociological-themes/>)

When friendship is considered through the lens of these female students experience of university there are a number of considerations. Firstly there is the task of managing the changes to precollege friendships and secondly there is the establishment of the new friendships from within the university environment. Both of these processes may involve feelings of anxiety or loneliness. Buote et al. (2007, p.667) write about the importance of friends and how it can impact on college adjustment. They explain that:

The multiple functions that friends fulfil, and their provisions of support and well-being, suggest that having a close friend during stressful experiences would certainly help individuals cope. This may be particularly true during the transition to university, where a loss of friends may occur as there is typically a disruption in social support networks. (p.667)

On exploration of the five conversations, it became clear that friendship has a significant role to play in the university experience. I divide the theme of friendship into four sections; Old Friends, New Friends, Living Away from Home vs. Commuting and Friendships & identity. I examine how each of these theme impact on my students.

Old Friends

During adolescents, peer groups or social support networks become more valuable. Oswald & Clark (2003) argue that social support networks create a “developmental context where adolescents can try out new identities and roles, aiding in the socialization process and the development of social skills” (p.187). However, while friendships and peer groups are fundamental in adolescent’s development the transition from secondary school to university changes the social context of those friendships. Sandra reflects on her group of friends from secondary school:

My sixth year group of friends would now have dispersed, I wouldn’t consider it a group anymore.

Paul & Brier (2001) elucidate that the:

One major area of upheaval is within one’s social network. Students must move from an established network of friends to a new environment where they are quickly challenged to form a new network of friends. Although a few precollege friendships might be maintained through college, never again will precollege friendships be the same. (.p84)

Elaine acknowledges the change in her friendships when she talks about meeting up with her secondary school friends after she started university:

There was this element of comparison almost. I don't even think it was deliberate by anybody's part but naturally enough....everybody has a separate story to tell and people are just like vying for airtime.

Amy interestingly feels that university allows her to increase her circle of friends rather than change it:

I don't know I guess it was nervous and exciting at the same time. It's an opportunity to meet new people too rather than you are not necessarily losing the old people either like the people I was friends with in secondary school I am still very close with now. I just feel I have widened my friend circle rather than made a different group. If you want to maintain the friendship it will be maintained you just have to put in a little extra effort if you are not seeing each other every day.

Paul & Brier (2001) introduce the concept "Friendsickness – a pressing relational challenge for new college students that is induced by moving away from established network of friends" (p.77). This concept is based on the issues of precollege expectations and university adjustment. It proposes that students whose expectations of university are not met and whose social network is made up of a larger percentage of precollege friends may not adjust to university life well and become lonely and distressed. Paul & Brier (2007, p.77) critique the university transition research that focuses on looking ahead at new friendships. They argue that new university students frequently look back to pre-college friendships. Elaine reflects on the change in her friendships:

I think when circumstances change, friendships change. I think emm..., it's a little bit hard, at the start anyway, to realise, do you know maybe you know, maybe I am not going to be that close with that person anymore now. It's another thing that's changing that's gone like now you're away from home.... you're away from your comfortable school setting and you're realising that God I am not going to be that close with that person anymore.

Geographical location may also have an impact on precollege friends. Johnson, Haigh, Craig & Becker (2009) research the concept of relational closeness where college students define closeness in their long-distance and geographically close friendships. Johnson et al. (2009)

argue that “with greater numbers of available communication channels, the impact of geographic distance on friendship is decreasing, allowing the formation and maintenance of relationships with people too far away for frequent face to face contact” (p.632). However, Manago, Taylor & Greenfield (2012) question that while adolescents and emerging adults have a variety of communication technologies at their disposal, does social media “engender an orientation toward popularity and large numbers of friends at the expense of reliable social support from close friends and the development of skills for intimate relations” (p.369). Both Elaine and Amy talk about how social media cannot replace a face to face conversation in a real friendship. Elaine explains that:

I don't use social media I think I always sort of thought of it as a filtering system...it means I don't really have those superficial connections.

On the other hand, Oswald & Clark (2003) and Steinfield, Ellison & Lampe (2008) posit that students who are able to maintain communication with school friends report being less lonely and are better adjusted to university life. The ability to stay in touch with school friends through social networking sites buffers university students' emotional distress associated with friendsickness. However these friendships may decline in both quality and quantity during the first year of university. Sometimes, students begin the university experience with an established friend from secondary school and this seems to be an ideal anchor between making new friends and maintaining existing ones. Amy acknowledges how important it was for her:

That really helped me, it was so nice being close to someone before I came and having that kind of support there and I suppose at the start I wouldn't be the quickest to make friends, it takes me longer.

Sandra also recognises how helpful it is to have a connection from secondary school:

I was lucky I had a friend coming with me into my course as well but we chose not to live together.

While these established friendships change as a result of the university experience, new relationships grow and develop at the same time.

New Friends

In parallel to the changing environment of precollege friendships there is the establishment of a new social network. Establishing new connections is only the first step in developing new meaningful friendships. Oswald and Clark (2003, p.189) outline the four types of friendship maintenance behaviours as: interaction, positivity, supportiveness, and self-disclosure. Each of these behaviours is necessary in solidifying a new meaningful friendship support network. This network of support provides a strong foundation for the adjustments to university life. Buote et al. (2007, p.685) show that building new friendships is related to social adjustment but also that new friendships impact positively on students' feelings of attachment to university, and even their academic adjustment. Friends fulfil a number of key functions in helping students accommodate to their new environment. In the interview there is an emphasis on being open to developing new friendships and even openness to connecting with people. Amy highlights that:

You have to be prepared for change and be open, be willing to make new friends and be friendly even if you're kinda shy. You have to make the effort and it's a constant effort the whole way along.

Buote et al. (2007) support the position and argue that "ones openness to new friendships was related to the extent to which they made friends at university" (p.679). This is not always easy, as Emer explains:

It does take me a while to settle in and it does take me a while to open up. I have three close friends that I keep in touch with constantly. This year, I was actually pushed this year to get to know more people. While it was hard at the start it did push me to open up and that's way better.

Alice talks about the importance of reaching out and making connections. She is pleasantly surprised with how easy it is to make friends:

I was completely wrong in what I thought, that it was going to be hard to make friends or anything, it was the complete opposite. I thought it was much easier to fit in. I actually found it quite easy [making friends] I am still friends with the girls that I talked to on the very first day of orientation. As soon as you arrive on a college

campus try to talk to people, talking to people, whether that blossoms into a friendship or not, it really makes you think about what other people think about and that people think different things and like where they come from affects how they behave and what they choose to do.

Anxiety around making new friends is present for my students. Amy talks about how making new friends is something everyone has to experience as part of university life:

In a way it's a bit daunting I suppose, everyone thinks that I mean even the most confident people are going to think well oh I am going to have to go and make new friends now. You know that is leaving your old friends behind is a bit of a big deal.

Gilligan (2005) recognises the significance of leaving behind friendships and the importance of having strong relationships with someone:

One confiding relationship, meaning a relationship that invites one to say what is on one's mind or in one's heart – a relationship where you can be yourself with another person, had been found repeatedly to be the best protection against most forms of psychological distress, especially in times of stress. (p.732)

Sandra, who identifies herself as socially confident, describes her experience of making friends in first year with people from outside her academic course:

I was a little bit out on the edge like. I wouldn't be that concerned about making friends, I'd be quite confident in going up to new people and talking but, and at the same time there is only so much that you can do, sometimes you are just on the edge a little bit because of that [programme of study] so yeah I don't know, that did kinda pull me back a little bit in first year.

Emer, who describes herself as shy, discusses the difficulty in starting university a year after all her friends started:

I took a year out in between school and college so all my friends had moved forward so like when I started I didn't know anyone.

Gender Differences

It is important to note that gender impacts on friendships. Research suggests (Shim & Ryan, 2012 and Rose & Rudolph, 2006) that males and females develop and sustain friendships differently. Shim & Ryan (2012, p.507) contend that females are usually oriented towards communal goals whereas males tend to be more oriented towards dominance goals. Rose & Rudolph (2006) propose that females tend to be more prosocial, but also more socially anxious and depressed than males whereas males tend to be more aggressive than females. They also found that women generally have higher-quality friendships in young adulthood than men. However there is some debate about what constitutes higher quality friendships. Unfortunately I was unable to get any male students to participate in my research. This would have been a useful exercise in comparing different responses by gender.

Johnson et al. (2009) and Fehr (2004) found gender differences in their studies on friendship. Fehr (2004,) found women rated patterns of interaction related to self-disclosure as more prototypical of friendship intimacy than men. She articulates that for females:

Friendships are focused on talking, particularly about relationship issues, feelings and emotions; men's friendships are activity based. These gender differences in friendship experiences generally are not disputed. They have, however, fuelled considerable controversy over whether women's friendships are necessarily more intimate than men's friendships. (p. 267)

The female students that I interviewed demonstrated these patterns of interactions in their friendships.

The difference of the experience of friendships among the genders permeates into different aspects of the university experience. Wise & King (2008, p.828) found that gender differences were also evident in students' perceptions of their families' environments and their views of the quality of their best friendships. Bagwell, Bender, Andreassi, Kinoshita, Montarello & Muller (2005) found that the quality of same-sex close friendships of college students predicted psychosocial adjustment and self-esteem. Buote et al. (2007) suggest that "one of the ways in which new friends helped reduce stress was by providing fun and

enjoyment, which acted as a distraction from the stress of academic work” (p.684). Elaine supports this sentiment by saying that:

It would have been very difficult if I hadn't met those other friends at the start.

Bagwell et al. (2005) believe that “women report greater depth of communication, emotional emphasis and involvement and closeness and security in their friendships than do men” (p.239). On reflecting on my five interviews, the need to make new friends is felt by all. The anxiety that goes with that need is variable. This anxiety depends on the individual themselves and also the existence of an established friend or friend from secondary school. However, the university experience involves studying with and sometimes living with new acquaintances. This may have an effect on the experience of university life.

Living Away from Home versus Commuting

Crosnoe (2000) notes that “friendships are embedded within the greater social landscape” (p.381). Physical proximity is an important factor in friendship development. Within the university environment there is an expectation that students living on campus will, through their new living environments, create a new social network. Buote et al. (2007) explain that although it is important for all first year students to replenish their friendship network, developing new friendships may be particularly important for students who live in on-campus accommodation during their first year at university. Elaine explains that:

I was lucky because I was on campus and because that kind of gives you a framework for meeting people.

The development of new friendships begins from the very first day of university and in some ways it can set the scene for the year to come. Buote et al. (2007) explore the importance of friendship and suggest that there is a positive relation between quality of new friendships and adjustments to university. They continue by stating that the positive relationships are stronger for students living on-campus than for those commuting daily. This echoes what Alice observes of her first year class-mates who were living on campus while she was commuting:

It's just that I don't think you have such an intense bonding with your friends. I find that the people who were living on campus in my class, they are all very very close and they are all very very good friends, cause they had to depend on each other at certain times.

Emer also commuted for first year and found that it impacted on her connecting with university life:

Last year I commuted a lot so I didn't fit. I didn't really feel like I fit in that much, so this year since I have moved up I have just gotten involved.

Beginning university education is a significant life transition for young adults. Research indicates that the role of friendships play an important part in adjusting to university life. Shim & Ryan (2012) articulate that "making new friends and establishing positive peer relationships are important to having a successful first year in college" (p.504). This is echoed by Wise & King (2008) whose research suggests that making friends and socially integrating into university life play a prominent role in the successful adjustment to university. Two of my students describe how living in on-campus accommodation helped them in establishing a new social network. Emer describes:

I was really eager to move up and like get to know people even more. I do feel so much happier in college, I do feel like I have settled in.

Alice also explains that living on-campus is helpful in relation to the university experience as well as establishing a social network:

You're spending a lot of time with people and you do form a great bond with whoever you're living with. Living away from home, I think it adds to the college experience rather than living at home. I think you are still in your comfort zone, you are still in the school mindset.

Living at home can sometimes be challenging for university students. Combining the worlds of university life with home life can be arduous. Sandra reflects on her students who live at home while studying:

The transition to college is very different for people who have to move out of home. I notice now with my commuter friends, they haven't developed the same way that I have developed, like maturity wise there is a very big difference. I have two lives, I have my college home, my college life and I have my home home and my home life. Two sets of friends, two houses, two families cause we are like a family here so it's real split, they never overlap. It's not as open if you don't move out. If you don't go through the discomfort of moving out you don't open up a bit.

Moving out of home can also help with developing independence and improving relationships with parents. Larose and Boivin (1998) propose that “adolescents who leave home.....become functionally independent of their parents and this in turn strengthens their emotional ties to them” (p.4). However Larose and Boivin (1998) recognise that this first significant separation from parents may in fact make the initial transition to university more stressful. Elaine acknowledges this difficult experience:

I suppose moving away from home for the first time you know, I would never really be away from home before for any period of time, so the realisation that you're gone or moved I suppose emm... yes it was difficult.

Personality and individual characteristics play an important role in developing new friendships. While a student's time in university has a reputation of being a fun filled life experience it can easily be a daunting change for some young people. Shim & Ryan (2012) highlight that “while many students thrive in the new social scene at college, others are overwhelmed and struggle to fit in. Social problems are intimately related to overall well-being and general success at college” (p.513). These problems can sometimes be linked to on-campus accommodation, where you cannot choose your housemates. Sandra talks about her experience of on-campus accommodation and she highlights the difference between her expectations of living with other students attending university and the reality:

I expected to come into four new people who were going to be my best friends. We were going to live together and we were going to have absolute craic and banter, and it was going to be the best fun ever. Whereas everyone is doing different courses and everyone has different interests. It's like moving out of your home home into a

new home but with no choice of who you live with or how it's laid out, it was a bit rigid. I just thought it was going to be a bit more free than that.

In considering the experience of my students, the general consensus is that living in on-campus accommodation, is the ideal situation in order to develop friendships at university. Whilst leaving home may be difficult and on-campus accommodation is not always easy, however the benefits of friendship seem to compensate. These benefits contribute to the overall experience of university life, which in turn contributes to the development of identity. Flum & Kaplan (2012) suggest that “experiences during adolescence, particularly in social context such as schools, carry pivotal meaning in people’s lives...which in turn, elevates their self-reflection ability and develops in tandem with identity” (p.241). Therefore, the experiences of friendships both old and new may impact on identity development.

Friendship & Identity

Friendship has emerged as an important theme for the students, relationships with old friends and new friends impact on their experience of university. The experience of these friendships also impact on identity. In chapter two, Erikson’s life span development theory is epigenetic. Marcia & Josselson (2013, p.617) discuss this theory as understanding the links between inner experiences and the outer reality. In the conversations with the students, the experience of their outer reality is influenced by their friendships and peer relationships and informs the development of their identity.

Torres et al. (2009) consider the “role that culture and dominance play in personal and societal beliefs about identity” (p.583). They argue that identities are socially constructed. Jones & Abes (2013) draw attention to students’ perceptions of self and suggest they are “influenced somewhat by membership in social groups – and that membership in each group varies in salience for the individual by time and context” (p.36). My students appear to view the role of friendships as a catalyst to personal development. Emer explains that:

If you just come in and just float through like and don't bother making friends you will literally end up miserable, you won't have developed at all.

Elaine draws attention to the different social groups that students may be a part of during their university experience:

It's ok to have different friendships for different situations.

Deaux (1993) explores the links between identity and group membership, and claims that memberships of a group is due to a connection between the group identity and the students. Bagwell et al. (2005, p.236) write that competence in friendships links to personal development. Elaine discusses how she has matured since beginning university:

Friendships is the one place I have noticed it [how she has changed], like in school I never would have questioned behaviours of friends or anything like that. Now I can see that people aren't perfect, I am not perfect. People should never be expected to be perfect and friendships aren't perfect but it's OK to disagree on things and its emm.. OK, like I was saying to not be best friends with the same person.

Understanding identity development and the difficulties this may present to students will enable us to better support and facilitate their university experience. This experience is greatly influenced by the role of friendships and peer relationships which provide the social supportive network for students and creates the environment for identity development. Paul & Brier (2001) in their research on Friendsickness acknowledge the role of new friends in college as “critical for support, confirmation of one’s identity, opportunities for socialization, and other dimensions of college adjustment” (p.77). Elaine articulates where new relationships helped her:

Well for me it was a lonely time I think at the start, getting used to all the changes at once so it definitely helped meeting new people.

Josselson (1987) explains that females may need an anchor during periods of transition. She highlights that “the process of anchoring is critical to identity formation in women because the self is experienced so much in relation to others” (p.175). The students express the benefits of their new anchor friendships and view them on a par with family relationships. Sandra writes:

Now I am living in a house with friends and that's a family house, we do a week shop between the four of us on Monday. I cook dinners for the week and they clean up for the week. We make lunches together, the bathroom is shared, clothes are shared, we...everything is shared there is no divide at all.

Identity Development among the Students

The study of identity has long been integral to university student development. Jones & Abes (2013, p.19) deduce that an understanding of identity is necessary if one is to understand students and their experiences of university education. Erikson's (1980) view encompasses individual and social meaning and is considered in terms of the interplay between individual and society. Identity formation according to Marcia (2014) represents a core developmental challenge that adolescents must address on their way to adulthood.

Considering this challenge I reflect on my five students. Connecting each participant to an identity status may allow for a deeper understanding of what that individual may be experiencing in their life at university. Research (Marcia & Josselson 2013 & Arnett 2007) acknowledges that it is feasible that students in university are experiencing some identity exploration or formation. Jones & Abes (2013, p.3) suggest that the exploring identity allows students to consider the meaningful questions of Who am I? and What will I be?.

Three of my students present as moratorium identity statuses. They appear to be in the midst of crisis. They are currently exploring who they are and what are their core values. Marcia & Josselson (2013, p.620) describe people in moratorium status as currently in an identity exploration. They acknowledge that it can be challenging to sit alongside the emotional pain these people may be experiencing and not try to intervene. My response to Emer echoes this sentiment. I observe her despairing, of ever finding a course choice that she feels comfortable with. I engage my guidance counselling skills of immediacy and silence to allow Emer time to reflect on this statement:

I change my mind like the weather! I was just petrified that I would make the wrong decision and that I would come to university and that I'd rush it.

I consider Emer, Elaine and Alice in a moratorium identity status. They each present with varying levels of anxiety with their situation. Emer comes across as very unsure and quiet. She berates her inability to make decisions confidently and refrains from making comments about her beliefs:

I wouldn't say boo, I would literally melt into the background.

Emer also came to meet me after she reviewed her quotes. She was anxious over how she came across during our conversation. She was unsure if she made any sense at all. Luyckx et al. (2012) recognise that “ongoing exploration in breath has been linked with anxiety, depression, low self-worth and other forms of distress” (p.1227). Emer refers to having anxiety during her Leaving Certificate which was four years ago. This ongoing exploration may, in conjunction with personality traits, contribute to her overall uncertainty. Lee, Dickson, Conley & Holmbeck (2014, p561) discuss the link between self-esteem and coping. They suggest that anxiety and difficulty coping can be linked to low self-esteem which in turn may impact on identity exploration.

Elaine is also experiencing a moratorium identity status. She is intuitively aware that there is some significance to the changes that are taking place in her life and while she finds them unsettling she trusts the process:

I think well looking back on it now maybe it was almost unconscious I am not sure but I think there was a bit of a getting away aspect. Not that I wanted to get away from anything in particular but just I think I wanted to like give myself a chance to start again, not to start again but just to go my own way and you know be independent I suppose.

Elaine finds comfort in her faith and feels it helps her with any uncertainties she may have about university life:

I have faith so I don't tend to worry about those things anymore.

Both Emer and Elaine show signs of a moratorium identity status. They appear to be exploring their identity but have not made any definite identity commitments. Interestingly they differ on how they are coping with this exploration. Kilmstra et al. (2012, p.1228) draw attention to two distinct types of coping. Engagement coping which is aimed at active problem solving and dealing with stressors and related emotions. Whereas disengagement

coping is aimed at avoiding or withdrawing from problems and escaping feelings of distress. Both of these experiences would be considered classic moratorium.

Alice however, may be described as searching moratorium. Searching moratorium, according to Meeus et al (2012), is an adolescent who has “strong commitments and has explored them intensively, but is also very active in considering alternative commitments” (p.1010). This searching moratorium describes my experience of Alice, who talks about her social learning at university. She explains how she is growing and changing with her university experience and seems to thrive on each new realisation of her own personal beliefs and morals:

Socially and everything, and definitely with your own personal beliefs and morals, it's a culture shock coming to university.....The discussions that are had in university, like with the students union, like the campaigns the students union do, it's so different to what we are used to, that it's kind of uncomfortable. It's completely different, but I suppose that's like, it's more realistic to the outside world than school. I have definitely found that from coming to university I have grown in my sense of learning about other people, and that people are different, and that's great.

Kilmstra et al (2013) discuss the impact identity searching can have on an individual. They explain that identity development may be characterised as an alternation of exploration and re-evaluation. They acknowledge that “exploration is productive and helpful to the person” (p.223). While Elaine and Emer are experiencing discomfort with this exploration at the moment, it is still a more optimum identity status than foreclosure or identity diffusion. As a result of my conversation with Alice and recognising the extensive exploration she has undertaken I feel that she is on the cusp of identity achievement. As she summarises:

One thing that baffles me about college is that people kind of talk about everything, they talk about their own beliefs and what they believe in, and you kind of have debates about well, I don't think that and I think this and I think that's great. I think that really develops you as a person. It opens your mind to, so it opens your mind to so many different concepts.

Marcia & Josselson (2013) describe identity achievement as “an individual who is reasonably integrated and self-aware, possessing an inner world and sense of self” (p.620). This reflects my experience of Amy. She articulates her position:

I think I have become more argumentative and judgemental but not in a bad way. Before, I think I was very, I agreed with everything. If someone had an opinion I would say yes and if someone had the opposite opinion I would be like yeah yeah. Whereas now I more, college has taught me about forming your own opinion and having your own say, and I suppose now I am more strong in my own view points and I am able to say no, this is what I believe in and know my values more.

Identity achievement is certainly not the end of one’s exploration of their identity. Marcia (2014) informs us that if “identity has been formed at late adolescence; the individual can be expected to undergo subsequent identity crisis throughout the life cycle” (p.171). Amy demonstrated past identity exploration and a strong commitment to her identity. I would describe her as identity achievement.

My fifth participant, Sandra, presents as extremely confident and self assured. However, it was during the course of the interview that I began to consider Sandra’s identity status as foreclosure. Marcia (2014) describes foreclosure as a “non-exploratory approach to identity formation, one sees a reluctance to question earlier childhood occupational and ideological positions” (p.172). Sandra expressed very early in the interview her determination in her career choice:

I was very set on what I wanted to do and I was very set on where I wanted to do it, so going in I knew a lot about the campus, I knew what was available, I knew about the clubs and societies I had done all my research.

Sandra’s determination is admirable and Marcia (2014) commends people in a foreclosure identity status in attending further education. Marcia (2014) states that “this is somewhat remarkable, given all of the disconfirming information to which they have probably been exposed [He suggests that the university experience will either] go in one ear and out the other or be actively resisted” (p.172). Sandra describes her position in university as:

It's a unique position to be in, in college where someone wants to get out of college. It's not that I don't I love college but I know where I want to go and I just want to get there.

Foreclosure, while not being considered an ideal identity status, is open to change much like all the other identity statuses. As Erikson maintains identity is a combination of both the individual and the world in which they live. Sandra's world will change significantly when she leaves university and this may be the juncture which prompts a commitment to engage in identity exploration.

Adjustment & Coping

Kilmstra et al. (2012) propose that coping strategies and personality traits, strongly impinge on identity development and they influence one another in a reciprocal fashion. Emer found the idea of making a decision about university at the same time as the Leaving Certificate examination overwhelming. She took a year out after her Leaving Certificate to take time to make decisions regarding her future choices. Reflecting on this decision Emer believes it was the right decision for her at the time:

I was losing the plot trying to figure out what I wanted to do. I took a year out to work and just settle my head like, so you know it was a good decision.

Baxter Magolda (2014, p.25) describes the college experience as a time of transition which inevitable calls for reconsideration of one's role and responsibility in the world. The university experience is considered an opportunity to construct one's own beliefs, identity and social relations and essentially transition from dependence on authority to self-authorship. Oswald & Clark (2003, p.188) suggest that first year college student's report the transition to college as the most stressful adjustment phase in their life. Emer discusses how different her university experience is this year compared to last year:

I would be more open, more eager to get involved in things. I am way happier in college this year than I was last year. I feel like I have settled in with like getting involved. This year I found that I'd be more willing, like more open to talk to people.

I argue that the university experience is much more complicated than acquiring the knowledge and qualification for a chosen career path. Shim & Ryan (2012) maintain:

The transition to college is a major milestone in the lives of young adults. It brings new social challenges as students are thrust into a new social scene quite different from school that involves navigating a larger social system and living amongst peers. Making new friends and establishing positive peer relationships are important to a successful first year in college. (p.511)

Shim & Ryan (2012) propose that social and personal growth are significant benefits of college in their own right and support Tinto (1997) who argues that successful transition is intricately intertwined with academic adjustment as well as satisfaction with the college experience. Alice recognised the links, in adjustment to university, when she summarises that:

Another thing would be to definitely get involved from first year onwards. I think you miss out a lot in college if you're just coming in to do lectures and then go home. I mean there is the academic side where you come in and do your coursework and do your exams, and there is the social side where, if you're in a club or you're in a society, and boy is it that, that's half the learning, it really is.

Gilligan (2014) draws attention to the “tensions between psychological development and cultural adaptation” (p.92). Amy articulates how disconcerting she found her days at the beginning of her university experience:

Coming to college and having this freedom, where I have hours and hours where there is nothing planned or nothing on, it was really strange for me. I found it really, almost boring, I didn't know what to do with my time. But I really enjoy that about college now. I really like the free hours and I like the way every day is different. You have a routine but it changes all the time, you never get bored. Going from the established daily routine to comparative freedom, not having anyone tell you what to do is great.

Once Amy became adjusted to her new routine she was able to enjoy it and recognise its benefits.

Kaplan & Flum (2009) recognise the links between academic achievement and social environment. They articulate that “personal and social identities provide valence to engagement and participation in schoolwork, which in turn shapes students’ self-perceptions” (p.76). Alice recognises the significance of her social context when she proposes that:

Once you have made a really good group of friends that helps it make your whole college experience more enjoyable.

This quote from Alice captures the main theme that emerges from the conversations. The structure of the university experience seems to be held together by the university community and the relationships formed within that community.

Conclusion

When I reflect on the conversations, there is some essential learning for me. It is important to recognise the unique way in which each of the students experience university. Students in the same identity status seem to experience it differently. The concept of moratorium identity status and the various layers and complexities within this identity status deepens my understanding of the different responses. The impact of personality traits and coping skills also influence a student’s experience of the concept of identity. While identity may not be the prevailing concept in the students mind, it is a fundamental element in the university experience.

Chapter 5

The importance of Friendship in developing Student Identity

Reflecting on my Research

In this research I examine the experience of five female students attending Maynooth University. I undertook this enquiry due to a 'gap' that I feel exists in supporting students transitioning to university. As a result of the engagement with the literature and the in-depth interviews with the five students, I have a deeper awareness and understanding of that 'gap'.

When I began my research, my practice as a Schools' Liaison Officer informed my knowledge of the experiences and challenges that may face students at university. The focus from the Department of Education and Skills and the conversations in schools seem to concentrate on course choice and employability. Kaplan & Flum (2009) recognise the importance of understanding this experience for students when they write:

Students' engagement [in education] – their choices, struggles and negotiations – is clearly affected by, and in turn influences, who they think they are, who they think they want to be, and who they actually become. Engaging deeply in a certain topic, or striving to achieve high grades in a subject matter, are precursors to, or perhaps already manifestations of students' self and identity commitments that could have implications for their future. (p.76)

My aim in this enquiry is to gain a more meaningful understanding of the personal experience of university and engage with students on their understanding of the concept of identity. The experience of listening to the five students; Emer, Elaine, Amy, Sandra and Alice is enlightening. Friendship emerges as a strong theme and a critical factor in the transition to university. The world in which these students engage appears to be occupied by significant peer relationships and friendships. These relationships seem to directly impact on a student's sense of belonging and contentment. Erikson (1968) describes his concept of identity and identity diffusion as epigenetic, he argues that people's concept of identity is an

amalgamation of individual and social meanings. In this research the depth of social meaning associated with friendships seems to support his position.

When I reflect on the impact of friendships on the five students the power of peer relationships emerges as a core theme. In terms of friendships, transitioning to university is experienced as a time of irreversible change to old friends and the establishment of new social networks. Unsurprisingly these changes impact on the students feelings of adjustment to university life. It is interesting to note that living on campus helps facilitate establishing new friendships and seems to be a more popular option than commuting. The five students I interview all articulate their preference to living in Maynooth rather than at home. The theme of leaving home and how it impacts on personal development may benefit from further research and investigation.

The literature suggests that the social world can inform the formation of identity. Each of the students presents their own unique position in relation to their concept of identity. This is not overtly expressed; however it is possible to gain an understanding of their concept of identity from an exploration of their conversations. I assign, based on my reading of the literature and the interviews, an identity status for each of the students. From this, I suggest it is possible to explore how the individual and the world in which she lives can impact on her identity.

I posit that Emer, Elaine and Alice are all in different stages of the moratorium identity status. Personality traits and coping skills seem to influence the experience of moratorium. Elaine appears to attribute her contentment with the uncertainty around her, to her faith. This suggests that there are benefits to periods of quiet reflection in student's lives. Further research into the role of faith and the development of the concept of identity among adolescents is merited. Amy and Sandra, I believe, represent strong identity commitments. Amy is committed to her new student identity as a result of her exploration and self-awareness. She also appears to be completely engaged with her university experience and is content with her beliefs and values. Sandra, who is also strongly committed to her identity, tries not to let university derail her from her long established path. While these five female students have different personality traits, different coping

skills and different presentations of identity statuses, they each highlight and identify the importance of friendships in their university experience.

The experience of university may be very different for men and women. Josselson (1987) believes that the most important developmental task facing women is the formation of their identity. She explains that the psychoanalytical theory of identity development, which informs my understanding of the experience of university, has been conceived in terms of male development. Only recently have theorists (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, Gilligan, 2014 and Josselson, 1996) begun to address the female need for attachment and connection in relation to their own development.

Limitations of this study

One of the unintentional limitations of this study is that it has not engaged with any male students. While I draw on Josselson's position regarding identity development, I would have like to explore the differences, if any, between males and females understanding of the concept of identity. I contacted a large number of students for my research and only females engaged. This in itself is interesting; out of 46 male students contacted, not one replied. On reflection, I question the manner in which I initially communicated with the students. I suggest we need further research into the methods we use as researchers, academics and departmental administrators to communicate with our students. A deeper understanding is required of the most effect methods of communication and an appreciation of differences between genders in how they engage with those communications. In addition to how communication methods can by influenced by gender, it is worth noting that none of the students I interviewed were first year students. This poses the question of first year student's ability to engage with university life and structures and may signify the importance in how various university services initially communicate with new students.

Whilst my female students provided extensive insight there is the concern about the application of knowledge to a wider university population. The case study is not intended to create a general narrative but presents an opportunity to develop a deeper understanding

of the process of transitioning to college which can inform admission practice and policy.

Jones & Abes (2013) write about the awareness needed with stereotypes:

The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.....when we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise. (p.17)

Identity is formed in the lives we live with the people around us. It is the interactions, reactions and relationships that we have on a daily basis, which help us create our own identity. Whatever gender students identify as, universities should encourage, facilitate and support the development of the concept of identity and recognise its role in the experience of university.

Areas for Further Study

Much of the research conducted around the concept of student development and more precisely the links between student development and the role of friendships originates in North America. This suggests that there is a need for further research focusing on the Irish experience of student development. This research could explore in depth the experience of living in on-campus accommodation and the contribution in establishing new friendships in university. This research could also examine how friendships progress and develop through the university experience, especially toward completion. This may help universities in supporting students transitioning in and out of university education.

Recommendations

The main indicator for my students, in how they are experiencing university, is their relationships with their peers and friends. This knowledge reinforces for me the importance of personal development as part of university life. The development of identity, some consider, more important in today's society than ever before. Kilmstra et al. (2012) caution that "as contemporary societies have become increasingly individualistic and less supportive, establishing a stable identity has become increasingly challenging for many young people" (p.1227). My experience from this research is that students rely upon engagement and support, especially from peers. If universities actively engage in programmes on personal development it may promote a more engaged student population; which in turn may result in a more focused and committed student. Kaplan & Flum (2009) echo my belief when they summarise that "together with many others, we believe that the goals of education go beyond the objectives of a high grade point average, conceptual change, critical thinking, or the acquisition of self-regulation skills, and should be conceptualized in terms of broad development goals" (p.73).

It is with these goals in mind that I aim to continue my research and develop a programme focused on personal development for university students. This programme will endeavour to allow students, in a group situation, the space and time to reflect on their experience of university. With the support of their peers, students will explore how their identity is developing in parallel with their academic studies. Through providing this space and time for reflexive consideration, students may develop self awareness and resilience to support them in their academic studies and in the next phase of their lives.

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Appendix A

Erikson's Life-span Personality Development Theory

Old Age								Integrity and Despair
Adulthood							Generativity and stagnation, Self-absorption	
Young Adulthood						Intimacy and Isolation		
Adolescence					Identity and Identity diffusion			
School Age				Industry and Interiority				
Play Age			Initiative and Guilt					
Early Childhood		Autonomy and Shame, doubt						
Infancy	Basic trust and Basic mistrust							

Appendix B

Marcia's Identity Statuses

		Has a Crisis-Exploration Been Experienced?	
		Yes	No
Has a Commitment Been Made?	Yes	Identity Achievement: has explored alternatives and made a commitment	Foreclosure: strongly committed to identity positions without exploration
	No	Moratorium: currently in an identity crisis	Identity Diffusion: lack of commitment and lack of meaningful exploration

Appendix C

Chickering's Seven Vectors of Student Development

Developing Competence	Developing intellectual, physical and emotional competence.
Managing Emotions	Developing a maturity about processing emotions and handling both the positive and the negative.
Moving towards Interdependence	Establishing emotional independence, developing self-direction and with confidence embracing their interdependence on others in society.
Developing Mature interpersonal relationships	Having a tolerance of the differences within society and within individuals and being able to maintain long-term intimate relationships.
Establishing Identity	Developing self-esteem, becoming comfortable with their own thoughts and feelings, and getting to know themselves.
Developing Purpose	Making commitments for the future and following through on decisions.
Developing Integrity	Establishing inner beliefs and becoming congruent with those beliefs.

Appendix D

Costa and McCrae's five personality traits

Neuroticism	Struggling to adequately deal with negative emotions
Extraversion	Socially competent and dominant individual who experiences positive emotions
Openness to new experiences	Ability to engage and be curious about the world around them
Agreeableness	Seeks to maintain positive relationships and amends behaviour to facilitate those relationships
Conscientiousness	Responsible, reliable and dependable

Appendix E

Email seeking student participation in my research

Dear Student,

My name is Fiona Casey and I am a Schools' Liaison Officer in the Admission office of Maynooth University. I am undertaking a Masters in Education (Adult Guidance and Counselling) and I am hoping to explore student engagement and the factors supporting retention at third level. I am particularly interested in finding out more about your experience of college, the supports and services you received and how that contributes to the overall success of students at university. I accessed your email addresses from our Admissions Office Student Ambassador Listing.

I am running a focus group on Tuesday 16th February from 1.30pm until 3.00 pm in Rowan 1, Rowan house, North Campus (I can send you on detailed directions prior to the focus group if needed) and I would very much like to invite you to participate. There will be 6 to 8 people some of whom you may know from working at Open days etc.

During the focus group we are going to discuss your experiences on transitioning to Maynooth University. These will cover areas such as;

- **Matching expectations with reality (How school prepared you for University)**
- **Family support (The role of your family in your new life at University)**
- **Peer support (New friends and old friends)**
- **Identity (The new and improved you)**
- **Advice (The words of wisdom you would give a student who is about to make this transition)**

If you are interested in attending please confirm via email by Monday 15th February. I am particularly interested in hearing about your own experiences and getting input from you on what it is like to move from Second level to Third level.

I wish to advise you that I will make notes on the topic discussed and the suggestions and inputs from the group will be put up on a flipchart. These notes will be used within my thesis however I will not be referencing any comments to any individuals nor will I include your names or any other identifying information in my research. For those of you who may be interested I will send on a consent form which will outline again the purpose of the study and confidentiality.

Please email me if you would like to participate.

Kind regards

Fiona

Appendix F

Focus Group Consent form

I.....agree to participate in Fiona Casey’s research study
“Transitioning to third Level – the personal perspective”.

I am participating voluntarily. I confirm that I am aged 18 or over.

If I choose to engage in the focus group I am aware that notes may be taken of any comments I make.

I understand that disguised extracts from the focus group may be used in the thesis and any subsequent publication if I give permission below.

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether before it starts or while I am participating.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data prior to the completion of the thesis, in which case the material will be deleted.

I understand that I have access to the material should I request it prior to completion.

Signed.....

Date.....

If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process please contact the Secretary of the National University of Ireland Maynooth Ethics Committee at research.ethics@nuim.ie. Please be advised that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

Researcher:

Fiona Casey

Schools’ Liaison Officer

Admissions Office

Maynooth University

Tel: 087 1257426

Email: fiona.casey@nuim.ie

Appendix G

Interviews Consent form

I.....agree to participate in Fiona Casey’s research study
“Transitioning to third Level – the personal perspective”.

I am participating voluntarily. I confirm that I am aged 18 or over.

I am aware that this conversation will be sound recorded.

I understand that disguised extracts from this conversation may be used in the thesis and any subsequent publication if I give permission below.

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether before it starts or while I am participating.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data prior to the completion of the thesis, in which case the material will be deleted.

I understand that I have access to the material should I request it prior to completion.

Signed.....

Date.....

If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process please contact the Secretary of the National University of Ireland Maynooth Ethics Committee at research.ethics@nuim.ie. Please be advised that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

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Appendix H

Overview of Students

Name of Student	Year of Undergraduate Programme	Subjects	Age
Emer	2 nd year	Spanish & Music	19
Elaine	2 nd year	English & History	19
Amy	2 nd year	German & Music	20
Sandra	3 rd year	Primary Teaching	21
Alice	2 nd year	Media Studies	20