

**Perceptions of Risk of Harm and Social Capital in  
Young People's Lives**

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## Abstract

Contemporary young people would appear to have access to more information than their predecessors in relation to keeping safe by avoiding or reducing risks. However concerns about young people's perceived increasing risky behaviours have contributed to a growing focus on understanding young people and risk of harm across private and public spheres. This study examines the views, experiences and behaviours of young people and adults in relation to risk of harm to young people and the role of social capital in reducing perceived risk. Using qualitative data with young people and adults in a Scottish community this study develops an understanding of perceptions of the main risks of harm to young people and whether social capital helps to reduce these risks. Social constructions of 'appropriate' behaviours for young people to engage in and subsequent constraints imposed by adult-led structures and safety concerns, formed a significant focus of youth theorising in this area.

To a certain extent, the findings from this study challenge the conventional construction of young people as risky individuals, by identifying young people's negotiation and avoidance strategies for keeping safe. However, young people's experiences and behaviours in public and private spaces remain significantly structured by age and gender. Young people and adults perceive risks associated with alcohol and public spaces to be high and prominent. The continuing notion of risk appears to be evident in young people's choices about who to socialise with and where, their safety concerns and ultimately how particular social networks can be accessed in order to capitalise on protective measures. Young people's safety concerns

are overwhelmingly related to the 'other' in public spaces, reinforcing dominant social constructions of private spaces as safer than public spaces.

Strong community ties are highlighted as paradoxical: whilst providing trusting social networks which contribute to loyal and safe peers, the intimacy of such networks is perceived by adults as a barrier to young people's bridging capital and social mobility.

These findings pose difficulties to applying late modernist risk theories which minimise the role of wider social processes in shaping young people's perceptions.

Understanding young people and risk is best served by adopting the sociology of youth and social constructionist perspectives which assert the impact of gender, and in particular the power of age constructions which continue to operate within young people's lives. Ultimately, perceptions on risk of harm to young people remain infused with gendered and age expectations and constructions.

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# Chapter One

## Introduction

### Introduction

This thesis is based on a qualitative study, which examined the views, experiences and behaviours of young people and adults in relation to the main risks of harm to young people and the role of social capital in reducing perceived risks, in one Scottish community. This chapter introduces the main aims, context and rationale for the study. An overview of subsequent chapters is also given to assist the reader in navigating the thesis structure.

### Aims of the Study

The aim of this study was to understand how young people and adults view the main risks of harm to young people in their community, and safety measures to reduce risk of harm to young people. This aim was addressed by exploring the following key research questions:

1. What are young people's and adults' perceptions of the main risks?
2. What informs perceptions of risk to young people?
3. From adults' and young people's perspectives, what role does social capital play in reducing perceived risks of harm to young people?
4. What are the theoretical implications of the study findings?

In the UK, there is a lack of research which explores young people's views on the main risks of harm to them, according to their definitions rather than adults' definitions.

This is a surprising omission given the contemporary concern about this issue within media and policy discourses focusing on young people. This study sought to address this gap by considering the issue of risk in one Scottish community from the perspective of young people themselves, and adults, using focus groups and semi-structured qualitative interviews. By exploring young people's and adults' accounts of these issues, this thesis contributes to a greater understanding of the complex and diverse responses which young people make when faced by the often contradictory discourses around risk, space and responsibility. Research in this area has the potential to inform safety initiatives, and contribute to understanding young people's behaviours and concerns in relation to their safety in private and public spaces; and adults' behaviours in relation to their efforts to protect young people from harm.

By considering young people's and adult's views on this issue, this thesis also contributes to attempts to theorise the social position of contemporary young people from sociology of youth perspective. From a theoretical perspective it will be argued that the concepts of power, social control, resistance and gender found within sociology of youth theoretical frameworks have the potential to assist in understanding and contextualising the responses of young people in the current study.

### **Thesis structure**

Following on from this introductory Chapter, Chapter Two reviews sociological, health and criminological literature relevant to young people and risk of harm. In doing so, gaps within the literature are highlighted as the basis for the current study. The chapter explores theoretical frameworks and concepts which have the potential to assist understanding of existing literature and the research findings presented in

subsequent chapters. It is proposed that the ideas within social constructionist approach to risk and sociology of youth perspectives provide a particularly useful framework for understanding and contextualising the current study. Key theoretical concepts from these frameworks are identified as: risk and social capital. These concepts will be explored within this chapter, and it is argued that understanding these concepts in relation to youth identities is particularly important.

The methodological approach taken by this study is outlined in Chapter Three. The rationale for the chosen research strategy and design is presented before discussing how participants were recruited to take part in the study, and how the fieldwork unfolded in practice. The process of data analysis is then outlined in order to facilitate understanding of how the study findings were reached.

Chapters Four through to Seven present the findings of the study, based on the focus group and interview data. More specifically, Chapter Four explores alcohol and drugs as being perceived as posing the main risks of harm to young people. The reasons why alcohol and drugs are perceived as posing main risks of harm to young people, according to the participants, are presented. The role of gendered expectations of young women's and young men's alcohol related behaviour is discussed within this chapter. Chapter Five moves on to explore why young people occupying public spaces is perceived as posing a main risk of harm. This chapter explores the social meanings attached to private and public spaces, highlighting that who young people socially interact with as well as where young people socialise, are identified as significant risks.

Chapter Six presents perceptions in relation to adults protecting young people from harm; exploring the often contradictory discourses about whose role it is to protect

young people. This chapter presents the tensions between professional duties and personal intervention where caring for young people is concerned. Chapter Seven explores young people's protective friendships, highlighting young people's negotiation and avoidance strategies to reduce risk of harm. This chapter sees young people as social capital producers as well as receivers, in the context of risk avoidance.

Finally, Chapter Eight discusses the key findings from this study and highlights the relevance of these findings to existing theoretical and empirical knowledge. The chapter is structured by the key themes which have emerged from the study findings, and situated in the context of the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter Three. Chapter Eight concludes by highlighting the theoretical and empirical contribution of this thesis, including the implications for future research.

## Chapter Two

### Risk, Young People and Social Capital

#### A Literature Review

##### *Introduction*

Drawing upon a range of sociological, health and criminological material, this chapter reviews literature relevant to perceptions of risk, young people and social capital. The chapter explores theoretical frameworks and concepts which shaped the study and provide the context for the research findings presented in subsequent chapters.

Firstly, dominant modernist theories on risk will be reviewed and critiqued, and it will be proposed that they understate the influence of social and structural processes on shaping risk perceptions and concepts of individual agency. Secondly, it is then argued that socio-cultural perspectives on risk provide a particularly useful framework for understanding and contextualising the current study. Furthermore, literature from geographies and health studies makes the most substantial contribution to this aspect of the review. The next section focuses on young people, highlighting their common association with risk in the literature. In addition, theories and definitions of youth are then reviewed, followed by empirical work which explores young people and risk.

Thirdly, theories of social capital will then be reviewed and critiqued in relation to their focus on the benefits of social networks and how these are placed in the wider picture of shaping norms, beliefs and values. Although there is a lack of literature which specifically considers the issue of social capital being accessed to reduce or negotiate perceived risk, related bodies of literature can be drawn upon to facilitate understanding of key elements of this process. In the event, as will be addressed later

in the thesis, social capital emerged as a lesser theme in the findings, although the concept is still helpful for wider considerations of the topic. Finally, literature which explores young people developing social capital as a means to increase safety, well-being and in turn, reduce risk, is examined. This chapter concludes by highlighting gaps within the literature reviewed, presenting this as the basis for the current study.

In addition to the searches of the University library catalogue, the electronic database search used for the literature review utilised an array of possible keywords including: 'risk', 'risk of harm', 'social capital,' 'belonging,' 'networks' 'young people, 'youth', 'adolescents', 'teenagers.' This search was run in the following bibliographic databases (JSTOR, Sociological Abstracts, PsycINFO, Web of Science Core Collection, Social Care Online, CINAHL, International Bibliography of Social Science, ASSIA, British Humanities Index and Social Services Abstracts), all of which were searched from February 2009 to April 2015.

## **Risk Society, Risk Perception**

### ***Risk and Society***

Risk of harm has become a central focus of exploration and theorising within social science (Spencer, 2013). In discussing 'risk' the following definition is used: *risk refers to the belief of the likelihood of an individual experiencing harm or a bad outcome; hence risk is used as a short-hand for risk of harm.*

The literature consulted two distinct approaches at either end of a continuum to theorising and understanding risk. In the first, assessing risk is deemed to rely upon the perception of real, objective hazards, and probabilistically assessing the likelihood of something dangerous occurring. This modernist approach underpins the scientific

study of risk (Henwood *et al.* 2010). The other approach is to see risk as socially constructed, as a concept produced by shared values and meanings which can change across time and space (Lupton, 1999). This second approach encompasses the sociocultural perspectives on risk. The modernist approach to explaining risk will be reviewed first.

Modernist approaches to risk explain it in terms of probability and calculation terms; where the focus is on quantifying risks typically associated with technology and industry (Lupton, 1999). These 'manufactured uncertainties' resulting from our self-confrontation with the effects of industrial society include climate change, air pollution, smog, nuclear radioactivity, toxicity of food, the danger of widespread genetic modification, and even global financial crises from newly created global financial systems (Beck 1992: 22; Beck 1999: 111). 'Objective' risks tend to be separated from subjective risks, asserting that lay people's understandings are inferior compared with 'expert' knowledge (Lupton, 1999).

However, for late modernists, societies have moved on from very rigid to more fluid social categories. With the proliferation of mass communications, individuals are more conscious of events and of potential threats from outside of their own communities. Even where the application of science and technology has reduced or solved one set of problems, these have been replaced by new and different problems and unrecognized risks that were sometimes created (as unintended consequences) out of previous solutions (Lawy, 2002). For Beck (1992), modernity introduces global risk parameters that previous generations have not had to face. However, heightened perceptions of risk, by some, are interpreted as a result of societal changes triggered

by late modernity. Late modernity is theorised as a period of rapid change in the social, political, cultural and economic worlds, marked by increased differentiation between people (Webb, 2006) where more intelligent applications of newer, better forms of knowledge will render problems more amenable to human intervention and control (Kelly, 1999).

Late modernisation is thought to have produced a new type of society, according to Beck (1992) we live in a 'risk society.' Beck tends to equate the risk society with a disaster society in which maximal catastrophes serve as the paradigm for understanding risk (Scott 2000: 36). The term 'risk society' has become 'lingua franca' across a range of disciplines including sociology, politics, criminology and cultural studies' (Mythen 2007:793, cited in Morrissey 2008). Perceptions of risk consist of the unknown and unanticipated effects of scientific and technological advances (Beck, 1992). It is argued that risk discourse breeds insecurity, encourages the use of scapegoats and forces people to accept 'expert' knowledge of both risk and how to avoid it (Ericson and Haggerty, 1997).

The proposed severity within risk society theory is similar to the perceived threat within moral panics. Ungar (2001) attempts to define the difference between the two: exaggerated deviations appropriate to moral panics and the potential emergence of catastrophes to the risk society. He explains that moral panics were largely contained within a discourse of safety, and the social construction of moral deviants served to affirm the boundaries of the normative social order through claims-making activities of public guardians. The uncertain and unpredictable nature of risk society accidents, on the other hand, undermine reassuring claims to public safety and raise key questions



“. . . of trust, expertise and authority, the fallibility of science, the nature of (once hidden) institutional practices, the threat of immobility and, ultimately, the affirmation of social order” (2001: 288).

The concept of moral panic traces its inception to Cohen’s (1972) ground breaking analysis, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*.

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media . . . Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten . . . at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way society conceives itself. (Cohen 1972: 9)

For Cohen, every moral panic requires the delineation of a scapegoat or ‘folk devil’, an identifiable object onto which social fears and anxieties may be projected. As the personification of evil, he conceptualizes folk devils as susceptible to instant recognition as ‘unambiguously unfavorable symbols’ (1972: 41). Both Beck and Cohen draw on disaster theory, however moral panic theory differs in that it does assume the normality of safety. For Cohen folk devils serve as the ideological embodiment of deeper anxieties, perceived of as ‘a problem’ only in and through social definition and construction. Cohen identifies that very often young people are placed in the position of folk devils.

It has been argued elsewhere that the heightened sense of risk consciousness commonly associated with the uncertainties of late modernity has also given rise to a process of merging, whereby discourses of risk have conjoined with discourses

containing a strong moral dimension (Hier 2003). Quantifying and calculating the risks of events occurring has become a major preoccupation (Webb, 2006). In addition, according to Beck (1992: 33), risk involves 'something to do with anticipation, with destruction that has not yet happened but is threatening, and of course in that sense risks are already real today.' For Giddens (1991), the term 'risk society' refers to a particularly advanced phase of the modernisation process characterised by unpredictability and rapid flux. Giddens (1990, 1991) explains the outlines of late (or high) modernity as consisting of existential anxiety, characterized by the 'disembedding' of social relations. Such an ambivalence, says Giddens, arises from the intersection of social events and social relations 'at distance' with local contextualities. That is, late modernity involves a radical realignment of how individuals 'live in the world' in the sense that the disembedding of social relations renders individuals as increasingly vulnerable to the actions of unknown and distant others. Tomlinson (1994) questions the extent to which people have an on-going, phenomenal experience with global affairs. Tomlinson insists on preserving the distinctions between distant/local and mediated/immediate experience, he contends most people are aware of global affairs through their engagement with the mass media, but this form of mediation is encountered as a distinct mode of experience, separate from immediate experience and the contextuality of the familiar. Phillips (2000) opposes that political consumption only provides people with a limited sense of agency in global political affairs, as they discursively differentiate eco-politics as a mediated public realm separate from the realm of everyday experiential reality. Phillips concludes that individuals are shielded from a sense of blame or anxiety, not from trust relations embedded in expert systems, but from a sense of order or control

achieved in the realm of everyday living through routinized patterns of responsible living. An important element of moral panics - and of the severe responses towards folk devils to which they lead - is the sense that such reactions bring of restoring order.

Beck does not wish to suggest that daily life in today's risk society is intrinsically more hazardous than in pre-modern world. Late modernity's blindness to the risks and dangers produced by modernization – all of which happens automatically and unreflectingly, according to Beck – rather leads to the questioning of divisions between centres of political activity and the decision-making capacity of society itself. New forms of mistrust and fear of the future portray people as individual victims of events and their own failings, isolated within fragmented communities (Ecclestone and Field, 2003). Young people are constructed as responsible for their future life chances, choices and options. These processes of 'responsibilization' compel young people to prudently manage the risks of their own DIY project of the self (Kelly, 2001, 2007), and those that do not comply become the source of moral panics.

The perceived expansion of choice is significant to this approach; it is argued that more areas of life are released or disembedded from the hold of tradition (Beck, 1992). One of the most distinguishing features of Beck's risk society is that class is no longer required to understand this new emerging social reality (Curran, 2013). The apparent breaking down of traditional structures has resulted in the 'individualization' of people. In a risk society people are forced to construct their own biographies and identities based on personal hopes and fears as opposed to community and family. Beck's account also resonates with what we instinctively 'know' through our daily lived experiences – that we are increasingly separated from distinct social divisions (Skelton,

2005). Beck and Beck-Gernsheim claim that everything must be decided by the individual, from their gender to identity. The effects of one managing their own biography, making their own choices is that 'failure becomes personal failure', where individuals are perceived to take responsibility for their own misfortunes. For Beck and Beck-Gernsheim:

Individualization is understood as a historical process that increasingly questions and tends to break up people's traditional rhythm of life...To put it bluntly, the normal life history is giving way to the do-it yourself life history. (2002: 88)

It is claimed therefore that individual identities are not as strong as they were, that they are constantly changing and reproducing into new identities resulting in the breakdown of social divisions. Such images of risk and victimhood also require new therapeutic interventions to restore 'damaged self-esteem' and create safe environments for people (Furedi, 2002). Consequently lifelong learning is increasingly the focus for these new inclusive interventions (see Ecclestone, 2002).

Those that support Beck's theory argue that youth researchers can adopt a middle-ground position between the dominant polar extremes of agential reflexive behaviour and structural constraints when trying to understand and theorize the lives of young people (Woodman, 2009). There have been those who have advanced the significance of choice in structuring young people's life experiences, whether or not they actually refer to Beck (e.g. Chisholm 1997, Looker and Dwyer 1998). Arnett (2004, 2006), for example, has presented his influential 'emerging adulthood' thesis by propagating a choice discourse. How others disagree with this position will now be discussed.

### ***The problem with 'individualised' risk***

The late modernist approach to risk as taken by authors including Beck can be critiqued on two levels. Firstly, upon the argument which postulates that risks are experienced, perceived and reproduced by the individual, irrespective of social divisions, culture and meanings. Secondly, on an epistemological level, Beck's (1992) view of risk is rather loosely placed along the realist – constructionist continuum. Literature from the field of health is drawn upon to highlight evidence and arguments which contrast the views as presented within the modernist approach to risk.

Firstly, the notion that risk is individualised – both in its distribution and how it is perceived – is critiqued here. The present-day individualizing forces of social inequality erode class-consciousness (Beck 1992). It is highlighted in the literature that what Beck fails to adequately consider is that individualization may directly contribute to, and advance the proliferation of, class inequalities and economic exclusions (Elliot 2002). Critics of Beck have demonstrated the continuing relevance of class to structuring life chances (Goldthorpe 2002, Curran 2013) and by showing how risk is intrinsically linked with class divisions (Mythen 2005).

It is also argued that the risk society thesis simplifies the associations between risk and the distribution of wealth and resources:

The relations between individualized or privatized risk, material inequalities and the development of global poverty are more systematic and complex than Beck's theory seems to recognize. (Elliot 2002: 305)

It is essential when exploring how risk is distributed that the contribution of inequalities across different spaces is considered as fundamental.

In terms of young people's lives, arguments which suggest young people who choose to enjoy individual freedom with the intention to pro-long the start of adult responsibilities under the context of Beck's choice biography have been criticised. Such individuals are shown to have highly different educational and class profiles from those who do not (Coles 1995, Furlong and Cartmel 2004, 2007, Bynner 2005).

There is some agreement with Beck in that Furlong and Cartmel (2007) concur that setbacks are perceived as individual shortcomings or failures. However, from this perspective, economic and cultural resources are still central to an understanding of differential life chances and experiences (France 2007). They acknowledge that subjectivity is actually an important resource in late modernity but, importantly, that "[r]eflexivity is a key component in the dynamics of class, not a challenge to class based perspectives" (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 139). This opposes Beck on two points: (i) the focus for Furlong and Cartmel seems to be individualization as a subjective phenomenon whereas for Beck, individualization "is the social structure of second modern society itself" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: xxii), and thus a macro-sociological phenomenon, rather than something that relates primarily to personal preference or attitude; and, (ii) the argument is clear that they are renouncing Beck's rejection of class as an irrelevant form of analysis (Roberts, 2010). However, there is no doubt that in discussing the end of class, Beck is not referring to the end of inequality; in fact, he describes it as 'the beginning of radicalised inequalities' (Beck 2007: 680), (Roberts, 2010).

The evidence which shows the links between increased risk and inequality is vast. This body of work is too large to fully consider here (Shaw *et al.* 2014; Ross & Mirowsky

2011; Stringhini *et al.* 2011; Pampel, Krueger, & Denney 2010; Fors, Lennartsson, & Lundberg 2008; Lantz *et al.* 2001), yet it is worth highlighting some recent empirical studies which provide examples of such relations. In writings based within the sociology of health, there is the acknowledgement of a rise of health promotion methods drawing attention to the individual being responsible for their own health. The rise in 'self-help' books and the shift in health advice being previously only distributed within hospitals and doctors surgeries but now increasingly found in other arenas suggests lines have been blurred between expert and non-expert knowledge (Nettleton, 2013). Thus in terms of seeking and accepting health advice, individual action is positively promoted. Given the widespread acknowledgement of the social factors influencing young people taking risks then, it is perhaps surprising that many public health interventions are still aimed at changing behaviour, an approach that has had only very limited success (Baum & Fisher, 2014; Cohn, 2014). This health work sees itself within a modernist paradigm; therefore it reflects Beck's analysis of late modernity.

The claim that individuals are separated from the effects of class and that they are responsible for their own health – can be challenged sufficiently by evidence which shows the effects of poverty on individuals' health outcomes. A vast body of evidence shows that many individuals do not have the option to 'choose' to be healthy or to receive much needed health care due to structural and social disadvantages. In other words, to live 'risk-free' is a privilege for the minority rather than a choice for all. With regard to social class, the substantial evidence that young people in lower socio-economic positions are more likely to engage in unhealthy practices (Viner *et al.*, 2012)

and to continue these into adulthood (Blair, Stewart-Brown, Waterston, & Crowther, 2003; Jackson *et al.*, 2012) is acknowledged, while it is accepted that the strongest determinants of adolescent health are structural factors (Viner *et al.*, 2012). Recent evidence has shown that poorer populations do not receive life-saving health treatment (Gorey *et al.* 2014) and links have been made between income inequality and high rates of STIs (Harling *et al.*'s 2014). Empirical evidence has shown that family values can impact upon teenager's decisions relating to pregnancy and motherhood as well as employment decisions (Crompton, 2006). Other examples challenge the individualist position - evidence shows that educational disadvantage has a significant impact on young people's lives. Furlong and Cartmel (2007) have illustrated how class-based inequalities have persisted, and even though the gap in educational attainment and participation between classes at age 16 has lessened, a large gulf still exists.

The individualization thesis has been criticised on several fronts. Therefore the underlying implications of these critiques are that agency has been ignored, variations in welfare state provision and local cultural contexts in which people live have also been ignored (Brannen and Nilson, 2005). The nature of the 'individual' has also been criticized for reflecting an autonomous and 'stand-alone' view of individuality, whilst consequently diminishing the understanding of the individual as deeply embedded within other social relations (Sevenhuijsen, 1998). Further, the idea of the separate individual is said to be more reflective of one narrow particular experience – that of the adult masculine experience, highlighting adult sexual relationships over process-orientated relationships between mothers and children in particular (Ribbens McCarthy and Edwards, 2002).



Some of the evidence and arguments which critique individualisation shift away from examining risk in itself to focusing on families and relationships. In a comprehensive review of the literature, Jamieson (1998) found little evidence to support the thesis that individualisation is an emerging feature of contemporary relationships. Instead she highlights how experiences of intimacy are wider and more variable than Giddens' ideal of the pure relationship. Although Jamieson notes the significance and potential resonance of public discourses of disclosing intimacy, she views such accounts as partial and selective, obscuring the contradictory complexity of lived private lives. This view is supported by a number of empirical studies demonstrating an enduring attachment to ideals of family and commitment (Jordan *et al.* 1994; Edwards *et al.* 2002; Weeks *et al.* 2001). Jamieson (1998) argues that the research base does not support the individualization thesis as a true reflection of either the current state of family relationships or the direction in which they are moving. Scott (2000:36) critiques the narrowness of Beck's approach: "Despite an awareness of gradations of risk, there is a slippage in the analysis in which at key points the actually existing risks – as opposed to hypothetical risk – are subsumed under ultimate catastrophe." (2000). Furthermore Scott critiques Beck's claims on the individualisation of people, the separating from traditional norms and divisions as a direct consequence of existing within a new phase of modernity. Scott shows that collectivization and individualization to be interpenetrating features of the entire history of industrialization, rather than what Beck claims about individualization to be new and concurrent with 'postmodernity.' In this camp, continuity as well as change is emphasised.

For theorists who reject claims of breakdown and individualisation, the concept of social change in personal relationships is profoundly overstated. Many social theorists question the empirical basis for such narratives of decline, as those who welcome ideas of individualisation generate a view of equality and justice that operates independently from wider structural constraints.

Secondly, it is argued that a reluctance to define the epistemological stance of risk perception presents contradictions in approaching risk research. Beck advocates a 'sociological perspective' in theorising risk perception which in his view makes it possible to explore both the concrete and the abstract dimensions:

I consider realism and constructionism to be neither an either-or option, nor a mere matter of belief. We should not have to swear allegiance to any particular view or theoretical perspective (Beck, 2000: 211).

Beck has been criticised for being unclear about whether manufactured risks are extant or imagined (Mythen 2004). Despite claiming to be in the middle ground, it is argued that in Beck's work all of the language used arguably conjures up the idea of choice decisions that have to be made, with consequences that have to be faced (Roberts, 2010). In its entirety, Beck's risk society perspective is predominantly informed by a realist position, "a strong gravitation towards objectivism rather colours Beck's understanding of public perceptions of risk" (Mythen 2004: 100). Others agree that Beck "clearly nails his colours to the mast at one end of a binary" (Roberts, 2010: 140).

However others question whether it is possible to approach risk through a blend of realism and relativism, Adam *et al.* (2000) argue that risks cannot be approached by realism:

The essence of risk is not that it *is* happening, but that it *might* be happening...One cannot, therefore, observe a risk as a thing-out-there - risks are necessarily constructed. (2000: 2).

It is recognised elsewhere that methodological tensions will inevitably follow in terms of what questions can be asked about risk and how it can be researched. For example, Henwood and others (2010) recognise that the realist approach obscures essential questions about the social, cultural and political processes that give risk its meaning and how this occurs within the situations, places and spaces where people encounter risk in their daily lives. The rejection of the contribution made by social and cultural processes to the perception of risk within the risk society thesis is the fundamental reason why other approaches to risk need to be considered. Secondly, valuing diverse ways of producing risk knowledges, not just those entailed in established paradigms, practices, and procedures, where statistical testing is the norm is equally important. Beck's approach is limited in its grasp of perception of risk (Elliot, 2002). Beck's theory does not grasp the issue of the different ways in which risk can be perceived. It is clear that his work does not appreciate the full significance of interpersonal, emotional and cultural factors as these influence and shape risk-monitoring in contemporary societies (Elliot, 2002).

Furthermore, Alexander (1996) argues that a persistent materialism underlies Beck's entire approach highlighting his understanding of the perception of risk is utilitarian and objectivist. Lash (2000) criticizes Beck and Giddens for their utilitarian understanding of the relation between the actor and the environment, insisting that actors relate to the abstract systems of late modernity in a manner that is decisively mediated by their relation to communities. Atkinson (2007) finds Beck's work over many years to be filled with ambivalence, not least in his appraisal of what

individualization actually entails. While ‘individualisation spells the end of sociology’s “virtual fixation” with groups and collectives (Beck 1997: 21) ... we can identify and should investigate “cultures of individualisation” and “collective life situations” (Beck and Beck- Gernsheim 2002: 207)’ (Atkinson 2007: 356).

Focusing on individual choice alone can therefore lead to problematic conclusions about risk, blame and responsibility. If the risk society concept is accepted, individual outcomes and particularly those of young people, may be interpreted as a reflection of ‘bad choices’ or lack of ‘expert knowledge’ in the negotiation of risk choices. More than two decades have passed since Beck published his work and there remain unanswered questions about how such uncertainties and risks have been managed and perceived – individually or socially. In order to address such questions, it is necessary to turn to an alternative approach to risk – how risk is socially constructed.

### **The Social Construction of Risk**

Given the limitations of the late modernist approach for this study, which is interested in young people within social contexts, an alternative perspective which promotes the analysis of the social construction of risk will now be examined. Firstly, the arguments presented within the social constructed approach to risk will be explored and reviewed, with a particular focus on risk perception. Literature drawn from the sociology of health forms a significant body of the work reviewed. Secondly an emphasis on culture and community will be considered as necessary to addressing the social construction of risk. Thirdly this approach will be compared and contrasted with the individualist approach to understanding risk.

### ***Purity and Contamination***

The work of Mary Douglas forms one of the main theoretical underpinnings of this study. Douglas argued for a view of notions of purity and contamination as serving to construct cultural boundaries – between individual bodies, social groups within and between communities (Douglas, 2002). Klawans (2004: 8) has stated that many scholars have owed their inspiration for academic work on the topic to their encounter with her book (2002) *Purity and Danger*. In contrast to Beck's interpretation of an emerging risk-consciousness, Douglas advances a structural-functionalist interpretation of risk perception (Wilkinson 2001). Whilst Douglas' theory has been criticised for being 'under developed' (Duschinsky 2011), the following reviews the ways in which her work is particularly illuminating in the context of young people and risk.

Douglas argues that phenomena which are constructed as "dirty" or "polluted" are purposefully labelled as such in order to maintain boundaries or divisions between certain social groups (Douglas 2002). The process of constructing order and stability necessarily generates exceptions and phenomena that fall outside of these boundaries (Fussey *et al.* 2012).

The pure is qualitatively homogeneous and self-identical. The impure, by contrast, is that which is qualitatively heterogeneous, incorporating materials from two or more separate origins; it can never present itself as an origin, for it is already marked by its dependent, derivative status. (Duschinsky 2011: 313-314)

Much of the research which applies Douglas' theory includes stigma relating to bodies, including tensions around drug injecting activity (Harris 2009; Elverdam 2011). Despite the few connections made between Douglas's theory and young people, her work has been promoted as a powerful tool in the field of understanding youth as it constructs

models of understanding that place young people at the centre of the discipline (Green 2007). Young people are a marginalised minority group, Douglas's model can help to provide a better understanding of how they are perceived as a potential danger in society and notice the mechanisms by which society seeks to control them (Green 2007). Young people can be seen as attacking the formal structure. When local councils seek to restrict young people from moving freely in certain areas they will often use the language of untidiness and suggest that young people, in being noisy, unpredictable and not fitting in, are a threat to the fabric of a town (Green 2007). By using this metaphor of pollution and contamination, the rejection of young people occupying public spaces as a risk to others is understood in a deeper way.

Similarly, Durkheim (2001) focused his attention primarily on the (pure) sacred as the collective morals of the community. The result has been that, though themes of purity and impurity have appeared again and again in research across many disciplines, there has been surprisingly little social theoretical attention paid to the topic (Duschinsky 2001). The central message taken from Douglas's work is that individuals who breach the internal or external lines of a society's system of classification are subjected to ritualization (Fardon 1999: 81). Purity for Douglas (1966) reflects the structure of society and contributes to its preservation, at the same time offering a shared and meaningful cognitive picture of the world to the members of that society. The overall symbolic order of a society is normally maintained by keeping the pure and impure separate (Douglas 1966).

### ***The Other – Risk and Blame***

What is understood to be contaminating is dangerous in the threat it poses to social order, it is culturally specific and works to establish and maintain ideas or norms about self and Other. A 'risky' Other may pose a threat to the integrity of one's own physical body or to the symbolic body of the community or society to which one belongs. Therefore it is argued here that taking the socially constructed approach to risk is appropriate to exploring perceptions of risk. Notions of risk are framed as shared cultural assumptions and shared expectations rather than individualistic judgements (Douglas 1992). In Douglas and Wildavsky's (1983) view – risk cultures start not from the risk but from the blame, starting from the 'who to blame'. Thus hierarchical-institutional cultures blame the outsiders, the criminals, the foreigners. Similar to Douglas' work on the other is Becker's (1963) theory of deviance which drew on his study of marijuana users in the 1960s. Essentially it is a theory of how risk-taking (deviance) may become a permanent way of life. The argument that runs through both of Becker and Douglas' work is that those who are associated with risk are isolated from conventional society.

Douglas introduces her analyses of blame by sharing her frustrations with previous risk analysts' exclusion of exploring the cultural differences in the distribution of blame. Her writings are based on the acceptance of how industrialization draws members of small local communities into larger regional, national and international spheres.

Of the different types of blaming system that we can find in tribal society, the one we are in now is almost ready to treat every death as chargeable to someone's account, every accident as caused by someone's criminal negligence, every sickness a threatened prosecution ... Under the banner of risk reduction, a new blaming system has replaced the former combination of moralistic condemning the victim and opportunistic condemning the victim's incompetence. (1992: 15 – 16)

Douglas' focus on blaming the Other forms a key part of this study with relation to identifying whether individuals who are perceived to be risky are blamed due to the underlying threat to solidarity norms and values. Particularly, Douglas' approach will help to explore whether risky young people are perceived to represent instability in distinctions between adulthood and youth. Douglas argues that 'risk' as a concept and word serves the purpose of providing a vocabulary with which to hold people accountable.

Dangerous dirt is that which is recognisably out of place and in an ambiguous status (Douglas 1992). The crucial point here is that *unclear identity* is a threat to good order because it has potential to confront rules. Unlike other risk theorists, Douglas hits a key note here as she brings to light the notion that communities do not respond well to 'risks' – certain phenomenon or person(s) which cannot be neatly defined/labelled or distinguished from one cultural norm to another. It is precisely this emphasis which forms the focus of this study – what do perceptions of identified risks reveal about what is perceived to be safe or acceptable within a given community? For this study, using the work of Douglas as underpinning the approach to risk leads to questions that need to be explored including what do people perceive the main risks to be and what does this tell us about the cultural specific expectations within the given community? By identifying specific risks, what identity boundaries are people trying to maintain about themselves and the 'Other', and also who is defined as the other?

Douglas emphasises that in order to study risk perception accurately, the researcher needs to take the given cultural bias into account, in other words its social construction in a particular society. She argues that public perception of risk has been



individualized; it is treated as if it were the aggregated response of millions of private individuals. Her critique of the individualist approach is that it fails to take into account individuals' interaction with others, and reproduction of meanings and values. In contrast she emphasises that risk is not a thing but a way of thinking. Certain questions need to be considered in researching risk perception: does the risk affect the individual or the collective good; whose purposes does the risk serve and what kind of community is being studied. Further, each different type of culture is designed to use dangers as a bargaining weapon, "but different types of culture select different kinds of dangers for their self-maintaining purposes." (1992: 47). She argues that individuals do not try to make independent choices, but when faced with risk-related issues they already come with culturally-learned assumptions and weightings. She makes the point that when disaster strikes in a community, blame is used as a means of maintaining and reinforcing the community ideal.

Furthermore, adding to Douglas' theory of perceptions of risk and blame, empirical work has highlighted how identifying social and cultural norms facilitates researching risk perception. Douglas' concept of 'matter out of place' has been applied to the practice of childhood vaccinations and how they are perceived (Elverdam 2011). Every culture contains elements that are difficult to classify – a category termed 'matter out of place' by Douglas (2002). It is the injection as a preventive measure causing the child pain that is matter out of place, as with other immunisations, it does not have a function here and now but has its potential usefulness in an unknown future (Elverdam 2011). Similarly, in exploring students' perceptions of risk, Rau *et al.* (2010) identified that Douglas's (1992) notion that risk judgements are shaped through

shared understandings of what constitutes risk – was consistent with their finding that students know act in the moment and their decisions are shaped by what their peer group and social environment consider ‘normal’ behaviour. Lupton (1999) explores the risk discourse relating to the pregnant woman’s body, and draws upon Douglas’s (1966) work, particularly how that which crosses conceptual boundaries, is dealt with by societies as impure, contaminated and risky to their integrity. “Pregnancy is a source of ‘social pollution’ because it challenges notions about bodily margins: it is an anomalous bodily state, a body in transition from one state to another.” (1999: 78). The preservation of dual understandings (sick/healthy, interior/ exterior, clean/dirty) operates to protect a front of social and bodily cohesion (Harris 2009).

### ***Risk in Communities***

Douglas also explores how communities and individuals respond to misfortunes, the different types of responses and explanations: moral (the victim sinned); rational thought (was the victim ‘smart’ enough to overcome certain adversaries) and acts of deviance or disobedience (a disloyal traitor within a community). She draws a direct connection between the nature of the social networks/ bonds within a community and its constructions or risk:

In short, the stronger the solidarity of a community, the more readily will natural disasters be coded as signs of reprehensible behaviour. Every death and most illnesses will give scope for defining blameworthiness. Danger is defined to protect the public good and the incidence of blame is a by-product of arrangements for persuading fellow members to contribute to it. (1992: 6)

Community-wide risks are a weapon for mutual coercion, argues Douglas. In discussing the impact of cultural norms and conforming to such norms, Douglas points out that

members of a given community are not always aware of such norms until they are either faced with 'foreigners' within their community or move elsewhere and experience different norms and values. It is thus the deviant actions or new ways of doing life that expose the prevalent cultural norms and beliefs within the community, even though "The innocent view of culture is that we don't have it at home; it is only abroad that people are culturally hide-abound." (1992: 25).

### **Deconstructing Risk without Devaluing Harm**

At a first glance, Douglas' arguments could be perceived as strongly social constructionist in terms of her emphasis on the social and cultural contribution to perceptions of risk. However she clearly states that the reality of dangers is not at issue, accepting the reality of harm. Douglas' approach to understanding risk and harm does not minimise the fact that harm, danger and pain exist yet without diminishing at the same time the relevance and significance of the social and cultural contexts in which responses to these harms are constructed and reproduced:

The dangers are only too horribly real . . . this argument is not about the reality of the dangers, but about how they are politicized . . . Starvation, blight and famine are perennial threats. It is a bad joke to take this analysis as hinting that the dangers are imaginary. (Douglas, 1992: 29)

This study seeks to assert that whilst there is the experience of harm and suffering which is very real to many; it also argues that risk is socially constructed. Risks may lead to physical or psychological harm, yet the perception of risk itself is the result of social meanings, beliefs and values. Distinguishing the difference between what is experienced and what is perceived presents a complexity to those who desire to research risk. It is because of this complexity that it is necessary to review literature which successfully addresses that which is constructed without claiming that harm

itself is relative. The sociology of health literature manages to achieve just that. The social constructionist approach used in empirical research has unveiled the social and structural contexts in which lay people's beliefs about their health are produced and reproduced. For example, Blaxter (1990) found that definitions of health varied throughout the life-course and in relation to gender. Attempts to prevent illness through health promotion campaigns have failed to acknowledge the material disadvantages of people's lives. The effect can be the marginalisation of certain social groups who may be perceived as 'deviant.' (Bunton *et al*, 1995). Nettleton (2013) explains that sociologists are concerned with the experience of illness- the individual's subjective interpretation and response to the physical signs and symptoms. It is this theoretical balance which is of particular significance to this study.

Medical anthropologists have long emphasised that medical belief systems are culturally specific, and their content and origins are social in origin (Nettleton 2013). However constructionism is not a unified perspective, there are differences within the general approach (Nettleton, 2013). The problem of relativism is that it pre-supposes that all knowledge is relative, "if we refuse to accept the validity of any measures of health improvement or engage with the realities of disease, then as sociologists we cannot make any kind of contribution to quality of life or the improvement of human health." (Nettleton 2013: 29).

There are three main approaches to exploring risk within a social-structural framework (Nettleton 2013). Firstly, the 'macro-social analyses' of risk refers to societal level explorations. Secondly the meso-social focus explores organizational issues e.g. schools, churches or hospitals. Finally the micro-social analysis explores the social

meanings of behaviours that are deemed to be risky. Focusing on the meanings and interpretations of risk provides clues as to the prevailing social and cultural norms which shape people's views, beliefs and actions (Nettleton, 2013). Two perspectives on risk behaviour have emerged from such micro-level studies. First 'situated rationality theories' claim that an individual's assessment of risk is 'situation dependent'. Second, 'social action theories' propose that risk assessment is contingent on a person's prioritization of risk *and* on the social dynamics of situations, recognizing therefore the extent to which risk behaviours are contingent upon and produced by social interaction, negotiation and prevailing social norms and values. The focus taken in this study includes both situated rationality and social action theoretical approaches to the micro-social analyses of perceptions of risk.

Moreover, empirical examples highlight the significance of context and social interaction in the form of risk perceptions. Rhodes (1997) identifies situated rationality theory as a main theoretical perspective commonly applied in sociological analyses of sexual risk-taking. Situated rationality theories posit that risk-taking does not occur in a context-free vacuum but is socially situated, i.e., risks are perceived in the context of other risks and dangers which may be considered more immediate. This highlights the relativity of risk and counters the view of risk-taking as irrational. Hartley *et al.*'s (2014) study found that teenagers' drinking behaviours were contingent upon the social interaction with their romantic relationships and production of shared social norms about appropriate gender identities. For many male participants, drinking alcohol was a sign of maturity and was associated with sexual activity.

## **Comparing approaches to Risk**

Comparing and contrasting the individualist approach to risk with the social constructionist approach highlights the theoretical strengths of the latter. What the risk society thesis lacks, the social constructionist approach often provides. Scott (2000) frames the work of Mary Douglas as the rival perspective to Beck's risk society. Scott criticises Beck for taking "the hypothetical 'greatest theoretically possible accident' as the paradigm for contemporary risk." (2000: 38). Douglas goes further by arguing the concept of 'risk' itself is socially constructed: "[risk] is not a thing, it is a way of thinking, and a highly artificial contrivance at that." (1992: 46). The approach taken by Douglas allows us to ask more questions about why some phenomena are identified as 'risks' and others are not, her focus is on risk perception. Where Beck places a heavy emphasis on the risk society as a product of technical-scientific advances in our society, Douglas argues that although our technology may be new; that society has always considered itself to be facing catastrophe in the face of an uncertain future (Douglas and Wildavsky 1992, Wilkinson 2001). Whilst Beck seeks to make a distinction between the past and the new society which is characterised by attempts to avoid risks created by modern technology advances (Beck 1992), Douglas suggests that when social solidarity is weakened or placed under threat, then people react by constructing shared beliefs about impending catastrophe. There are also epistemological differences between these two theorists: there is no agreement between them on the 'reality' of risks we face.

For Douglas (1992) the question is 'how safe is safe enough for a particular culture?' Scott advocates for Douglas, critiquing Beck by promoting the need to evaluate the

socially constructed nature of risk: “There is nothing natural about risk-aversion; it is a sociological fact demanding explanation...” (2000: 39).

Douglas argues that the public response to risk has been individualized. For her, perceptions of high risk reinforce already existing social divisions: “It may be a general trait of human society that fear of danger tends to strengthen the lines of division in a community” (Douglas, 1992: 34). The evidence for the strengthening of division lines in response to fear is the response in which the tendency is to ascribe danger and misfortune to individuals or groups in already marginalized social positions: the poor, the dangerous classes, homosexuals, unmarried mothers, foreigners (Scott, 2000). Scott points out that Douglas’ analyses appear to draw us towards the opposite conclusions from those of Beck: high risk consciousness decreases rather than increases the chance of solidarity. The crux of the argument for Douglas and Wildavsky (1983) is that there is no increase in risks in contemporary times; instead there is only an increase in perceived risks.

It is for these reasons as laid out above that Douglas’ approach forms the theoretical underpinning to this study. Whilst Beck’s approach points towards a focus upon individuals’ choices and negotiation of ‘expert’ knowledge in response to risk, Douglas’ approach moves towards an exploration of the social construction of risk which forms the focus of this study. Douglas’ approach provokes interesting questions about how norm-driven communities respond to perceived risks and what processes are involved in such a response. Douglas’ theory of risk, blame and the other will help to answer questions about risky behaviour and social -as opposed to individual - responses to perceived risk.

## **Young People and Risk**

As it has been discussed, links between theories on the social construction of risk and social networks highlight that meanings about what is perceived to be risky and who is perceived to be a risk are derived from groups of people. The running theme is that young people are intrinsically associated with risk – as a risk, at risk or both at times.

Due to this paradox, young people's perceptions of risk will now be looked at.

However, the sociology of youth will be explored firstly, in order to establish how young people are often associated as being a 'naturally' risky group. Secondly the contrast between perceptions of young people as risky and young people's perceptions of risk will be reviewed. Thirdly, the 'expert' knowledge discourse will be reviewed as an approach to explaining young people and risk. In contrast to the expert discourse, the socio-cultural approach to understanding young people and risk will be examined. The latter approach is presented as the framework which underpins this study as it has significant links with the work of Mary Douglas. Finally young people's use of space will be highlighted as an important theme which links with the risk and social capital literature.

## ***Young People***

Terms such as 'child;' 'childhood;' 'teenager;' 'young person;' and 'youth' appear at first to be universal concepts. Yet studies across different times and places have shown that various meanings and values can be attached to these terms. International differences in how 'childhood' is viewed and experienced (see Punch, 2003) suggest that the concept of childhood and 'youth' can change. Childhood, youth and adulthood are socially constructed differently across time and place. Children and



young people's lives vary according to gender, class, ethnicity, spirituality and age (Punch, 2003). It is predominantly accepted in the UK that children play and adults work. There is no single law that defines the age of a child across the UK. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by the UK government in 1991, states that a child 'means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier' (United Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 1, 1989). Taking the legal definition of a young person, this study takes a young person to mean an individual who is between the ages of 12-18 years of age. Childhood and 'youth' tend to be embedded in the notion of 'becoming'; a young person is not 'complete' until they reach their adult status in society (Punch, 2003).

Youth is principally about becoming: becoming an adult, becoming a citizen, becoming independent, becoming autonomous, becoming mature, becoming responsible (Kelly, 2000: 468)

It has been acknowledged that divisions between childhood, youth and adulthood are not clear "but flexible and dynamic as children move in and out of different versions of adult and child-centred worlds" (Punch, 2003: 290). Prior to the seventeenth century, distinctions between dependence (childhood), semi-dependence (youth) and independence (adulthood) formed a precursor to modern 'youth' (France, 2007). Modernity provoked significant changes for young people, including migrations of large populations from rural to urban areas, which led to a growing awareness of youth as a distinct age category (France, 2007). Due to an increase in youth crime in urban areas, youth became increasingly constructed as 'other' and the state was taking more involvement in regulating and controlling them. Youth thus became separated from both childhood and adulthood, by the middle of the nineteenth

century; youth was established as part of the life course (France, 2007). Youth culture was seen as a growing problem, provoking feelings of social disorder (France, 2007). There is the assumption that youth exist outside of their communities and therefore have a diminished sense of their civic and political responsibilities (Harris 2001, Gordon 2010). Within communitarian theory, for example, the community is conceptualized as 'a community of adults to which children are permitted a slow, if somewhat awkward, introduction to citizenship' (Fine *et al.* 2001: 315).

Sociologists argue that children and young people are often viewed as 'naturally' immature, irrational and thereby risky (Bancroft and Wilson, 2007). In Western culture there has been a common acceptance of youth as a period of distress and disorder as discourses and language around discussions of young people reflect debates on the nature of youth problem behaviour (France, 2007). As children grow older, they are assumed to take on risk characteristics, either manifesting risk in problem behaviour, or becoming risky to themselves and others (Kelly, 2003). This leads to an assumption that harm is embedded in the child from an early age:

The secondary school age child (10 –14 years old) now manifests risk in smoking, drinking and drug use. Bullying of other children, other problems with school conduct and criminality firmly place the child at this age as beginning his or her career as a risky subject. (Bancroft and Wilson, 2007:314).

As teenagers often engage in typically 'adult' activities, this particular stage is associated with deviance as social identities are crossing the boundaries between 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' childhood and adulthood. On the one hand, developmental narratives define youth as a distinct life course stage which is clearly distinct from adulthood (Henderson *et al.*, 2007).

On the other hand, sociology scholars argue youth is socially constructed across time and space. The sociology of youth transitions has moved on from an earlier narrow focus on the transition to work as the principal and more recently has recognised that youth transitions consist of negotiating between 'youth' and 'adult' activities (Hall *et al.* 2009). It is argued that transitions are not best captured as something particular to any one age and stage of the life course. France (2000) argues that viewing young people as a 'pre-self' or a 'becoming being' is flawed and limiting as it fails to acknowledge the on-going process of identity construction. The discovery of each new stage of life is accompanied by the cultural definition of needs, competencies, tasks, and behaviours thought to be appropriate for individuals belonging to a given age group (Hammer, 1996). Valentine (1996) provides a useful commentary on the concept of the teenager, emphasising that there are multiple constructions:

Teenagers therefore lie awkwardly placed between childhood and adulthood: sometimes constructed and represented as 'innocent children' in need of protection from adult sexuality, violence, and commercial exploitation; at other times represented as articulating adult vices of drink, drugs and violence. These multiple constructions of teenagers thus enable adults to represent their own adolescence (and sometimes their own children's) as a time of innocent fun and harmless pranks whilst perceiving other people's teenagers as troublesome and 'dangerous.' (Valentine, 1996: 587)

It has been established that young people are a highly contested group as their identity has been defined and re-defined across different places and times.

### ***Young People and Risk Taking***

What follows from the perception of young people as inherently risky is a preoccupation in the literature with attempts to stop young people taking risks. One of the main approaches to equipping young people to stop taking risks is to educate

them with 'expert' knowledge based on the assumption that young people's risk-taking is caused by a lack of knowledge, irrationality and immaturity which can be stopped by health promotion. Whilst acknowledging that individual accounts of risk may exist, health-related policies typically privilege 'expert' risk knowledge as the 'scientific' basis for identifying and managing health risks. These official discourses largely view risk-taking as the expression of individual ignorance and irrationality, citing deficits in the individual's knowledge and reasoning.

However the regulatory nature of these 'expert' discourses on risk has been the subject of academic critique and research. A number of experts have also argued that, by attempting to reduce the immediate risks of the outside world, many parents have come to adopt an excessively restrictive approach to their children's access to the outdoors, which has the potential to do serious harm to their long term health and well-being (Jenkins, 2006). Health itself becomes something to be purchased and consumed, with health promotion prescribing 'a certain lifestyle intended to minimize risks, and construct responsible, prudent, health conscious citizens who are expected to buy into this lifestyle' (Ayo 2012: 101). Responsibility is placed upon the individual to make healthy choices, meaning that inequalities in health and illness are no longer the responsibility of governments. Such discourses provoke young people to engage themselves in the forms of self-surveillance through what Foucault (1988) terms 'technologies of the self'. Under this framework, health and social service workers are also frequently positioned as authorities who define and regulate what constitutes 'risk' and membership of 'risky groups'. They do so not through dominance over young people, but via young people's own (re) production of moral understandings of risk for

particular social groupings and at more macro-societal levels (Shoveller and Johnson 2006, Bay-Cheng *et al.* 2011). Conventional public health interventions aim to have young people (re)align their health practices with those of a 'responsible' citizen, and generally do not reflexively consider the social effects of public health practices or how public health and health promotion deploy power as a social institution. Indeed, many health promotion models emphasising lifestyle and individual responsibility overlook social context and power within society (Korp 2010). Abel and Frohlich (2012) argue that a more nuanced understanding of an individual's 'choice to choose' (to paraphrase Giddens) depends on critical reflection on the following points:

- 1) the range of options for any individual is limited by the amount of different forms of capital available to him or her; 2) the effectiveness of the application of the different forms of capital for health benefits depends on contexts and people's abilities to play their capital most effectively and; 3) the non-material aspects of the social structure shape individual preferences as well as what people find appropriate. (p. 242)

If young people are socially constructed as being both at risk and risky, then this has implications for how they are regarded, managed and governed.

### ***Setting Young People's Perceptions of Risk in the Socio-cultural Context***

In positioning risks as objective and real, policy makers ignore the extent to which risk is itself 'socially constructed' as previously discussed. Most existing policy debates in this field overlook the extent to which the meanings attached to risk behaviour change over time and from one culture to another. This is not to say that risks do not exist and have real consequences, it is rather to argue that notions of risk arise as the result of

particular 'situated' value judgements. It is argued that young people's changing transitional experiences have led to a generalized increase young people's stress: judging by the perceived rise in suicides and eating disorders in young people (Furlong and Cartmel 1997). Despite the dominant view that educating young people is the answer to reducing risks to young people, evidence suggests that young people are aware of many perceived risks and how to avoid them (Yardley 2008). The literature highlights particular risks to young people. The most common include teenage pregnancy, alcohol use and risky spaces.

One of the main risks to young people as portrayed by adults and the media is teenage pregnancy. Teenage pregnancy is typically depicted as a major risk to young women and as a severe social problem for contemporary Britain (Duncan, 2007). Teenage mothers are often perceived as a homogeneous group of immature, irresponsible, single, benefit-dependent, unfit parents who deviate from ideals of motherhood, 'normal' motherhood (Yardley, 2008). In her study, Yardley (2008) found that young mothers rejected these beliefs, saying they experienced stigma from the public which was exaggerated by media coverage. Interestingly, some participants attempted to distance their identity from other teenage mothers, believing they were exceptional cases. Others viewed becoming a mother as a positive event. The precise nature of the risk, however, has been difficult to grasp, as a number of different outcomes have always been possible. In both Australia (Kirkman *et al.* 2001) and the UK (Graham and McDermott 2005), while young mothers are well aware of being 'judged and condemned' (Kirkman *et al.* 2001, p. 279), they are keen to emphasise that they are good mothers; indeed, as mothers who stay at home to look after their babies, they

position themselves favourably in contrast to older mothers who work outside the home. Qualitative evidence includes mothers expressing positive attitudes and gaining self-esteem and self-worth through the role of motherhood (Duncan, 2007).

The teenage pregnancy strategy represented an attempt to re-educate risk-taking teenagers into knowledge-seeking managers of risk (Carabine 2007), who could act in their own interests, display economic rationality (Duncan 2007) and thus avoid social exclusion. Risk governance was thus central in the attempted management of risk through influencing individual decision-making, and encouraging behaviour change. However qualitative studies of teenage mothers have highlighted clashes between a risk-based analysis which characterises young motherhood as a negative outcome, and young mothers' assertions of improved lives and positive identities (Hoggart, 2012). A further area of vagueness is the issue of whether the problem is seen as pregnancy or parenthood. The policy emphasis, and certainly most of the rhetoric was focused on teenage motherhood, as opposed to teenage pregnancy per se (Hoggart, 2012). Class-based trends are generally considered to be driven by different life chances and expectations which influence middle class women towards a rejection of young motherhood in favour of education and employment, whereas motherhood can be more attractive to young women who may envisage unemployment or unskilled work (McLeod 2001, Tabberer 2002, Rudoie and Thomson 2009). Taken together this work indicates a pattern of different contexts and values for teenage pregnancy decision making (Hoggart, 2012). In a recent study, young mothers expressed their need to claim their status as a good mother through the consumption of buying everything new to showcase a fitness for motherhood (Nayak and Kehily, 2014).

Another main preoccupation has been with teenage alcohol use and the key message from the literature is that health promotion attempts are too narrow and simplistic to influence young people's decision-making. Studies on young people's perceptions of drinking alcohol help to cement this point. For example, young people have said they did self-govern by drinking but not to excess – but because this deviates from completely abstaining from drinking, their behaviours are framed as risky by some people (Spencer, 2013). By assessing their own practices in relation to adult behaviours, young people concluded that the risks to their own health were minimal, suggesting that adults should be the main target for health promotion messages – often pointing to examples of adult hypocrisy. In contrast to adults, young people suggested that only a minority of young people drank (or smoked) excessively and respondents attributed problematic or risky drinking to 'bad parenting' or coming from a 'poor social background' (Spencer, 2013). The message portrayed by health promotion is for young people to abstain from drinking any amount and that alcohol is only 'bad' for young people. A qualitative study which explored accounts of drinking away from licensed premises, either at home or in public places such as parks, given by adults and young people of age 13 and over found that research participants associated drinking away from licensed premises with immediate risks (Foster and Heyman, 2013). Those risks they identified included fights breaking out at home or in a public place, drinking to excess, falling over and becoming ill when intoxicated. The risks identified by health promoters may be less important to decisions around alcohol consumption than the need to discover their own personality to and fit in with their peer group (see themed issue of Health, Risk & Society, Alaszewski 2013, Spencer 2013, Thing and Ottesen 2013). For example, young people fitting in with their peer



group may impel them to disregard potential future harm (Spencer 2013, Thing and Ottesen 2013). Health promotion and education discourses have been highlighted as failing to acknowledge and address the pleasure and sociability young people associate with drinking alcohol (Harrison *et al.* 2011). Young people have said they cannot relate to the solely negative messages of harm connected to drinking alcohol that are portrayed in health promotion programmes (O'Malley and Valverde 2004, Hunt and Evans 2008).

Finally, the social construction of space is a further running thread in the research studies which apply the socio-cultural approach to exploring young people's perceptions of risk. Giddens (1991) argues that modern identities are no longer rooted in locality. Rather, for Giddens, modern identities are individual creations, reflexively crafted and free of ties to place. In contemporary theories of modernity, place is only addressed in order to assert that it is no longer relevant (Giddens 2005). These theories downplay the significance of geographical differences, which contrasts the key messages within the literature on young people's perceptions of risk. The significance of locality in shaping young people's perceptions of risk is emphasised in the literature (Farrugia 2014). Young people's cultural practices are highlighted as being embedded within young people's local frames of reference (Thornton 1996, Bennett 2000). Studies on teenagers suggest that the space of the public street (like parks and shopping centres, Skelton and Valentine 1998) is often the only autonomous space young people occupy. Part of the process of occupying spaces in which there are no adults has been identified as resisting adult power (Blackman 1998). In the context of occupying public spaces, young people have said that knowing people provides

assurance that danger and trouble will be minimised as new territories are explored (Watt and Stenson 1998). At the same theme, young women may have more gender specific concerns about going into public spaces at night (Watt and Stenson 1998).

Drawing on Douglas' cultural theory, Green *et al.* (2000) have shown that young people's perceptions of risk are frequently based upon the assessment of others as 'insiders' or 'outsiders' and highlight the 'territorialisation' of places and spaces in everyday life.

One of the main themes which emerge from the literature on young people's perceptions of risks is that their ideas are context-specific which contradicts the view that young people experience risk individually due to personal irrationality and immaturity. Schäfer (2010) critically questions how far Beck's, Beck-Gernsheim's and Giddens' conceptualization of risk help us to understand young people's everyday experiences and how it affects their present day and future lives. Schäfer's analysis indicated that young people's perception of the risks and uncertainties which characterize their everyday lives is influenced by their understanding of spatial differences. It was highlighted that risk knowledges are context specific and that socio-spatial landscapes (Evans, 2002) matter with regard to young people's creation of their own biographies. The authors claimed that their findings strengthen the call for a socio-cultural conceptualization of risk and provide an original insight into the multiple ways in which young people experience and negotiate their everyday lives.

Abbott-Chapman and Denholm (2001) found that views were clearly embedded in the current social norms for young people and their wider social networks:

In their approach to risk taking, most young people are not heedless and reckless, but are making decisions to engage in or avoid risk taking which they see as justified within their own normative risk frameworks and perceived risk hierarchies (2001: 294).

Some decisions to engage in risky behaviours may offset other substantial health risks, and can be understood from a harm reduction perspective. For example, Graham (1993) demonstrated that the regular engagement in courtyard smoking breaks by young single mothers in large blocks of flats (apartments) in the UK played an important role in the reduction in social isolation experienced by those young single mothers. Young people themselves, however, may have different ideas of what is rational to think or do within the agency-centred frame currently cast as the norm, and can 'depict themselves as risk managers rather than as risk takers' (Mitchell *et al.* 2001: 226). In some situations, risk taking is framed positively and can be seen by young people as both rewarding and justified (Sharland 2006), or as contributing to a sense of self (Batchelor 2007). Despite physical addiction issues related to smoking, many young people begin and continue to smoke because it has benefits attached to it, such as sociability (Amos *et al.* 2006), feeling a sense of control over their own destiny or self-image (Denscombe 2001, Johnson *et al.* 2003).

The literature highlights that prescribed 'at risk' young people are typically pursued for their perceptions of risk more so than young people in general (Fishmann and Cottrell, 2000). It is also important not to presume that young people's perceptions are homogeneous (Morrissey, 2008). Foster and Spencer (2011) argue that there has been no improvement in challenging the 'youth are trouble' vs. 'youth in trouble' trap; they call for researchers to study young people's lives in such a way that is separate from the usual dichotomies.

## **Social Capital**

The differing interpretations of the status of family life and intimate relations come together around the currently popular but loosely defined concept of social capital. Social capital has become increasingly popular amid sociological debates (Dike and Singh (2002)). The recent high profile given to social capital as a framework for explaining social processes reflects the wider pre-occupation with notions of social change and individualisation. Within the context of perceived risk in society, social capital is thought to offer an explanation for perceived changes in the way we live, work and relate to each other (Edwards, 2004). Concerns over a perceived demise in community relations and an associated decline in trust have generated a new interest in social capital as a framework for theorising and promoting social resources. Social capital explores the nature of social connections and what people 'do' with these connections. As such it strongly links with the previous themes on how strong social connections are where shared meanings of risk are constructed. The work of Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam will be briefly reviewed in light of how useful each approach is to exploring the role of strong social connections in responding to perceived risk.

### ***Social Capital as a Concept***

The main theoretical stances on social capital are provided by three key writers: Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1990); James Coleman (1990) and Robert Putnam (2000). There are some similarities across each approach including the acknowledgement that social capital is about how resources are produced as a result of trusting social networks. The differences lie in what these resources are; who produces, receives and benefits from social capital and whether it is in decline.

For Bourdieu (1990), the volume of the social capital possessed depends on the size of the network of connections they are linked with. Thus, although social capital derives from family and other social relationships, its type and content is inevitably shaped by the material, cultural and symbolic status of the individual and family concerned (Bourdieu 1990). For Bourdieu, economic capital is the root of all other forms of capital. From this perspective, contemporary society is witnessing neither the erosion nor the transformation of social capital, but rather its consistent positioning in the reproduction of privilege and inequality.

His concept of the 'habitus' is an attempt to bridge the gap between the two extremes of subjectivism and objectivism. Habitus refers to a set of dispositions, created and reformulated through the conjuncture of objective structures and personal history (Bourdieu 1990). For Bourdieu, habitus only exists inasmuch as it is 'inside the heads' of actors. Secondly, the practices of actors, their interaction with each other, and the way in which they do things are an integral part of habitus (Bourdieu 1990). The habitus is said to dispose actors to do certain things. Bourdieu presents three different views which, in their contradictory nature, can undermine the validity of his concept: objective conditions produce the habitus, the habitus is adjusted to objective conditions, and there is a reciprocal or dialectical relationship between them.

Lindbladh *et al.* (1996) and Lindbladh and Lyttkens (2002) have applied Bourdieu's theory to the field of health-related behaviour, arguing that the habitus shapes health-related decision-making. Crawshaw (2004) employed the theory of habitus to analyse risk-taking among young working-class and to explain how these young men's risky practices are continually reproduced. He suggests the existence of a 'masculine

habitus' which both exposes and predisposes men to risk-taking. Similarly Dixon and Banwell (2009) draw upon the theory of habitus in their attempt to explain the temporal trends and sub-population variations in smoking behaviour in affluent countries. Noting that high socioeconomic status (SES) males, followed by high SES females, began to abandon smoking once it was adopted by the masses, they suggest the theory of habitus may explain the sedimentation of smoking in successive low SES cohorts.

The weakness in Bourdieu's concept is that he does not account for social change and individual agency. Jenkins (1992: 82) argues it is not easy to see how this model works:

Thus, the habitus is the source of 'objective' practices, but is itself a set of 'subjective' generative principles produced by the 'objective' patterns of social life. Such a model is either another version of determination in the last instance, or a sophisticated form of functionalism.

The relationship between habitus and field is therefore far from clear. At times Bourdieu writes as if each field generates its own specific habitus, at other times actors are seen to bring to whichever field they are a part of their own, pre-existing and historically constituted habituses. As such, Jenkins (1992) concludes that Bourdieu fails to offer a sound theoretical understanding of social groups or social identity.

Jenkins continues that the ontological status of the 'field' is unclear, as to whether it is 'real' or purely an analytical concept. Jenkins critiques Bourdieu's concept of habitus on the basis that Bourdieu does not even consider that individuals may actively deviate from the imperatives of the habitus, "His model of practice, despite all of its references to improvisation and fluidity, turns out to be a celebration of (literally) mindless conformity." (1992: 97). Habitus is linked to capital in that some habitus act

as multipliers of various kinds of capital. The definition of capital is very wide for Bourdieu, including material things; culturally significant or symbolic resources and social capital. Social divisions have been given different levels of consideration by the social capital theorists. For Bourdieu social capital is inextricably linked to a number of other central resources, or capitals, which determine an individual's standing as well as their likely trajectory. Along with social capital, Bourdieu stresses the significance of economic capital, cultural capital in the form of institutional status and personal values, and symbolic capital representing the construction the other capitals take when they are legitimated with symbolic power.

Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of collectivity-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word (1997: 51).

Bourdieu is recognised for arguing that some individuals may produce social capital but may not have access to economic capital.

A further critique is discussed by King (2000), he argues that the habitus concept is based on objectivism – the very approach which Bourdieu attempts to avoid. It is argued that individual choice cannot come into question or exploration as individuals are determined by habitus; their position in the field is unchangeable (King 2000).

Other authors have critiqued Bourdieu's emphasis on field as it leads to a 'paint-by-numbers' approach in that once the field has been identified the researchers will have identified everything they need to know about that problem (Webb *et al.* 2002).

Bourdieu's account may be seen therefore as descriptive as it has a tendency towards

circularity and thus potential difficulty in identifying sources of change (Crompton, 2006).

With its emphasis on the predisposition of different groups, Bourdieu's theory leaves little or no room for viewing people's actions and choices as anything other than the reproduction of pre-existing social structures and divisions. Thus, social capital does not facilitate actions; it determines them (Edwards *et al* 2007). His theory has been criticised on the grounds for being rooted in economic capital and because he believes that all action is interest-orientated (Smith and Kulynych, 2002). Furthermore, agency is seen to be missing or underdeveloped; his theory is inclined to hierarchies among people through analysis of distinctions, undermining 'horizontal' relationships. This point is key in highlighting why Bourdieu's focus on 'vertical' relationships is not helpful for exploring relationships marked by trust and reciprocity and how such relationships may benefit from 'horizontal bonds' in the context of negotiating risk of harm. As Field states: "There was no place in his theory for the possibility that other, less privileged individuals and groups might also benefit in their social ties" (Field, 2003: 20).

The strong link he makes between economic and social capital is narrow in the sense it implies that communities or groups with low economic capital will inevitably have lower levels of social capital. Focusing on different types of relationships, with a particular emphasis on strong, horizontal networks forms a key part of this study. As Bourdieu's approach overlooks such networks, his work is not useful for this study. Furthermore, as this study seeks to explore meanings attributed by individuals and groups towards risk of harm and the role of social connections in forming such



perceptions, Bourdieu's theoretical approach is limited for exploring such themes. This study seeks to explore how young people employ strategies to negotiate risk through social capital which includes active choices. Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and social capital appear to be a limited utility for understanding this process of negotiation.

A detailed consideration of the relationship between families and social capital is offered by James Coleman (1988). Unlike Bourdieu, Coleman considers young people in relation to social capital which is more relevant for this study which focuses on young people. Coleman specifically analysed parent-child relationships as a feature of family social capital. Coleman emphasized the ability of some communities to establish a highly dense social web of relationships, based on trust and reciprocity, and the accumulation of experiences of mutual benefit, which together, allow the formation and enforcement of norms that encourage people to work for a common cause. These properties, or structural characteristics, of social networks, (i.e., high density networks) guide social life within the community and create forms of power and influence in community social interactions. These network properties are treated as "social capital" of certain communities and organizations.

For Coleman, parents invest in their children – as the next generation of the family who will in turn support them later in life, both the children and the parents benefit from social capital (Edwards, 2004). Coleman (1988; 1990) emphasized the importance of the social connections between families, specifically, the interconnected social networks of parents and their children which he referred to as intergenerational closure (or social network closure). Closure relationships are defined in terms of the

strength of social connections among parents whose children are themselves friends. When intergenerational closure is present, parents support common norms for behaviour, communicate with one another about children's activities and whereabouts, share norms to evaluate children's behaviours, and impose similar consequences for misbehaviour (Coleman 1990). It is through these relationships that parents may support socialization goals, structure parenting practices, and develop children's competences. Hunter *et al.*'s study (2012) used Coleman's framework on intergenerational closure with an emphasis on strong ties; however, the findings suggested that social network closure across social differences is a challenge to cultivate. To cross social boundaries between families however, weak ties may be used to build social and cultural competencies for parents and children and may provide them with the social-relational tools (i.e., social competencies) needed to later build stronger ties.

Coleman and various other writers (Furstenberg and Hughes 1996; Amato 1998; Runyan *et al.* 1998) have also attempted to measure the social capital available to children in their families and relate this to outcomes such as educational success, development or wellbeing. Such studies adopt a narrow and largely normative approach to families, evident in Coleman's negative assessment of households in which both parents work, and his description of the single parent family as 'the most prominent element of structural deficiency in modern families' (1988: 111).

There are distinct differences between Bourdieu's and Coleman's work. Bourdieu sees social capital as a tool of reproduction for class divisions (in which those with more [economic] capital benefit), whereas Coleman sees social capital as (positive) social

control, where trust, information channels, and norms are characteristics of the community. Thus, Coleman's work supports the idea that it is the family's responsibility to adopt certain norms to advance children's life chances, whereas Bourdieu's work emphasizes structural constraints and unequal access to resources based on class, gender, and race (Lareau, 2001).

Many have strong criticisms of Coleman's framework. As Virginia Morrow (1999) points out, this mainstream social capital literature both draws on and feeds into a powerful political rhetoric about the damaging impact of family breakdown on children and society in general. Coleman's concept assumes family mediation of social capital, ignoring the agency of the adolescent in accessing social capital (Dika and Singh, 2002). The concept emphasizes the virtues of parental involvement, and implies a top-down view of the parent-child relationship (Morrow, 1999).

Although few intimacy theorists explicitly address the theoretical concept of social capital, their research points to a regeneration of social connectedness rather than a breakdown. Bassani (2007) draws on Coleman and critiques the tendency to only focus on aspects of how social capital impacts on young people. Coleman's acknowledgement of social capital as benefiting the well-being of young people resonates with the stance taken in this study. However, as highlighted above, his framing of young people as mainly receivers of social capital is a limited approach for this study as young people's production of social capital in responding to perceived risk will be explored.

The theorist Robert Putnam (1993, 1995, 1996) has generated the most commonly referenced definition of social capital, focusing on trust and networks and explicitly

linking their measurement to economic growth and the health and well-being of populations. Putnam has concentrated his work in the main on localised communities, but along with other theorists (Newton 1997, Fukuyama 1999), he identifies family as a crucial foundation for social capital. Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (2000) begins with addressing major changes to civic and social life in American communities, drawing upon social scientists' framing of such concerns in terms of the concept of 'social capital.' The core idea of social capital theory is that social networks have value and that social contacts affect the productivity of individuals or groups.

Social capital can thus be simultaneously a "private good" and a "public good." Some of the benefit from an investment in social capital goes to bystanders, while some of the benefit redounds to the immediate interest of the person making the investment. (2000: 20)

One particularly useful feature of Putnam's approach which distinguishes his work from Bourdieu and Coleman is his distinction between two different types of social capital: bonding and bridging. It is emphasised that inward looking or bonding networks tend to reinforce exclusive identities and homogenous groups. In contrast, bridging or outward looking networks tend to encompass people across diverse social backgrounds. "Bonding social capital constitutes a kind of sociological superglue, whereas bridging social capital provides a sociological WD-40." (2000: 23). It is the outward-looking co-operative bridging social capital that enables people to 'get ahead' in life. Putnam's distinction between bonding and bridging is of particular interest to this study. His conceptualisation of different types of social networks provides more theoretical space for acknowledging and exploring different, complex relationships from which phenomena are socially constructed. Identifying bonding networks may

also facilitate an exploration of why risks are perceived to exist outside of these networks and shared norms.

One critique of Putnam's approach to measuring civic participation is that broadly speaking he regards official membership in formal organizations as a useful barometer of community involvement. Whilst these indicators may have proven useful for exploring adults' levels and experiences of social capital; they are less useful for exploring young people's social capital. Informal social involvement is thought to be common at all levels of the social hierarchy. According to Putnam, informal social involvement is thought to peak among young adults due to a lack of family commitments. A strength to Putnam's approach however is his consideration of how dominant social divisions will impact upon how social capital is accessed and produced. He considers for example, gender and location to be distinguishing factors in determining where and how social capital is accessed. Differences in gender are thought to even affect the use of internet – where boys are thought to use computers and internet to play games whereas girls will use it more to connect with others by using e-mails and other forms of communication. Putnam explains that trust needs to exist within social networks in order for reciprocity to be effective. He emphasises reciprocal bonds are more likely to exist within smaller communities as members within a dense network are likely to encounter one another in the future.

Social capital has appeared more and more frequently in social science literature yet it comes with a degree of controversy and intense debate (Holland, 2008). For the relevance of this particular study, it is regarded as a useful rather than problematic concept, yet it is recognised there are tensions across different definitions and usages.

Kovalainen (2004: 157) sees the inherent appeal of social capital as that it is at one and the same time an economic, a political and a sociological concept, giving it interdisciplinary prominence and potential. Within the social capital literature, there are debates addressing whether social capital is breaking down and how useful it is as a concept. There is not enough space here to address both of these issues. The focus here is alternatively on which approaches are useful in highlighting the association between the social connections upon which risk is constructed and how perceptions of risk facilitate either the dividing or reinforcing of groups of people, identities and norms.

### ***Does Social Capital Benefit People?***

One of the main questions which arises in the social capital literature is whether social capital is positive, is it a process which we should be encouraging? The focus on the role of networks and relationships has often been emphasised within the context of the need to impose order in the face of change (Edwards, 2004). Social capital is thought to provide a link between ordered families, ordered communities and an ordered society through shared values and norms (Edwards, 2004). The notion that social capital should be promoted has however been critiqued on the grounds that to promote social capital is to only promote traditional or oppressive family and gender relations (Edwards, 2004). Traditional bonds and family values are seen as characteristically limited and constraining while new forms of association and communities of interest are perceived to provide the resources for people to be able to cope with an uncertain and changing world (Pahl and Spencer, 1997). However it

can be argued that social capital can exist within traditional and non-traditional networks, and it is this argument which is helpful for the current study.

In social capital theorising people do things for each other – they expect and trust that these actions will be repaid so that they will benefit from the ‘cost’ of their helpful effort. Coleman (1990) sees social capital largely as an unmitigated good. Under Coleman’s approach, children will benefit from their parent’s networks with other parents as information will be shared and access will be given to educational and social arenas. His focus is purely on the social resources, excluding the impact of social divisions.

For Bourdieu (1977), family members with access to symbolic and material resources are able to draw on these capitals in order to cement their advantage and transmit the benefits to their children. Children are thought to acquire behaviours that are appropriate for educational and occupational success, as cultural capital is transformed into ‘consecrated’ educational capital (Bourdieu, 1977). In contrast, the social capital possessed by the materially disadvantaged enables survival but offers little opportunity for increasing prosperity.

In terms of the benefits of social capital, Putnam (2000) advocates that social capital allows people to resolve collective problems more easily, by sharing information and cooperating. This point is key in considering how people respond to the perceived problem of ‘risk’ and may help to explain why perceived risk may strengthen social connections and motivate individuals to tap into their reciprocal networks to keep safe.

However he claims that 'bonding social capital' is particularly likely to have illiberal effects within communities that can have oppressive consequences.

Norms and networks that serve some groups may obstruct others, particularly if the norms are discriminatory or the networks socially segregated. A recognition of the importance of social capital in sustaining community life does not exempt us from the need to worry about how that "community" is defined – who is inside and thus benefits from social capital and who is outside and does not. (2000: 358)

Putnam is saying that it is not the social capital itself that excludes others but the discriminatory attitudes, beliefs and norms within a particular community which can be used to exclude and hurt others, depending on what those norms are in a given time and place. Notions of insiders and outsiders in relation to bonding social capital present similarities with Douglas' (1992) work on the Other. It is an aim in this study to tie these themes together in order to find out whether bonding networks are utilised or facilitate a response to the perceived 'Other' in the context of risk and blame.

Whilst Putnam's argues that information sharing facilitates the strength of reciprocal bonds, alternatively Douglas' work leads to the opposite conclusion that sharing information and perceptions about the other may weaken bonds. The relationship between perceived risk and the strength of relationships will be a focus of this study.

Ramos-Pinto (2007: 56) suggests that we can see social capital as a capacity for collective action, "Social capital does not produce "good" or "bad" results, and rather it is a resource that can be put to many uses, good, bad or indifferent, even by the same group of people..." Putnam's approach to social capital includes this approach – where he focuses on the joining together of norms and networks within particular groups, and how these affect their capacity for collective actions. Ramos-Pintos (2007)



acknowledge that groups where social identity and norms are strong and the capacity for collective action is high – there is often a resistance to change.

However, one limitation to Putnam's approach in the context of who benefits from social capital is that he refers to social capital as solely being produced and received in the public sphere. Feminists have argued that women and young people have historically been marginalised from the public sphere and do not benefit from family as a social capital resource in the same way as men in terms of family connections easing the path to financial and/or political power (Edwards, 2004; Lowndes, 2003; Sapiro, 2003). Mothers and young people may be involved in informal and small-scale networks of association that are not acknowledged by the dominant social capital focus on more formal, organised civic society (Lowndes, 2000, 2003; Stolle with Lewis, 2002). It is argued that an improved conceptualisation would draw upon the sociology of childhood, exploring how children and young people themselves generate and use their own social capital (Morrow, 1999). Morrow highlights that research has yet to show whether social capital increases for children and young people as they engage in strong social networks as it has been shown to do for adults. Conceptions of young people as active participants in shaping the nature of family life and caring relationships, and in generating social capital for themselves and others – is largely absent from the social capital theories (Edwards, 2004). Social capital theorising is seen as a one-way street, with young people as passive recipients (Edwards, 2004). The feminist critique is useful as it raises questions about whether explorations of social capital need to take greater account of how social capital is measured in order to capture how it benefits both adults and young people. In other words, an effort

needs to be made to identify social capital in both the private and public spheres. In particular, as some feminists have pointed out that through their gendered social positioning as family and community carers and networkers, women are central producers of social capital (Blaxter and Hughes, 2000; Molyneux, 2002; Sapiro, 2003; Stolle and Lewis, 2002) but are not often recognised as such.

Therefore identifying social capital in private and public spheres, and recognising females equally to males as producers of social capital, will be focused upon in the current study. The next section will look at these issues.

### ***Young People and Social Capital***

Traditionally, empirical evidence exploring social capital has focused on adults' experiences of social capital, excluding young people as investors and producers of strong social connections. Recently, more research has been conducted on identifying the role of social capital in young people's lives. This section reviews the literature on young people and social capital - showing evidence to suggest young people are producers; social capital does play a significant role in young people's well-being and considers the view that social capital can have a negative impact as well as positive impact. There is a gap in the literature on social capital being accessed in response to perceived risk. However, work on social capital and well-being rather than social capital and risk, is helpful in highlighting how social networks are accessed to promote well-being. These concepts will be drawn on in this study and applied more explicitly to issues of risk and young people.

There is a growing body of evidence which highlights young people as producers of social capital and that there are identifiable benefits. Investigating how social capital operates within young people's relationships reveals that young people have a range of relationships in their lives; with some being more intimate than others (Phillips, 2010). As discussed, children and young people have been predominantly viewed as passive recipients of the benefits of parental social capital, rather than active producers and consumers in their own right (Holland *et al.* 2007). Yet the literature shows that young people are active agents in the production of social capital (Leonard 2008, Holland *et al.* 2000) and that it plays a significant role in their lives (Helve and Bynner 2007). Social capital in young people's lives has also been identified as facilitating upward mobility for those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Holland *et al.* 2000) and provides support for those who are in poverty (Macdonald and Marsh 2005). Boeck *et al.* (2006) found that the young people were in a state of 'risk stagnation', unable or unwilling to take the risk to leave their present situation, immediate network and locale. These young people were typified by strong bonds to a group, a restricted sense of belonging, and a fatalistic outlook in life (Boeck *et al.* 2006). Furthermore, the literature shows that friendships are common sites for social capital production including 'gangs' that act as a site for resistance: 'bad boys' are able to secure escapism and respite from maltreatment, gather physical protection from and assert dominance over their peers and access unspoken emotional support (Czysmoniewicz-Klippel, 2013), getting protection from urban violence (Rendon 2014) and social capital can act as a deterrent of crime (Briggs 2009, Thomson *et al.* 2013). Friendships may also provide a source of social capital in the transition to secondary school (Holland 2008). Despite earlier claims that social capital can only be associated

within the family, there is evidence to show that homeless young people create social capital outside of the nuclear family (Oliver and Cheff 2014).

Social capital has been found to act as a protective factor for young people facing adversity including the psychosocial adjustment of migrant children living in urban cities (Wu 2014); war-affected young people (Hall *et al.* 2014) and in improving mental health as social networks can provide sources of support (Corrigan and Phelan, 2004; Hendryx *et al.*, 2009, Malmberg-Heimonen 2010, Sehee H, Hee-Sun L 2012, Hampshire and Matthijsse 2010). Drawing upon Putnam's theory, strong bonding social capital has been identified as a constraint on upward mobility where young people to imagine breaking from 'the bubble' of the community (Holland 2008). Other work has drawn links between social capital received by young people and their sense of belonging to place, with school increasing young people's sense of belonging to their home location (Smiljka 2004, Schaefer-McDaniel 2007, Morrow 2001, Sinkkonen 2013, Chhuon and Wallace 2014).

In contrast, some authors have argued that social capital is a romantic notion which disguises the exclusion of some young people as a result of others' inward looking bonds, referring to this process as the 'darker side' of social capital. Discourses surrounding the links between bonding social capital and deviance presume that strong bonding ties between individuals are largely responsible for problematic group behaviour, organised criminal activity and gang membership (see e.g. de Souza Briggs 1997, 2003; Rubio 1997; Putnam 2000). The exclusion perceived to emanate from bonding has meant that the ability of bonding ties to create benefits for the individual has been largely ignored:

The current push to increase the bridging ties in communities has led to a devaluing of the significance of bonding ties among vulnerable individuals and has resulted in the erosion of the social capital so important for young people. (Billett, 2014: 2)

The concept of perverse social capital was introduced by de Souza Briggs (1997). He poses three cautionary arguments which aim to show the dark nature of social capital. First, while social capital may be beneficial for one individual, it will not necessarily be beneficial for the community or society. Second, social capital can be used for right or wrong. Finally, due to the nature of social capital, it is divided along the fault lines of social divisions. Bridging ties are found in informal and formal networks between individuals of socially dissimilar groups (de Souza Briggs 2003: 2). Dark social capital has been widely associated with bonding ties and 'thick trust' (Field 2008) due to its ability to create strong group identification leading to exclusion of outsiders. Several authors have ascribed to viewing close ties as only producing negative outcomes, including Beyerlein and Hipp (2005) – who suggested that the bonding networks fostered by evangelical Protestant communities are to blame for higher crime rates. Field (2008:99) also claims that 'closer ties appear more frequently associated with perverse consequences.' These accounts have been criticised by Billett: the response of social capital theorists has thus been on how best to increase bridging capital networks within communities. "The notion of bonding social capital being 'second rate', 'dark', 'bad' or 'perverse' is complex because the perceived negativity is arguable and largely dependent upon individual standpoint." (Billett, 2014: 4).

## **Conclusion**

The literature review has demonstrated that risk is a widely debated concept, as social scientists have attempted to define and explain the role of risk in society. The different

approaches to risk have been outlined. Sociocultural approaches have been reviewed and identified as relevant in seeking to explain why some dangers are constructed as risks while others are not. As one of the main theoretical approaches to risk, it has been argued that Beck's (1992) 'risk society' is limiting as it sets up individual outcomes as solely a reflection of young people's 'bad choices', consequently minimising the contribution of wider social processes. Contextualising risk within social and structural issues is emphasised as essential. The review has identified applying a moderate social constructionist approach to understanding risk perceptions as a main aim of this study. Whilst drawing on elements of both Coleman's and Putnam's theories, the work of Mary Douglas (1992) including her concepts of purity, contamination and her theory on risk and blame form the main theoretical underpinning for this study.

Young people are presented as a significant and relevant group in exploring risk as they typically embody individuals who are beginning to form their own identities within their immediate social and cultural settings. Young people also represent a group of people who are not well represented in empirical work on perceptions of risk or as producers of social capital. It is argued that adult definitions of risk have principally delivered the framework for exploring and understanding young people's risk-taking. The literature review identifies there is a gap in empirical evidence which addresses young people's perceptions on the main risks of harm to them. Examples of adult-defined risks to young people are given, including risks posed by teenage pregnancy, alcohol consumption and substance abuse. It has been highlighted that empirical evidence is lacking on whether social capital is perceived to play a significant

role in young people's response to perceived risk of harm. Locating risk perceptions within young people's immediate social and cultural settings has been highlighted as integral to understanding the formation of risk perceptions. Social capital is presented as potentially a useful lens to look through in the context of understanding how young people may negotiate risk, protecting themselves and each other. The following research questions have been derived from this literature review:

**Research Questions:**

- What are young people's and adults' perceptions of the main risks?
- What informs perceptions of risk to young people?
- From adults' and young people's perspectives, what role does social capital play in reducing perceived risks of harm to young people?

## **Chapter Three**

### **Researching Young People's and Adult's Perceptions of Risk**

#### **Methodology**

This qualitative study was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and ran from May 2011 until January 2012. This period of time included the initial starting point of contacting potential participants, to successfully sampling participants and

completing the data collection. The time gap between sending out correspondence to potential participants and successfully gaining access turned out to be longer than I had originally anticipated. In the end, more time was spent chasing up participants than on collecting the data which highlighted issues surrounding problems with accessing schools for research. After the data was collected I conducted a thematic cross-sectional analysis and wrote up the results as the analysis developed. What follows is my account of this whole process, a reflexive account of the methodology. The research has been a qualitative study, therefore I do not attempt to present the results as representative of other groups of people in similar roles or situations; rather the strength of this study and data derive from its contextual focus.

### **Reviewing the literature: developing the research questions**

The first step towards carving out the research questions and aims was to conduct a literature review. This process was a journey in itself which presented unexpected twists and turns as I engaged with macro-theory and micro-concepts to better understand the areas of interest. My reading led me to be very interested in the social construct of 'risky youths'. The purpose of the literature review was to firstly scope out what was there, what academics and researchers know about young people and risk of harm. Secondly I was attempting to see what was *not* there, what we do not know about young people and risk and the most interesting lens to look through.

Attempting to squeeze this rather large topic of young people and risk of harm in the community into a single discipline, I felt would detract from the complexity and multi-levels of this subject area. Thus I decided to approach and include literature from



various disciplines, including Sociology, Social Policy and Health. However the key theories utilised to birth the research questions and facilitate analysis fall into the discipline of Sociology.

My interests situated with exploring people, relationships and risk of harm; particularly how social networks are interrelated with this idea that everyone is and should be responsible for keeping young people safe. With this in mind it was inevitable that risk society theory and the sociology of childhood and youth were to be looked at in great detail so as to inform the moulding process of my research questions and aims.

I reviewed literature about young people, risk, community and social capital that could be used to explain why young people are perceived as particularly vulnerable to risk of harm. The following quote acutely captures the purposeful foundation of this research:

There is an urgent need to discover young people's own values and beliefs surrounding risky behaviour, including their concepts of right or wrong, legal or illegal, safe or dangerous, within a non-judgemental framework which does not label them at the outset as 'mainstream' or 'at risk', and which avoids imposition of an 'adultcentric' world-view (Abbott-Chapman and Denholm, 2001: 280).

I did not approach young people or adults with a prescribed definition of risk or harm, as I wanted to explore the meanings and thoughts of the participants' perspectives on these key concepts.

It became clear that, whilst the literature provides a body of research about young people's views on risk of harm, their views have tended to be represented as belonging to one homogenous group. It is important to consider that young people

may view risk of harm differently from adults, not because they are ‘becoming beings’ but because generally their place in society is different to that of adults due to unequal power distribution. The review also highlighted that it is specifically needed for researchers to produce more empirical work which locates young people’s perceptions in their own cultural and social settings. A further gap in the existing literature is presenting young people’s successful accounts of being protected from harm due to the interaction of others in a social capital context. Therefore it was part of the research design to explicitly ask questions on the roles of members within the community of young people – whether they be young people, adults or both. Other studies have tended to either approach young people *or* adults. This research presents data from both age groups enabling comparisons to be made between groups of people who are socially connected to each other on a regular basis.

## **Research Questions and Methods**

### **Question 1**

- What are young people’s and adults’ perceptions of the main risks?

### **Question 2**

- What informs perceptions of risk to young people?

### **Question 3**

- From adults’ and young people’s perspectives, what role does social capital play in reducing perceived risks of harm to young people?

### **Methods**

- **Semi-structured Focus Groups:**

6 groups of young people, 3 groups of men and 3 groups of women in School

- **Semi-structured Focus Groups:**

3 groups of mixed adults in School

- **Semi-structured Interviews:**

### **Why Qualitative?**

Quantitative methods could have been used to collect data from larger numbers of people; however quantitative data could not have provided the level of depth and context delivered by qualitative focus groups and interviews. Arguably one of the ultimate aims of using a qualitative approach is to set the data in its context, which is exactly what this study has sought to do. The aim of the research was not to measure the prevalence of risks but to understand the social and cultural meanings underlying the perceptions of risks. Hence it was an easy decision to use qualitative methods.

'Qualitative' research is often used as a term to describe a very wide range of approaches and methods found across different disciplines. Ritchie and Lewis (2003) provide a neat definition of what qualitative research is and seeks to accomplish:

There is fairly wide consensus that qualitative research is a naturalistic, interpretative approach concerned with understanding the meanings which people attach to phenomena (actions, decisions, beliefs, values etc.) *within their social worlds*, (2003: 3 emphasis added).

I have emphasised the text '*within their social worlds*' as it highlights that the qualitative researcher's desire is to explore the contextual conditions and cultural influences surrounding the phenomena which is being investigated. So in this study I was highly interested in identifying what existed within the adults' and young people's social worlds according to the meanings they attached to the circumstances

surrounding young people, risk and roles within their community. Furthermore, I was committed to reflecting the complexity and diversity of these people's lives and perceptions both in the analysis and presentation of findings. Qualitative research allows for valuable space in the analysis to maintain respect for the uniqueness of individual cases as well as comparing themes across participant groups.

My questions have been derived from theory and concepts focused on micro social processes including risk of harm and social capital. Qualitative research is used when the aim is to explore people in depth,

Qualitative research provides a unique tool for studying what lies behind, or underpins a decision, attitude, behaviour or other phenomena (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003: 28).

This study was purely qualitative, both reflecting my own personal methodological strengths but more importantly the nature of the topic and desired empirical knowledge. Key features of qualitative research include a focus on meanings; using flexible methods whilst attempting to capture data which are detailed, rich and complex. This data is mainly in the form of words and ideas rather than numbers.

Layder, (1998) suggests using the 'adaptive theory' approach which attempts to serve the needs of both theorists and empirical researchers. Adaptive theory offers the advantage of combining both developed theory and concepts which generate from the data analysis from empirical research (1998). Adaptive theory focuses on the ties between agency and structure in social life and the connections between the macro and micro levels of analysis.

Thus adaptive theory represents a methodological approach which takes into account the layered and textured nature of social reality (its ontological 'depth'). It also acknowledges the need for an epistemological

basis which reflects the interweaving of objective and subjective elements of social life. Adaptive theory centralises 'emergent' theory, it insists that they emerge directly from data collection and analysis. (1998:20)

Another major advantage to engaging with qualitative research is the option to utilise a flexible research design where twists and turns can reveal themselves in the sampling process, often leading to an increased number of participants from a different criteria from the original plan.

### **Access**

As I found out in this project, there are layers of gatekeepers who exercise power over access to children. The first layer was the ethics committee at the University which required me to submit a thorough ethics application form. I was encouraged by the short time it took to receive permission from the Head of Education; naively expecting the swiftness of the council's response to reflect the forthcoming responses from the schools. I could not have been more wrong. I sent letters out to seven schools initially, to which five schools replied with a 'No'. The remaining two schools required chasing up. This contact was made between May and June 2011. The timing was unfortunate as the school summer holidays were fast approaching. At this point I had to re-apply to another Council, to the Head of Education, before sending out more letters to schools. I re-evaluated my research design and considered attempting to gain access to youth clubs as well as schools to increase my prospects. I also got in touch with a friend who had said he would be happy to contact the Head Teacher he knew closely. This line of enquiry proved to be fruitful. My experience of gaining access is an example of what Lofland and Lofland described as being armed with 'connections': 'There is a great deal of wisdom in the old saying that 'it's who you know that counts'' (1984: 25). This was very much the case for the current study.

## **Access to Schools**

I decided I needed a 'bounded' community, one in which the boundaries were both physical and social. Schools presented an obvious solution to these needs, as schools are locations inhabited by both adults and young people with regular attendance from both. Most comprehensive schools provide access to a cross-section of young people from varied socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. For these reasons I decided schools would be a favourable option to pursue for recruiting participants. The boundaries which I had anticipated to exist turned out to be wider than I had first thought. The school represented a site for gaining access to young people and adults rather than a bounded community. Young people's experiences outside of school were found to be more significant and influential in shaping their risk perceptions than the relationships developed and knowledge gained within school.

Before sending invitations for participation in research to High Schools, I applied for a Protection against Vulnerable Groups (PVG) Disclosure to comply with ethical guidelines for conducting research with young people. I then completed an access form for the Head of Education at the Local Authority. Once permission had been obtained from the Head of Education, letters of request for access were sent to several High Schools. The letters enclosed information leaflets detailing the background to the study, aims, methods, potential risks and my contact information. It took five months before there was a glimpse of hope that I would be accepted to a school for access. The harsh reality of getting access to schools became clear to me soon after the initial request letters were sent out. I successfully gained access to a High School after following through with a friend's offer to contact his friend who was a Head Teacher.

I eventually met with the Head Teacher face to face to discuss the project, to make decisions about the timing of data collection (making sure data collection did not fall into examination times) and which room would be most suitable for conducting focus groups. As schools have extremely busy time schedules, I had to be fairly flexible in my timing conditions.

The site in which the data was collected was a non-denomination Secondary School based in a small Scottish town with an estimated population of fourteen thousand, five hundred. The school was described by many of the staff as entailing tight-knit community relationships, with many teachers having attended the school when they were younger. The town has a strong history of heavy industry, yet now may be perceived as a commuter town by outsiders, and as a strong community which few leave, by the insiders. In relation to pupil support services, one of the key characteristics of the school was the on-going relationship with a local youth club. The youth worker was recognised as a consistent figure in pupil support services, in and out of the school, based in the local community. The school and wider community characteristics presented an ideal site for this study.

### **Consent**

The growing literature on ethical issues in research with young people highlighted my duty as a researcher to consider the 'rights' of young people, and to make 'appropriate' the information I provided on which they could make their decisions about participation. I wanted to assume that, in being provided with appropriate information, all the young people involved were 'competent' to make their own understandings. I was concerned about giving young people as much choice as

possible about whether or not to participate and in what ways. Alderson and Morrow (2004) ask researchers to consider a range of issues, including: conveying that 'consent means being able to say yes or no' (2004: 106); providing opportunities to ask questions; allowing plenty of time for decision-making; and being clear that young people can consult others and change their minds. The product of consent — a verbal agreement, or a signature on a consent form — depends on participants' interpretations of (and memory for) the information they are offered, and does not necessarily represent the same kind of understanding for everyone (Alderson and Morrow, 2004). Because of these points, I took the issue of consent very seriously, for both the young people and adults in the study.

Priscilla Alderson's work (1993) has addressed issues for children's consent to medical procedures; she and others have argued that consent must be renegotiated over time, whether in a medical or social research context (Alderson, 1995; Morrow & Richards, 1996; Morrow, 1999 cited in David *et al.* 2001). It has been argued that a competent young person is

...One who has sufficient understanding and intelligence to enable him or her to fully understand what is proposed and also sufficient discretion to enable him or her to make a wise choice in his or her own interests (Barton & Douglas, 1995: 125–126, cited in David *et al.* 2001).

The problem with this assertion is that a young person's definition of 'fully understanding' may be different from how an adult would define 'fully understanding' (David *et al.* 2001). Chronological age and competence is not necessarily the same thing, and thus it is a question of providing young people with information that is matched to their competencies in order for them to make informed decisions (David *et al.* 2001).



I wanted the young people's choices to be free of the constraints of either parents or the school as far as possible. I purposely avoided any pressures to participate or penalties for not doing so and explicitly emphasised that I was recruiting participants for my study; that is, that the young people were being asked to opt in to the study, not opt out. I also wanted to treat the young people's and adults' consent as a process rather than a single event, checking that they wished to continue to take part in the research, at each stage of their involvement. As Denscombe & Aubrook (1992) point out, the school context is characterised by differential power relations, making it very difficult for young people, (and to some extent, school staff), to opt out of participating in research. They argue that the high pupil response rates achieved in school-based studies is rooted in this hidden pressure, and that researchers need to consider the ethics of their practice in this respect. Once access had finally been granted and meetings had been held with the Head Teacher, information sessions were held with both the young people and the adults. I spoke to a selection of young people in one group, consisting of male and female third years and fourth years. I then delivered information sessions to all the staff members who were due to take part. Every individual who attended the information sessions were given an information sheet about the study, and an invitation letter to participate in the research. Young people were additionally given a parental letter with an attached parental consent form.

The information sessions were used to communicate the aim of the study, how it was going to be conducted, how the findings were to be used, ethics and confidentiality. Potential risks to the participants, including feeling distressed; discussing topics of risk

which they may be currently facing and therefore may wish not to take part in and speaking about views in front of their peers, were discussed in the information session in order to secure as informed consent as possible. The research took an opt-in approach where only people who wished to take part responded to invitations to participate. Alderson (2004) highlights that the ethical opt-in approach takes time and tends to obtain lower response rates, but it does respect people's privacy and free choice. Not every young person who was invited to take part did so. There is a risk of young people being coerced or manipulated into taking part in research, potentially from gatekeepers such as parents, guardians and teachers. Every effort was made to convince gatekeepers that not all people had to take part and I was looking to openly invite everyone but only required willing volunteers to participate. Everyone was given the option to withdraw from the study before focus groups took place, and it was also emphasised to them that they had the option to not answer questions or withdraw from the research at any point. Letters to parents and young people asking for consent were distributed to all who came to the information session; each letter enclosed an information leaflet and consent form (See Appendix 1). Unfortunately it is not known the extent to which parents had influence over their child's participation. Arguably parents could either discourage their child from taking part or encourage a hesitant young person who may not have desired to take part. Emphasis on voluntary consent was communicated during the focus groups as means to attempt to reduce the likelihood of unwanted participation.

I produced consent forms with 'tick boxes' for whether or not, and how, the young people and adults might wish to participate in the research. The consent forms were

distributed to the participants after they had attended the information session. The information session helped to build rapport and stimulated their thinking about the topic. I took time at the start of every focus group and interview to make sure points concerning confidentiality and consent were reinforced.

For consent to be considered truly informed, participants must understand the nature, purpose and likely consequences of a research project. Given this understanding they agree to participate without coercion, knowing that they can withdraw at any time (Morris, 1998). As Graue & Walsh point out, young people have come to expect that when adults ask them a question, the adult already knows the answer:

Few children have had the experience of being approached by an adult who wants them, the kids, to teach her, the adult, about their lives. (1998: 113)

This social barrier was another obstacle to try and avoid in the research process, I consequently reinforced that I was interested in their views and that there were no right or wrong answers.

Child protection guidance encourages professionals to pass on information suggesting that a child might be at significant risk of harm or abuse (Alderson and Morrow, 2004); social researchers typically explain at the outset of a project that confidentiality may be breached in these circumstances. Alderson and Morrow (2004) emphasise that researchers and participants may define 'harm' very differently; they highlight young people may find it hard to notify the researcher in front of their peers if they do not understand something. Furthermore, as Heath *et al.* state "consent' may be based on little more than a desire to please, or a fear of the consequences of not being seen to be co-operative' (2007: 413). Institutional hierarchies usually mean that in schools,

consent must first be obtained from adult gatekeepers (Morrow and Richards, 1996). Where young people are deemed capable of decision-making, some writers argue that placing responsibility for consent on their shoulders may lead to feelings of obligation (Hill, 2005), or the desire to be seen as 'co-operative' with researchers who are viewed as school 'visitors' (David *et al.*, 2001). Alderson and Morrow (2004) recommend the use of leaflets, because written information is standardised, and can be taken away to be re-read and discuss with others.

It has been highlighted that consent given at the outset is neither binding nor permanent, and participants should be informed that they may withdraw 'for any or no reason, and at any time' (British Educational Research Association, 2004, p. 6; see also British Psychological Society, 2006, on Standards of Self-determination). It has been found that children and young people in particular say they would not know how to say that they wanted to stop, that they would worry about the researcher's reaction, and that they would feel guilty about letting the researcher down (Reeves *et al.*, 2007). However in this project, I witnessed a small handful of young people approaching the Head Teacher whilst I was in their company, saying despite their parents providing consent that they would rather not take part. Despite the obvious loss of a participant, I was pleased to see that young people felt they had control over whether they participated or not, giving me more confidence that those who I ended up interviewing participants who were not coerced into participation.

There are no simple or prescriptive solutions to deal with such complexities and ethical practice cannot be guaranteed simply by using the 'right' techniques. However, being made aware of such issues certainly informed my research design and practice.

## **Sampling**

Research participants in this study were young people aged 14 – 16 years of age from a secondary school and adults who worked in the school including classroom teachers, non-teaching staff, pupil support teachers. Participants additionally included a youth worker who worked for a local church but had strong connections with the school and two youth team volunteers. For the purposes of this study a young person is defined as somebody who is between the ages of 12 – 18 years of age. There were two main reasons for focusing upon young people in this particular age group relate. Firstly, young people in this age group or ‘teenagers’ are highly associated with either being ‘at-risk’ or engaging in risky behaviours (Valentine 1996; Kelly 2003, Furlong and Cartmel 1997). It was therefore anticipated that this age group would be familiar with discussing issues relating to risk of harm and safety. Young people of this age group also form the primary audience for health promotion campaigns relating to risk (Hoggart 2012). Secondly, as one of the main aims of the study was to explore the role of young people’s networks and social capital in responding to perceived risk, young people who were old enough to have developed independent networks outside of school and family were identified as the most likely to be helpful participants. Hence participants who were in secondary rather than primary school were chosen.

The main reason for including adults as participants was to address the research aim to elicit adults’ perceptions of risk to young people. I wanted to sample adults who could reflect on their experiences of observing young people in close proximity, but also adults who belonged to the same given community as young people. This included not only class teachers but also pupil support staff and non-teaching staff. As the literature emphasises context and community based norms and beliefs in shaping

people's views, it was important to recruit participants from within one given community and the school provided access to both young people and adults in one community. It was not originally intended to recruit the youth worker and youth volunteers, but when I became aware of the youth workers' key role in young people's networks and lives; I then invited the youth worker through school contacts and youth work volunteers to be included in the study. This sampling technique was a form of snowballing where contact is made with a suitable respondent, and that respondent is then asked for other contacts with the characteristics required by the study (Burton, 2000).

This sampling and recruitment strategy was not intended to produce a representative sample of young people and adults from which inferences about the wider population could be made. Rather, the intention was to undertake an in-depth exploration of the views and experiences of a range of young people and adults most likely to offer evidence to inform the research aims.

In the initial discussion with the Head Teacher I explained that I would like to have access to 24 young people, divided into two groups of 6 young women and two groups of 6 young men. I also requested access to one group of 6 classroom teachers; one group of at least 4 non-teaching staff and one group of at least 4 pupil support staff. I was limited in having the decision power regarding the age group of the young people as the Head Teacher asserted that young people in S5 and S6 were not available due to their exam commitments. S1 and S2 were highlighted as unavailable due to their timetable and so it was decided that I could only have access to S3 and S4 school pupils. The first point of contact with the sample was to be the information session in

which I would speak to a group of 40 school pupils to explain about the research aims, confidentiality and parental consent. The Head Teacher stated that as I was looking to hold focus groups with only 24 school pupils, he would pre-select the group of 40 pupils from S3 and S4 to attend the pupil only information session. As I did not want to jeopardize the access I had to the school given the time limitations, I did not attempt to negotiate for a higher number of pupils to attend the information session even though I would have preferred this. I distributed the information and parental consent forms to all 40 school pupils. Only 17 parental consent forms were returned and so I could only include 17 young people (10 females and 7 males) in the focus groups despite initially aiming to include 24. This is a limitation which should be borne in mind when reflecting upon the findings of this study. A higher number of participants with a more diverse age range may have produced different findings. Nonetheless, the sample used in the current study provided a valuable opportunity to examine the views and experiences of the target population.

It was decided to conduct single sex focus groups with the young people, as previous studies have shown that young men tend to dominate discussions and silence girls when speaking in a mixed sex group (Curtis *et al.*, 2004). It was anticipated that peer groups are likely to be divided predominantly by gender, therefore disclosing personal information may not put the young people at risk if they are speaking in front of peers who know them well. Curtis *et al.* (2004) found in their study that more open discussion took place in single sex groups compared with the mixed sex groups. The limitation to using single sex groups for the young people was that, on reflecting on the findings, it would have been interesting to hear responses from both sexes to

comments made about gendered beliefs. Yet, such comments may not have been made if the groups were mixed sex. It is worth bearing these points in mind.

It was anticipated that some young people may prefer the option of being interviewed individually therefore the option was provided also. Punch (2007) found in her study with young people that some preferred individual interviews for the following reasons:

‘You could say things you couldn’t exactly say with the group,’

‘Could say things and not feel bad,’ (Punch, 2007: 221).

Punch (2007) argues that using both individual interviews and group discussions enables researchers to combine the benefits of each type of interview as there is no one ‘magic’ formula, as some young people may prefer focus groups whilst others may prefer interviews.

As with the young people, the Head Teacher also preselected the adults to attend the information sessions. The Head Teacher invited 7 class teachers, 5 non-teaching staff and 5 pupil support teachers to attend an information session per each group. Out of those who attended the information sessions, 5 class teachers; 5 non-teaching staff and 5 pupil support staff attended the focus groups.

The outcome was that thirteen adults from the school were arranged into three mixed focus groups; including a mixed sex group of classroom teachers, a single sex group of non-teaching staff (receptionist, medical staff and catering staff) and a mixed sex group of pupil support teachers. These numbers were chosen as Krueger (1995, cited in Murray, 2006) states that: ‘increasingly, the most effective focus groups are composed of 6 to 8 participants.’ Morgan (1995, cited in Murray, 2006) points out that the size of each group is contingent upon the topic and participants. In the current



study, the topic is sensitive; therefore group numbers of six allowed for sufficient numbers to exist whilst also reducing the risk of over-disclosure of views and personal experiences to large numbers of people. However due to the low numbers of participants recruited for this study, one limitation is a lack of representativeness for the findings.

The focus group details are set out below:

### **Young People in School**

Focus Group 1: (14 - 15 years) Lauren; Karen; Jenny; Charlotte, Julia, Emma

Focus Group 2: (13 – 16 years) Hannah; Emma, Katy and Marissa

Focus Group 3: (14 - 15 years) Lauren and Karen (Marrissa did not show up)

Focus Group 3: (14 – 15 years) Connor, Stewart and David

Focus Group 4: (13 -16 years) Murray, Cameron ,Edward and Craig

### **Adults in School**

Focus Group 1 Classroom Teachers: Steve; Lisa; Robert; Lynn and Michelle

Focus Group 2 Mixed Roles (Including Catering, Admin and Medical Staff): Louise; Maureen; Jane; Katy and Lynn

Focus Group 3 Pupil Support Staff: David; Clare and Moira

### **Youth Worker**

Youth Team Volunteers: Lorraine (23 years) and Emma (19 years)

## **Methodology**

### **A: Focus Groups with young people and adults**

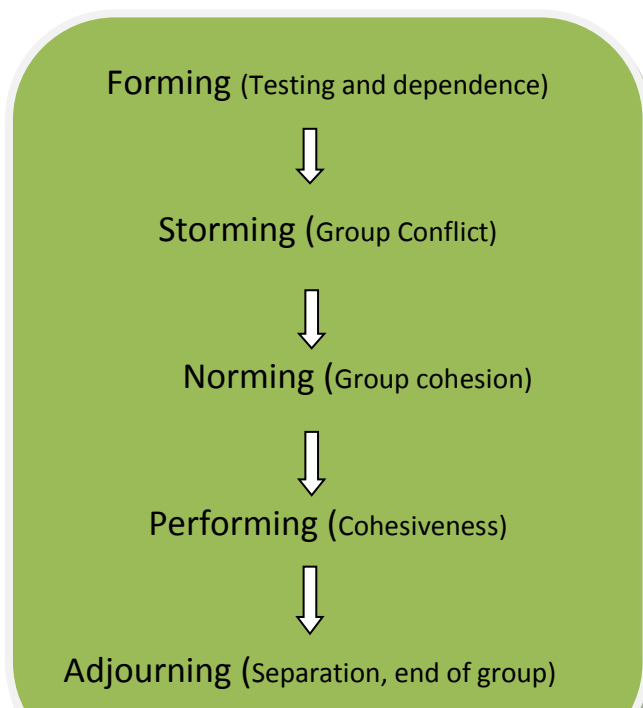
Focus groups or group discussions usually include between 3 and 6 participants arranged together to discuss the research topic as a group (Bloor *et al.* 2001; Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). The group process is expected to throw light onto an issue through

animated and joint discussion with the researcher acting as a facilitator. They are helpful for creating a more naturalistic setting as they are often used with participants who know each other fairly well. The method of focus groups was chosen so as to unveil the normative understandings and particularly to provoke group discussions on group meanings (Bloor *et al.*, 2001). I was aware that individuals may not always be entirely honest in a focus group setting; however focus groups offer the advantage of allowing participants to hear each other and provide the option of reflecting on the topic and in turn providing a refined insight into their own views and experiences (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). Focus groups were chosen as they have been demonstrated in previous studies to be particularly successful methods for research with young people. I used a semi-structured focus group questions guide for the young people which can be found in Appendix 3 and for the adults, which can be found in Appendix 4.

Others have also highlighted that some of the main advantages of group interviews with participants of any social group are the spontaneity of the discussion, the jogging of each other's memories and the more relaxed and fun atmosphere (Krueger, 1994; Valentine, 1999a; Stewart and Shamdasmi, 1990 cited in Punch, 2007). This benefit manifested itself in the group I held with two young women who were very close friends, they kept telling stories which jogged the others' memory about related stories and thoughts. The data collection with the two young women was originally planned as a small focus group with three people; unfortunately one young woman could not attend. I was undecided as to whether the meeting would still resemble the dynamics of a focus group, an interview, or something in between. In hindsight I would

say it resembled something in between, as the numbers failed to represent a 'group' however the context of the data represented joint meanings based on shared reflections and experiences between two young women, as would typically be found in a focus group. This session flowed particularly well because of the social relationship between the participants and the advantage of having both young women present in the same interview.

The beauty of the focus group is the ability for the researcher to listen to the interaction between participants in which clarification, frames of reference and spontaneous contributions take place. I found that focus groups with young people provided an insight into the underlying tones when discussing particular topics, for example, one group of young women became most animated when discussing the differences between how young men and young women are viewed in the context of taking risks. This gave me the impression they were enjoying being listened to on this particular subject whilst being validated by others in the group. Tuckman and Jenson (1977) identified five stages in small group development which demonstrate a sequence that groups tend to pass through. The five stages he called: forming; storming; norming; performing and adjourning.



**Figure 2. A model group of phases (Tuckman and Jenson, 1977)**

In the forming stage participants tend to be very guarded, tense and possibly anxious, showing signs of being concerned about saying the right thing. In the current study, one focus group of young women did not move past this phase, they were extremely quiet and tense which resulted in an early termination of the session. It is also up to the researcher to decide how to explain their silence. I asked the young women at the end what would have made them more comfortable and responsive; they replied that being involved with their friends would have made it easier.

In my first focus group with mixed teachers, this stage lasted a while, with people making small contributions to topics and appearing to take a long time to consider what to say to each other. I tried to ease the tension by asking them to generally describe the area, community and nature of young people's activities; this appeared to be successful in making them more relaxed. It was also a huge advantage as I learned a lot of useful information on the geographical area. It also meant that I was more prepared for the following groups, particularly in the sense of knowing what certain words meant; including place names and the slang for local hang-outs for young people.

'Storming' is a period of time where there is vocalised criticism, where some people may become dominant or defensive. This is often where strong conflicting views emerge providing interesting material. The next stage is 'norming' where a consensus

may be reached in the group where people co-operatively arrive at agreements and find common ground. Then 'performing' takes places where individuals become much more animated and excited about the subject, being more relaxed at this stage it is likely the data will be very revealing. In the final, 'adjourning' stage, points of view are often reinforced or repeated to communicate which observations are important to them. Depending on a multitude of factors, the sequence of events may not always happen in this order and some stages may not occur at all.

### **Reflections on Holding Focus Groups in a School**

The focus groups were conducted on the school grounds, during school hours, so as to minimise interruption to the school day and schedule. However, there were several interruptions to the environment: the room held storage units for the admin staff and was used at other times as a meeting place for a small group of young men who often appeared. Another disadvantage was the not-so-soundproof walls where conversations could be easily heard in the corridor amongst management staff and I anticipated those outside of the room could inevitably hear what was being said. This caused some concern about privacy and confidentiality; however there was no alternative to consider. The problem with conducting data collection within a school is the associations that can be made by pupils and staff towards certain areas; I understood the management corridor was the place where pupils would be sent due to bad behaviour. This provoked me to reassure pupils that my role was not to discipline them, that I was not a teacher and would not pass on what was said unless there were child protection concerns.

It was hoped that as teachers were likely to know each other quite well, that they would be at ease fairly quickly within the focus groups. The first group included mixed classroom teachers from different departments, so I anticipated they would at least know of each other. However, it was also very likely that the quiet individuals may have been withholding responses out of fear of the repercussions of gossip amongst staff. It was interesting that all members of the Pupil Support Group were very open and at ease which may have been due to being used to speaking about this topic as part of their role. All of these factors, however small, have contributed to the data collection process and of course the data produced.

### **B. Semi-structured Interviews**

In-depth interviews were carried out with two young women together, two individual classroom teachers separately and a Youth Worker. I had originally planned to offer interviews to all participants who took part in the focus groups so as to be able to explore individual's views and experiences at a deeper level, however I was restricted by time constraints and meeting the staff's demanding schedules. Interviews provide access to the context of peoples' behaviour, thereby providing a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behaviour.

At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience. (Seidman, 2006: 9)

The aim of the interviews was to obtain a fuller understanding of the participants' reasons, feelings, opinions and beliefs (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). It was hoped that the interviews provided a space for the individuals to explore unmarked territory that they previously had not consciously and verbally reflected upon. The level of participation

in all interviews was very high and provided a bulk of rich data. The interviews took between forty-five minutes and one hour fifteen minutes. With the consent of the interviewees, all of them were tape recorded and fully transcribed. The interviews took place between October and December 2011, in the school and in the youth club. My research training meant that I was aware of the power imbalance in the research process and that I presented myself as a white, middle-class female researcher during the interviews (Seidman, 2006). However, the power imbalance altered considerably according to whom I was interviewing. To the adults I introduced myself as a PhD Research Student at the University of Stirling and ensured I was not there to evaluate standards of teaching and education; to the young people I reinforced I was a student and not a teacher without any desire to discipline them, but emphasised where possible my desire was to hear *their* views; by highlighting the small contribution young people have made to Social Science Research so far. I threw light on their opportunity to share their views so that knowledge would be more equally distributed. Presenting my identity in this way allowed them to consider associating me with other adults who express a desire to listen to them.

The interviews followed an interview guide including semi-structured questions and prompts which had been piloted and improved prior to the interviews taking place (See Appendix 2 for the Youth Worker Interview Guide). I had organised my questions around the concept of risk in the context informed by my academic literature review. To further complicate things, the pupils revealed that they were currently learning about alcohol risks in their P.S.E class which I believe to have significantly impacted upon their responses at the time. This was a conceptual challenge to overcome by

trying to steer their minds away from what they had been taught and encourage them towards what they truly thought was considered to be risk of harm according to their own views and experiences.

With interviewing there is a pro-active attempt to capture the interviewee's own language so as to obtain their meanings and perspectives in its 'natural' form (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). I certainly experienced the aspect of participant's own language as I had to ask on many occasions for clarification on local terms which were used.

Building up a rapport with interviewees is very important and fortunately I had met with all interviewees twice before the interview: in the information session and the focus group. All my interviews were with women, mainly for two reasons. Firstly I selected female interviewees who had previously taken part in focus group discussions; the two classroom teachers I interviewed were participants who demonstrated a high level of participation and it was clear they had more to express on the topic. I would say the second underlying reason for interviewing the women was because I found it easier to build up rapport with the women than the men. This factor has been identified before:

When the interviewer is also a woman, both parties share a subordinate structural position by virtue of their gender. This creates the possibility that a particular kind of identification will develop. (Finch, 1984: 76)

On reflection, I think I should have approached the male participants; however their silence and low level of contribution in the focus group may or may not have changed in an interview situation. In concurrence with the experience of Smith (1996), the interview in which I shared more of my identity yielded the 'richest' data that I received:



The issue of the 'richness' of data equates with establishing a relationship where the women felt they could trust me with some of the more intimate details of their lives, where they were prepared to reveal the 'backstage areas of self,' (Smith, 1996: 65).

Seidman (2006) emphasises that researchers should listen out for the 'public voice', the voice which reflects an awareness of an audience (present or unpresent). It is not untrue, it is guarded. Such language includes words often like 'challenge' and 'adventure', conveying the positive aspects of a participants' grappling with a difficult experience but not the struggle. I found this observation very interesting and particularly helpful for dealing with participants whose role is a public one, especially when I was required to interview teachers on school grounds during their working hours. I was listening out for their public voice – what they feel they ought to say and their personal voice – what their own personal views were on young people and risk of harm. As with any method you are trying to extract the truth or at least to obtain data that is 'truthful' according to the participants. I believed I could be confident that some participants were indeed truthful due to personal interest being expressed (Lofland and Lofland 1984), whereas the young people may not have exhibited the same level of authenticity.

### **Young People and research**

Individual researchers and groups have recently focused on refining methods used to hear young people's views in order to achieve greater authenticity, credibility and reliability (Tisdall *et al.* 2009). With this 'moral crusade' in the back of my mind, there was an element of pressure present throughout the project; a pressure to give equal weight to the voices of the young people as well as the adults; to represent their views

as accurately as possible without reinforcing already damaging prejudices about young people.

Many of the challenges of researching young people comes from the fact that they are social subordinates to adults in our society and Western culture has constructed young people to be 'becoming beings' and not as mature, intelligent or as powerful, as us adults. Tisdall *et al.* (2009) draws attention to some quotes taken from Save the Children (2001) and Council for Disabled Children (2008), to highlight how young people can experience research, consultation and evaluation:

'Once I was asked a questionnaire but I did not understand the questions so I just said "yes" and "no" where I thought I should!' (young person aged 13).

'Don't guess what we want'

'Trust us – we need to trust you' (2009).

Historical and cross-cultural comparisons demonstrate that concepts of childhood or youth are not universal nor inevitable (Tisdall *et al.* 2009). Childhood studies have thus encouraged us to critically look at our own and others' conceptualizations of childhood or youth, and recognise their impact on structures, services and relationships. The authors assert that all of us will come to such activities with our own particular backgrounds, and associated assumptions about childhood and youth. This will influence how we carry out our research, in terms of the questions posed, the methods used, and the ethical frameworks. In light of this, I have attempted to be aware of my own background and assumptions which may have influenced the research process.

There have been recent calls to rehabilitate the notion of young people as 'becoming' beings. Much has been written about the differences between research with young people and research with adults (Punch, 2002). There have been debates about what the adult role should be in research involving children. However, I approached the participants from the stance that adults and young people have multiple identities and research often can only highlight part of their identities.

### **Analysis**

The aim of qualitative analysis is to understand the subjective, meaningful experiences and views of the participants you research. The theoretical approach taken towards the research design was that of feminist methodology. In keeping with feminist methodology, focus groups are a *contextual* method. In other words, focus groups locate individuals within a social context, and focus on individuals' interactions with others (Wilkinson, 1999). In addition to being a contextual method, focus groups are also a relatively non-hierarchical method (Wilkinson, 1999). Again this aspect of focus groups is in keeping with feminist methodology, due to the potential to reduce power differentials in the research process (McCarry, 2005); between the researcher and the researched.

### **Managing Qualitative Data and NVivo**

Qualitative data is highly rich in detail but unwieldy and intertwined in content. Data management was an essential stage so as to manage the pages and pages of transcripts and hours of recordings along with observational notes. The data management involved deciding upon the themes or concepts under which the data was labelled, sorted and compared. Familiarisation is a crucial activity at the

start of analysis. When reviewing the chosen material the task is to identify recurring themes or ideas.

In the literature there is much emphasis on finding the right package to fit the analytical task, rather than allowing the structures and processes of a particular piece of software to dictate how the researcher carries out qualitative analysis (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). There is no one best programme: the best one is the one which most suitably meets the needs of the analysis required. NVivo offers many features which help to make the data management an easier and more creative process. I chose NVivo mostly because of my specific training in using this software.

### **Coding**

The analysis process started by identifying a broad set of thematic categories by reading the transcripts and looking for recurring themes and ideas. I worked 'manually' by reading the transcripts and choosing categories that appeared to be contained in the transcripts as opposed to letting the software help by creating a list of the most frequently used words in the texts and allow code development to be informed by this list. The manual or maybe what could be termed "human", method was helpful at this stage for accurate coding, because only human readers can detect all of the subtleties of human expression involved in the multiple ways of phrasing any particular idea.

With regard to the data analysis process Strauss (1987) describes a three stage model: open coding, axial coding and selective coding. During the initial open coding process, data is organised into broad analytic themes and coded on that basis. At the axial

coding stage, a second pass through the data develops the links between the emergent themes. During the third phase of analysis, extracts from data which best illustrate the main themes identified are selected for inclusion in the final report.

Broadly speaking, interview and focus group data from the current study was analysed in this way. However, in reality, this was not a linear or straightforward process and I moved back and forth between these phases at various stages of the analysis process.

During the open coding stage, I read through all the focus group and interview transcripts looking for distinct concepts and categories in the data. In other words, I was breaking down the data into first level concepts, or master headings, and second-level categories, or subheadings. Each concept or second level category formed a 'node' using NVivo. As the literature review informed the research questions, I was looking for key words, phrases and data relating to these concepts including "risk", "danger", "dangerous," "harm", "trust." For example the following text box shows examples of a transcript which was coded under the 'risk' node initially:

Edward: but there's certain areas that are more dangerous than others, the people makes it more dangerous, they're eh, just don't know actually....drinking, smoking, maybe drinking

Murray: it's putting yourself in danger I guess when you're goin about walking

Cameron: especially if you're alone and not with anybody,

Karen: how paranoid do I get when I'm walking I worry so much I think there's something wrong with me I think everything's a risk I don't know

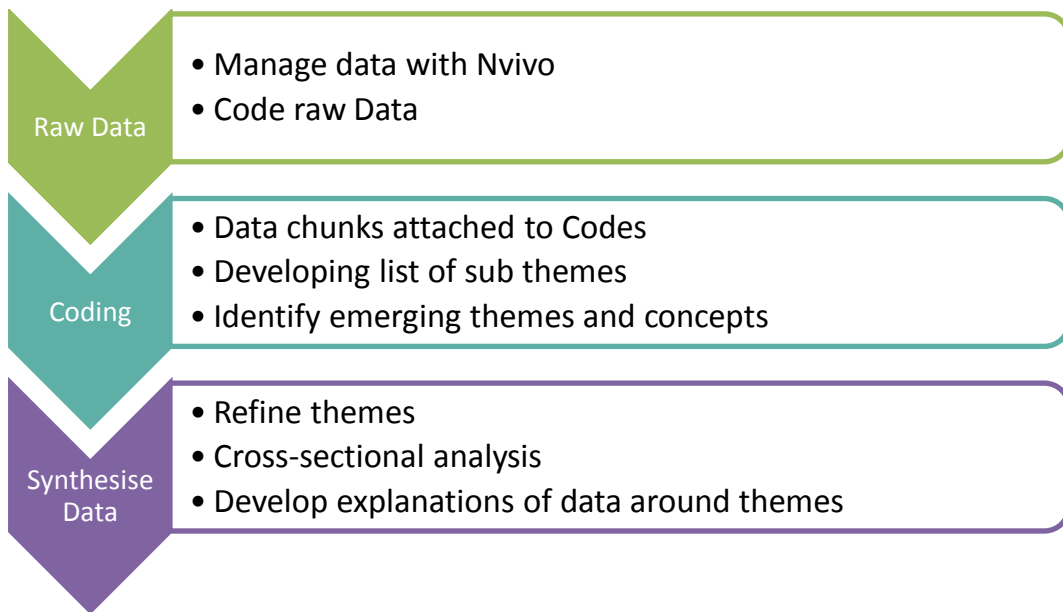
In open coding, I was focused primarily *on the text* to define concepts and categories. In axial coding, I was using *my concepts and categories* or nodes while re-reading the text to 1. Confirm that my concepts and categories accurately represented focus group and interview responses and, 2. To explore how my concepts and categories were related. During the second pass through the data, all transcripts were coded, and links between these themes emerged alongside the development of new themes. As the second stage of thematic analysis involves grouping all of the individual nodes into between 4 – 7 key groupings or categories of nodes, it is unhelpful to have hundreds of nodes. At the point of selective coding, the codes that formed the findings chapters were as follows: alcohol and drugs, public spaces; adults protecting young people and young people’s protective friendships. Sub themes were clustered under these main node concepts and are also presented in the findings chapter.

Coding ‘involves the use of concepts (labels placed on discrete happenings events and other instances of phenomena) and categories (a more abstract notion under which concepts are grouped together,’ (Blaikie, 2000: 239). For example, under the “public spaces” node were the subthemes including: examples of public spaces; ‘other’ young people, risky adults; barriers to being outside; negotiating the risk of public spaces and why young people want to be in public spaces.

Additionally, during coding, certain key phrases and words used by participants, which appeared to be prevalent were used for running text queries to discern whether these were used by other participants across the transcripts. Such queries were helpful in the analysis of common language use, particularly in describing particular public spaces. For example in the first focus group, references were made to “the woods” as

a risky public space therefore I wanted to find out what other participants said about this area. Such text queries added further rigour to the coding process.

### The Analysis Process



The above table is a visual representation of the analytical process, a simplified version of the general flow of cross-sectional analysis of qualitative data. At a first glance it looks as if the process is fairly linear; however in practice I jumped between various stages depending on how close I was to the data and whether or not I was satisfied that all emerging themes had been captured.

Some could argue that an 'unstructured' approach in data analysis will lead to lack of rigour and validity of findings. However, when dealing with complex social concepts and a variety of participants, analysis almost has to be flexible so as to capture the complexity of such rich data (Ritchie and Lewis 2003). The analysis approach used in this study is based largely on the interpretation of meanings expressed in the data. It has been highlighted that moving between stages is a research strength rather than weakness:

The ability to move up and down the analytical hierarchy, thinking conceptually, linking and nesting concepts in terms of their level of generality, lies at the heart of good qualitative analysis. (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003: 213)

I decided to use a thematic cross-sectional analysis so as to give the most weight of the findings to the themes rather than revolve around the people. I wanted to explore both what adults and young people had to say whilst retaining that space to explore the emerging themes. A thematic cross-sectional analysis was conducted where I looked across the whole data set in relation to a common set of themes, a small group of themes were prescribed but the overall approach was to explore the emerging themes from the data.

My aim was to identify key themes and concepts whilst respecting the variety of sources and level of abstraction from which they derived. I organised the data around cross-sectional code and retrieve methods, in which I compiled a common system of categories to apply across the whole data set and used as a means of searching for and retrieving chunks of labelled data, with the help of the data management tool NVivo. This method was chosen so as to offer a systematic overview of the scope of the data, to aid the process of finding themes which emerged across all data sources which helped to make connections. I would argue that whilst this process involved 'chopping' up the data and moving it around, that the process itself did not remove the data from the context in which they occurred. The findings in chapters Four to Seven are presented according to the themes rather than the participants. As the analytical process evolved, I kept a record in the memos of the intellectual decisions I made with references to literature and personal observations so as to formally log and present the turning points of the interpretative process. My approach to the level of



abstraction for data analysis was influenced by arguments for analytical methods to portray people's subjective experience, faithfully reflecting the way in which they give meaning to their lives, rather than selective interpretations or accounts which subordinate the reality of peoples' lives to the aim of wider generalisation (Ritchie and Lewis 2003).

The analysis has sought to identify what I would perceive as significant *and* what the participants counted as significant, thus the analysis was both deductive (themes identified from the literature review) and inductive (themes emerged from the raw data provided by the adults and young people.)

### **Role of researcher**

Symbolic interactionists argue that every part of our social life is played out through 'roles.' Fieldwork can be an intense time for a researcher as it involves continuous presentation of self and management of self. The role of the researcher in the field is an area which deserves some attention here. I had to learn how to behave as a researcher in a school, in a youth club during the day and at night; how to be an adult but not a teacher, how to be an interviewer but not a friend. Hochschild (1983, cited in Ramsay, 1996) used the term 'surface acting' to describe the management of outward appearances. I had to refrain from reacting at times and 'force' myself to respond when things were said which had not 'surprised' me as it clearly had with the interviewee. The interaction alone revealed what I considered as 'normal' and 'deviant' compared with others. It was an interesting position to be in, managing my own emotions and self whilst simultaneously asking people to reflect on *their* presentation of self and views on others' roles and 'performances', both public and

private. This reflexive process is otherwise known as the emotional labour of research. Emotion is often dealt with as data but not as often as an experience which permeates and affects the research process; it has been suggested this hidden process reflects a legacy of the masculinist research agenda in sociology (Ramsay, 1996).

The rules for emotional expression in research may be different from everyday life, but the interaction skill involves two people whose life histories will shape how they respond to one another. (Ramsay, 1996: 142)

I found emotional expression; or rather the negotiation of it was a constant process in dealing with the interviews and focus groups.

### **Influence of Researcher biases and preconceptions**

Many commentators have emphasized the need for researchers to examine their biases and preconceptions. Some have encouraged attention to disciplinary biases and perspectives as well as to individual bias (Thorne *et al.* 2002). The term reflexivity is used to describe a researcher's sensitivity to the often subtle ways that their particular location, experience, worldview, and assumptions contribute to shaping the data that is collected and how it is analysed (Hunt, 2010).

It may be that sociologists are hesitant to consider the effect of identity on their work because the groundedness of identity claims threatens to unearth those ghosts we are trained to ritualistically bury at the start of our research projects: bias and subjectivity. (McCorkel and Myers, 2003: 200)

Edwards (1993) argues that the researcher's feelings and experience should be analysed as an integral part of the research process. The 'sharing of yourself' has been suggested to reduce the exploitative power balance between researcher and subject. Identity social characteristics help both the researcher and the subject to 'place' each other within the social structure. This can sometimes work negatively: 'My status as a

white person attached to a public institution was what placed me – and it placed me in a negative way’ (Edwards, 1993: 188).

Another consequence of spending significant amounts of time in the research field is the possibility of ‘going native’, or being accepted and emotionally linked with the participants. It has been suggested that going native is a product of the researcher’s isolation and desire to be accepted;

In an alien environment, the emphasis put on such institutions as kinship reflects a need to cling on to something which can connect raw fieldwork to the more familiar and comfortable conceptual systems of academic life. (Payne, 1996: 30)

I would not go as far to say I ‘went native’ but at the same time, cannot disguise my emotional attachment to the participants. I had a keen desire for not only the young people and adults to ‘like me’; but also to engage in a shared vision for the importance of the research and findings. I think the desire to be accepted had more to do with expecting face-to-face interactions to be ‘easier’ if I was ‘liked’ and got along with everyone. Including people who were excited about the research and saw meaning in it, for me confirmed their ‘membership’ to the study - affirming that I had selected the right people for the role. Thus it was important for me as the researcher to socially connect with the participants for multiple reasons. These declarations of ‘emotion’ and ‘social attachment’ to my participants are a reflection on the influence of which feminist methodology took a firm hold on this project.

### **Influence of Feminist Methodology**

Other central tenets of a feminist methodological approach can be described as a way of doing research which empowers participants, enables their voices to be heard, works reflexively, and rejects the distinction between the researcher and the researched (Skinner *et al.*, 2005). Crucially, the subjective position of the researcher is acknowledged and documented so that the way in which the research process affects the research results is apparent. Such an approach is conscious of the potential power of the researcher over the researched (Stanley & Wise, 1993, cited in Skinner *et al.* 2005), and is concerned with the emotional wellbeing of the researcher and the researched (Skinner *et al.*, 2005).

Standpoint epistemology requires that the researcher put her taken-for-granted assumptions, beliefs, and stereotypes on the table for dissection. It requires an analysis of how her own use of master narratives gives form and substance to not just her experiences in the field, but her sense of her own identity as well as the identities and 'differences' of others (McCorkel and Myers, 2003). I was a young middle-class female who shared beliefs and vision with the youth worker whilst finding similarities with other young middle-class female teachers. My preconceived bias towards young people meant that I sympathised greatly during data collection and almost admired their accounts of negotiating risk of harm whilst other onlookers may have been less sympathetic at stories of drinking alcohol. Half way through the interview with the two young women I almost felt like I was one of them, engaging in a catch-up chat over what they did at the weekend and found myself laughing along to amusing stories. This may have been a touch of 'going native' or it was an overly keen desire to be their

friend rather than be the authoritative adult in the room, neither of which I wanted to encompass.

Any researcher would like to say the data speaks for itself and the findings would have been the same irrespective of who conducted the study. However I am not that researcher and cannot attempt to say that my identities and narratives had no influence on the topic, questions and analysis. My aim was to be true to the participants in the sense of presenting their views and experiences according to their constructions, not mine. I hope I was able to achieve this despite being an outsider (and sometimes insider).

### **Sensitive Data and the Impact on the Researcher**

Interacting with participants can provoke rather emotive responses, some that may be on-going after the initial data collection has been completed. I recognised such emotive responses in myself due to my longing to represent young people in a favourable light. It has been recognised that sympathy and the impulse to help are often present in a researcher's experience (Lofland and Lofland, 1984), particularly when the interviewees are in a socially disadvantaged position. According to Lofland and Lofland (1984), it is the known observer who typically experiences discomforting moments of truth and desire to have more informal connections with the participants. I started to witness signs of this happening the closer I got with the Youth Worker as I found her very easy to get on with. Our 'relationship' was sealed by the shared vision we had for enlightening society about the truth of young people's lives and we bonded over the mission to set the record straight by de-demonizing young people.

Patton (1990) discusses that sharing a strong identity with the participants can emerge; you come to understand the behaviours, ideals, anxieties, and feelings of the participants, identifying with their lives, their hopes and their pain. It is anticipated that emotional labour in research is much more probable to appear in studies that seek to explore 'sensitive' topics. The ethics preparation for this study taught me that risk of harm to young people falls under such a heading. Lee and Renzetti (1993) highlight that typically research becomes sensitive when there are potential circumstances either for the participants and/or the researcher. The revealing of school practice may have been a cost. For the young people, exposing the 'risks' that they had taken, out of fear that adults would intervene and punish them for, would have been a cost:

For instance, wrongdoing uncovered by research might bring with it the possibility of discovery and sanction. (Lee and Renzetti, 1993: 5)

For these reasons, I am indebted to all who agreed to take part as I can anticipate that costs were indeed paid. Research which explores the private sphere or deeply personal experiences, dealing with things which are sacred to those being studied are typically what make some studies more 'sensitive' than others. What is essentially 'private' to one person may not be considered 'private' to another, which is why I remained as aware as possible of the cues of the participants when interviewing.

It is hoped that the current study makes a positive, if small, contribution to understanding the concerns of young people and adults in relation to an issue which they themselves perceive to be important within the context of their own lives. To this end, the following four chapters detail the key findings of this study.

## Chapter Four

### Alcohol and Drugs Posing Risks to Young People

Drawing upon focus group and interview data, this chapter presents the responses provided by all participants. The chapter covers a number of sections which address the first research question: What are young people's and adults' perceptions of the main risks? These sections include alcohol-related risks: risk of the unknown; perceived acceptability of alcohol; risk of 'unacceptable and inappropriate' behaviours and others. Also included in this chapter are a number of sections more closely aligned with question 2: Are perceptions of risk informed by gender and class? These sections include social risks to young women and social risks to young men.

The first section focuses on the perceived risks posed by alcohol consumption. Alcohol was considered as a main risk of harm to young people because of its prevalence, accessibility, perceived acceptability in that particular community and the harmful effects of drinking. The second section focuses on perceived risks posed by drugs. Stigma relating to those who are drug users was highlighted as significant.

#### **Risk of the Unknown**

Adults and young people perceived alcohol consumption to increase the likelihood of young people being exposed to dangerous situations, as 'normal' discernment of danger would be seriously impaired:

School Teacher Lisa: *Emmm, well if they're drinking they're exposing themselves to other situations where they are more vulnerable, quite often*

*drinking and violence goes together and drinking goes with inappropriate sexual relations.*

School Pupil Lauren: *Yeah, with alcohol yeah, well like to be honest when you're drunk you don't know what you're doin'.*

School Pupil Karen: *If like we went out and there's a big group sometimes you just get out of hand and you do like stupid stuff like lie on the road, that can put you at risk for doin' something you didn't wana do.*

Youth Team Volunteer Lorraine: *When you're young you're drinking, you get drunk really quickly can damage your body like, gets you drunk really easily you might fall you will do things you regret. When you are a young girl or a young boy, 13, 14, it can affect you in the future, they don't think about these things.*

Youth Team Volunteer Emma: *I think when they are drunk they think they're invincible they can do that they can jump off that wall and hurt themselves.*

Here the School Pupils and adults highlighted that being under the influence of alcohol can lead to them doing something they would otherwise not have done; that things can 'get out of hand.' Therefore it appeared that drinking only became a risk at this 'uncontrolled' stage. According to the young people, risky behaviours are those which provoke a degree of stigma and social embarrassment, hence public stigma about drunken behaviour was perceived as harmful as well as dangerous behaviour. Alcohol was perceived as increasing the probability of risk to basic physical safety, as alcohol was perceived to increase the likelihood of dangerous behaviours such as lying on a road or jumping off walls.

### **Perceived Acceptability of Alcohol**

The perceived acceptability of excessive drinking was expressed by both adults and young people. The drinking culture was thought to contribute to the probability that young people will get excessively drunk and often. Adults perceived young people as wanting to drink excessively:



Non-teaching Staff Member Katy: *...but nowadays, they cannae get enough, they're no happy unless they're flat on their backs, and it just seems to be the society, it's just, like my own children are the same they cannae get enough of it!*

Non-Teaching Staff Member Lynn: *Yeah, it's almost like they are boasting. Yeah they are very much influenced by their friends, and I think where the drink is concerned, if one has three bottles, the other has to have four bottles.*

Not only were young people perceived as 'not being able to get enough' but were also believed to be in competition with one another to see who could drink the most amount of alcohol. Drinking excessively was constructed to be a society-wide problem.

Classroom Teacher Michelle: *I don't know, it's accepted isn't it by their groups? It's almost the norm for things to do and I think the kids are aware of the groups that do drink at the weekend and whether they want to be a part of that.*

School Pupil Karen: *You see at the start when my Mum told my Dad that there was a lot of people drinkin', my Mum was so surprised 'cause my Dad turned around and went well they're all gonna do it.*

School Pupil Lauren: *I think it's like a part of life, everyone's gonna do it do you know what I mean, it's always gonna happen, it depends who you are and what age you are, who you are with.*

Non-Teaching Staff Member Jane: *It's a problem in general, in society, like everybody or most people had their drink when they were younger eh? But I cannae remember it being that bad, that you went out to get drunk, you went out to try out.*

Youth Team Volunteer Emma: *It's always going to be an issue.*

Young people drinking was equated with social acceptance when talked about in an experiential way, where young people experiencing drinking as a one off was accepted as *normal* and almost a rite of passage; whereas any level of drinking that was more continuous was viewed as a social problem.

The perceived acceptability was emphasised by reflecting on local 'traditions':

Classroom Teacher Michelle: *...and last year we actually had three of them who were sent out the school building before break and they fell asleep on the grass in their prom dresses out there...really shameful but it seems to be the tradition, you know that they come back and say they had a great night. Oh I don't know but that's what they do they don't see it as they're doing wrong really.*

School Pupil David: *It's quite a bad thing. Sometimes they do it in other's houses.*

The Teacher talked about how young people are viewed as not having the correct view, that their own behaviours are morally wrong. There seemed to be a confusion and disbelief that the morality of drinking was not an incentive for young people not to get drunk.

The perceived acceptability was thought to be explained by the 'cool' image attached to drunkenness:

Classroom Teacher Michelle: *...or he's a cool lookin' lad I'm gonna get in with that crowd because I fancy him...they're stupid really the way they make their choices, but I think they do make the choice as to whether they're gonna drink or not.*

The Teacher constructed young people's decision to get drunk as 'stupid'. These lines of logic are not new in the context of shaping young people's decision-making. It could be argued that adults also make similar choices, to drink as a way of alleviating social anxiety when pursuing romantic interests. The perception sets young people as being *different* from adults and *less competent*: young people are scrutinized for making such choices, the same choices which arguably adults make.

It was perceived by the adults and young people that young people view getting drunk as an achievement and a means to receive status and access to more intimate relationships and friendships. It was commonly asserted that *there must be a reason* for young people choosing to drink:

Classroom Teacher Michelle: *...no I think some of them try and avoid it, others will think it's more like a medal to be won, a trophy, "I got drunk at the weekend what were you doing?"*

Youth Team Volunteer Emma: *I think it's to be cool, to fit in, cause some people like do it to forget their problems, drinking, trying to keep up with the older people like cause a lot of them go out drinking with older people. I don't know...it's like popularity, it's like people like people knowin' who they are.*

School Pupil David: *'Cause they think it makes them look cool.*

School Pupil Cameron: *They might drink to make themselves look cool, so they can be accepted by their gangs.*

The adults and young people suggested that young people as a group view drunkenness as of a higher social or popular status amongst peers. Social acceptance was also perceived to explain why young people want to get drunk.

### **Social Risks to Young Women**

From the responses, there was clearly a gendered difference between perceptions about what could happen to young women and young men in the context of alcohol. Responses highlighted the risk of sexual activity; sexual violence; stigma of perceived desired image to be 'sexually available' for men; the risk of being known as 'a slut' as risks specific to young women who drink. For young women, the risk of being publicly seen whilst drunk may derive from the social acceptability for men to drink. Drinking is typically a masculine leisure pursuit thus when women drink alcohol, they are viewed as masculine, and are perceived to be drinking alcohol because of motives different from those belonging to men.

According to the School Pupils, young drunk women are particularly vulnerable to male sexual perpetrators:

School Pupil Lauren: *You could end up pregnant or anything! Like if a girl was drunk a boy would take advantage of her but if a boy was drunk that be a good thing but for the girl it be like ...*

School Pupil Karen: *You wouldn't even know who it was by cause you can't really remember.*

Youth Team Volunteer Lorraine: *It is a risk I think that, em, if they've been drinking, an older boy coming up to him, they're like "Oh he's much older," and they're flattered, and go for it and ...*

Youth Team Volunteer Emma: *There are more risks with girls with boys trying stuff with them; well the girls go for it though eh they do.*

School Pupil Lauren compared public responses to drunken sexual relations between a young man and a young woman; emphasising the response to the young man would be a positive one whilst implying a negative response towards the young woman. It could be said that young drunk men taking advantage of young drunk women, is constructed as affirming masculinity and social status, whilst at the same time degrading women's status. According to the young women, drunken sexual relations for the woman is costly (possibly physically and socially); for the young man there is something to be gained and almost praised. Young men were highlighted as a particular risk to young women, where young men pursue young women and women are the deciders of whether any sexual activity will occur. Women were viewed as having more to lose than the young men including the risk of rape; the risk of a negative image or reputation and the risk of getting pregnant. Young women were constructed as being at risk from both unwanted sexual relations when drunk *and* risky sexual behaviour. Youth Volunteer Emma labelled young women 'slags' which suggests she perceived highly prevalent sexual promiscuity to be associated with young women who drink.

The School Pupils Lauren and Karen also highlighted that young women's drinking behaviour is often geared towards finding a balancing point between having fun, being sociable, a fear of losing control and becoming vulnerable to men. There was a further example given by School Pupil Karen of the gendered risk of young women being around drunken men.

*School Pupil Karen: There was this one time, this creepy guy, we had a couple of drinks. Our Mums were away, we were on holiday, we were walking and they were quite mingin'...and then we were in the hotel and this guy and another guy, I sat down on the sunbed and he started pushin' me down! And I was screamin' at her! She was like it was fine! I started cryin' and running away and he was chasing me! It was so scary I was cryin' and we woke up the next day and he was on our balcony!*

*School Pupil Lauren: He was a total stalker eh? I got him told, he was like I love you! And I was like scared.*

From the responses it appears that when men's expectations of sexual intimacy with women who are drinking are not met, women feel at risk of violence.

Young women were viewed as weaker than young men in relation to their physical response to alcohol:

*Youth Team Volunteer Lorraine: I think boys can handle themselves a bit more than girls.*

*School Pupil Karen: I think boys have more control, they can handle it, they can take it more. If we drank the same amount as some boys go out and drink, we'd be on the floor.*

Not only were young women framed as weaker but were also believed to be vulnerable to *more* risks than young men. This discourse has been used to reproduce gendered beliefs about young men and women, excluding social acceptance of young women drinking alcohol in the process and thus contributing to the social demonisation of young women who drink. Furthermore, 'truths' about young men

who drink alcohol are used to reproduce and affirm the masculinity of young men, in which they are socialised as being the stronger sex and the least vulnerable to harm. Young men were also perceived as having more self-control than young women when drinking.

The young women perceived other young women using alcohol as an excuse to be sexually promiscuous:

Youth Team Volunteer Emma: *There is quite a lot of girls that are slags that are really young but now it's everywhere.*

School Pupil Lauren: *Some people just act drunk so they can be sluts to people.*

School Pupil Karen: *Oh my – that annoys me so much!*

School Pupil Lauren: *It just gives them an excuse to be, like, all over the guys.*

Youth Team Volunteer Lorraine: *I've seen young girls in an awfae state when they've been drinkin, if I ever get like that...*

Young women perceived as acting sexually promiscuous or provocative were constructed as socially unacceptable, where presenting different identities was irritable to them. Using labels such as 'sluts' and 'slags' suggests that the School Pupils and Youth Volunteers view drunken young women, who behave sexually, as deviating from acceptable norms of femininity and youth. The responses suggest that such images are to be avoided as they are associated with degrading ones social status. The labels used suggest that drunken young women are perceived to engage in public displays of extraordinary levels of sexual provocativeness or heterosexuality.

### **Social Risks to Young Men**

As with young women, gendered risks for young male drinkers were also identified.

Such risks included getting into fights, violence, and confrontation with gangs. Young men's perceptions were often embedded in their own experiences in their geographical community:

School Pupil Connor: *they're always bad when they're drunk and that and wanna start fights.*

School Pupil Murray: *teenagers drinkin', well if it continues I guess there'd be more gangs people like that drug taking, and that. It could be due to everyone goin' out at night.*

School Pupil David: *Like they've got a bad temper on them when they're drunk and that. They start a fight,*

School Pupil Stewart: *I remember I was at the park and folk were drinkin' and it turned out to be a fight. One of my pals was in so I had to jump in and get him out it which was kind of a risk cause it could end up turning into me.*

The connection was made between young men drinking and the likely outcome of increased aggression to other men. Fighting and violence are often linked with masculinity; it could be said that the school pupils perceived other drunken men to display signs of heightened masculinity which is typically associated with danger. The responses from young men and women appeared to orbit around the notion that alcohol affects young people in such a way that risky behaviours which are deeply embedded in gendered constructions are exaggerated or heightened when alcohol is misused.

### **Risk of Further Control by Parents**

The young people identified getting into trouble with parents and losing their trust as a major risk, which suggested how much they valued those relationships:

School Pupil Lauren: *With my dad it's a risk, getting caught, cause I don't wanna lose trust with him, like it's....*

School Pupil Lauren's comment reflects the context of contemporary discourses regarding parenting circulating around 'closer' and less hierarchical relationships between parents and children (Valentine, 2004). It could be said that the nature of such parent-child relationships acts as an incentive for young people to withhold information about their drinking habits rather than young people choosing to disclose their experiences to their parents. The risk of further parental control over young people's leisure time was identified by the young men. The young people avoided this risk by withholding information from their parents. The young people were concerned their freedom would be restricted further if parents knew there were young people drinking in their company:

School Pupil Stewart: *You can't really go to parents cause if you tell them folk have been drinkin' then they'll say you cannae go to the park. Like if you like goin' to the park and you can actually say no, if you dinnae drink then it's actually quite fun. Folk there that dinnae drink.*

Whilst others (mostly adults) have interpreted parent's control of their children's whereabouts to be a protective factor, in this case young people have viewed this as a risk to *avoid*; the risk that the little time young people have to choose what they want to do rather than be told what to do may be taken away from them. Hence young people perceived there was the risk of a social cost if information about their time spent around others who drink alcohol were to be disclosed to parents.



### **Risk of Alcohol Poisoning**

The risk of alcohol poisoning was identified by the young people. In one account a young woman described a scenario where she had been drinking and found herself to be very ill as a consequence, speculating that her drink had been 'spiked':

School Pupil Karen: *Like yeah I was havin' a drink but we didn't have that much. It was like so weird cause like one minute we were absolutely fine and next minute we were spewin' everywhere me and my friends. It was horrible really horrible cause this guy was really rough I don't even know why I was there but like, there's no way we had that little to drink and to be in that state; it was weird.*

This particular experience had appeared to have no impact on her subsequent decisions to drink alcohol. In the above incident the risks appeared to be the unintended level of drunkenness; being sick and the man who was 'rough' suggesting he was interacting with the girls in an unwanted manner. Another 'incident' was identified:

School Pupil Lauren: *...hospitalised, remember that time?*

School Pupil Karen: *Oh yeah, uh huh, she went to hospital to get her stomach pumped.*

This was in response to being asked if there was a line between drinking safely and putting yourself at risk. The risk was constructed to be at the stage of getting your stomach pumped, highlighting that concepts of 'safe drinking' and 'risky drinking' are relative and placed on different continuums by different individuals.

### **Risk of 'Unacceptable & Inappropriate' Behaviours**

Alcohol was constructed to pose a main risk to social cohesion and solidarity as alcohol was associated with the increased probability of unacceptable and inappropriate behaviours:

Classroom Teacher Lisa: *Well I overheard my higher pupils, well not overheard, they said specifically em, where they were at a party where a number of people were drinking where a girl was drunk she was being sick in the toilet. It was ruinin' someone's party and they were saying that is not acceptable, a larger group of pupils saying we don't like that behaviour not that we should not be drinking it's like em the cause for behaviours but the girl just said she was being sick*

School Pupil Lauren: *People start to go to these places right and the idiots come and waste it for everybody, like drinking...*

School Pupil Jenny: *I think some places ...they just let them stay there I'm like 12 I didnae want to see that, those who are off their face...They're like drunk and everything.*

Here, according to the Teacher's account, the young people have constructed acceptable and unacceptable behaviour when drinking or drunk; therefore a perceived social risk to young people is crossing that line from acceptable to unacceptable. The responses suggest that there is an expectation for young people to be drinkers who do not violate social 'rules' about acceptable places to drink and situations for drunkenness. Under-age drinking was associated with 'inappropriate' behaviours:

Classroom Teacher Lisa: *I mean younger kids doin' things that they maybe shouldn't be doing, you also hear them speaking about things that people have done that they shouldn't have done.*

School Pupil Connor: *Well you're a kid so you're not behaving yourself when you're drunk. And anythin' could happen.*

School Pupil Connor associated drunken bad behaviours with youth; suggesting that being young is likely to accentuate anti-social drunken behaviours compared with being an adult. It could be suggested that perceptions of youth as being a stage of anti-social behaviour is thought to be magnified by alcohol consumption. Other young people expressed their annoyance at drunken young people spoiling their own social time with peers:

School Pupil Connor: *Even I go there sometimes and it's just boring.*

School Pupil David: *You're basically just watching a bunch of people get drunk and falling all over the place.*

Thus, anyone who falls beyond the parameters of the 'competent' drinker is perceived as neither amusing nor desirable to those around them. The above responses suggest there are 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' behaviours for young people and alcohol seems to perpetuate inappropriate or 'wrong' behaviours. For most of the adults, young people drinking was seen to be unaccepted; whereas according to young people, drinking alcohol was only acceptable up until the point of *excessive* drinking. It could be suggested that drinking alcohol has been predominantly constructed to be an adult activity by adults and some young people. According to adults, it is acceptable for adults to go out to the pub with friends in order 'to do something' whereas when young people go out to drink with friends it is seen as irresponsible, morally and legally wrong. The responses from the adults suggests that in their view, young people should be innocent and free from engaging in adult activities; that there is a very clear boundary between acceptable youth activities and acceptable adult activities. When the two cross over, there is a strong negative reaction where young people are demonized and adults are seen as 'not understanding' young people.

### **The Experience of Drinking**

The response about the actual experience of drinking alcohol was very mixed across both young people and adults. There was a diversity of opinion from young people which appears to contradict the belief of many adults that all young people want to drink. Some young people expressed the view that drinking is fun whilst others coined it as 'boring'; some young people were strongly against it.

Some adults acknowledged that drinking is a positive social experience for young people as it is considered to unite friendships and you can have a “nice time”, whilst on the other hand it was considered to be a negative experience for young people, particularly when young people who drink come from families with drinking problems, or from parents who accept drinking as normal.

### Drinking for ‘Something to Do’

It is interesting that both adults and young people talked about drinking alcohol as a leisure activity for young people. The notion of drinking as a cheaper option compared to other activities was highlighted. Young people drinking was rationalised by adults as a consequence of there not being enough to do for young people in the geographical area:

*Non-Teaching Staff Member Louise: Do you not think a lot of young people go out and drink, hang around cause there’s nothing else for them to do? If there is...like they’ve got the cinema but not everybody can afford to go, so they buy cheap drink and share it among themselves.*

*Pupil Support Teacher Clare: There’s not a lot for young kids to do, eh, although the youth project starts tonight, tomorrow night, that is a youth club that is starting at the sports centre and that may help, but because there’s not a lot to do they go to drugs and drink.*

*School Pupil Murray: ‘Cause there’s nothing to do in this place, there is nothing really interestin’, it’s fun for them to do.*

*School Pupil Emma: Peer pressure, but like just ‘cause your pals are doing it you do it, and there’s nothing to do in the town.*

Adults often drink alcohol privately, behind closed doors at home. As young people do not own private spaces (their parents and guardians do) they have to resort to drinking in public spaces, as demonstrated in this study, e.g. in the park or in the woods.

Although it may be said that the woods were a private space for young people, it

appeared to be a negotiation of a public space which provides private space, away from the prying eyes of adults. However, the hidden space contributes to a further 'deviant' image of young people, causing adults to question 'why are they there? What are they up to? It must be wrong as they are obviously trying to hide something?' An adult drinking in private is accepted as normal, whilst for young people it is seen as deviant and a threat to society.

A possible explanation for young people choosing to drink is that they view it 'as fun.' They talked about both drinking yourself and watching others who drink as a fun experience:

*School Pupil Lauren: I think it is if you go, like there's like a line. I think it's fun because you know you're not allowed it's like, "oh this is like a thing I'm doin' wrong cause I'm not allowed to do it," it makes it so much more...*

*School Pupil Karen: Sometimes it's funnier without it cause then you can watch all the folk that are. If you don't and people are you're like "oh you're so..."*

School Pupil Lauren talked about being aware that drinking 'is wrong' therefore there was an admittance of the forbidden fruit syndrome, where she wanted to drink because she was not 'allowed to' legally and socially. Thus it appears that despite adults' attempts to discourage young people from drinking by enforcing the morality context, this was not successful with School Pupil Lauren and her friend.

Alcohol was also viewed as a mediator to unite friends together, according to the observations of the following Classroom Teacher:

*Classroom Teacher Lisa: ...it was a laugh but it unites you all together in a social group that you're all in on something a wee gang and that's a nice feeling as well...so that's the only reasons I could think of. Em, I can only presume it enhances their friendships.*

Classroom Teacher Lisa was using her own experiences to reflect on when she was younger and drinking alcohol. Her own experiences were used to understand young people's present experience of drinking, suggesting friendships are enhanced socially.

### **Battling Generational Alcoholism**

So far the above themes present mostly positive experiences of drinking. A negative experience of drinking was often constructed in the context of generational alcohol problems in families of young people. Some of the participants placed responsibility for young people's problem drinking in public space on what they perceived as poor parenting by 'others', which they were quick to stress was about particular families' practices and 'bad' choices, whilst other participants identified the negative force of being influenced by parents who drink excessively thereby 'normalising' the practice:

*Classroom Teacher Lisa: Yeah so I guess the kids that are more extreme in their drinking, it is because of a generational pass down then you have got your sensible kids and they've got good role models.*

*Classroom Teacher Michelle: I think it's individual because I think the influence that the pupils are for getting to drink underage now is the adults that have done it you know...I used to do this "oh my dad used to do that all this you know," and it seems to be accepted for these certain groups and families and that, they're the ones that drink at the weekend. I think that maybe an influence rather than ... but the choices they make are often influenced by parents.*

*Non-Teaching Staff Member Lynn: I think also if there's any alcoholism in the family the parents maybe have problems it can em...they just let their own child get on with it...*

*Non-Teaching Staff Member Katy: I actually had yin, this wee girl lying out in the street, and it was when there was a couple of days after they come back to school and I asked her if she was ok and her mum said "no I didn't even get into trouble my mum didn't even ground me," she was miraculous screamin' her head off, and I thought ok then.*

*School Pupil Edward: Usually the children that do drink are usually the ones that the parents don't care about them.*

Having parents and family members who are known to drink a lot of alcohol was considered as an explanation for young people's drinking behaviour. Having a family where alcoholism is prevalent or drinking heavily is accepted as normal was thought to put young people at higher risk of having drinking problems. As Non-Teaching Staff Member Katy discusses above, she encountered a school pupil who had possibly passed out from alcohol poisoning and considered this normal because her mother did not communicate otherwise. Therefore, it is perceived by both adults and young people that certain groups of young people are more at risk than others.

### **Drugs**

In Scotland, Barnard *et al.* (1996) found that 31% of a sample of 758 pupils had used illegal drugs, whilst for those aged 15–16 the figure was 57%. More recently, McKeganey & Norrie (1999) have reported that around one in ten 11–12 year olds in Scotland have experimented with illegal drugs. Despite these figures, the young people in this study expressed strong views against illicit drug use. The ways in which young people decide to not use drugs and the role that peers play in the decision-making process is not understood well, as research in this area is severely lacking (McIntosh *et al.* 2003). In this study the decision to not experiment with drugs was influenced by the negative image of those who do use drugs; young people often commented on the undesirable image of drug users and also the risk of being out of control.

Adults identified drug use as one of the main risks of harm to young people, yet the young people interviewed asserted that they would never try drugs and viewed those who did use drugs as highly stigmatised individuals in their community. People who

use drugs are considered as 'others' by young people. Young people's decision to not experiment with drugs was often reinforced by their disapproving social encounters with drug users.

According to the adults, young people's exposure to drugs was not uncommon in their community. Exposure to drugs was framed as a risk and those who offer drugs to young people were also considered as posing a risk of harm to young people:

*Classroom Teacher Lisa: Quite a lot of kids speak about exposure to drugs, and when they're hanging about with the older people, I think these pupils who are getting access to drugs it's definitely from the older generations*

*Pupil Support Teacher Clare: ...there has to be money about although I would say if they are involved in drugs, some of them, they get the drugs there has to be some money about.*

*Youth Team Volunteer Lorraine: I'd say drugs as well actually 'cause...you hear of like obviously like we know like it is a small place you know quite a lot of people. You hear the stories of young people like, doin' that and doin' this, it's just... and I think drugs are obviously really bad and so's drink, but I think that more young people drink than take drugs and I think that should be addressed a lot more than drugs.*

Adults' knowledge about the availability of drugs in their community was fuelled by media coverage of the prevalence of drugs. Adults commented on the labelling of their own community due to the accessibility of drugs to people:

*Non-Teaching Staff Member Jane: Yeah we do actually have quite a big drug problem and it's actually televised quite a few years ago, that this town was mentioned in a documentary and it opened quite a few people's eyes, mines included, how big a problem we had and you do come across it more and more like the more they deal with the kids.*

*Pupil Support Teacher David: I think it's more than when I was young anyway; drugs are more of an issue, weren't really an issue when I was young.*

*Pupil Support Teacher Moira: At one point it was known as drug central.*



Adults considered young people who were exposed to drug use through their own families to be more at risk of harm than those who were not exposed to drugs at home. Not only were young people considered to be at a risk of harm due to the availability of drugs at home, but also because of the risk of 'normalising' the use of illicit drugs:

Non-Teaching Staff Member Lynn: *I think if they see it in their own house that's when...and I think if they don't see it in their own house then... I think that we are all parents we all have our views but I think that's the way; if they see it if it's the norm in their own house then I don't think they see it as a problem at all, em but I think that people who are looking into that can appreciate it not's the behaviour.*

### **Stigmatisation of the 'yobs'**

It is not uncommon for drugs users to be highly feared, blamed and socially excluded. Young people who were open to disclosing their alcohol consumption also disclosed their aversion to 'others' who consumed drugs. The reproduction of the stigma by adults and young people towards drug users appeared to fuel fears around drugs as presenting a risk of harm to young people, yet more so, drug users were constructed by young people as risky. Taking drugs and the individual risks of harm to health were identified by both adults and young people. Adults did not discuss drug users as posing a risk of harm to the younger members of the community, whereas the School Pupils did. One response from an adult highlighted her positive reaction to hearing young people deciding to abstain from drugs, emphasising that outcomes are dependent on the choices that young people make:

Pupil Support Teacher Clare: *I spoke to a group of 3rd year boys last week. They were talking about drugs in Asda, and I was quite impressed with*

*some of the choices they were making 'cause some of them were saying that's a mug's game whereas the quiet ones, they'd obviously been influenced, and peer pressure no matter what you teach them, it's choice behaviour and some of it's not choice some of it is depression, really quite pronounced I think again the social networking makes the peer pressure even greater.*

In the above response it is clear that this adult was aware of the stigma young people place on 'others' who take drugs, labelling it as a 'mug's game.' The adults were confident that many young people were strongly against drug use as young people had distinguished people who take drugs as *different* and *deviant*.

Pupil Support Teacher Clare: *Some were really anti-drug. Drink is different but there's a lot they might be causing a bit of chaos, but they are right into their sport so they regard jakeys [tramps] as... and eh drug takers and drinkers they regard them as lower life, yeah, and we were talking about Halloween and a 5th year boy who was right into his football was saying we were taking eggs to go and throw at the druggies; it depends on their group.*

The above response provides an insight into the social exclusion of others who take drugs, to the extent that young people would take action in a display of public aggression against the 'druggies.' Such expressions reinforced the boundaries between 'us' and 'them', suggesting that drug users were considered as risky. The responses from the young people further reinforced the notion of stigmatising drug users, in which there were certain fears around being in the presence of others under the influence of drugs:

School Pupil Stewart: *It's the older folk, because a lot of the young ones hang about with the older ones like they kinda like boss them about and they can like drug the young ones up. It just causes trouble.*

School Pupil Lauren: *Yeah we were at like, a Halloween party and there was like, these yobs but these girls then I was in the toilet and she had like, this eccay in her hand and I was like Nuh! Nuh nuh nuh, like they were like, all over the bathroom floor this girls' Mum was goin' crazy because it was so scary it was horrible like, people you don't expect to like do it were like,*

*doin' it that night, just bein' idiots so we left then that made me scared cause I was thinkin' oh is she doin' that in my house.*

School Pupil Lauren: *You see the state some people get in.*

School Pupil Lauren's response suggests that the negative image of being under the influence of drugs was an incentive to not take them. According to the young people, drugs were constructed as posing a greater risk than alcohol:

School Pupil Lauren: *Just like, the things they get up to like we never take drugs or,*

School Pupil Karen: *It's just something that we're never ever, ever gonna do.*

School Pupil Karen: *I'm not sayin' you're in control with alcohol but you can like determine how much you're gonnae take.*

School Pupil Lauren: *I think I'm ok with like alcohol cause I'm not an idiot with it; I know when to stop*

School Pupil Karen: *I can have like, a drink and then that will be me I'm fine but-*

School Pupil Lauren: *But if you take a drug like, that's it.*

These responses show that School Pupils Lauren and Karen were extremely adamant that they would never take drugs. They considered activities engaged in by drug users to be highly deviant, activities that they themselves would not consider getting involved with. Drugs were viewed as more harmful than alcohol in terms of the lack of control. The responses from the young people showed that drugs were not only to be avoided but specifically the *people* that took drugs were to be avoided at all costs:

School Pupil Lauren: *She [Karen] doesn't want me near they people that were takin' drugs and that 'cause I told her all about that so she tell me what to do if they were tryin' to get back. She told me not to go out with that guy.*

In the above example, School Pupil Lauren had expressed romantic interest in a young man and was keen to pursue him, yet her friend had advised her to stay away from

him as he was known to be associated with drug users. School Pupil Lauren obviously viewed this as a small sacrifice to pay so as to stay in the 'safe' and 'known' group of people and avoid the 'unknown' group of people.

The young people demonstrated some knowledge or at least an awareness of the risk of addiction to drugs, using this to justify why drugs are worse than alcohol because they are considered to be more addictive:

School Pupil Jenny: *Like I know alcohol can kill you, I think drugs 'cause they kill you quicker than drink*

School Pupil Lauren: *And maybe if you take one once and you feel you wanna do it again cause of the adrenaline, one day you take one too many*

School Pupil Jenny: *My mum always says at first you get high at first but you want to get that again so they take more to try to get higher than before, but your never gonna get that same first...*

School Pupil Karen: *I don't really understand what it means to be high, but I don't even want to know cause it, just when you see like, people out in the streets and that, they go up to the woods and they come back with eyes like this big, so happy and you're like, it kinda makes you feel...*

School Pupil Jenny: *They're not actually happy they're like, got so much crap in them.*

School Pupil Molly: *It's like an adrenaline rush, it's not really like a fix.*

The young women here reflected on their observations of seeing others on drugs, asserting that the result did not appear pleasant by any means. When asked to consider if they found out one of their friends was using drugs, they had mixed responses:

I: How would you feel if you found out if one of your mates was taking drugs?

School Pupil Lauren: *Oh my God....*

School Pupil Karen: *I'd go mental at them.*

School Pupil Lauren: *If it was a girl I'd be worried but if it was like a boy I wouldn't be.*

School Pupil Jenny: *It depends who they were. If it was like one of my close friends I'd be like, "what do you think you are doing" but if it was someone like, some people are like, and they go and you hear so and so that doesn't surprise me.*

School Pupil Jenny: *Feel bad for stereotyping, but there are some people you just know that would do it and there are people who just wouldn't.*

The responses were gendered as they admitted they would be more concerned for a female than male friend using drugs, suggesting they perceive males as either obtaining a higher immunity to the effects of drugs or as more able to cope with the consequences compared with girls. The level of concern was associated with the level of friendship with a potential drug user; the School Pupils emphasising that if another young person was taking drugs whom they had 'expected' to, then they would not be concerned for their wellbeing. School Pupil Jenny went as far to say there are some people she 'knows' would take drugs, reinforcing the notion of stigma – that those who take drugs are 'unsafe, evil and dangerous.' Such people were also perceived as unable to 'be changed or helped':

School Pupil Jenny: *I think they can be helped but they probably wouldn't choose to. You could try to change some people*

School Pupil Karen: *There's no point in trying to change...unless it's someone you really care about, there's no point in trying to change someone unless they want to change themselves. At the end of the day, it is not your body and they can do what they want but it is (a) really stupid decision.*

## **Smoking**

In the context of drugs, young people claimed that smoking was also a risk of harm, specifically because of the health and addiction risks. Again the young people in the focus groups expressed strong views against smoking and those who are smokers:

School Pupil Jenny: *Some people think it's 'cause all their friends do it. Personally I just don't care, I wouldn't go near it. People just think they smoke cause their friends smoke.*

School Pupil Karen: *They feel they have to do it. They have to do it if they want to be accepted, but it shouldn't be like that if they are friends.*

So, young people who smoke are considered as weak because they smoke only if their friends smoke.

I: Why do you think smoking is a bad thing?

School Pupil Jenny: *It's bad for your health.*

School Pupil Zoe: *Once they start they get addicted or it's hard to stop.*

Smoking was viewed as a coping mechanism for young people who were stressed or struggling with an issue, yet such reasons were not acceptable to the young women:

School Pupil Lauren: *I think the stress as well, 'cause it keeps them busy.*

School Pupil Jenny: *If there's something wrong they don't know how to deal with it...personally it's not something I would go to. I've never been in that situation, I can't stand it.*

School Pupil Marissa: *I think there's other ways you can go about it rather than smoking and drinking, like you can talk to people.*

School Pupil Karen: *We have the decision to like, say smoking and alcohol, we can like, put that into ourselves that affects us.*

The young people expressed disbelief about others who *choose* to smoke or take drugs, saying such choices were stupid and they would *never* consider taking drugs. 'Others' who smoked and took drugs were considered as risks, as they were seen as

weaker individuals. Those who take drugs were viewed as a lower life, dangerous and people to be avoided at all costs. Peer pressure and emotional struggles were not considered as reasons to justify the choice to smoke or take drugs. Interestingly some of the young women who expressed such strong opinions against drug use had also disclosed their alcohol consumption, reflecting the widespread social acceptance of alcohol. Misuse of drugs and alcohol often provoke a spectrum of views and beliefs.

### **Summary**

This chapter has presented findings related to what young people and adults perceive to be the main risks of harm to young people in their community. All young people in the study identified alcohol consumption as the main risk of harm. Furthermore, alcohol was more often talked about as the driver for other social risks. In contrast, adults were more likely to talk about the individual health risks associated with alcohol consumption among young people. Adults did not talk about drunken people (young and adult) presenting a risk of harm to young people, whereas young people commonly highlighted other drunken people as a risk of harm. Moreover, the young people in this study expressed strong views against illicit drug use. Adults identified drug use as one of the main risks of harm to young people, yet the young people interviewed, asserted that they would never try drugs and viewed those who did use drugs as highly stigmatised individuals within their community.

Disparities in adults' and young people's views suggest differences in socially constructed norms relating to youth and adulthood which is explored further in the discussion chapter. This chapter has also presented findings relating to whether perceptions of risk are informed by gender; notions of control and the implication of

loss of control were implicitly gendered. For young men, the negative implication of losing control was the perceived prospect of physical violence. For young women loss of control is perceived often to result in unwanted sex or sexual assault. Other risks as identified by young people and adults are discussed in the next chapter.



## Chapter Five

### Unknown People and Places as Risky: Maintaining Bonding Social Capital

Drawing upon focus group and interview data, this chapter presents the responses provided by all participants. The chapter covers a number of sections which address the first research question: What are young people's and adults' perceptions of the main risks? These sections include risks posed by public spaces: unpredictability; risky adults such as the police and sex offenders, darkness and 'other' young people. Also included in this chapter is the perceived risk of bonding social capital as identified by the adults in this study.

#### **Unpredictability: "You could end up anywhere with anybody"**

A running theme related to why public places were identified as a main risk of harm was the *unpredictable nature* of such environments, due to various factors including the weather, the daylight hours, the physical state and structure of different areas and of course not being able to predict *who* will come across your path. This theme emerged from both adults' and young people's responses. Public space can present the illusion of increased *choice* for young people (Robinson, 2000), yet the respondents perceived increased 'choice' as increased risk. The adults talked often about the perceived risk that 'anything' could happen:

Non-Teaching Staff Member Jane: *At the weekend it would be, you hear them all see at this time of the year and it's mucky. As well as the drink side I'd be like why are you hanging about in the wood? It's easy for someone to get lost.*

Pupil Support Teacher Clare: *'Em if I give you an example at the moment they are right into dark nights and they are jumping gardens so they jump into one, jump over another and at one point a boy jumped over a wall and fell down 20 feet. Now they just laughed and he had to get up himself so you know, what happens if you're not aware of what's next so again it depends on the group.*

School Pupil Stewart: *When you dae go you've got to watch your back; it's like anything can really happen.*

School Pupil Karen: *You could end up anywhere with anybody, how paranoid do I get when I'm walking? I worry so much; I think there's something wrong with me. I think everything's a risk, I don't know.*

The risk of being outside was viewed as significant due to the perceived increased difficulty to discern whether one was at danger or not and possibly not having access to resources to overcome such risks. Both adults and young people constructed public places as dangerous because of the 'lack of control' and seemingly chaotic nature of social interaction, a lack of control of what happens and a lack of control of who is involved. The adults in the above responses highlighted that public spaces are risky for young people as young people could 'easily get lost' or are not aware of geographical layouts and will consequently get hurt. It is more likely that young people know such areas better than adults do, as young people spend long periods of time in public spaces with friends and also information about where to go/who to avoid is constantly shared among young people's networks.

Young people expressed the concern that *anything* could happen to them, making them feel extremely vulnerable to predators. They considered themselves as obvious targets to any source of deviance in public space, provoking anxiety and extra vigilance when being outside. It is possible that young people's private lives are so highly controlled that any other form of existence is perceived as dangerous by them. The

responses suggest that young people view themselves as potential victims when operating in public spaces rather than citizens who have a right to interact in the public sphere safely.

The interviewees' construction of risky places was also informed by their local knowledge of the area and of a collection of known or experienced incidents:

School Pupil Murray: *There's good places and bad places.*

School Pupil Edward: *But there's certain areas that are more dangerous than others, the people makes it more dangerous, they're eh, just don't know actually....drinking, smoking, maybe drinking. It does actually have quite a bad name, not actually that bad anymore, it's had a bad name from the past.*

Youth Worker: *There are areas that maybe people would say oh I wouldnae walk through there, but that's maybe just a perception that people go "Oh that area I don't know."*

The young people were more likely to identify incidents that had either happened to them or they had heard about than the adults. The above responses suggests that public places are constructed as either 'good' or 'bad'; 'safe' or 'dangerous'; 'unrestricted access' or 'restricted access.' Young people's movement in public places were thus presented as existing within either of these extreme social constructions. Responses did not ever situate on a spectrum of 'safe' and 'unsafe', they were either one or the other. Such opposing dualisms reflect the highly contradictory nature of how young people's existence in public space is perceived, by both young people and adults. Such perceptions are in keeping with the contradictory socialisation of young people themselves: innocent or guilty, saint like or evil. Young people's reflections on where to hang out with friends and where to avoid were very much calculated around the discourse about spaces as either safe or dangerous, never in between. Thus young people are led to expect that their time spent in the public sphere is either going to be

safe and 'boring'; 'predictable'; 'controllable' or dangerous and 'fun'; 'scary'; 'risky' and 'uncontrollable.'

Local gossip, media coverage of 'extreme' incidents and personal experiences further fuelled the discourse on what public spaces have to offer young people. In the following responses, the incidents discussed appeared to have fuelled their perceptions of what it is like to be outside at night and what can happen. The young people talked as though these incidents had a significant impact on their perceptions of risk, the public domain and the fear of the unknown. The powerlessness of being put in a situation where access to help was not immediate appeared to be at the core of these perceptions.

*School Pupil Craig: I don't go out at night time, it's scary. It's well, it's like three people that got stabbed in one week or something, there's quite a lot of dodgy places.*

*School Pupil Molly: The park, that's probably one of the most roughest places you can put...what would put me off going to something like that is because the reputation of being quite rough so I would think if I went it (would) be rough people that would be there.*

*School Pupil Murray: Sort of just stories, yeah I don't go out at night, I see it in the papers like a murder or a theft.*

*School Pupil Karen: It's really bad you could end up...someone got really bad and was lyin' in somebody's garden and they left her there! They just left her there!*

*School Pupil Lauren: it was for hours they lost her.*

Hearing about such incidents which happened not only in their community but to young people as opposed to adults appeared to fuel young people's anxieties about public spaces. School Pupil Molly highlighted that rough places equated with 'rough people' where again the unpredictable nature was projected onto people as well as places. 'Dodgy places' were equated with deviant people – people who were not

expected to follow the 'normal' pattern of social rules. From the responses, young people talked about public spaces as environments which lacked means of excluding 'deviant' people and behaviours – as young people would experience in a School; public spaces appeared to lack means of controlling who could occupy such spaces with the exception of police control. It seemed that school and home life presented an environment which is predictable, ordered, controlled with limited autonomy and power for young people. In contrast, the public spaces represented the opposite: unpredictable, chaotic, unrestrained with the apparent freedom of choice and increased power as to what they could do and with whom.

In summary, in young people's views public spaces represented an environment to be avoided as they were associated with dangerous incidents caused by dangerous people. In other ways, young people and adults identified public spaces which were understood as fun and free from adult control. The relationship between young people and public spaces is ambiguous in this sense. In the context of identifying risks of harm, young people and adults said that public spaces were associated with irregularity and unpredictability. Irregularity in the people who were seen to occupy public spaces was associated with increased risk of harm. Different 'types' of people occupying public spaces represented different types of risk, in the views of young people and adults. It could be suggested that due to the 'normality' of organised routine and means of excluding and including people through surveillance and security measures in dominant areas of young people's lives e.g. School and home, the appearance of no control over who enters into and out of public spaces has caused significant fear and perceived risk in the views of adults and young people.

### **Adults are a risk in public places**

The young people talked about public places posing a risk of harm because of the adults who occupy them, including the police; dangerous people and sex offenders.

Adults did not specifically identify the police as a source of risk to young people. Adults tended to talk about unknown people or strangers as presenting a risk of harm to young people.

### **The Police**

The police were viewed as posing a risk of harm to young people because they represented an authoritative power who could control where young people 'should' and 'should not be' and what they 'should' and 'should not' be doing. The police were viewed as having more power than most adults to disrupt their outdoor time and to restrict their freedoms, with the additional risk of criminalising young people's behaviours. According to the young people, the police had the risk of unpredictability and were also viewed as operating in a highly inconsistent manner.

School Pupil Connor: *Maybe like, some folk go out at the weekend get drunk and that, it is quite stupid cause the police are always goin' there.*

School Pupil David: *The police go the park.*

School Pupil Connor: *And the police could go to the park, they go about 6 o'clock or sumthin', the police dinnae lift a lot of them it's mostly the older yins they lift.*

School Pupil David: *Basically they go to the [place name] it's a park there's no really much lights. It's really dark so unless the police have got lights they can't really see you.*

School Pupil Lauren: *Our friend got lifted by one of the police one night...I was away with my other friend. Two of my other friends were here and she got lifted by the police, I got a phone call from her and she was drunk I was drunk and they'd been lifted and I was like there's nuthin' I can do.*

Interviewer: What's the worst thing about getting picked up by the police?

School Pupil Karen: *Embarrassment.*

School Pupil Lauren: *Embarrassment.*

School Pupil Karen: *Well I've never actually been lifted by the police you know.*

Young people identified the police as a risk as they were viewed as individuals with power whom could not be resisted easily or at all. School Pupils Lauren and Karen suggested that the police present a risk of social stigmatisation, saying the worst thing about getting picked up by the police was the risk of embarrassment. Young people viewed the police as facilitators of reinforcing acceptable and 'normal' social norms associated with public spaces, reinforcing that it is not acceptable for young people to explore such spaces, sending the message to young people that they are not welcomed and will not be able to socialise in the public without some resistance from adults.

The Youth Team Volunteers claimed the police would not go into the woods for *their* safety; in this case the police were viewed as the most vulnerable people:

Youth Team Volunteer Emma: *The police don't go into the woods, they turn their lights off and they drive in. They only go on the roads, they don't go in the woods and there's wee grass pitches with all wee names and they all go and sit in there 'cause they know the police aren't gonna get them.*

Youth Team Volunteer Emma: *Yeah but they don't go in the woods, I think it's for their safety as well, it's like pitch black and stuff.*

Youth Team Volunteer Lorraine: *They don't go as far in, but aye.*

This was a useful example to demonstrate how powerful the socialisation of space is, where invisible but socially constructed boundaries exist in the public sphere to maintain the division between adults and young people, between 'us' and 'them.'

There was a great conflict amongst the young people about how to view and socially relate to the police. There was conflict over whether the police were there to criminalise, control, embarrass, restrict or protect them. In the context of being protected by the police, the School Pupils expressed very little faith both in the police's desire to protect young people but also their ability to protect young people in the public domain; as the following response show:

School Pupil Edward: *The police isn't so good here, like, because I think the most I've ever seen is a policeman on a bike. Just would like to see more of them.*

School Pupil Craig: *There's a bit up my street but a neighbour lived across. There was some gangs walking up with some golf clubs they were shoutin' and then two police cars, one police van and sort of police hatch van turned up and I was like "what are they doin?"*

School Pupil Edward: *When you need more, you get one on a bike, when it's like a person shoutin' you've got about two vans.*

School Pupil Cameron: *When you look at policeman from America they've got like guns and you look at the British police and it's like ...*

School Pupil Craig: *They've got batons.*

School Pupil Murray: *I don't think the police would do anything to help you they can't be there at that point, if you're going out yourself your parents can't be there.*

School Pupil Edward touched upon his disappointment in the police failing to be visible when it was thought they were needed the most, needed to protect young people and omit any danger or risk present. The conflict over how to view the police appeared to be a running theme with most young people. It is not uncommon for the police to be presented as trustworthy individuals who will be there to protect civilians from harm; yet young people's views suggest the police's actions and inactions contribute to the belief that young people are guilty until proven innocent. The young people's comments suggested that their encounters with the police were driven by suspicion



over young people's motives for being outside at night; they felt as if they were being perceived as criminals or deviants by the police.

In young people's views, when the police were not picking up young people who were drinking, they were behaving in other ways which suggested the public domain is perceived as an *adult* domain. It is one in which the young people are the foreigners, the outsiders and adults are the insiders who are 'meant to be there' whilst young people have been made to feel they were not meant to be there. This was highlighted by School Pupil Connor:

*School Pupil Connor: And because folk are drinkin' they get lifted at the weekend, the Police stop us and say "Where are you's goin'? What you doin' tonight?" And we don't wanna get stopped cause we're not doin' anything wrong.*

Mistrust of these adults came across often when talking in the interviews and focus groups. In relation to mistrust, there was one particular deviant adult highlighted by the young people, where risk of harm was a perceived threat to their everyday lives.

#### Sex Offenders and Risky Adults

With news headlines constantly projecting stories of paedophiles and the abuse of young people, it is no surprise that the young people in this study touched upon the risk of sex offenders in their community. There was a known sex offender in the close vicinity of their own geographical area, with one young man revealing he had lived on the same street:

*School Pupil Edward: I don't walk that much anymore because of a recent person let out of jail, his first house was actually about 10 houses away*

*from mine, that was a bit worrying. Yeah so my mum gives me lifts if I'm goin' anywhere.*

School Pupil Cameron: *Like he said there's that man here he's just been released from prison.*

School Pupil Edward: *Yeah there's stories but apparently he's been in our school.*

School Pupil Craig: *He's been walking around it.*

School Pupil Edward: *Yeah, he's been released from prison he's on the sex offenders list. Everyone's aware of it.*

School Pupil Murray: *Everyone in Scotland, it's not just here, he's been in other areas, it makes us feel very uncomfortable.*

School Pupil Cameron highlighted the vulnerability that young people face, that it was a possibility a young person could have been talking to a sex offender without knowing and this seemed to transfer the perceived risk to an actual risk of harm. Other young people also touched on the fearful reality of coming into contact with this man:

School Pupil Cameron: *It's good that you know what he looks like cause you could then be talking to him without even knowin'.*

School Pupil Karen: *The guy that got out from jail, he was a guy that got released.*

School Pupil Lauren: *That's another reason why I won't walk out on my own.*

School Pupil Karen: *He was at the school.*

School Pupil Lauren: *The newspaper and Facebook, there's a lot of things on Facebook. He got out a couple of weeks ago they wouldn't talk about it directly. You'd at least know probably never ever approach us but even if, what the truth is rather than stories.*

Highlighting the possibility of a sex offender added to the construction of the public domain as an adult domain, one in which dangerous adults are permitted to exist and young people less so, therefore despite being in an adult domain, the presence of a sex offender was described by the young people as presenting a significant risk of harm to them.

Other incidents were shared about unknown adults presenting a risk to young people whilst walking outside.

*School Pupil Connor: I remember one time I was out with my friends in that, in the town. Someone jumped out of a window, it wasn't any of us and this guy came out to chase us in the street and he jumped one of them and attacked them and a friend came and dragged him off. The guy left but that was quite scary.*

This incident is a further example of the unpredictable nature of the public environment for young people, where young people appear to present an easy target to predatory adults. This is a difficult place to be as young people can often be assumed to be the perpetrators rather than the victims of such attacks.

A running theme in the context of adults in public spaces is that of surveillance. Young people highlighted they were under a great deal of surveillance by the police, in which young people were being watched under the perceived context that the police were waiting to criminalise them for the sake of protecting adults in the community and maintaining the public domain as an adult's territory. Whilst on the other hand, the young people also expressed an awareness of being under the risky surveillance of a predatory sex offender in which they were the victim. Thus it appears that young people, with or without knowing it, are subjected to the dualism of being framed as the hunter or the hunted, the evil outsider or the innocent victim, from an early stage of their experience of the public sphere. Such concepts were utilised by many adults within the study, the views presented constructed young people as either victims or trouble-makers. Thus different adults with different images and risks presented one of the reasons for young people viewing public places to be one of the main risks of harm.

### **Are you afraid of the Dark?**

Both adults and young people conceptualised public space as risky often because it is dark outside at night, when young people are most likely to have 'free time' to do as they please. It is worth noting here that the data was collected in the autumn and winter months when daylight hours are fast decreasing. It is safe to suggest, then, that dark nights were an issue at the forefront of their minds as it was another factor to consider in young people's decision-making about whether to go outside or not.

Darkness was highlighted by the young men as it presented an environmental barrier to their option of playing football outside in the evenings:

*School Pupil Connor: Yeah, we usually go to the astro sometimes but the only thing is, it's got dark and the lights don't get turned on unless there's team training. It's just out there in the school, we'd play football.*

The young men expressed a great deal of frustration over the lack of provision for lights to be turned on at night for them to see the pitch for playing football. In this case darkness presented the risk of not being able to play their favourite sport, exercise and socialise with friends. This example highlights that despite the illusion of freedom and choice, young people's use of public space is still controlled by adults.

Other public spaces were identified to have little or no lighting:

*School Pupil David: Basically they go to the [place name]. It's a park, there's no really much lights, it's really dark so unless the police have got lights they can't really see you.*

Interestingly in this case, the limited lighting was an advantage as it provided further privacy for young people. These two examples demonstrate the paradoxical nature of how different public spaces are perceived and how young people's needs are different for each space, depending on how they intend to utilise such spaces. The young men

explained that they prefer to stay indoors when it is dark, as this was seen as effective risk avoidance and a means to ensure safety.

School Pupil Cameron: *Well I don't mind goin' out in the day time but at night I'd rather stay in. Even my sister who's just 19, my mum and dad always tell her to be careful when she's goin' out as well.*

School Pupil Edward: *I don't think I'll change that much I mean I just sort of decide. I mean my mum and dad obviously don't like me goin' out at night but they allow me to, but not for too long, especially now that it's getting darker. I don't really go out when it's this cold, it's boring.*

School Pupil Murray: *Nope, depends if it's serious. A couple of weeks ago I gave my friend a lift home 'cause it was getting really dark so me and my dad gave him a lift home.*

School Pupil Edward highlighted that his parents are more restricting of their allowance of how long he spends in the dark, hence it could be suggested that the young people's fears of the dark in public space was fuelled by their parents' fears. The perceived risk of the dark also caused School Pupil Murray to intervene in his friends' safety by ensuring he was escorted home by a trusted adult rather than making his own way home.

### **Other Young People are a Risk in Public Spaces**

Just as with adults, the young people's responses shows that public space acts as a mediator for significant social encounters which are often unwanted ones. The young people highlighted that 'other' or deviant young people presented a risk of harm. Other young people were considered to be unknown, who were not considered as 'friends' and whom they would not otherwise choose to spend time with. Such people were almost always expected to be engaging in 'wrong' activities or behaviours. It seems that just as adults express multiple representations of 'youth' so do young people – as contradicting representations of what it means to be a young person co-

existed, young people were either friends or 'others.' Responses included strong views and negative opinions about such deviants that they were almost not even considered as young people but as others. Whilst it could be said that adults often move into public spaces to meet new people which is accepted as reflecting a good social life; young people occupy public spaces to meet known people and friends and avoid new people, as nearly all new people are expected to be dangerous.

The main group of people who were feared by the young people were those who they did not know in a socially intimate way, particularly those from neighbouring communities:

School Pupil Stewart: *And you're at a park with a bunch of folks so you cannae trust all of them.*

School Pupil Murray: *Well like the people.*

School Pupil Cameron: *People goin' out.*

School Pupil Lauren: *There is people like, places attract people, neds. There used to be a thing with the park, this is like ages ago, we used to go to this, it just used to be a wee group of us. I talk to like, we talk to a lot of people. They would ask us where we're goin' tonight by these neds, then they'd turn up then their friends would turn up. It just turned into a big riot.*

School Pupil Karen: *If other people know people from like (neighbouring town) then you'd come down then there's a fight.*

Other young people were considered as posing a risk of harm as there was fear of unknown and different identities of others; it could be suggested that other young people represented unknown motives; values; beliefs and behaviours. From previous interactions with 'other young people,' the views presented suggested that other young people represented a threat to their established social rules, identities, a threat of manipulating and changing their chosen public spaces. Other young people also

provoked fear of contrasting social power and authority which may manifest in violence or aggression.

Young people in large groups or 'gangs' were highlighted as posing a constant risk of harm in public spaces.

School Pupil Stewart: *Folk that were drinking would take it to the games centre so folk at the games centre knew if they were drunk but (you) cannae really dae anything cause there's hunners of them.*

School Pupil Edward: *Gangs...*

School Pupil Murray: *Yeah, but this was a long time ago. When I first moved, when I was about 4 and I'm 13 now so, 9 or 10 years ago. I don't know what they were...*

School Pupil Cameron: *Were they violent or?*

School Pupil Murray: *I don't know, I just know they were there.*

School Pupil Edward: *Like thugs.*

School Pupil Cameron: *I'm not sure they were bad enough to like kill people but...*

School Pupil Murray: *Yeah they weren't like New York gangs. They were just like groups causing trouble, like teenagers.*

The above responses highlight that other young people were considered as a risk because of their deviant risk-taking activities including drunkenness and violent behaviour. The literature suggests that young people inhabiting public spaces were socially demonized by adults, young people who also take part in 'adult' activities such as drinking or smoking may be considered as 'doubly deviant.' What was interesting was that most of the adults in this study discussed all young people as vulnerable to risk of harm from individual behaviours such as getting lost or getting drunk, whilst young people specifically discussed 'other' young people as presenting a threat to

their safety. The adults described all young people in the same terms whereas the young people were making distinctions between them and others.

Young people who were known to be motivated to cause actual harm and threats to them were viewed as a risk to avoid in public spaces:

School Pupil Stewart: *I remember I was at the park and folk were drinkin' and it turned out to be a fight. One of my pals was in so I had to jump in and get him oot it which was kind of a risk cause it could end up turning into me.*

School Pupil Connor: *You get some folk that like to give abuse to folk and it's just like pointless but they might turn round and hit em even if they're...*

School Pupil David: *Usually you end up getting hit cause they're tryin' to get a chase.*

School Pupil Karen: *Well at the start we wanted to, then we got lots of hassle from these folk and when we did go it was like crap. I remember you were like "lets go" and I was like "no my mum says I'm not allowed to go." We're like prone to get hassle, it's my parents' decision.*

Finally, young people who were older than them were considered to be a risk of harm:

School Pupil Stewart: *It's the older folk, because a lot of the young ones hang about with the older ones, like they kinda like boss them about and they can like, drug the young ones up. It just causes trouble.*

Youth Team Volunteer Emma: *When I was younger...I'm trying to think...I didn't like the older people when I was younger in the park. If you saw them you used to walk away cause they were so intimidating cause, I don't know.*

Youth Team Volunteer Lorraine: *They were older, they were in massive groups but you've matured and realised why should I be scared of them, 'cause we're older. We see some of the young people when they're out and you talk to them. I think like, we've spoke to them so we know them now, we didn't know them before.*

Older youngsters were viewed as having more authority and were using their social power and status to control and possibly harm the younger ones; where they were seen to 'drug the young ones up'. Interestingly the young people did not talk about any examples of resisting the social power of older ones, suggesting in younger people



are perceived as passive victims who are not socially equipped to challenge the older individuals.

Again, it is more likely that the perceived risk was higher than the actual risk as it has been noted elsewhere that perceptions of young people in groups can be misleading and wrong. As with adults, the presence of different identities can often cause fear of the unknown and conclusions are made about the 'danger' of the 'other.' It is worth noting that adults did not highlight other young people as posing a risk of harm.

Both young men and women spoke about avoiding public spaces as they did not want to meet certain groups of young people there. This showed that young people's use of public space is further reduced by the presence of 'others' or deviants who are considered to present a real risk of harm. Contrary to other studies, in this case young people did not desire to be seen by others in the public domain; rather they wanted to socially engage with their friends in public, but preferably in a private manner. Public places therefore present dilemmas for young people in terms of making decisions about negotiating risks and places.

### **Bonding Social Capital and Bridging Social Capital**

The adults in the study said the perceived lack of social mobility of young people in the community was a risk. The adults commented on the close ties existing within the community and how this was likely to present a barrier to young people wanting to live and work elsewhere after school. The nature of the social networks was described by all adults as close:

*Classroom Teacher Michelle: I think this is the closest community I've ever known, the way it pulls together, but it's also because the kids all know*

*each other at school; it's not separate groups, they all know kind of families as well.*

It could be said that the social networks within the community have high levels of bonding social capital in which relationships are primarily inward-looking; focusing on maintaining horizontal ties within community boundaries. The bonding networks however were perceived as detrimental to bridging capital – to develop outward-looking relationships which help people to 'get by' economically and socially. The perceived tight-knit community was discussed as a possible reason as to why young people did not appear to visit other towns or cities:

*Classroom Teacher Robert: I'm surprised at how few folk have been to the nearest cities. I just think they see it as it is, it's where they grow up, get married, where they die.*

*Classroom Teacher Michelle: I think, I don't know if it is a risk but what I see is some of them, they don't really see life outside of this community. Some of the girls, their ambition is to have a daughter who will be queen on gala day, but this is actually what some of them live for, so I don't know if you can put that as a risk. I think it's something that affects them. I think we work very hard to try and get them even to a frame of mind where they've got the same opportunities as everybody else. I think some of them, it's getting them to realise there is a big world there. Some of them will not accept that there's life outside [place name], you know there's that oh no, and it's quite clear that from a very, very young age these kids have been told you just want to grow up get a house and be gala queen, and that's what they aspire to it's difficult to change that.*

*Classroom Teacher Lynn: They love children; they love babies, which is a credit to them. They want, they have a caring nature, and perhaps some alarm bells do ring, or that's maybe selfish. I agree with you but they're happy as well, perhaps to the outside, maybe they can't understand that, maybe it's a lack of appreciation, respect.*

Adults' perceptions of young people's future aspirations suggested adults view bonding social capital as integral to young people's identity formation and, in turn, potentially risky to their economic and social opportunities. Classroom Teacher Michelle's response about 'getting them to realise there is a big world out there'

suggests that young people's network closure can be explained by their lack of awareness of what life is like outside of their community. The adults perceived the community as 'being stuck' in time, as not moving on with modernity:

*Classroom Teacher Robert: I think, eh, other communities outwith should look at here as a town, as a community that is slightly different, because as I said I don't know what it was like 50 years ago but I think it's still in a time warp.*

*Pupil Support Teacher Moira: It takes the kids in [place name] a while to accept somebody and trust them, but once they do they would stand and fight their corner very, very hard and I think that's a typical [place name] thing. It can take a long time to feel a part of the community I suppose. It is and it always has been a very close-knit community. It's on its own, it's a close-knit small community that (is) maybe twenty years behind in many ways but obviously has a huge number of issues. At one point it was known as drug central. But it is a close knit community and the community support each other and the kids take a while to get into the community, in the school community, but then they will fight their corner for you.*

The above responses demonstrate the perceptions of risk in relation to the impact of the close-knit community remaining self-serving almost and unwilling to change. The inward-looking networks according to the adults were closely connected to the preserving of the community characteristics, identity and socio-economic status. Such patterns were constructed as a hindrance to providing young people with opportunities to engage in heterogeneous bridging relationships, as opposed to homogenous bonding relationships. Classroom Teacher Moira identified the socially exclusive nature of the community and young people's experience of accepting new members. As bonding networks were strong; bridging networks were perceived as unwelcome and threatening to community solidarity.

The Youth Worker commented on the perceived division and tensions between established members of the community and newcomers:

Youth Worker: *I think there's big diversions now. I think it used to be tight-knit but with all the new houses on the peripheral it's em, more commuters so you find people commute and are never really coming into the town at all. That's probably on all the outskirts then you find maybe em, like one of the areas is in the bottom fifteen per cent but they really there are areas where they'll hate each other, but there are areas where they all get together. You think "Gosh that's brilliant, that is real community where they are all helping each other!" Supporting each other, babysitting each other's children so there are areas of em, real community spirit. You'll find round the gala day there's a huge - although people say it is a community spirit, although I'm not entirely sure it is. I think because it's tradition that the town people em, like it to be but I think incomers they em, the more town people judge the em, incomers if you know what I mean. Em, on the standard 'cause they've obviously, some of them have got more money than others so there's a whole judgement thing and that's no very good, but that's probably the best a family could ever have done.*

The perceived animosity towards individuals, who are perceived to be more privileged than the dominant socioeconomic status of the community, is an example of high levels of bonding capital restricting the development of bridging capital. Commuters are almost perceived as having a foreign identity, one which threatens the social cohesion of the community. 'Newcomers' are perceived as not engaging with strong symbolic rituals such as the gala day, which in turn reinforces the notion of 'us' and 'them'; possibly impacting upon young people's perceptions towards 'outsiders.'

In response to recognising the perceived risk of young people not accessing bridging capital, teacher's efforts to reduce this risk was highlighted:

Classroom Teacher Michelle: *They lack confidence in themselves. If they can't see anybody in the family that's ever gone to University, a lot of the kids, when you start to talk to them about University it's like the first time they've ever heard that word whereas some other areas you go into some schools and the kids actually think you have to go to school 'til your 21/22. It's almost as if you're opening up doors for them and you try to shove them through but you can't make them go, you know?*

The above quote details the concern the teacher had for young people's apprehension almost of going to higher and further education. Young people's perceived lack of

accessing capital by bridging relationships with 'the outside world' was constructed as a risk. The culture of the community was constructed by the teacher as one which rejects access to network resources outside of the young person's normal circles.

### **Summary**

Adults and young people in this study identified public spaces as posing significant risks of harm to young people in their community. Both young people and adults held perceptions about 'stranger-danger' posing a real threat to young people's safety. Additionally fearful perceptions held by young people were further heightened by local gossip and media coverage (local and national) about dangerous incidents happening to young people. Young people in the study also identified 'other' young people as presenting a perceived risk of harm whilst adults did not identify this perceived risk. In the views of young people, public spaces presented environments in which territories needed to be negotiated with older individuals. Encounters with the police led to further social interactions associated with the general dissuasion of young people occupying public spaces undisturbed and unquestioned. The minority of adults in the study discussed public spaces as presenting a positive opportunity for young people to explore and have fun in an environment which lacked adult supervision, whilst other adults questioned young people's choices about spending time in public spaces with suspicion and doubt. The findings indicate that it was accepted as normal for young people to predominately occupy private spaces and adults to occupy public spaces. Further implications of the findings are explored in the discussion chapter. The remaining findings chapters focus on perceptions towards reducing risks to young people.

## Chapter Six

### Adults Protecting Young People – Negotiating Personal and Professional Identities

This chapter presents the findings relating to the research question: from adults' and young people's perspectives, what role does social capital play in reducing perceived risks of harm to young people? The sections relating to this include: the family; surveillance by school staff; relationships between school staff and pupils particularly tensions between professional and personal boundaries and the perceived network of resources in the community for supporting young people.

The analysis revealed that all responses expressed *various* perceptions about whose role it is to protect young people from harm. The interviewees were asked to identify who they believe to be responsible, who do they believe to have the most influence and access to resources to be able to significantly reduce these risks to young people. As the different types of 'harm' were located in different social realms (public spaces and private spaces e.g. at home) responses identified different sources of protection. Interestingly the state was not identified as a source of protection; the police and government-funded campaigns were not identified as resources.

#### The Family

The majority of the respondents expressed the view that the parents and other family members of a young person should be primarily responsible for young people and therefore *should* be a protective factor in reducing the risk of harm to young people. Parents of young people specifically were highlighted as a protective factor because they were perceived to be able to enforce control over young people's behaviours.

Parents were also considered as a protective factor because they were anticipated to implement consequences when young people 'broke the rules' or engaged in risky behaviours or activities. However the responses from both young people and adults highlighted the complexity of parental roles in young people's lives, as it was recognised that whilst parents usually enhance the safety and welfare of their children, they can also present a risk of harm to their children. Thus the fact that the known adults in young people's lives can be both protective and harmful presented a difficulty in conceptualising the role of the family in young people's lives.

It was clear that both adults and young people construct the home to be the primary space for young people's boundaries being set; boundaries regarding what young people are 'allowed' and 'not allowed' to do. In order for parents and family members to be considered as protective, such boundaries had to be set and be consistently enforced according to the views of adults and young people.

### **Parents' Primary Responsibility and Control**

It was highlighted in the focus groups and interviews that there was a hierarchy of *responsibility* for young people, with parents at the top:

Classroom Teacher Lisa: *Like everybody has a responsibility but I guess the buck drops with who their house leader is em, their parents are more responsible than teachers, definitely.*

Non-Teaching Staff Member Louise: *Family members of school, if the parents (are) not there then the next step (is) grandparents or (the) school.*

School Pupil Connor: *Themselves, and their Mum and Dad have got to tell them.*

Pupil Support Teacher David: *The parents.*

Pupil Support Teacher Moira: *The parents.*

The dominant perception was that parents are responsible for young people's welfare and safety. However, parents were typically only viewed as a protective factor if consistent means of control were put in place for young people, including setting a 'good example' and ensuring there would be consequences/punishment for not obeying rules set at home:

Non-Teaching Staff Member Louise: *I think boundaries should be set at home, you set a boundary for your child, you could say "I'm going out," you are under a 10 o'clock curfew, you don't know that, but they have come in when you've told them.*

Non-Teaching Staff Member Lynn: *Boundaries should be set...if you set boundaries in the house, you know if they are not set or if they set boundaries and you take two steps back and nothing happens and there's no consequences.*

School Pupil Karen: *We have the decision to like, say smoking and alcohol, we can like put that into ourselves. That affects us but our parents have the responsibility to feed us and clothe us, make sure we're happy but if they didn't... I think they don't really have the control, full control cause it's our - it's what we want to do.*

School Pupil Jenny: *I think you have control of yourself, but your parents have a big part in it...like it depends how strict your parents are or if they don't care.*

There was a general recognition across both young people and adults that there is an issue of power and resistance – it is the expectation for parents to have power over their child's life in relation to meeting certain needs, yet such power can be resisted as School Pupil Karen highlighted; parents do not have 'full control.' In other words, young people may attempt to assert their own autonomy in decision-making about how their 'free time' is spent and for how long. As it is socially accepted for young people to have little power over how their time is organised, young people who resist such power are constructed as rebellious and risky.



Non-Teaching Staff Member Lynn highlighted that boundaries are ineffective if parents do not instil consequences when boundaries have been broken. The School Pupils' responses suggested that boundaries set by parents may be different from those set by themselves and their friends, and when they were different, young people were more likely to conform to the boundaries set by their friends than their parents. In such cases the parents were perceived as 'bad parents' as they did not desire to assert control over their children's time and whereabouts.

Interestingly, in cases where boundaries had been broken, the young people admitted to making a conscious effort to prevent their parents finding out:

School Pupil Lauren: *She doesn't want me, obviously like, what Mum would want you to go out but as long as I don't get caught then what she doesn't know.*

School Pupil Karen: *Yeah it's like, what she doesn't know can't hurt her.*

School Pupil Lauren: *I'd be totally ashamed if I got lifted by the police, like my Dad, I'd hate that to happen my Dad would just.*

School Pupil Karen: *I'd feel sorry for my Mum 'cause I know she'd be sooo disappointed in me, and it's like.*

School Pupil Lauren: *Yeah my Mum would be so mad if I got lifted by the police.*

School Pupils Lauren and Karen presented the issue as one of *protecting the parents* from their anticipated disappointment in their child if they were to find out about their drinking activities. This was an unexpected flip of the coin in which the boundaries were being manipulated by the young people to protect the parents, to maintain the image of their children as 'innocent' so as to keep their parents happy; rather than having to face the 'shame' and 'disappointment' of finding out their children's 'innocence was tainted'. Hence, the young people were led to conclude 'what she

doesn't know can't hurt her.' Parents are then constructed as bad parents and the young people as deviating from 'normal' patterns of 'growing up' – a life stage which is highly accepted as normal in our Western culture.

Adults and young people hence perceived parents who can successfully 'control' their children's behaviours as a protective factor, and parents who could not control their children or did not enforce consequences when boundaries were broken were not considered as protective of young people.

### **School Staff**

Teachers and other School Staff Members were highlighted as providing a protective factor for young people, by adults in the study. The majority of young people did not refer to adults in the School as protective of them from harm. The School Staff referred to themselves as protective as they recognised their professional position of power in terms of having access to relevant professionals who could intervene in young people's lives. Specific processes needed to take place according to the adults in order for surveillance to be effective. Taking a holistic approach to young people's welfare was considered by adults as a necessary approach to dealing with risk of harm. Other protective factors were more concerned with young people approaching adults to disclose that they were at risk of. The following section takes a closer look at these themes.

### **Surveillance**

Adults in this study highlighted their own surveillance as a significant protective factor, yet one which can only be successfully implemented when acted on. Adults highlighted that observing young people and considering their welfare and safety was

a process pursued by *some* teaching staff, not all. Young people did not recognise adults' surveillance as a protective factor, with a particular ambivalence towards teachers as a group, yet some acknowledging there was always at least one teacher they felt they could approach with a problem.

School teachers from all departments are clearly in an advantageous position to visibly observe hundreds of young people every day. Classroom teachers in particular recognised this as a protective factor:

*Classroom Teacher Lisa: It is your duty to be recognising if anything's going wrong with that child, even if they are not telling you, being ready to recognise that. I'd say if staff notice you do pass it on, I don't think we always notice...or something becomes normal quite quickly even if it's not necessarily the correct thing. Somebody's appearance for example, like if any child's appearance is not great you would report it but if a kid for a period of time looks the same and if it's been reported, you can become comfortable with it, not comfortable, like accepting of it. Yeah I'm aware of it.*

*Classroom Teacher Michelle: I think they've got a professional responsibility to act upon things that's happening; they can't turn a blind eye to some things. I wouldn't turn a blind eye to anything, and I will go out my way to chase pupils if they've caused me a problem and they know I will. I wouldn't forget, they know and they respect that as well I think. Some teachers sort of forget and don't do anything about it or they will say they'll do something about it and they don't. I think they should, they've got a responsibility because I see my first and main priority as a teacher, that the kid's safe. You can't teach kids if they are not safe.*

Classroom Teacher Lisa expressed the view that it is a teachers' *duty* to watch over young people's progress and identify if a school pupil is at risk of harm, whether the child is disclosing information or not. *Teachers' surveillance* of young people was identified by most adults in the study as a necessary primary factor in the protection and support of a young person. Interestingly despite asserting it is her 'duty' to identify a young person at risk, she highlighted that there was the possibility of risk

going unnoticed. Her reasoning for this was the likelihood of becoming almost desensitised to a new behaviour or appearance of a young person which was initially 'out of the blue' but if it continued may become normalised by a teacher. Young people who are at risk of neglect may then slip through the gaps of surveillance as they are likely to be conforming to the rules of classroom behaviour and therefore, attention is not drawn to them by 'bad behaviour.'

Not knowing the truth about whether a young person was at risk of harm disturbed some members of staff in the sense they felt uneasy at the prospect of a young person being at risk and yet not showing any obvious visible signs:

Non-Teaching Staff Member Louise: *Then there's the ones that come in immaculate but you don't know what's happening to them at home. We don't know really what's happening. We maybe assume they come from a nice address they are being looked after.*

In these cases surveillance may not always be the most effective protective factor, as Classroom Teacher Lisa pointed out; it can be easy to 'get used to' these small but vital changes to a young person. In both of the responses above, the importance of acting or responding to suspicions however small was considered vital to the process of intervention. Classroom Teacher Michelle emphasised that making referrals about concerns for a young person's safety was left to the discretion of individual teachers therefore was not always followed through.

Living in a smaller sized community was typically viewed as a necessary precursor to surveillance of young people presenting a protective factor,

Classroom Teacher Michelle: *No I've been in bigger schools it's like night and day, because you're an outsider, you are given rose coloured glasses you don't see what's going on in there 'til you work in there and I would never go back. I would rather go and drive 100 miles today than go back to*

*that School because it was so, you know clique, the kids, clique...which was a self-preservation thing. They're trying to protect themselves from this massive chaos that's going on, that are so isolated and you see them on their own and you know there's something. If I saw a kid wondering about on their own, "Cheer up! It's nearly Christmas. What's your name anyway?" And I'd blether, and I would do that but a lot of the kids in the bigger school don't even make eye contact. I think one of the benefits of having such a small School is you do get to know the kids and it's great.*

*Classroom Teacher Lisa: It's definitely a good thing, having a smaller School. It's like I'd say the vast majority of staff at least knows someone's face, like I can even recognise a child's walking. I know who that child is from the way they're walking and that's nice, and like, it's nice to say "Good morning!" You say their specific name, I don't know if the children would appreciate or realise that. Yeah, a lot more staff know the children well. Em, it's nicer, a smaller community, definitely has to be nicer with everybody knowin' each other, maybe not knowing each other's business.*

*Non-Teaching Staff Member Jane: I think this school is a good size. It's no tiny but it is quite, it's a good size for it to have a good variety of people like staff and pupils but it's no massive or bursting at the seams like some others.*

The size of the School was recognised as supporting the development of closer relationships between teachers and young people, facilitating an improved surveillance system in which adults are the observers and young people the observed. Other adults identified communication between school staff as a necessary part of keeping young people safe:

*Pupil Support Teacher Clare: Staff are really good at coming to us if there's an issue, if there's a concern about welfare. They really are, and the communication, there's a lot of 'em memos go out to say "please be aware there are issues" in so and so's life.*

According to the Pupil Support Teachers it was not uncommon for classroom teachers to act on their suspicions about one of their class pupils at risk of harm. The effectiveness of this as a protective factor stemmed from consistent communication between various members of staff. It was also highlighted that communication

between parents who observe young people and the School Staff helped to further develop a network of supportive adults.

Surprisingly staff did not talk about the child protection protocols in the school when talking about staff sharing concerns about young people. The absence of these discussions could reflect a variety of reasons including the 'private nature' of young people's safety and welfare, of which staff are only driven to talk about if there is concrete evidence to suggest a young person is at risk of harm.

### **Relationships with Staff**

The data revealed that adults in the school can only be considered as a protective factor if they have a supportive relationship with a young person in which a teacher is genuinely interested in investing in the young person's welfare; whether they see intervening as part of their job description or not. There was a strong perception held by adults and young people that not all adults in the school could be viewed as a source of support for young people, as it was seen additional to the role of a teacher to engage with young people on a 'personal' level unless they were a Pupil Support Teacher.

Adults highlighted that not all Teachers appeared to have the same type of relations with all young people, that there were varying degrees of intimacy and hence varying degrees of support:

*Pupil Support Teacher David: It depends on the child, some teachers are more approachable. Some pupil support staff have better relations with other kids, they've all got caseloads. Yeah if somebody's on your case load it's up to you.*

Pupil Support Teacher Clare: *That's all about relationship. You've got influence on them if you've got relationship and if they trust you, you ask them to stand quiet or to not do this in class then some of them will manage that and others it doesn't matter what you say 'em. It's about relationships but it's about the child wanting to improve and change and develop, if they choose not to.*

Pupil Support Teacher David suggested that the reason why some teachers have closer relationships with young people and not others is because only a few adults are thought to be considered by young people as 'approachable'. He went on to say that despite the initial responsibility of dealing with a 'caseload', it was entirely up to the individual as to whether to invest in a relationship which would facilitate openness and support for the young person. Pupil Support Teacher Clare highlighted that relationships between staff and pupils characterised by trust were protective as young people were more likely to be 'influenced' by the adult.

Some young people disclosed they had experienced support from a teacher, helping them to face some issues which were bothering them:

School Pupil Karen: *Oh there's one teacher I could talk to.*

School Pupil Lauren: *Well I was getting some hassle from the older girls about that thing, 'bout the car and em, one of the teachers had heard like the girls havin' a right bitch about me in the car. I had this like, she's really lovely like, a really lovely teacher. She took me to the side and said "If you ever really need to talk to anybody then you can always come to me," and I told my Mum and it was like, "That's good if you don't always feel good talking to me you can always go to her, that makes me feel so much better."*

The adults went on to discuss the limitation of Pupil Support Teachers not being able to engage in a relationship with *all* young people,

Pupil Support Teacher Clare: *I've only got one thing, we look after the real high risk kids the ones that, and we pick up a lot on our way and have really good relationships, and the wee plodders in the middle I always feel, yeah some of them get picked up but it's the child who wants to be invisible; they*

*are the ones who worry me. We don't have the time to get to them. It's not you don't want to, I said "How many of you would love to be invisible?" And three hands went up and these are lovely kids who would never give any trouble in class and they worry me 'cause they might hand in their homework in time and do their classwork but you just don't know what's going on there.*

The above quote highlights that there are young people who are considered more reserved than others, who possibly meet all the behavioural criteria in the school and hence do not require intervention due to disobedience, yet may require intervention due to them being at risk. Young people who are quiet and comply with the rules were thought to be at risk as they are less likely to engage in a relationship with adults.

Ways of getting around this barrier were not identified by the adults and there was no implication that this issue had been addressed in practice.

In terms of the factors which help to facilitate the development of an open honest relationship with young people, it was highlighted that Pupil Support Teachers are in a favourable position compared with other teachers:

*Pupil Support Teacher David: It's easier for us because we can speak to them one to one, it's easier for us to build up a relationship than class teachers.*

Pupil Support Teachers were recognised as having more one to one time with pupils and therefore were more likely to get to know them better than the pupils' classroom subject teachers. Hence Pupil Support Teachers could possibly be a more effective protective factor than classroom teachers due to the proximity they have with their pupils. Classroom teachers' perceptions towards their pupils was emphasised as being an important predictor of how teacher-pupil relations would be in practice:

*Classroom Teacher Michelle: I think everybody's gonna be different aren't they? I do think some teachers are more "I'm a teacher of my subject rather than I'm a teacher of my children," whereas I see it as a bunch of young*



*people in front of me. I think all teachers should be like that and they are not and I know some teachers don't even know their kids' names which is the first thing I do, is learn their names and then I'd learn something about them. I don't always remember but I write it down to start with. I don't keep it all in my head, especially the kids that are new to me and I think if you build up a great relationship, and I think you can get them to work for you better. That way I enjoy it, I enjoy my job.*

Classroom Teacher Michelle shared her observation that some teachers viewed young people in their class as pupils solely, distancing them from a more holistic perception, possibly making it easier to discount suspicions of risk as pupils are perceived in a certain way. She emphasised remembering young people's names as an example to demonstrate teachers who de-personalize young people by failing to remember their names.

#### **Crossing Boundaries: Interfering or Intervening?**

Discussions about adults acting upon suspicion or knowledge of a young person at risk of harm suggested that intervening in a young person's life in such a way was a difficult task for School Staff, difficult for some more than others according to the responses of the adults. The way in which risk of harm to young people, specifically risks occurring in a young person's home was discussed, suggested there were underlying tensions in perceptions towards making distinctions between the private and public lives of young people. Not only were there tensions regarding adults' construction of risk of harm but particularly towards the roles that adults play in young people's lives.

Classroom Teacher Michelle perceived the nature of welfare intervention as a teacher's 'professional responsibility' yet contrastingly commented she 'went out of her way' to help young people. This contrast suggests an uncertainty regarding the

professional role or personal duty of a teacher. 'Going out of one's way' suggests that the action was not considered as the typical task of a teacher and hence there was some doubt about how to place protection work. 'Profession' as a concept is somewhat problematic, as it can convey different meanings to different audiences. Knowing whether to consider caring and protection of young people as professional was an ambiguous concept for many adults in the study. The notion of making personal sacrifices rather than constructing such work as part of the job was highlighted by others too:

Non-Teaching Staff member Lynn: *If you are happy to deal with something 'till the end, no matter how long you've to stay to the end after work or give up your lunch; then that's what you've got to do. If you've had to give up some time and I think that you're better to other people if you want to.*

Making sacrifices such as giving up the lunch hour was considered as an action which improves the standard of care and support for a young person, above the call of duty of a teacher. Intervention was again framed as an individual choice rather than a professional duty as it was said: 'If you are happy to deal with something till the end,' suggesting the protection process could be unnecessary or unwanted *additional* work for some.

Adults highlighted that observing young people and considering their welfare and safety was a process pursued by some teaching staff, not all; hence such qualities were believed to be a personal choice for individuals rather than an expected professional duty for the teaching role.

Non-Teaching Staff Member Jane: *No I think some people, just think "Oh it will go away let somebody else deal with it." I think it's an individual thing, you find not everybody bothers. A lot of people in here come in, do their*

*job, go home and forget about it. A lot of us don't, me for one I don't, so you do become involved.*

*Non-Teaching Staff Member Lynn: Could be a lot of people just don't want to get involved because they don't know how other people's gonnae react. If you got in touch with the family, how is the family member going to react to you? You might get told "Mind your own business it's nothing to do with you." That's probably why a lot of people want to ignore it em, and there's other ones who can just see past that. They'll do it whether the family members are agreeing to it or not, it depends on the type of person you are. I think teaching staff as well would come in, teach, leave again and hope they never have to deal with anything at all.*

Both Staff Members above talked about interacting with young people on issues about risk of harm and protection as 'getting involved,' reflecting the perceived intrusive nature of such interactions. The way in which protecting young people was talked about suggested that the adults viewed teachers who 'got involved' as more committed to young people, committed to investing in their welfare and their holistic being as well as educating them.

The responses indicate that a teacher speaking to their pupil about their welfare and safety 'crosses the boundaries', the professional and social boundaries in the views of adults working in the school. The distinction between professional dynamics and personal 'involvement' implies the *private* nature of young people's lives, in which it may be considered unacceptable by some for school staff members to intervene. In the views of the adults, the identity of a teacher was negotiated when 'additional work' was required to interact with school pupils as part of an effort to provide support, some teachers viewed this process almost as dismantling their professional identity and accumulating a personal identity possibly to appear more approachable for young people; to break down the professional barrier and to create a social context which was more 'appropriate. For some this process came across as sacrificial in their

views, as it required giving up the lunch hour or committing to a series of referrals and meetings with parents etc. It could be suggested that the cost of executing the 'professional self' in order to present the 'personal self' to young people can vary from the perceived fear of sacrificing the professional credibility to the cost of one's own emotional comfort; particular conversations with young people may be embarrassing or uncomfortable for some teachers more than others. The lack of consistency among how all teachers respond to young people's welfare was observed by the adults in the study:

I: Do you think that is the case with all teachers in the school?

Classroom Teacher Michelle: *No, definitely not. I think a lot of them have got blinkers on, they're here to teach the subject rather than teaching kids. I think that goes on, there's a difference with teachers. Yeah they would say their main priority is to get the kids to count. You can't get them to count if they're not sitting in a safe environment. I do think my main, yeah is the safety emotionally, and I would go through anybody in the classroom who sniggers or makes a comment or question or something. I will go through them, I hate that. I think all teachers should be like that. I think training in that would be really good, because if they could understand the emotional state of some of these pupils who maybe want to ask a question but feel they can't because they could be ridiculed, that's preventing that pupil from learning. They will shut off, you can't teach them. You can teach them better if they are relaxed, (in a) comfortable emotional state if they feel safe and secure.*

The above response highlights the lack of consistency in adults' responses to young people who are at risk of harm. It was perceived that teachers would be better equipped to discern whether young people needed further support in classrooms if they had specific training about young people's 'emotional state,' again highlighting that training may bridge the gaps between the professional role of teachers and the private nature of young people's welfare, when teachers are informed that young people's emotions are a part of their professional role; not outside of it.

### **Parenting and Providing Pastoral Care to Young People in School**

In the context of protecting young people, the more 'informal' or 'parent-like' a teacher was depicted, the more approachable (and appropriate) staff were considered to be for young people requiring adult support:

Pupil Support Teacher Moira: *Some staff are more approachable than others.*

Elsewhere it was emphasised that teachers have the opportunity (if they so choose) to encompass a *Pastoral role*, suggesting that the *Teacher* role alone is not typically associated with caring for the young person's welfare. In order for this professional position to be understood as one in which care is an on-going process, it must be considered as something other than a Teacher, i.e. a Pastor or a Mother:

Pupil Support Teacher Clare: *For Class Teachers, it's the Pastoral role is just beginning to be developed so they're not as far down the line as Pupil Support.*

Pupil Support Teacher David: *Every member of staff is meant to have a pastoral role, so it's what we focus on, but every Teacher has got a pastoral role.*

Classroom Teacher Michelle: *It's just personal, I'm a Mum of five. I kind of Mother to everybody and the kids here are great. I've got a great relationship with a lot of them, a lot of them will come to me with things, (rather) than go to other teachers with and they will tell me things, but certainly if I hear a comment or a Pupil discloses something, I wouldn't hesitate in giving them my opinion. Trying to set them on the right track.*

It is interesting that Classroom Teacher Michelle perceived her relationship with her Pupils as 'personal'. The nature of the social interaction between staff and pupils was considered as private rather than public, and in turn implied to be unprofessional rather than professional. Hence these connotations suggest such work is de-valued alongside other 'professional' and valued work which requires 'skill'.

Other responses reinforced the social construction of care work as unskilled and unprofessional, a process that is additional to their primary working roles in the school:

Non-Teaching Staff Member Jane: *There is people who are strong enough just to come in and do their job, go home and forget what happens. There is quite a few people who would be like that, but the majority aren't.*

Non-Teaching Staff Member Lynn: *I think it's if you're a parent in the first place it's a natural thing but there is people who genuinely, it's in their nature.*

Classroom Teacher Lisa: *Ehhh, there's a lot of parts to it, specifically responsible for young people, you are. I heard a few years ago, a term "corporate parent," we are their parent as such when you're in school. Yeah definitely everybody's role in the school, a corporate parent, it sounds a bit like, a lot of people definitely but just personality wise some people aren't like that. It doesn't make them a bad person. They are not naturally caring or mothering, any of those things, eh and it's changed because in the past you were their teacher, there to give a child an education but then you had guidance Teachers to deal with other issues, but nowadays they are trying to reduce structures of Schools. There's not as many lines of folk dealing with things, so you're registration Teacher is meant to be responsible for your guidance as well.*

Classroom Teacher Michelle constructed any involvement in a young person's well-being as 'personal' again reinstating that in order for a teacher to purposefully choose to 'get involved' in a young person's life, one must have a quality that is other than that of a teacher. How care is constructed is demonstrated immensely in Non-Teaching Staff Member Jane's response, saying there are staff members who 'are *strong enough* to do their job and forget about what happens,' suggesting individuals who detach themselves from the reality of a young person at risk of harm exhibit 'strength' and those who do respond in a caring fashion are 'weak.' It was interesting that Classroom Teacher Michelle almost devalued her care work, rationalising it because she is also a mother.

A very good example of this 'professional dilemma' was the account given by the catering manager, in which she describes a turning point in her professional role when the school asked her to attend a child protection course:

Non-Teaching Staff Member Jane: *I think nearly all the staff have now done the child protection course and all my Staff included and first when we got the letter I thought "Why do we need to do that?" The reason actually, how much it is actually relevant, 'cause we all went and done it and it was really surprising and I thought "Oh we do need to do that," and we have actually used their training and...*

I: So when you went on the course, how did it change your view towards your responsibility?

Non-Teaching Staff Member Jane: *It made me realise how much you are responsible for every young person, their role model really. Anybody is, like the Head Teacher, the janitor, anybody they are all, everybody looks to you for advice and for like, to set examples.*

I: Did you see yourself in that role before the course?

Non-Teaching Staff Member Jane: *No, no really. No.*

This example was extremely interesting as it reinforces the context in which young people's safety and welfare is constructed alongside professional roles. Non-Teaching Staff Member Jane highlighted that she had not previously considered herself as a relevant Member of Staff concerned with child protection. The course had clearly changed her whole perspective towards how she viewed herself and how she viewed her role in protecting young people. Attending a child protection course no doubt enhanced the sense of professionalism attached to the context of addressing young people's welfare in her workplace. Her transition was an extreme one in which she went from being responsible for selective young people at her own discretion to being responsible for *every young person*, yet not all Teachers appear to share this perspective.

### Young People Disclosing 'Private' Information

According to adults, young people speaking to school staff about being at risk was considered as important for protecting young people from harm. Part of the process of adults responding to known risk of harm to young people was the necessity to deal with 'private' information. Overhearing private or personal information was constructed as teachers being put in a position in which they had to make a decision about whether to act on such information:

Classroom Teacher Lisa: *The kids disclose when they're chattin' most of them will chat about anything or you do overhear kids talkin' about things but they're very open, which is kind of nice but sometimes it's not nice that you don't want to hear.*

Classroom Teacher Michelle: *I find the kids are very, very open, too open and you have to remind them you're gonna have to pass things on. Kids have said things to me that I've had to pass on, or they don't resent you for it.*

Non-Teaching Staff Member Louise: *Em, sometimes I think things are said in school which shouldn't be said. People say "Oh I know that person's doing..." and they are not given a completely new start.*

Most of the adults agreed that the young people in the school were 'unusually' honest about their personal lives and would often discuss what was considered as personal information with each other in class. The content of the information being heard and being 'forced' into a position of making a decision about what to do with this information led the teachers to construct certain conversations as something which 'they should not hear' or engaging with a young person who is 'too open.' This was highly contradictory to the point made about young people who are 'too withdrawn' who present a problem of knowing whether to intervene on suspected risk rather than known risk of harm. School is considered as a public setting in which education and subsequent discussions are informative, non-emotive and academic. It appeared that



any content beyond these categories was constructed as something which should not be said in school.

Private information covered a range of topics including conversations of a neglect nature, a sexual nature and of alcohol and drugs misuse:

*Non-Teaching Staff Member Jane: A boy who is no longer at the school em, if I had any food left he was asking to say, and I well alarm bells start ringing and one day he told me "Can I take that pizza home," and I says "What for?" And he says "Well I'm babysittin' tonight," and he was a 12 year old, first year. He had quite a few siblings and he was the oldest, and I says "Oh" I says "You're babysitting?" "And that will save me making them their tea," and I says "Ohh...this is no right eh?" But I get to somebody to speak about it, it turns out he was just winding me up. It was just because there was so many of them; they used to fight each other for food, and who got there first. So you didnae want to hear things like that eh?*

*Non-Teaching Staff Member Lynn: Kids are really open. I've heard girls talking about sexual experiences and I honestly think to myself "That is a wee bit over..." and I think we are, as a Staff, to try and help as much as we can and the good thing about this School is that it doesnae matter if you are a Teaching Member of Staff or a Non- Teaching Member of Staff, if people want to come and speak to you and the management are happy enough for you to deal with it...As long as the kids know you are passing it on, but that's one thing I think or to hear about their antics at the weekend. Some of it's a laugh but some of it you think to yourself that is getting a wee bit dangerous. You know, to get to that stage and not actually knowing what's happened to you and also to think yeah some people who were speaking about this, are young for these experiences.*

*Classroom Teacher Michelle: I suppose when one of the kids here have got a problem, it's very, very short while before everybody knows, that kind of thing, em.....gossip gossip gossip. Small community thrives on gossip, but it does seem to sort things out though. You get it with the girls I suppose the same everywhere. Third year is maybe the worst where gossip becomes rumours and lies and it gets exaggerated and it causes problems and girls and boys deal with it different. Boys will say "I've got a problem with you," bang and then it's over. Girls, it will be gossip for ages. Yes.*

It was interesting that the staff predominantly presented the issue of hearing conversations between young people of a personal nature as a problem rather than as an opportunity for intervention and reduction of risk of harm.

The above responses suggest that teachers struggled to be confident of how to locate 'sensitive' information, the nature of conversations overheard about deviant experiences were almost magnified by the contradictory public environment of a school. There was confusion about boundaries, boundaries around 'appropriate conversation' and boundaries around 'professional duty.' This conflict in general is a useful demonstration of how powerful social meanings are when attached to specific geographical locations in which there is an established social conduct. Tensions between public and private conversations appeared to link with tensions about how to act on such content within a public setting. There appears to be a need for staff, teaching and non-teaching, to be informed of their responsibilities for young people's welfare and the appropriate procedures for responding to 'sensitive' information, whether overheard or privately disclosed.

### **Positive Support Networks: Social Capital in the Community**

This study revealed that there were layers of social capital operating through various networks in the community. Social capital was found to exist in interactions between young people and adults, and between adults; specifically between the Youth Worker and teachers in the school.

### **Integrated Network of Resources**

Most adults and some young people highlighted that having an integrated network of resources including people from different professional and non-professional roles provided a successful protective factor for young people. The reflections on successful experiences of young people being protected from harm or further harm often described how several adults were required to work together to provide the best

intervention for a young person. The sharing and multiplication of resources acted as an abundant supply of capital to enhance the safety and development of young people. There were sufficient responses to believe that social capital forms a significant part of the process for keeping young people safe. Young people's networks with teachers and a Youth Worker for example appeared to help them to 'get by'. Classroom Teacher Lisa summed up the web of resources potentially available to help protect young people from harm:

*Classroom Teacher Lisa: Well, in this school you have got your first port of call you have your form Teachers, who are responsible for making sure you're in School, your happy, you've got all your Teachers, Pupils Support Department. Barnardo's used to have a club at lunch time but in our community they have access to the church it's our main one and a lot of children do go there on a Friday and at other times in the week. I don't know if there's any other groups in the community that deal with stuff, there probably will be. I don't know specifically who they could go to; I guess their main port of call would be people in the School. I think there's some circumstances where you hear kids if somethin's happened they're all quick to jump on the bandwagon and be against someone as well 'em, if they see somethin' as negative they can be quite mean about those things as well.*

*Classroom Teacher Steve: I think there is a support network there.*

*Non-Teaching Staff Member Lynn: You've got the support eh, and I think within the School I think within the School sometimes parents em, they come along for things. Like the fact, I mean we are quite a School as well as being you know a lot of Staff who have either worked here for as long time or a lot of our Support Staff are from this area and I think they quite like that idea 'cause they feel as if they are part of the family of this town. If there is gonna be a problem people (they) will help as much as they can, it's not gonna be as if they come into an establishment and they're just gonna be somebody who doesn't know. (There is) the church, Facebook.*

*Pupil Support Teacher David: The Staff, people tend to work together work with other agencies. There's the good Staff a lot of kids stay on for longer and you can work with them. They're leaving School generally more mature they can deal with life outside School a lot better than if they left earlier.*

*Pupil Support Teacher Clare: I think that is because it's a tight knit community, the school is seen as a hub.*

Pupil Support Teacher Moira: *And they see the school is trying to support the youngsters.*

School Pupil Lauren: *Everybody knows everything about you 'cause it's a wee place.*

School Pupil Karen: *You cannae dae anything without somebody watching you but like, I think it's an ok community. I think like, everybody knows each other so it's kindae, people know somebody or there's so and so.*

According to the response above, the school appeared to be the hub from which all other resources were linked with. As mentioned earlier, Non-Teaching Staff Member Lynn highlighted the advantage of staff growing up in the area and how this added to the cultural knowledge and shared identity with the town and its people. Working together, as in mixed professional and non-professional individuals co-operating was emphasised as an important part of the process required to produce social capital. The community was described above as 'tight knit' reflecting the nature of the social ties across adults and young people, suggesting there are high levels of social capital in the form of protection and support for young people.

What adults did not comment upon was the issue of access to such resources from a young person's perspective. Most of these networks, if not all, depend on adults approaching young people who suspect risk of harm rather than young people approaching adults to disclose information. However there were accounts given in which young people did approach adults for support. Social networks as a protective factor, it could be argued, can only be fully utilised when a young person is known to be at risk by adults.

Nearly every staff member in the school interviewed discussed the strength of the network between the School and the local church in which the Youth Worker was

based. The Youth Worker was portrayed as an indispensable resource to the school and most importantly to the young people:

*Classroom Teacher Lisa: The reason it is, is the lady who runs it she is fantastic at what she does she is. I think it's a paid role, they've got a number of people, some voluntary, some paid, doing all different kinds of youth work and she has a link with the School. She comes into classes to help with the projects and we have links with them, so they take young people to India for example. The first years last year made presents to take to India for the children, so she's in the school and sees all the kids. She's like a celebrity; they are so excited to see her, a great affinity with her. It really is like a celebs style, whatever she's doing, attracts children to the church. She has got strong links with the School; she's tying it all together.*

*Non-Teaching Staff Member Lynn: Our church for the school and they have a really good youth worker down there and she gets involved and because she em, she has a load of kids. They have a breakfast club now and that's why we probably don't, we would liked to have had a breakfast club but it just didnae work out. She has a breakfast club, she picks them up then she drops them off here...They have Youth Clubs, drop-ins, we had a situation just at the end of the summer when one of our young girl died and it was the church that the Youth Worker sorted out. She did a lot of coming, the kids to come together to discuss things about it. She did some bereavement counselling with them, she... em the youth worker will come up and she works well with the pupil support department so that works well. I mean she comes into the School at least once a week if not more, they do things in the hall at lunch time, so she's about if anybody needs that so it is a good.*

*Non-Teaching Staff Member Jane: It's amazing she even offers a Youth club on the Friday night and goes to the church and takes people home so they're safe if they've not got any other way. I went to School with the Youth Worker, her family have always been very church but they don't preach to you. She would never ever like preach religion to you and she actually, she's went to em, she worked, she had her kids, and then she went to University and actually done her degree in youth work and she's now like a qualified Youth Worker and she takes on young people and trains them and ..*

*School Pupil Jenny: I know a woman who does a lot for the community and she runs Youth clubs and stuff, if I had like a major problem...I know I could go to her she would help me deal with it or the person she's just such a nice person. I'm sure she'd find a way. She does like everything.*

It is clear from the responses that the Youth Worker's input into the school is highly valued; the adults rated her work as having an extremely high quality and her relationship with young people as very strong. The presence of the Youth Worker in the school cannot be overlooked as it shows there is an overlapping of different professional bodies in a public way, so both adults and young people can be encouraged to see the joint working taking place weekly. Again this is a good example of how social capital can be produced through the means of strong ties between those who have resources to combine and offer as there is a shared goal – to meet young people's needs and to protect their safety and well-being.

In terms of protecting young people, the youth worker has been seen to provide emotional support in different contexts. Interestingly, adults and young people did not discuss the youth worker as 'responsible' for young people's safety yet in practice the youth worker has played a very significant role in keeping young people safe in very practical ways e.g. she disclosed that there had been several occasions where she had driven young people home who were drunk or had at least arranged for their parents to come and collect them.

According to the Youth Worker, service providers who were 'newcomers' and did not invest in long lasting and trusting relationships with young people, were perceived as weaker protective sources than those who were community members:

*Youth Worker: These are all professional people who don't necessarily live in the community and I always, I often think when you leave a position em, like the manager at Barnardo's has just left. We were beginning to get a good relationship with her she's left and somebody else has to come in and that's us the adults trying to think that through the support for a child what kind of effect does that have on a child, if that person's in their life then they move away. I suppose one thing really is the ability of living in the*

*community that we live in that we'll live here, we know the or you hear of the risks and the pressures that young people have and being able to support that and also I suppose maybe actually young people know that you know.*

Here the Youth Worker was expressing her concerns of the impact of high turnovers of service providers for young people, specifically service providers who are not living within the same geographical location as the young people. In her view, adults who live in the same community as young people are more likely to offer a higher standard of care as they share the same community characteristics and have a deeper knowledge of the local issues affecting young people. In other words, bonding social capital between adults and young people who share the same community membership, resources and identity is perceived as increasing the well-being and safety of young people.

Parents and young people were also viewed as highly significant in the web of protective resources:

*Classroom Teacher Lisa: Well if I can think about em, we have got eh two first years just now that are quite challenging in their social interactions. They like to push people, tell people to f off, just in the corridor "Get out my way," all these kinds of things. The older pupils are quite accepting of it and supporting of it and want to come and say this kid's putting themselves in the situation where they could be getting into fights, and they say that's something to watch out for and it's nice but all the seniors if they do this the way they interact with these young pupils they are like looking after them and they are still caring so that's like a specific example, the benefit, and they maybe know a bit more about em people's issues so can be more accepting somebody's trauma.*

*Pupil Support Teacher Clare: The parents, they'll come in and it will be Mum and Dad and very quickly they tell you their name. Before you know it, they call you by your first name and you're working together and it's almost like an extended family. It feels with some of the kids when you're working close with them. I think positive relationships is your biggy and role models. Well I think the fifth years and sixth years staying on are role models and they are in the school they are monitoring kids in the corridors*

*in lunch time. They are feeding back on that so for me there's that and I think teachers are positive role models as well and the Pupil Support staff cause there's nine teachers in Support for Learning so there's a lot of people that are looking out for them.*

*School Pupil Lauren: I think it's got a lot to do with my Mum as well 'cause I'm really close with my mum I'll tell her everything, like what's right what's wrong. She always says to me "I'm not stupid. I know like, I was there once I know what you get up to just as long as you don't come home like that."*

*School Pupil Karen: But it's like I don't know why this sounds so bad but I'd rather tell her Mum than mine. I don't know, just 'cause she just gets it; just gets what we're talking about. Whereas my Mum's like, "You shouldn't be doing that," or she jumps to conclusions.*

*School Pupil Jenny: If someone was serious drinking problem you'd have to go, I'd definitely have to go to my Mum and say I was really worried about them.*

*School Pupil Emma: I think it depends on the situation, some conversations, personally I talk to my Mum about boys but when it comes to my Dad...awkward!*

Young people who were higher up in the school years were viewed as a valuable source of support for and surveillance of the younger pupils in the school. Senior pupils' likelihood of *knowing* the young people's 'issues' and yet accepting them in a respectful and supportive manner was considered to bring an additional support factor as young people were then 'accepted'. Senior pupils were also utilised as a source by the school to represent acceptable behaviours and to set examples for the expected code of conduct in the school. They also provided a further means of providing information to the staff on how the young people were behaving and whether there were any causes for concern. Self-surveillance of senior pupils in the school and in turn of the young people themselves may feed into the process of engaging in safe rather than 'risky' behaviours and thus be a potential protective factor.



## Summary

This chapter has presented the findings relating to whether social networks defined by trust play a role in reducing risk of harm to young people. The majority of the respondents expressed the view that the parents and other family members of a young person *should* play a key role in reducing risk of harm to young people. Parents of young people specifically were highlighted as a protective factor as parents were understood to be able to enforce control over young people's behaviours. Parents were considered as the primary individuals for instilling morals and behavioural patterns in young people's lives; those who were thought to fail to do so were considered as not being able to control their children.

School staff viewed themselves as protective in the lives of young people. However the majority of young people did not refer to adults in the school as protective of them. Adults highlighted that observing young people and considering their welfare and safety was a process pursued by some teaching staff, not all; hence such qualities were believed to be a personal choice for individuals rather than an expected professional duty for the teaching role. It was anticipated that teachers need to be 'approachable' and 'motherly' in order to play a role in protecting young people. Responses reinforced the social construction of care work as unskilled and unprofessional, a process that is additional to their primary working roles in the School.

Staff predominantly presented the issue of hearing conversations between young people of a personal nature as a problem rather than as an opportunity for intervention and reduction of risk of harm.

Finally the integrated services existing between the schools, the Youth Worker and input from parents was considered to be a valuable resource in facilitating protecting young people. Continuing the theme of relationships defined by trust, the next chapter focuses on young people's friendships as playing an important role in responding to perceived risks of harm.

## Chapter Seven

### **Young People's Protective Friendships: Negotiation and Avoidance Strategies to Reduce Risk of Harm**

This chapter presents the findings relating to question 3: from adults' and young people's perspectives, what role does social capital play in reducing perceived risks of harm to young people? The themes relating to this question are relationships between young people; protecting friends from physical harm; being responsible for friends and reducing the risks posed by alcohol and public spaces. Additionally the theme of gendered perceptions towards differences in male and female friendships relates to question 2: What informs perceptions of risk to young people?

Emerging themes from the data include perceptions about how behaviour conforming to morals and rational decision-making can help to keep young people safe. Themes detailing the protective nature of young people's friendships are then discussed.

Young people's perceptions about the nature of peer intervention are shown to be highly gendered; despite young men and young women equally providing accounts of reducing risk of harm to their friends. Young people's negotiation and avoidance strategies to reduce the main risks of harm in their community are then discussed.

#### **Following the Moral Standard**

Both adults and young people talked about the 'right' and 'wrong' behaviours of young people, saying that knowing the difference between the two should in practice provoke young people to abide by the moral code. Such language suggested that both adults and young people held strong beliefs and expectations about acceptable and unacceptable behaviours from young people. A moral standard was often discussed in

relation to influencing the choices young people make about safety and danger. Both adults and young people spoke about young people knowing rights from wrongs and that such knowledge *should be* a dominant force in their decision making about whether to engage in risky activities such as drinking alcohol and taking drugs.

Responses about following the moral code were very much framed in an individualised perception of risk-taking behaviours, in which harm was considered to be a result of particular choices made by young people and hence protection from harm was framed as an individual choice or inaction. The individualised discourse of risk held by the interviewees meant that little attention was given to the wider social processes that young people have little or no control over.

Classroom Teacher Michelle said that if young people knew what behaviours were wrong for them to engage in, then this would help young people to make necessary corrections:

Classroom Teacher Michelle: *The kids at least, they know they've done wrong and they'll take a tellin' kids at that school. They know when they've done wrong, they take a tellin' and I think that is a difference.*

In this case the teacher was discussing an experience in which police officers were giving presentations on alcohol and drugs at the school, commenting that the police officers' message was believed to have been better received by young people who had a moral standard and agreed with adults that certain behaviours were wrong for young people to engage in. Young people were also keen to emphasise that morality was not only a protective factor, but a reflection of intelligence:

School Pupil Lauren: *If you've got half a brain you know your rights from wrongs. It's just idiots that don't know.*

Young people's responses suggested that they were in disbelief at 'others' choices, in which their risk taking was perceived as a failure of cognitive processes. Interestingly the same School Pupil discussed the issue of young people behaving in certain ways *because they knew it was 'wrong'*:

School Pupil Lauren: *I think it's just 'cause everybody, they do it cause it's like, wrong. When you're older, when you're the age it won't be...I think people do it cause it's like, they like, they know it's wrong so they think it's like, fun.*

The contradicting views above suggest that being obedient to moral behaviours may only act as a successful protective factor under certain conditions or circumstances.

School Pupil Lauren highlights the paradox of right and wrong behaviours in which some young people desire to conform to behaving correctly yet others are driven to behave wrongly simply because it is 'wrong.' Others commented on how difficult it was for young people to consistently conform to behaving in the 'right' and acceptable way:

School Pupil Jenny: *I think it's because at this age you are under pressure to do things social wise that are right, not wrong.*

School Pupil Jenny touched on the difficulty of dealing with a social pressure to do what is 'right' rather than wrong. She did not highlight the source of this pressure, but I could suggest that the relative sustaining public image of young people as risky and out of control is an image that all young people are judged against, therefore if any small 'mistake' is made it could be unfairly blown out of proportion and in turn 'taint' any preceding image of the young person as 'innocent and right'. Young people are often put into one of two boxes 'angel' or 'devil' (Valentine, 1996) and it appears that striving to follow the moral standard may be twofold as the social consequences for

'failing' are fairly extreme. For young people it appears there is a large room for error and 'failing' to meet the social expectations of how to behave rightly. This labelling process was recognised by the Youth Worker:

*Youth Worker: I remember em one of the girls who comes down here, her agreement with the School is she comes here once a week and eh and her attendance has improved in the School and eh I remember the first day she started. I had to go to a meeting in the School and she came with me and one of the first things that somebody said to her when we went through the door was "You behaving the day?" and I'm like "Oh my goodness! Welcome us!" Her perception of that girl is that she misbehaves.*

The above example suggests that young people who have behaved 'wrongly' in their past are not able to re-invent their image or label held by some adults, thus when young people do the 'right thing' it does not necessarily guarantee a renewed identity in the eyes of adults. Adults hence appear to label certain young people as the misbehavers, continuing to view individuals through this filter and defining their identity based on 'bad' or 'good' behaviour rather than acknowledging identity as something which can be fluid and changing. In the context of protection, it could be suggested that young people who display 'risky' behaviours are less likely to receive support from adults due to barriers such as labelling and social stigma.

Young People and some adults recognised that if young people followed the 'right' behaviours, not only were they more likely to be safe but they were also more likely to be accepted by adults socially and possibly given more opportunities. It was recognised that in some cases, failing to do what is 'right and encouraged' e.g. study hard and go to University, would put young people at risk of harm:

*Classroom Teacher Michelle: I had a pupil and she's absolutely terrified to tell her parents she hadn't even applied for University 'cause she knew she wouldn't get in and that's sad. That's really sad. We've had situations*

*where I've not been able to exam because that news going home puts the pupil at risk. And the pupils' terrified to go home.*

This example demonstrates the double-jeopardy which young people are facing, there is a wave of pressure to get young people to perform in a certain way, not only because it is believed that achieving certain standards will protect them but will also enhance their chances in life. Hence young people may not only face harm from engaging in certain behaviours but may also face risk of harm in the form of being 'punished' for not conforming or behaving in a certain way. Following the acceptable and 'right' behaviours is a complex process for young people, one which may not always be protective, particularly if there are risks to young people who fail to do the right thing.

The above responses suggest that using a moral standard to discern whether engaging in behaviour or avoiding it would lead to a safer outcome was not a simple task. Doing what is 'right' for the sake of 'being right' was a complex protective factor, perceived to be useful by adults, yet, in practice resulting in young people striving to avoid negative labels from adults. Those who do not conform to the moral standard are labelled as 'idiots', rebellious and possibly face risk of harm by adults. Interestingly neither adults or young people discussed whether there was a social consensus as to what behaviours were considered as 'right' and 'wrong', and did not comment on the possibility that what is deemed as 'right' for one young person may be perceived as 'wrong' for another. The possibility that young people are taught different moral values by different people including parents, teachers and friends was not an issue that was considered in the responses. Hence the potential problem for young people in terms of being subjected to conflicting values and beliefs about what is right and

wrong for them to engage in was not identified as a barrier to the moral code as being an effective and consistent protective factor.

### **Rational Thinking and 'Cleverness'**

Rational thinking and cleverness were considered to be protective factors for young people. Both adults and young people discussed these perceived factors. There were mixed views about the role of education or more specifically, 'awareness-raising' about the risks of harm, in relation to developing 'rational thinking' for young people. Young people who chose to avoid risky behaviours were considered to be demonstrating rational thinking and cleverness by young people and adults. Young people who drank alcohol, took drugs and engaged in other risky behaviours were not believed to either think rationally or be aware of the risks they were taking:

*Classroom Teacher Lisa: I guess for a lot of them they are clever enough to recognise it em, as not maybe not the best thing to be doin', so a lot of them, not even a lot of them I don't know they still take the risks.*

*Non-Teaching Staff Member Lynn: There's too much spiking drinks goes on, they didnae realise then. They didnae realise the dangers of that, even goin' to clubs and things like that. That they've been hooked on it, you hear they try things once and they become.*

There was almost a tone of disbelief that young people would choose to take risks and this was put down to a lack of knowledge or intelligence to be able to weigh up the costs of certain behaviours. These responses are located in the belief that protecting young people by educating them about risks of harm alone will be a successful method of prevention. As a result of this belief, young people who avoid taking risks are constructed as being 'more intelligent' than those who do take risks. Non-Teaching Staff Member Lynn thought that young people who drink are not aware of the risks of spiking and drugs. Interestingly the young people asserted that they were aware of the



risks and were tired of the repetitiveness of hearing about them in school every year. Young people who disclosed to drinking alcohol held this view as well as those who claimed to not drink alcohol.

Elsewhere it was perceived that an improvement in education and knowledge provided about risks would help to equip young people better to make safe choices:

*Non-Teaching Staff Member Lynn: I think our problems are with drink and drugs and I think even if you spoke to the police, to the community it, people, that is where our problem is and I think that is where crime comes from and I think within young people that is the big problem. If we could educate or get rid of that then I think our problems and our dangers would go away.*

*Non-Teaching Staff Member Katy: it's like they are kids bringing up kids where they done the same thing so they don't know any better as parents, so I think it's re-educating the parents to make them see what they are letting their children do.*

Not only is it believed that young people need education but also the parents need educating according to Non-Teaching Staff Member Katy. The notion that 'kids are bringing up kids' was emphasised as contributing to the lack of awareness that young people had about certain behaviours. In situations where young people are being brought up by *young* parents, the social status of the parents ('young people who don't know any better') fuelled the perception that young people do not know the impact of drinking and drugs. Adults are considered as the knowledge bearers and conformers and young people are perceived as the knowledge-receivers and the irrational rebels. Other adults highlighted that providing information should equip young people to be safe:

*Pupil Support Teacher Clare: Again all we can do is provide them with information, we don't go in and say don't do this don't do that.*

Pupil Support Teacher Clare highlights that teachers cannot control what young people do with their knowledge, that all they can do is provide the information.

I would not go as far to say that knowledge and awareness of the risks of alcohol and drugs etc. is useless or unimportant for making informed decisions, however the above section highlights that beliefs about young people's decision to engage in risk-taking behaviours are often located around the assumption that risk-taking is a reflection of a cognitive failure, as it can only make 'logical sense' that those who drink and take drugs are those who are uneducated and lack intelligence.

### **Relationships with Other Young People**

#### **Social Capital – Bonding and Bridging**

Young people in this study considered their friends to be a dominant protective factor, despite having constructed 'other' young people as a perceived risk of harm. Friends and peers were considered as more trustworthy than adults and they were most likely to recall experiences of other young people intervening to reduce a risk of harm than adults' intervention. This protective factor was identified by both young men and young women, with protection being exhibited in different, but meaningful ways. It emphasised that not all young people can be considered as a protective factor but, just as with adults, there needed to be a specific 'close' relationship or 'friendship' with others if the relationship were to be considered as protective.

Young people reported that they expected a friend would protect them from harm and not intentionally put them at risk of harm. Adults in the school and in the youth club discussed several known examples of observing young people helping each other:

Classroom Teacher Michelle: *I think there is certainly a lot of strength with the bonds that they've got, even if they were from different groups. If the kids knew another kid's really struggling, I think they'd get a lot of support and a lot of help*

Pupil Support Teacher Moira: *I think it can vary. I know some of mine have called ambulances for some of their pals who are in a very poor state um, whether or not they've actively helped them get into that poor state is debatable. I think they do have a recognition that some people go too far and there are, I know through discussions, they have been thinking of one particular discussions around a youngster who they were concerned was using drugs to the point they talked to staff about it because they were really concerned. They weren't dropping her in it but they were very concerned this youngster was drug using. They didn't want to see that happening. They wanted to see her supported to the point these girls were coming and saying we're really worried about this.*

Teachers were confident in saying that young people's networks were often supportive and protective, in that friends who had access to disclosed information (that possibly no other individual had access to) would respond and either intervene themselves or seek further support from adults. Young people also provided accounts of experiences in which young people were seen to be protecting each other from harm, even if a young person did not request such intervention:

School Pupil Connor: *One my pals, the lassie was drunk. The other lassie phoned her Mum to pick her up. The lassie wasn't really happy about it but she couldn't really walk.*

School Pupil Murray: *Nope, depends if it's serious. A couple of weeks ago I gave my friend a lift home 'cause it was getting really dark so me and my Dad gave him a lift home.*

The above examples demonstrate that young people are capable of weighing up the costs of risk of harm and are also capable of seeking ways out of risky situations, particularly on behalf of their friend's welfare. School Pupils Connor and Murray were not responsible for putting their friends at risk of harm but did however play a significant role in helping to protect their friends from harm. Hence, despite the dominant opinion that young people and their peers are to blame for the eruption of

anti-social behaviours and risky situations, the young men here contributed to the protection and safety of other young people.

### **Protecting Friends from Physical Harm**

The young men spoke about protecting their male friends from physical violence more so than the young women:

School Pupil Connor: *I've told my friend before not to go somewhere 'cause I knew there was people there who wanted to fight him.*

School Pupil Stewart: *I remember I was at the park and folk were drinkin' and it turned out to be a fight. One of my pals was in so I had to jump in and get him oot. Which was kind of a risk, 'cause it could end up turning into me.*

School Pupil Craig: *Someone was bangin' my head off, the wall, eh, and some folk like stopped him. Yeah my mates that stopped him, they jumped him. It's a bit crazy.*

School Pupil's Stewart's account of 'jumping in' to help protect his friend in very physical ways from getting hurt in a fight demonstrates the loyalty and level of commitment that young people can have towards protecting their friends from risks of harm, in this case in a very self-sacrificial manner. Preventing a fight from escalating is also a public expression of protection for his friend, one which will surely have communicated clearly to the friend that Stewart would be willing to do that again. Thus this account is a success story of young people providing protective behaviours. Friends stepping in would no doubt present an appealing option to young people compared with the intervention of an adult police officer which could lead to the criminalisation of behaviour, turning a bad situation into a worse one. Young people therefore demonstrate not only a willingness to protect each other but also the

'capability' to do so successfully when risks present themselves. Such evidence was found not only in the young men's responses, but also the young women's.

### **Responsible for Friends**

The young women believed they were *responsible* for their friends' welfare:

I: who do you think you are responsible for?

School Pupil Katy: *Yourselves.*

School Pupil Emma: *Friends too.*

According to the young men, being a friend to someone bestowed a duty almost or an unwritten expectation that if they needed to, they would intervene to protect their friend:

School Pupil David: *If it's like your pal, you'll help them.*

I: who do you think you are responsible for?

School Pupil Connor: *Your pals.*

School Pupil David: *Or if they dae soemthin' you don't want them to do, you are then responsible for them.*

School Pupil Karen: *I think my close friends would stop me from like being at risk.*

The above responses reveal the significance of friendship ties between young people, that intimacy between young people is significant to the point that young people believe they are *responsible* for their friends. According to School Pupil David, being responsible means being willing to intervene in a friend's situation if that person is 'doing something you don't want them to do', something risky and possibly something harmful. School Pupil Karen echoed this belief, speaking of her certainty about the likelihood of her friends stopping her from putting herself at risk of harm. Friendships

between young people thus present valuable resources and capital contributing to the welfare and protection of young people.

### **Protecting Friends' Private Information by being Trustworthy**

Friendships between young men and young women were quite different in terms of how protection manifested, for the young men, protection and 'helping each other out' was typically described as being expressed in physical ways. For the young women, protection was described as protecting each other from sexual predators and from making themselves 'available' to the risk of sexual predators by being under the influence of excessive alcohol and drugs. However, for young women protection of their self-image, their social status was also highly important to them. Young women discussed the need to be protected in the context of disclosing private information – keeping 'private' information private; friends were viewed as playing a significant role:

*School Pupil Marissa: They just like, keep things to themselves. You can talk to them about anything and they won't say anything. Sometimes people talk about you behind your back.*

Trust was highlighted as an important factor in protective friendships among young women, whilst young men did not highlight this at all, suggesting how young people's friendships are often gendered:

*School Pupil Marissa: I'd only talk to 2 of my pals, 'cause I trust them.*

*School Pupil Lauren: I think the only like, people that would not put me at risk is like, Karen and Marissa 'cause they are like my closest group of friends.*

*School Pupil Karen: We can talk about the same things. Sometimes when you're out you find it hard to talk or make conversation or you'll be afraid you say something that will upset them but when you're around it's just fine.*

School Pupil Lauren: *They need to be trustworthy like, I've known her all my life. Me and Marrison, we used to like, hate each other. Then we became really close and like, she would never like, go like, back and tell anybody anything what I'm sayin'. It's weird how it works like that, if things were happenin' at home and I couldn't talk to my Mum about it I'd go to her. I'd probably tell my friends and just like boys, like there's things I can say to my friends that I'd never say to my Mum. The conversations that me and my friends have are just, I know she'd tell me anything and I'd be the same with her.*

School Pupil Karen: *Probably just the same like, if someone was botherin' me in School, if I couldn't do something I wouldn't ask my Mum I'd ask my friends. Some days you just talk and everythin' starts cumin out eh? You start on one subject and end up talking about somethin' completely different.*

Young women's trust and dependency on their friends appeared to be demonstrated by the mutual sharing of private information and knowing that information had not been disclosed elsewhere. Talking to each other was the main bridge for producing trust between friends, conversations often about concerns over risk of harm, whether about risky behaviours or risky people. Most of the young women talked about the value of their friendships, not just in the sense of being able to share private information but also highlighting that friends who could be trusted were also confided in for both practical and emotional protection. The responses above reflect the significance of protective friendships in maintaining social status and identity for young women.

**'Girls look after Girls more than Boys Look after Boys,' Gendered Perceptions of Young People's Friendships**

Interestingly, young women's friendships were constructed to be more protecting than young men's friendships according to the youth team:

Youth Team Volunteer Emma: *I think girls look after girls more than boys look after boys.*

Youth Team Volunteer Lorraine: *I think boys can handle themselves a bit more than girls.*

Youth Team Volunteer Emma: *They can handle it a lot better I think.*

Youth Team Volunteer Lorraine: *No just when they're drunk, it's just, they handle themselves better in general.*

It was striking that young men's friendships were very much located in dominant beliefs about masculinity, in which men are perceived as 'stronger' than young women and therefore not requiring protection, whereas young women's risk was located in their femininity in which ideas of 'weakness' are assumed, therefore needing protection. Not only were young women perceived to be protecting and supporting each other more so than young men, but young men were viewed as being able to protect themselves better. These opinions are quite contradictory to the young men's accounts of friends intervening to help each other, whether it is to pull a young man away from a violent fight or to offer a parental lift home on a dark night. In light of the young men's responses, they were not conforming to the stereotypical accounts given by the Youth Team. If young women view protection and support as solely meaning the sharing of private information and trust accessed to keep information disclosed between friends, then yes, young women possibly experience these forms of friendships more than young men do. The difference between young women and young men's friendships as constructed by young people appeared to lead them to the conclusion that difference equates to either a higher or lower level of protection amongst male and female friendships. Hence, according to the young women's responses, young women's friendships are perceived as more protective than young men's; yet the data reveals the variety of ways in which young men's friendships are protective. Young people tend to spend more time in same-sex friendship groups so it



is possible that young women have not witnessed young men protecting each other from harm and do not share the same level of intimacy with young men as they do with their female friends. Thus there appeared to be a gap between perceptions about young people's friendships and what happens in practice.

### **Protection against the Risk of Alcohol Misuse**

It was also revealed that young people's friends do not put young people at risk when drinking alcohol, or at least attempt to reduce risk of harm; which opposes dominant opinion that young people put each other at risk:

*School Pupil Lauren: I think if one night we were out and there was like, alcohol involved I think my friends would not put me at risk. Maybe they'd have me like, have a drink but I don't think they'd like, give me too much with a paralytic affect one thing they'd do is like stop me.*

*Youth Team Volunteer Lorraine: I drove past 'em, some of them I actually know. I think they were like 13 at the time, I know her because I ken her, em she was just walking up the road and one of her friends was really drunk walking up past the sports centre and she was falling all over the place and she was lifting her up and carrying her. Yeah, 'cause she was really drunk. I know that I always used to look out for Emma even if she is sober. I was always like "Grrr what?! What's happening?!" 'Cause she's my best friend. If a boy...Like for instance, we were at a night club the other week and her ex-boyfriend was there and he was being a total idiot. He was just like drunk, like me and my friend were like, "Look! Leave her! Go away!" And he was like "Noo" and we were trying to get him away from her but he just wasnae having it, so just trying to protect her in that way.*

*School Pupil Karen: We have quite a big group of friends but like, I know if somebody got out of hand the first person I'd go to would be her but like, I know others if like, she wasn't there I know other ones would help me too but like, I'd probably feel more safe around her you know than anybody else.*

*School Pupil Lauren: I think the only like, people that would not put me at risk is like, Karen and Marissa 'cause they are like my closest group of friends.*

All the responses above suggest that the young women are highly emotive about protecting their female friends in meaningful and successful ways. Protection could

come in the form of keeping an eye on alcohol limits to fending off unwanted sexual attention from men. Not only did School Pupil Lauren highlight that her friends would not encourage her to drink 'too much' but also she believed that her friends would step in and take action if they perceived she was drinking too much. It could therefore be suggested that friends have a role in 'controlling' alcohol intake and negotiating the risk of getting extremely drunk.

### **Negotiating Alcohol Consumption**

Young people talked about how they manage their alcohol intake and make conscious choices to negotiate the risks taken. This highlighted a contradiction to what many adults believe about young people's ability to control how much they drink. School Pupils Karen and Lauren provided an insight into their experience:

School Pupil Karen: *I'm not sayin' you're in control with alcohol but you can like, determine how much you're gonnae take. It's like if the person has self-control, if they have enough self-control they won't do it around people who do do it.*

School Pupil Lauren: *I think I'm ok with like alcohol 'cause I'm not an idiot with it. I know when to stop.*

School Pupil Karen: *I can have like, a drink and then that will be me, I'm fine.*

School Pupil Lauren: *I don't really drink that many times like.*

School Pupil Jenny: *I think you have control of yourself.*

Youth Worker: *I've heard eh one guy telling me that em, there's a there's a big peer group, we're talking fifth and sixthth years and older and they'll go along and they'll camp outside so then one half will drink, one half won't so they look after the other half if they go out to a party. Then they change over now, I don't know if it's as clear. This is what he has told me em, then they'll make sure they get home and I'm like, "Oh my goodness!"*

These comments suggest that young people are aware that there are safe limits and consequences of drinking large quantities of alcohol, by demonstrating their active

choices about how much to drink. It also suggests that those who are seen to get extremely drunk are labelled as 'idiots' or are understood to lack in rational and coherent decision-making. It may be suggested that as adults do, young people also negotiate risk and make wise choices about how much to drink. The example provided by the youth worker suggests that young people take responsibility for each other and are willing to make social and physical sacrifices in order to reduce risk of harm to each other. In this example, the young people were using abstinence from alcohol as a means of control and took turns in their 'roles' of making sure the individuals who were drinking got home safely.

### **Protection against Risk of Harm in Public Spaces**

Whilst it was widely acknowledged that public space presents a risk of harm to young people; the respondents also talked about how they negotiate these risks. One method included avoiding public space altogether (a solution presented and preferred by most adults) and secondly, friends were considered to protect each other whilst exploring the risky public domain.

### **Avoiding Public Space to Reduce Risk of Harm**

Based on the belief that being outside in the dark was risky, many young people revealed that they purposefully stay indoors in order to stay safer and avoid unwanted social encounters. Young people being outside on the streets was viewed as a risk by most adults, therefore avoiding public space all together was a preferred means of risk avoidance amongst adults. It was clear parents had projected their own fears onto their children. Parental means of control including curfews and giving young people lifts played a key role in young people's avoidance of public spaces. It was anticipated

that young people would discuss how their parents had instilled restrictions on their spatial activities, yet more surprisingly, the young people expressed strong views about the advantages of staying indoors in terms of keeping safe.

It was also revealed that young people shared information with their friends as a means to protect them from risk of harm:

School Pupil Connor: *I've told my friend before not to go somewhere 'cause I knew there was people there who wanted to fight him. They are usually at the parks and stuff like that. I dinnae go that way anymore 'cause they are there. You ken places to avoid, whereas like other folk don't, my Mum and that wouldnae.*

School Pupil Edward: *We tend to, usually we're either at each other's house but sometimes we go out. Not much, just because it is quite boring.*

School Pupil Murray: *You just don't go out, you just stay in usually, and...spend most of our time at School or on Xbox.*

School Pupil Cameron: *You try to avoid the people that are actually in the groups and that, well I don't mind goin' out in the day time but at night I'd rather stay in.*

School Pupil Lauren: *I've never been like outside but it's like I'd never go out I stay in people's houses.*

Interviewer: Why?

School Pupil Karen: *Because it's safer.*

School Pupil Lauren: *It's better bein' in somebody's house.*

School Pupil Karen: *It's safer 'cause you're not on the streets.*

School Pupil Lauren: *When you're in a house and with people, you know who you're with.*

The fear of public spaces appeared to be the driver for making decisions about what leisure activities to engage in, with whom and where. The young people above clearly felt strongly about avoiding spending time outside if they could help it, even to the extent of going between places they depended on lifts from their parents. School Pupil Lauren also highlighted that sharing space with people she knew was a safer option

compared to sharing public space with people she did not know, making the assumption unknown people are dangerous. Young men also take great measures to avoid being in public spaces due to the belief that public spaces are dangerous to them, as public space and streets especially are often considered as men's territory. Private spaces were appealing to the young people as they were seen as bases which could be controlled.

Parents who drive presented valuable resources for getting around safely:

School Pupil Lauren: *Sometimes you need to get lifts to places and stuff but,*

School Pupil Edward: *I don't walk that much anymore, I actually would rather be taken a lift.*

Young people would take such decisions and negotiating into their own hands, ensuring the perceived safest outcome available was pursued. If all else failed and they needed to be outside, it was expressed that friends could be trusted to step in and help if a risky situation occurred:

School Pupil Karen: *It's like, I'd never think goin' out. If I was goin' out I'd never think I'll be fine 'cause I'm with a group of people. I at least know that if somethin' did happen they'd be there. It's like scary it definitely is a risk.*

School Pupil Lauren: *I think like movies have a big influence on like why you're scared, I can't even walk from like Marrison's to mine and it's only up the road. I think movies and the news, but I would never walk alone with both ear phones in.*

School Pupil Lauren here mentions not using both ear phones as a precaution so as to increase discernment as to whether a risk is present or not. This example suggests that young people believe they need to be on high alert all the time when occupying public spaces. Their views were quite extreme and their conception of the public sphere also

extreme. Media stories clearly had an influence upon constructing beliefs about what public spaces are like for young people as references were made to the media coverage of the abduction of two school girls in the U.K who were taken from a public space and murdered. Surprisingly young people did not view restriction of being outside as a risk in itself, the lack of exercise and being outside was not identified as a risk of harm. The private sphere was thus constructed as a safe space and a space in which young people were expected and encouraged to occupy.

This was the product of a combination of parental beliefs and known incidents of local knowledge. It could be suggested that the young people were more content with being in the private domain as this was the place where their identities were not challenged, threatened or tested. At home young men felt they were avoiding physical violence and young women were avoiding sexual violence. At home and school young people can accept the authoritative power of adults including teachers and parents, whilst being able to choose which young people they spend time with. Hence a more controlled space was equated with a safer space.

The analysis showed that young people viewed their friends as a safety net and a support resource for managing risk of harm in public spaces, whilst adults viewed young people as a risk of harm to each other in which all friendships were destructive and laden with peer pressure and corrupt company. Friends were seen by young people to be individuals who could be trusted to discern when they were at risk and to take the necessary action to protect them. This was a valuable resource considering most could not trust other members of the community including the police to protect

them if necessary. The responses also suggested that young people believe they need protection in public spaces.

School Pupil Connor: *I ken they were fighting with his pal and I was like, "I'll take you hame." He was fallin' into a bush so I took him hame.*

School Pupil Cameron: *It makes you stay with your friends more, don't wanna be alone and that.*

School Pupil Lauren: *Like I was meetin' this guy the other night. I was texting Karen to get her to come out with me. I was like "You're comin'," it would give me an excuse to go.*

In the case of protective factors for reducing risk of harm to young people; most adults spoke about keeping young people indoors as a means to keep safe whilst young people's views provided the further factor of friendships, relationships characterised by trust which provided the benefit of protection from harm. It is clear from the above responses that young people's friendships are not meaningless and disposable yet represent social networks that have value; and the value leads to the capital of resources for protection and sustaining of shared identities. Young people in public spaces therefore benefit from such *preferential* relationships in which those 'known' to each other provide protective resources whom can be trusted if a risk of harm presents itself. Reciprocity in the context of looking out for each other's safety appeared to be a common characteristic of how relationships functioned among young people in public spaces.

It could therefore be said that social capital amongst young people provided a means for reducing risk of harm. The impression was also that, in their view, social capital was available in sufficient measure to protect them when needed. The only relationship in which social capital was identified was in those with other young people. A minority identified as being able to trust parents to help reduce risk of harm, yet even some

pointed out that parents do not tend to be outside with young people therefore they are not an accessible resource for reducing risks of harm in the public sphere. In this study the young people are very much active agents in the production of social capital, in which the capital is utilised in the context of accessing friendship bonds as a mean to 'get by' in the seemingly risk-infested world of public spaces.

There did not appear to be any explicit gender differences among the experiences shared; as both young men and women referred to ensuring they were with friends when socialising outside. However, when young women met with young men, they took their friends with them so as to not project a misguided impression of meeting for sexual activity, as School Pupil Lauren said taking her friend would 'give her an excuse to go.'

### **Summary**

This chapter has presented the themes which emerged from the data regarding perceptions about the role of social capital in reducing perceived risks of harm to young people. Firstly, the chapter presented themes which emerged from the data. It was widely asserted that following the moral code of right and wrong behaviours should in practice facilitate safe behaviours among young people. Young people who did not conform to right or acceptable behaviours were labelled as trouble-makers or idiots. Closely linked to morality was the notion of rationality and cleverness, as young people who engaged in risky behaviours were labelled as idiots or perceived to fail in rational thinking. In returning to the research questions, young people's friendships were constructed as protective mainly in the views of young people; with some adults providing specific examples of young people demonstrating behaviours which sought



to reduce the risk of harm to their peers. Friendships which were characterised by trust, loyalty and sensitivity to keeping private information private were perceived as protective. The responses suggested that young people's friendships are constructed as highly gendered, with young women viewed as being more likely to look after each other compared with young men. Young women were also constructed as needing more protection compared with young men, who were perceived to be able to 'handle themselves better.' In the context of reducing the specific risks associated with drunkenness; negotiating alcohol limits consumed and young people taking turns in fulfilling protective roles were identified by young people and adults. In relation the perceived risks located in public spaces, avoidance strategies were utilised by young people to reduce the risk of harm as well as sharing local knowledge about where to avoid. The following chapter discusses the key findings and provides a review of how previous research on young people either confirms or refutes the main themes which emerged from this study.

# Chapter Eight

## Discussion and Conclusions

### Introduction

The aim of this study was to understand how adults and young people view the main risks of harm to young people and whether social capital played a role in young people's responses to perceived risks of harm. Data was obtained from qualitative interviews and focus groups with young people and adults in various roles in a Secondary School and Youth Club. Whilst a range of themes are presented in the findings chapters, this chapter focuses specifically on the more significant of these which are: young people's drinking as deviating from socially constructed norms; risk and blame; how perceptions of alcohol and public space risks were gendered and the contrasting views towards whether strong inward looking bonds helped to reduce risk of harm.

The sociology of youth, social capital and risk theoretical perspectives are drawn upon to facilitate a further understanding of the study findings. These theoretical frameworks share a common concern with power, norms and resistance in the lives of young people. By reflecting on the study findings in the context of the differing ideas found with childhood, youth and gender theoretical frameworks, the utility of ideas found within these frameworks are evaluated as a means of understanding the views of young people and adults in the context of risk of harm. This chapter concludes by highlighting the theoretical and empirical contribution of this study, including the implications for future research, policy and practice.

## **Young People's Drinking – Deviating from Socially Constructed Norms**

One of the main research questions was: 'What are young people and adults' perceptions of the main risks?' The study found that alcohol was identified by both young people and adults. In young people's responses, the perceived prevalence of alcohol consumption meant that alcohol was identified as a main risk of harm to young people.

### ***Drinking as a Rite of Passage vs. Deviant Drinking***

Tensions were identified between those who perceived young people drinking as a rite of passage in the transition from youth to adulthood, and the majority of participants who perceived young people drinking alcohol as a deviant act. Many adults and young people normalised drinking alcohol as an anticipated experience of 'growing up'; 'it's just somethin' that you do.' The perceived acceptability of excessive drinking was identified as contributing to alcohol posing a significant risk of harm. Therefore, the drinking culture was thought to contribute to the probability that young people will often get excessively drunk. Paradoxically, young people experiencing drinking as a one off was accepted as normal and almost a rite of passage, whereas any level of drinking that was more continuous was viewed as a social problem. Those who accepted drinking as part of transition are possibly accepting a certain degree of risk, that transition requires risk, that not taking risks might be bad for young people.

In the literature it is argued that in the absence of formal rites of passage young people in contemporary Western society create their own spontaneous rites of passage which may be harmful (Van Gennep, [1909] 1960; Robb, 1986). However this does not help to explain why some young people expressed a strong aversion to risky

practices in this study including smoking and drinking whilst others admitted to such practices. Furthermore, the rite of passage theory also does not help to explain the specific negative beliefs about young women who drink. In looking to other possible explanations for young people's alcohol consumption Bourdieu (1977, 1984) suggests that most people do not think about what they do because they do not have to.

'Practice' is routine, conducted unthinkingly and guided by an implicit logic, world view or 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1977, 1984). However the evidence presented in this study contradicts the conclusions suggested by Bourdieu that individuals are predisposed to ways of thinking, feeling, acting and classifying the social world and their location within it. In this study, the sample of young people were taken from the same location, school and age range yet there were differences in their beliefs and disclosed behaviours relating to risk. As it was argued earlier, this theory does not account for individual agency. His theory would suggest that this group of young people are a homogenous group with no marked differences in behaviour or perceptions. However the evidence presented here clearly contradicts that.

The work of Mary Douglas was highlighted earlier as the main theoretical underpinning for exploring perceptions of risk. Her work postulates that perceived risks are best understood as serving to construct cultural boundaries - between individual bodies, social groups within a community and between communities (Douglas 2002). She argues that phenomena which are constructed as 'dirty' or 'polluted' are purposefully labelled as such in order to maintain boundaries or divisions between certain social groups (Douglas 2002). There were small but distinct differences in the perception of young people drinking alcohol between adults and

young people, which support Douglas' approach. Adults spoke about young people drinking as a problem in general yet young people's perception was more specific in the sense that they perceived drunkenness as a risk – not just drinking. Applying Douglas' work highlights that in adults' view: young people who drank any amount of alcohol was a risk as this behaviour "polluted" (Douglas 2002) dominant norms about what it means to be young. Furthermore, when thinking about young people drinking, adults may view this as stepping outside of boundaries as drinking is acceptable for adults, not young people. Young people's drinking was viewed as a threat to the social order, as a threat to breaking down the clearly set boundaries between adults and young people – or "us and them." Douglas highlights that risk is culturally specific and works to establish and maintain ideas or norms about Self and Other (1992). In exploring their thoughts on why alcohol posed a risk to young people, adults highlighted the perceived acceptability of underage drinking in the local community as a reflection of wider norms in Scotland. The connection made between local behaviours and wider norms emphasises the relevance of sociocultural perspectives on risk, where the impact of social norms and beliefs is not discounted in the formation of risk perceptions (Douglas, 1995). Some adults did express that for young people the exposure to this risk was determined by individual choice. Yet the more prevalent voice highlighted that the distribution of this risk was closely linked with the culture of attitudes towards drinking as an activity unquestioningly due to be experienced by young people.

***“Some people just act drunk so they can be sluts to people” – Risk and Blame***

The study also explored whether perceptions of risk are informed by gender. It was found that perceptions of young people drinking alcohol were influenced by gender constructions of masculinity and femininity. Furthermore, perceptions of risks of harm to young women under the influence of alcohol were mostly centred on sexuality: the risk of unwanted sexual attention; sexual relations and social stigma to young women who drink were highlighted in the data.

Older boys were also highlighted as a particular risk to young women; where older boys pursue women and women are the deciders of whether or not any sexual activity will occur. Women were viewed as having more to lose than the young men, including the risk of rape, the risk of a negative image or reputation and the risk of getting pregnant. The findings also highlighted that young women’s drinking behaviour is often geared towards finding a balancing point between having fun by drinking within the safe limits of alcohol consumption and getting drunk, which may lead to increased vulnerability to perpetrators. Young women were viewed as weaker than young men in relation to their physical response to alcohol. Strong negative perceptions about young women who drink alcohol were expressed by the young people in the study.

These findings support dominant themes in literature about perceptions of drunken young women who are often stigmatised socially for being ‘less feminine’ than what is deemed to be ‘socially acceptable.’ Females who drink alcohol face more condemnation than their male counterparts, reflecting the persistence of traditional gendered (and classed) expectations of ‘respectability’ and historical sexual discourses

about women in public spaces as 'loose', inviting male (sexual) violence (see Skeggs, [1997] 2004; Jayne *et al.* 2012).

Jackson (2006) argues that behaviours departing from 'acceptable' forms of white, middle-class femininity are socially placed as more affiliated to working-class representations, including 'overtly sexualised behaviours.' Thus young women who deviate from what is socially acceptable regarding femininity by drinking alcohol and being sexually provocative are socially labelled as masculine and sexual deviants.

Young women's openness about (hetero) sexuality, which some teachers commented upon, may be part of an attempt at gender boundary maintenance attempt, or a form of recuperation (Jackson, 2006). Jackson points out that for feminists, some aspects of 'ladette' behaviours are positive and a cause for celebration; for example, increased assertiveness, self-belief and use of public space. Yet the views presented from both adults and young people in this study reflect the more critical side of the debate in which women, especially *young* women, who engage in the 'adult' and 'masculine' activity of drinking alcohol in 'adult' space, are a public disgrace and a cause for concern. Fears around young women drinking were voiced more than fears around young men drinking.

The work of Douglas (1992) on risk and blame helps to explain these responses further. Douglas points out members of a given community are not always aware of such norms until they are faced with 'foreigners' within their community. It is the deviant actions or new ways of doing life that exposes or reveals the perpetuating cultural norms and beliefs within the community. In this case, young women who drank alcohol were perceived to be sexually promiscuous and provocative which

resulted in them being blamed as 'sluts' or 'slags.' This behaviour was perceived to strongly deviate away from acceptable norms for young women.

Additionally, the study set out to identify who was perceived as 'Other' according to adults' and young people's perceptions. The diagram below shows a visual representation of young people's perceptions towards drinking, highlighting which perceptions perpetuate the 'self' or who is constructed to be within acceptable norms, and which perceptions construct the 'other' or who is constructed to be outside of acceptable norms. Any young person who displays the 'other' related behaviours is then blamed for corrupting the social boundaries which have been set.

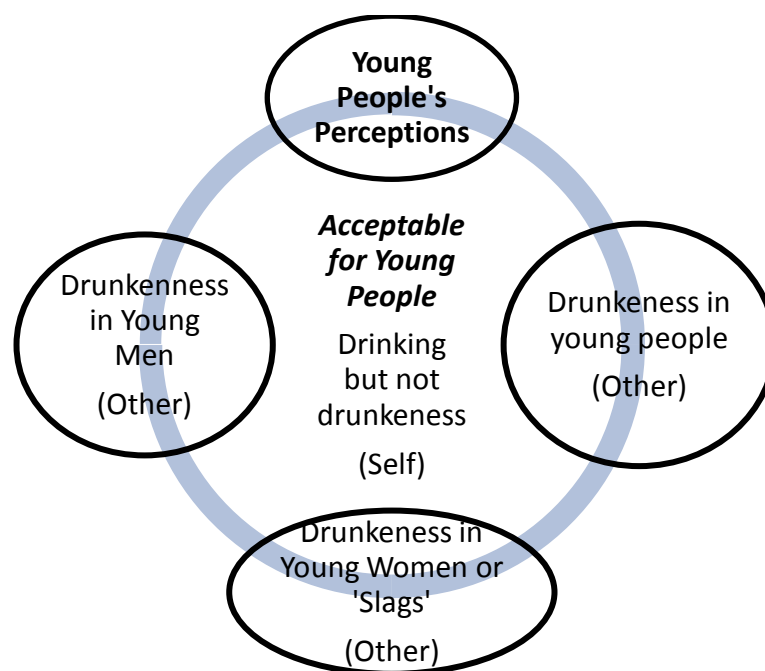


Figure 1

The next figure shows the extent to adults' perceptions towards young people and drinking:



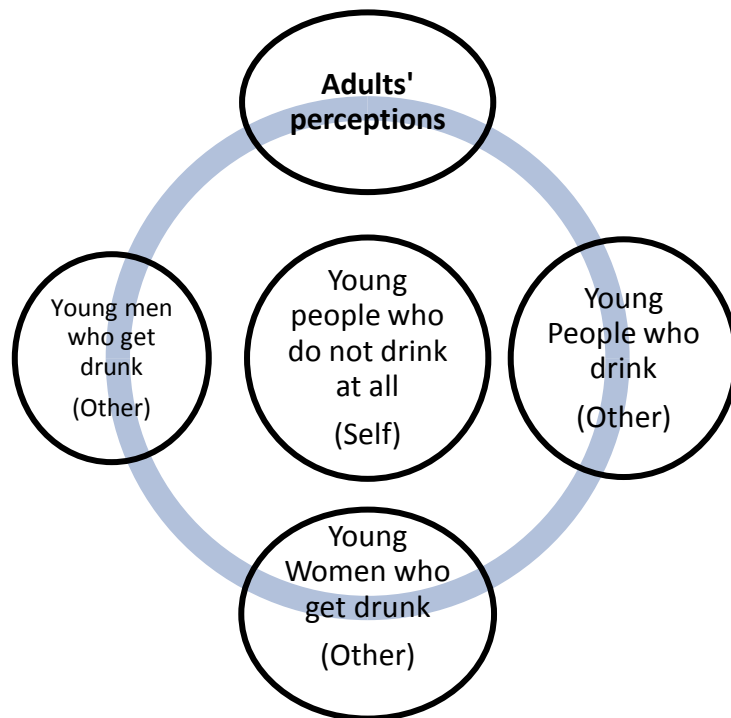


Figure 2

This finding is also parallel to Jackson's (2006) work, in which she found some teachers were explicit about finding drinking much more worrying when the drinkers were girls rather than boys. Young women who drink were simultaneously portrayed as at risk from harm and a risk of harm to others, a continuation of how young people are also portrayed generally (Griffin, 2000).

Literature highlighted that when alcohol is included in any social context it can be interpreted as a symbol that the situation is a sexual one (Ferris, 1997). The young women in this study had learned from experience that when drinking men's misinterpretation of the women's behaviour as overtly sexual was *their* responsibility rather than the men's, which is similar to assertions made by Ferris (1997).

Perceptions of drunken young women acting like 'sluts' is a useful example of Douglas' (1985) emphasis on the identification of risk serving a means of maintaining acceptable norms of behaviours. In this case young women drinking was perceived as

a risk to their social reputation, their behaviours were understood as existing outside of acceptable norms for young women, i.e. it is unacceptable for young women to be sexual beings that drink alcohol.

Moreover, the young men in this study talked about their rejection of other young people's drunken behaviours, acknowledging that alcohol 'changed' them. Drunken young people's 'new' identities were perceived as risky, rowdy and unappealing. Nairn *et al.* (2006) also found that young people in their study constructed alcohol consumption in loathsome terms and in the process validated their subject positions as non-drinkers. The researchers found that young people's 'different identities' when drunk represented ambiguous positioning which were unappealing, disturbing, and to be avoided in the views of their peers. The participants took up roles of being carers for drinking peers. Being the carer often reinforced the participants' decisions not to drink as they witnessed the abject bodies of their drinking peers, where the extent of their drunkenness might sometimes necessitate hospitalisation (Nairn *et al.* 2006).

The young women in this thesis' study were greatly annoyed by their female peers using their drunkenness as a reason to justify their overtly sexualised behaviours - even if the behaviours were suggestive rather than actual. This finding is consistent with other studies exploring young women's perceptions of other young women's drinking experiences (Abel *et al.* 2004). The young women expressed their irritation towards other young women who use their drunkenness as 'an excuse' and as a means to reconstruct their own identities into one which is overtly sexual and seemingly promiscuous (Abel *et al.* 2004). Nairn *et al.* (2006) also found that non-drinkers noticed their friends acting in ways they would not usually act and attributing loss of memory

of events to drunkenness, thereby disassociating themselves from their actions, especially if these involved sexual activity. This 'identity freedom' presents a reason to justify both abstinence from drinking alcohol and a reason to drink alcohol for some. The findings resonate with the work of Kristeva (1982) who found young women perceive other women who use alcohol as a useful excuse for explaining ambiguous performances of identity.

### ***Alcohol-Related Risks of Harm to Young Men***

Continuing the theme of the influence of gendered views towards risk, perceptions of harm to young men who drink alcohol and risks posed by drunken men were found to be located in social constructions of masculinity and personal experiences. Young men who drink are perceived by adults and young people to be more at risk from physical violence and this risk has been found in other studies (Lindsay, 2009; Ferris, 1997). The young men in this study expressed their fear of violence in public spaces perpetrated by drunken men. The young men's fear of public spaces significantly underlies their fear of alcohol-related physical assault. There is little known about the impact of public space constructed as an 'adult space' upon young people's fear of crime (See Goodey 1994; Deakin 2006; Cops 2010; Cops 2013), particularly young men's fear. Sociological knowledge on fear of physical violence among young people is largely lacking (Cops, 2013). Young men said they were responsible for keeping themselves safe therefore it could be construed that young men view themselves to be responsible for reducing the risk of alcohol-related physical assault in public spaces, by avoiding public spaces all together.

The findings here challenge widespread acceptance that young women are more likely to fear assault than young men (Burcar, 2012). It has been acknowledged that when young men drink they often want to start a fight or feel less threatened by other men once they have consumed alcohol (Harnett *et al.* 2000), and men are more likely to report incidences of fighting (Coleman and Cater, 2005); yet it is less acknowledged that young men fear alcohol-related violence in public spaces. Whilst the risks of physical violence were found to be influenced by gendered perceptions, the responses were also informed by real experiences. This combination of contextual meanings and information from immediate social settings and experiences highlights problematic issues when applying 'strong' constructionist theoretical approaches. In this case it is more useful to apply theoretical approaches which consider both the socio-cultural contexts as well as acknowledging that harm does exist.

The perceptions of alcohol-related violence expressed in this study gives weight to Douglas' (1985) emphasis on the importance of researching lay people's perceptions on risk. The young men's exposure to either personal experiences of alcohol-related violence or exposure through witnessing incidents involving their peers supports Kemshall's (1997) assertions that social proximity to risk and imaging the impact of risk on oneself, contributes to the formation of risk perceptions. The close-knit ties which characterised this community further accentuated the proximity of the young men's awareness of the risk of physical violence.

The identification of alcohol as a main risk of harm may have been influenced by the timing of the data collection. The young people said they were learning about the risks of alcohol in school whilst the data was being collected. It is likely that their responses

were influenced by their learning however it was clear the young people had exposure to alcohol consumption whether personally or indirectly within their community. It is also possible that the emphasis on control and competence reflects the younger age of the participants (compared with 'older' teens): for them it is especially important to show themselves as capable and competent persons, who are able to master different aspects of the adults' world.

### **Public spaces as Risky**

One of the key findings in this study was that all participants perceived public spaces as posing a main risk of harm to young people. It was accepted as 'normal' for young people to predominately occupy private spaces and adults to occupy public spaces. It was not anticipated that young people would identify public spaces as a main risk of harm as the majority of the literature discusses the ways in which young people are purposefully restricted from accessing public spaces (Valentine, 1996). It was anticipated that adults would construct public spaces as risky, as the literature demonstrates how public spaces are often occupied and defined mainly by adults.

### ***Gendered Perceptions of Risks Posed by Public Spaces***

Public spaces were socially constructed as risky due to their perceived unpredictable and chaotic nature. Both adults and young people constructed public places as dangerous because of the perceived 'lack of control' of what happens and of who occupies public spaces. Young people talked about public spaces as the site for which risky behaviours were exhibited by risky individuals or groups. Young people's perceptions could be explained by their interpretation of local gossip, media coverage

about dangerous incidents happening to young people and in some cases personal experiences of risk.

Perceptions held by the young people about public spaces were strongly influenced by gender and age. Generally men in public spaces who were older were constructed as 'doubly' dangerous to young men and young women. The young women talked about older boys posing a risk of harm to young women in a sexualised context, in which older boys were viewed as sexual predators initiating sexual behaviours with younger women. Older men were also perceived by the young men as a real threat to social harmony when occupying public spaces. Both experiences and fears informed their beliefs about older men presenting the risk of physical violence to younger men.

Hence older age and masculinity were perceived as risky to young people in particular.

These findings are consistent with the literature, as Hollander (2001) found in her interviews with young people that a combination of different social statuses equated with increased perceived risk of harm or 'dangerousness.' Young women's responses in this study echo dominant themes in previous research concerning women's fear of crime (Ferraro, 1996). Furthermore, despite noticeable gender differences in prevalence of crime, women have been found to be afraid of *all* types of crime (Karmen, 1991, cited in Ferraro, 1996) which is clearly demonstrated in School Pupil Karen's response 'everything's a risk'. When people believe crime or violence to be a possibility, their reaction may include constrained behaviour or adjustments in routines as a perceived means of reducing risk of harm (Ferraro, 1996). In this study, two young women provided an account of an unknown man harassing them sexually and not taking 'no' for an answer. They used humour when reflecting on what had

happened which is typical of the wider issue of women minimising the violence or assaults experienced by male perpetrators (Kelly & Radford, 1990:42):

When women say 'nothing really happened' - a frequent remark which prefaces accounts of things which did indeed happen - they are minimising or denying experiences. Very real things happen when we are followed or chased on the street, when male partners insist on sex or engage in systematic emotional abuse - we do not feel safe, our trust is betrayed.

The young women's responses significantly challenge the relevance of applying strong constructionist approaches as they understate the harm and danger that exists.

Local hangouts were described as places which were typically adult free and architecturally barren from further urban development, rendering such spaces as increasingly deviant in the eyes of other public space users who typically occupy 'planned' spaces. According to Childress (2004), young people make great social use of their communities' leftovers – the negative space in the positively planned and owned world – and pioneer the use of new virtual spaces that adults often do not see. Zill (1983) suggests that heightened concerns about the vulnerability of young people to 'dangerous strangers' are also responsible for this 'retreat from the street'. It was not unsurprising to hear that the young women preferred private spaces to public spaces, as young women have been known in previous research to use their own homes as the base from which they explore and reproduce identities, whilst at the same time resisting young men's dominance of the streets (McRobbie and Garber, 1976).

### ***Adults Posing a Risk to Young People in Public Spaces: Reinforcing Young People as the 'Other'***

One of the key findings in the study was that young people talked about public places being a risk of harm because of the adults who occupy them, including the police,

violent people and sex offenders. In contrast, School Staff and Youth Workers did not identify the police or adults as a source of risk to young people. Additionally, adults tended to talk about unknown people or strangers as presenting a risk of harm to young people. Before the data was collected, it was not anticipated that the police would be constructed as a risk of harm to young people.

Young people viewed the police as facilitators of reinforcing acceptable and 'normal' social norms associated with public spaces, including reinforcing that it is not acceptable for young people to explore such spaces. The police were considered by young people as a risk due to their ability to control and criminalise, control, embarrass and restrict young people. Young people felt less safe rather than safer with the presence of police officers in public spaces. Furthermore, the young people in this study expressed a degree of frustration with the police. Police officers' perceived inaction to protect young people and perceived inconsistent presence were key reasons as to why young people in this study did not trust them. Specifically, the young men shared personal accounts of being approached by police officers, saying they felt intimidated yet annoyed that the sheer encounter with the officers provoked them to feel they were doing something wrong when they were not. Such encounters reinforced young people's awareness that young people as a group occupying public spaces were to be treated with suspicion.

As it was established in the literature review that Douglas' (2002) theory forms a key underpinning to this study; her work on perceived risk as a way of constructing the 'Other' helps to deconstruct this finding. Young people's responses strongly indicate that adults, particularly the police officers' responses, reinforce young people's



identity as 'Other' when occupying public spaces. Furthermore, young people's awareness of their unwelcomed presence in public spaces as reinforced by police officers' controlling measures, points towards young people's 'contamination' (Douglas 2002) of 'pure' public spaces. Hence young people's attempts to socialise on the streets and parks in this study were constructed as contaminating such spaces. Therefore the perceived risk of young people serves to construct the cultural boundaries between public spaces as adult space and the 'normality' of young people within private spaces. The responses of adults in this study are consistent with this theory as one adult said 'you hear them all see at this time of the year and it's *mucky*,' (Non-teaching staff member Jane). Hence, associations made between young people being outside and images of dirt or muck, as expressed by adults in this study, supports the argument that risks are socially constructed to maintain social boundaries. This finding also supports the rejection of other theoretical approaches to risk, including Beck's (1992) risk society which understates the influence of social and structural norms in shaping people's views of risk.

Furthermore, it was highly significant that adults did not identify the police as presenting a risk to young people. The absence of this recognition in adults' perceptions suggests that adults may perceive police officers' presence and attempts to exclude young people from public spaces as 'normal' and in keeping with the 'normal' social boundaries of public spaces.

The identification of police as perceived risks to young people in public spaces is consistent with the literature. Miller *et al.* (2015) also found that young people continually referred back to experiences of how they believe that they are stereotyped

and perceived as trouble due to their age which made them highly visible in their communities. It has also been identified in the literature that young people, compared to adults, have expressed a less favourable (or more indifferent) attitude toward the police (Hurst and Frank 2000). Dobash *et al.* (1986) identify that young people reported the manner and style of encounters with the police as impolite and aggressive. Many studies have shown that attitudes toward the police are influenced by personal police contact (Griffiths and Winfree 1982, Brown and Benedict 2002). Hopkins *et al.* (1992) suggest that young people's experiences are often police-initiated with the young person positioned in the role of the deviant suspect under rigorous surveillance. It is also recognised in the literature that young people often feel discriminated against as social relations which play out between young people and the police in public spaces are different from those observed by adults and the police (Hopkins *et al.* 1992). Police officers use their social power and authority to reproduce young people's social positioning in public spaces as 'wrong' and 'unjustified', sending the message to young people that they must have a 'legitimate' reason to socialise or even operate in public spaces, whereas adults' presence goes unquestioned (Hopkins *et al.* 1992). Young people may perceive efforts to exclude them from public spaces as a barrier to securing an 'adult' identity (Hopkins *et al.* 1992).

It is recognised in the literature that young people are increasingly battling for their use of public space as they come under a growing level of interfering surveillance (Crouch, 1998). The findings here are also echoed in Laughlin and Johnson's (2011) study in which the young people did feel that police could sometimes be helpful; the

majority however cast the police in negative light and recounted experiences of a lack of response and action, harassment and false accusations.

Other adults considered as a risk of harm to young people were sex offenders. The possibility of an unwanted encounter with a sex offender added to the construction of the public domain as an adult domain, one in which dangerous adults are seemingly permitted to exist. The views presented by the adults and the young people suggested that the 'responsibility' of whether a young person is at risk from harm inflicted by a sex offender lies with the young person and their decision to socialise in 'adults' space,' not with the sex offender. Thus it appears that adults and young people have accepted that it is 'normal' for deviant adults to occupy public spaces and therefore it is not normal for young people to spend any amount of time in public spaces.

Furthermore, young men in the study provided accounts of encountering violent perpetrators on the street. Their accounts challenge claims that young men are less likely to report violence against them out of fear of obtaining the 'victim' identity which significantly deviates from masculinity norms (Burcar, 2012). Robinson's (2000) assertion that social identities and practices are often shaped and reinforced by the street experience is confirmed by young people's responses in this study.

These findings complement the literature which highlights that the street acts as a familiar organizer of local knowledge (Bourdieu 1984, Crouch and Matless 1996, cited in Robinson, 2009). It is the provider of memories of past interactions and it charts people and incidents which are conceptualised as out of the ordinary (Robinson, 2009). Valentine (1996: 590) argues that 'public space becomes defined as 'naturally' and 'normally' an 'adult space.'" She demonstrates that in order to protect their spatial

hegemony, adults develop a range of strategies to restrict children's access to public space, including reporting children to the police, interrogating children on the street, and calling through the media or democratic processes, for more controls such as curfews and increased use of CCTV cameras. Matthews *et al.* (2000) argue that public spaces to young people should be interpreted as a thirdspace set between the same (adult) and other (child). For many young people public space becomes reconstructed as their own private space, especially with the retreat of adults after dark (Matthews *et al.* 2000). This was found in the study as young people talked about occupying spaces which were outside yet rarely used by adults, hence it was reproduced as their private space. Vanderstede (2011) emphasises this ambiguity of the shopping mall and the street as reflecting the intermediate position of teenagers between childhood and adulthood.

### ***Young People in Public Spaces as "matter out of place"***

The social construction of young people as at risk in public spaces as found in this study can be explained applying Douglas' (2002) concept of 'matter out of place.' Douglas asserts that identified risks often indicate the need for a social group to maintain given norms, in this case maintaining public spaces as 'adult space' was perceived to be threatened by the young people occupying them. Additionally, some views presented by adults expressed suspicion around young people's motives for being outside. The ascribed deviance of young people being outside reflects deeper social meanings about space and young people. As discussed in the literature review, matter out of place refers to elements that are difficult to classify in a given culture. As highlighted above, the explanations given by participants as to why they perceived

public spaces as a main risk of harm included 'other' risky individuals including adults and 'other' young people; yet evidence shows that when comparing risks presented in private and public spheres – private spaces or young people's homes are shown to be more dangerous to young people than the latter. In applying Douglas' matter out of place concept, it becomes apparent that norms and beliefs about public spaces as adults' spaces inform such perceptions about public spaces as risky to young people. Specifically, the risk is not that young people are more statistically likely to be harmed in public spaces (as expressed by the participants) but that young people are difficult to classify within public spaces as they are perceived to belong to private spaces. Therefore when young people occupy public spaces they present as matter out of place in the eyes of others as they are not meant to be there.

Emotive responses to public spaces in the study were also reflective of the themes found in the literature, highlighting young people's use of public space as often a controversial issue; there are layers of meaning and purpose attached to young people's negotiation of public space (Robinson, 2000).

### ***'Other' Young People Posing a Risk in Public Spaces***

Continuing with the theme of public spaces, it was not anticipated that young people would identify 'other' young people as a risk of harm. Other young people were considered to be those who were not well known, who were not considered as 'friends' and whom they would not otherwise choose to spend time with. In the views of young people in this study, other older people were almost always expected to be engaging in 'wrong' activities or behaviours. Young people in large groups or 'gangs' were highlighted as being a constant threat in public spaces. The views shared

suggested that there were degrees of territoriality influencing interpretations of who is perceived as safe and who is perceived as dangerous. From the responses of the young people public spaces were associated with sites of conflict with 'other' young people; conflict was arguably assumed to exist because 'others' presented different identities which were interpreted as a threat to their safety. The roles were reversed when the young women talked about visiting neighbouring communities: facing distrust and suspicion from the 'other' young women in particular, the school pupils suggested the other young women were afraid they were going to 'take all the men.' This finding relates to the questions highlighted in the literature regarding who is constructed as 'other' in young people's views.

By revisiting the literature, notions of territoriality were found to be useful in explaining the responses. It is recognised in other research that when young people occupy public spaces increasingly they are more likely to have social interactions with older young people (Blazek, 2011). Kintrea *et al.* (2008: 4) describe territoriality as 'a social system through which control is claimed by one group over a defined geographic area and defended against others' (cited in Holligan and Deuchar, 2009). Territoriality tends to be found in association with youth gangs and social disorder but attachment to place and a desire to protect it does not logically entail a propensity to disorder (Holligan and Deuchar, 2009). Kintrea *et al.* (2008: 12, cited in Holligan and Deuchar, 2009) argue that territoriality is "bound up with the presence of social capital" as represented in psychological resources including trust and attachment. Social capital held by members of certain groups such as gangs and football team supporters' results in outsiders being viewed with suspicion and hostility (Holligan and Deuchar, 2009). In

such scenarios, the term 'bonding' social capital is prevalent; group members trust one another before those deemed to be outsiders (Holligan and Deuchar, 2009). According to Holligan and Deuchar, (2009) the motto that we 'know someone's face' with an implied assertion of trust captures this aspect of bonding social capital. Bonding capital between the young people was perceived as strong, making it increasingly probable that 'other young people' from 'other neighbourhoods' were perceived as risky, as they could not carry the same associations of trust as their 'known' peers did.

Stephens (2008) argues territorialities represent the struggles of young people for the resources that social capital offers for identity maintenance, personal well-being and safety. In cases where individuals perceive others as risky, it is likely to be an occurrence in small, established, face-to-face communities where public space use by group members is likely to be accepted (Childress, 2004).

As highlighted above, strong bonds characterised by trust and reciprocity were included in the participants' responses when speaking about young people and risk. The next section details this key finding more thoroughly.

## **Social Capital**

### ***The risk of bonding social capital***

The study aimed to explore the participants' views on whether social capital played a role in reducing perceived risks of harm to young people. It was found that adults constructed young people's strong inward-looking networks as a risk to their social mobility. The adults commented on the close ties existing within the community and how this was likely to present a barrier to young people wanting to live and work elsewhere. The inward-looking networks according to the adults were closely

connected to the preserving of the community characteristics, identity and socio-economic status. Such patterns were constructed as a hindrance to providing young people with opportunities to engage in heterogeneous bridging relationships, as opposed to homogenous bonding relationships. The adults identified the socially exclusive nature of the community, as bonding networks were strong; bridging networks were perceived as unwelcome and threatening to community solidarity. The culture of the community was constructed by the adults as one which rejects access to network resources outside of the young person's normal circles. The young people did not identify the lack of outward-looking networks or desire to work and live outside of the community as a risk of harm to them.

These findings both confirm and challenge theoretical concepts of social capital.

Firstly, Bourdieu's (1986) assertion that economic capital is the root of all other forms of capital is brought to light here. Adults voiced their concerns about young people remaining in a working class community with few opportunities for social mobility, which in turn was perceived to be directly linked with young people's strong bonds within the community. This point is consistent with Bourdieu's (1990) position which suggests that the production of social capital is linked with the reproduction of inequalities. Therefore in adults' views, bonding social capital presented a risk to young people's economic and social mobility. Young people did not reflect on the economic characteristics of the community as adults did, that is not to say that the young people do not experience the effects of their socio-economic positioning. However it was argued in the literature review that Bourdieu's approach can be restrictive in explaining all social phenomena as his theory takes a determinist



approach. Despite adults' concerns as outlined above, there were exceptions as young people in this study did disclose to visiting other communities to engage in the leisure and social opportunities which were not otherwise provided by their local community. This finding illustrates that whilst Bourdieu's theory is helpful in taking account of the role of economic and structural constraints, his approach does not provide room for individual agency or choice. Young people did speak about desiring to live in another community once they were older, which contrasted against adults' perceptions that all young people desired to remain in the community.

Field (2008) calls this the 'darker side to social capital,' whereby high levels of trust can paradoxically produce high levels of distrust towards new members or outsiders attempting to come into the community. One useful example in this study was the teacher's account of the young people socially excluding a new pupil from another country as he 'threatened' the status quo. This finding resonates with other studies which have found the ties that young people have with their ethnic group or family may become so strong that the social capital may in fact restrict or completely disassociate the youth from 'outside' group ties (Bassani, 2007). The findings in this study resonate with the work of Kemshall *et al.* (2006) who found that young people who were fatalistic about their futures were characterized by having a membership of a tight network of similar persons. MacDonald and Marsh (2001: 384) also found that whilst 'connections to local networks could help in coping with the problems of 'social exclusion' and generate 'inclusion,' paradoxically they could simultaneously limit the possibilities of escaping the conditions of 'social exclusion'".

What this means for social capital theory is that the current concepts may be limiting and too simplistic for providing a full explanation or picture of the role of social capital in young people's lives in relation to risk and well-being. What the study has shown is that young people and adults can hold very different perceptions on what the main risks of harm are to young people. Adults' views on bonding social capital as a risk to young people's development or social mobility could be underpinned by white, middle-class and *adult* discourses on what well-being looks like for a young person. Some of the adults appeared to be undecided as to whether a young girl from this community aspiring to grow up, get married and have children in the same locale was a 'bad' or risky situation. It may also be that as teachers, whose role is to educate and shape young people to be 'successful learners; confident individuals; responsible citizens and effective contributors' (Scottish Government, 2008b), may overshadow their interpretation of young people's choices. Further research exploring the extent to which bonding social capital restricts or reduces the likelihood of bridging social capital in young people's lives, may facilitate a deeper understanding of these issues.

The perception held by the adults is also recognized in the literature, where 'getting lost' in the transition from education to work is one of the key risks of social exclusion for young people (Bynner and Parsons 2002; Yates and Payne 2006; Finlay *et al.* 2010; Miller *et al.* 2015). Those most at risk of becoming socially excluded and joining this group are young people in high deprivation areas, for example in Scotland where this research has been carried out '40% of the lowest attaining pupils live within the highest 10% deprived communities' (Scottish Executive 2006). Young people who have the lowest attainment in schools, live in deprived communities and enter the NEET

(Not in Employment Education or Training) category are more likely to be caught in the cycle of low or no pay, which, as Shildrick *et al.* (2010) highlight, can plague an individual throughout their life, ensuring that they never move out of poverty or the ills associated with it. There has been increasing recognition of the need to draw upon the potential of community education to re-engage disaffected youth (Scottish Executive 2007; Learning and Teaching Scotland 2009). Community-based initiatives are seen to hold the potential to deflect young vulnerable people away from anti-social behaviour through generating social capital between young people and wider members of their local communities (Deuchar 2009).

Despite the message communicated by Bourdieu on habitus and much of the literature on the association between disadvantaged places and low aspirations or outcomes for young people – there is research which contradicts these messages. Kintrea *et al.* (2015) found in their study that the neighbourhood does not appear to exert a negative influence. Young people considered they lived in good neighbourhoods and saw them as places from where they could do well, even if many of them anticipated moving away. This does not readily support the fundamental idea that socialisation processes within disadvantaged neighbourhoods encourage worldviews that are inward-looking, negative and fatalistic (Kintrea *et al.* 2015). This is consistent with other East London studies (e.g. Butler and Hamnett 2011; Dench, Gavron, and Young 2006) that revealed high aspirations among ethnic groups who are simultaneously disadvantaged and upwardly mobile. Such research challenges the determinist view put forward by Bourdieu's theory that individuals are pre-disposed to the worldview as facilitated by their economic and structural environments. It

highlights that even though there may be dominant trends – that young people’s perceptions and agency still needs to be taken into account – alongside the social and cultural contexts. Young people who do aim typically ‘higher’ than is expected of them based on their location will not necessarily achieve such goals, it is still recognised that structural constraints play a role. Yet within the context of this study, it does pose a challenge to the determinist view presented by Bourdieu’s theory.

### ***Social Capital and Reducing Perceived Risks***

This study aimed to find out from adults’ and young people’s perspectives, what role does social capital play in reducing perceived risks of harm to young people? The study identified two key findings in relation to this research question: firstly, that bonding social capital was identified as playing a significant role in helping to reduce perceived risks of harm to young people and secondly, that young people are producers as well as receivers of social capital.

To begin with, both adults and young people identified that strong social bonds which are characterised by trust and reciprocity were utilised in responses to perceived risks. Young people’s networks with teachers but more so with the local Youth Worker appeared to help them to ‘get by’. The relationship aspect of the youth worker with young people was emphasised as crucial in facilitating many benefits to young people including their safety, increasing their connections; opportunities for leisure and becoming a more visible part of the community. Working together, as in mixed professional and non-professional individuals co-operating, was emphasised as an important part of the process required to produce resources which helped to equip young people better.

Nearly every staff member interviewed discussed the strength of the network between the school and the local church in which the Youth Worker was based. The Youth Worker was framed as an indispensable resource to the school and most importantly to the young people.

Additionally, the identification of trusting networks invested in within the community was reinforced when comparisons were made with long-term and short-term youth services in the community. According to the Youth Worker, service providers who were 'newcomers' did not invest in trusting relationships with young people and were perceived as weaker protective sources than those who were community members. Here, adults who share the same community membership with the young people or service users were thought to provide a higher standard of care than 'outsiders' could offer.

Young people were identified as being producers as well as receivers of social capital. More specifically, young people mainly identified their friends as primarily protective of them. Young people's perceptions about the nature of peer intervention were shown to be highly gendered, despite young men and young women equally providing accounts of reducing risk of harm to their friends. Young people reported that they expected a friend would protect them from harm and not intentionally put them at risk. Adults in the School and in the Youth Club discussed several known examples of observing young people helping each other. Young people also provided accounts of experiences in which young people were seen to be protecting each other from harm. The young men spoke about protecting their male friends from physical violence more so than the young women.

Young women's friendships were constructed to be more protecting than young men's friendships according to the youth team. Not only were young women perceived to be protecting and supporting each other more so than young men, but young men were viewed as being able to protect themselves better. The difference between young women and young men's friendships as constructed by young people led them to conclude that difference equates to either a higher or lower level of protection amongst male and female friendships. The perceived difference concerning how young men and women relate to their same sex friends comparatively is recognised in the literature as Oakley comments: 'While it's well recognised that women and men 'do friendship' differently, we don't understand very much how, in fact, friendship 'is done'' (Oakley, cited in Green, 1998).

It was also revealed that young people's friends claim not to put young people at risk when drinking alcohol, or at least attempt to reduce risk of harm, which opposes dominant opinion that young people put each other at risk. The example provided by the Youth Worker suggests that young people take responsibility for each other and are willing to make social and physical sacrifices in order to reduce risk of harm. In this example, the young people were reporting using abstinence from alcohol as a means of control and taking turns in their 'roles' of making sure the individuals who were drinking got home safely. Nominating other non-drinking group members to take responsibility for the safety of other members has been identified elsewhere in research exploring young men's drinking styles (Harnett *et al.* 2000).

Friends were seen by young people to be individuals who could be trusted to discern when they were at risk and to take the necessary action to protect them. A minority

identified as being able to trust parents to help reduce risk of harm. In this study the young people are very much active agents in the production of social capital, in which the capital is utilised in the context of accessing friendship bonds as a mean to 'get by' in the seemingly risk-infested world of public spaces.

In the field of child and youth development, sharing, helping, and cooperative forms of behaviour are hallmarks of social competence in childhood and youth (Wentzel *et al.* 2007). Shore and Compton (2000) examined the self-reported reasons for college students attempting to stop someone from drink driving. They found that increased likelihood of successful intervention was associated with a clear demand and concrete actions, compared with pleas or suggestions. There are also some studies examining friends' protection. Smart and Stoduto (1997) examined young people's protective behaviour regarding drug use by US students. They found that 35.2% reported they had intervened in their friends' illegal drug use, 48.4% for smoking tobacco, 36.8% for drinking too much, and 34.0% for driving after drinking. Bergin *et al.* (2003) found young people valued standing up for others, encouraging others, helping others develop skills, including those left out, and being humorous. Buckley *et al.* (2010) highlights young people are willing to help when a friend is injured. Buckley *et al.* (2010) concluded that young people intend to protect if they feel their friends expect them to and will do so if they feel that they can and have the ability to protect their friends. Flanagan *et al.* (2004) examined the strategies employed by individuals to protect their friends. The proactive strategies of the younger group tended to include talking to the friend or an adult or ending the friendship. Older students, on the other

hand, were more likely to ignore their friends' behaviour or in the case of driving risks, take the keys away from a friend who had been drinking.

The young women believed they were responsible for their friends' welfare.

'Sisterhood is powerful', asserts Griffiths, (1995); not the only author to comment on the nature of female friendships which at best are characterised by trust, loyalty and a deep intimacy. Friendships between young men and young women were quite different in terms of how protection manifested, for the young men, protection and 'helping each other out' was typically expressed in physical ways. For the young women, protection was about protecting each other from sexual predators and from making themselves 'available' to the risk of sexual predators by being under the influence of excessive alcohol and drugs. However, for young women protection of their self-image, their social status was also highly important to them. Young women also discussed the need to be protected in the context of disclosing private information – keeping 'private' information private; friends were viewed as playing a significant role.

The importance of female kin and friendship networks to women's wellbeing is well documented (Green, 1998). Trust was highlighted as an important factor in protective friendships among young women, whilst young men did not highlight this at all, suggesting how young people's friendships are often gendered.

Research on women's leisure has pointed to the importance of talk with women's friends as central to 'leisure highlights' (Green, 1998) and in this case, the young women utilised intimate friendships with other young women as reliable resource for support and potential intervention, with conversation being the centre of this support;



‘some days you just talk and everythin’ starts comin out.’ Young women’s friendships have been found elsewhere to be deep, intense and long-lasting (Griffiths, 1995) in which trust facilitates strong ties between young women and in turn provides social capital – means to resist restrictions of power and control in public and private spaces. Flanagan *et al.* (2004) found that young people do report talking to friends as an intended protective behaviour. Thomas and Seibold (1995) and Pandiani and McGrath (1986) too found that it was the relationship and perceived potential consequences that were important in predicting likelihood to intervene, with those more likely to intervene having a strong relationship with the risk-taker and perceiving greater negative consequences of failing to protect.

In studies about friendships, young women emerge as active agents in their own lives, seeking and implementing positive strategies and forms of resistance to cope with tensions or risks (Griffiths, 1995). In contrast with Hollander’s (2001) findings, this study revealed that young women view themselves as the protector of their friends, whereas other research has shown that women and men view only men as fulfilling the role of the protector. Other research has recognised the role of peer relations in mutual protection and securing each other’s safety among street children (Van Blerk 2005). Peer relationships in adolescence may have both short-term (well-being) and long-term (well-becoming) effects (Sletten, 2011). Friendships can help meet many social and emotional needs. The young women’s responses suggest they are highly emotive about protecting their female friends in meaningful and successful ways. Protection could come in the form of keeping an eye on alcohol limits to fending off unwanted sexual attention from men. This finding is consistent with recent research

about young women who reported a range of protective behaviours to reduce the adverse effects and the risks associated with alcohol (Armstrong *et al.* 2014).

The adults were confident in their assertions of identifying young people as being investors as well as receivers of the benefits of trusting and reciprocal relationships among their peers, within the boundaries of the school community.

Considering the findings of this study relating to social capital in the context of the literature, the implications for the usefulness of the different theoretical approaches may be examined. Coleman's (1994) emphasis on social networks entailing *trust* and *reciprocity* is useful in explaining the nature of the community ties described in this study. The main point was that social networks alone do not necessitate protective benefits, but social networks which are characterised by a consistent effort on behalf of its *members* to invest in effective communication, the sharing of information and a collective aim of protecting young people underpins the success of protective networks. In contrast, Coleman's (1994) claim that social capital is a product of rational choice theory, where individuals exclusively act on behalf of meeting their own interests is also challenged here. For Coleman (1990), intergenerational closure is present where parents support common norms for behaviour, communicate with one another about children's activities and whereabouts and share norms to evaluate children's behaviours. In this study, parents were highlighted by both adults and young people as being responsible for keeping young people safe. However young people did not identify parental networks as a means for reducing perceived risks of harm as Coleman's theory would suggest. In one particular example, a young person admitted to making a conscious effort to prevent her parents from knowing about her risk-

taking activities. These finding highlights the gaps in Coleman's approach as he fails to consider that young people's lives are not only shaped by the authority of their parents but are active in both negotiating risk and producing social capital.

Putnam's (1996) emphasis on social capital providing well-being is relevant here, as the majority of adults identified the relationship between the Youth Worker and the school as being integral to the well-being of the young people in their community. Youth Workers are possibly not hindered by the same professional targets that teachers are subscribed to. The Youth Worker invests in developing close social networks with young people, which increases the accessibility for young people to reach out for support if they so choose. The link between social capital and young people's safety and well-being may be further explained by the advocacy of the Youth Worker for young people, as she has access to other social networks with mixed professionals who provide support services to young people. This is consistent with Putnam's (1996) speculation that social capital can be linked with good health as the well-networked citizen can lobby more effectively for medical services than the less well-networked members. Another strand of Putnam's theory which has also been particularly useful in this study has been his distinction between bonding and bridging networks. Such distinctions has helped to identify the type of networks that young people described in this study with regards to the type of networks they turn to in responding to perceived risk of harm. It was highlighted in the literature that bridging networks can be presented as the favoured bonding, just as was put forward by the adults in this study. However, the accounts given by the young people about the value they place on their trusting friendships, particularly in the context of risk, challenges

this notion that people should only strive for bridging networks. It could be said that the 'darker side' (Field, 2008) of social capital does not detract from the benefits of well-being upon young people who have access to bonding social capital within their community. Additionally, Putnam's recognition of the role of gender in social capital has also been found in this study.

Furthermore, in terms of the benefits of social capital, Putnam (2000) advocates that social capital allows people to resolve collective problems more easily, by sharing information and cooperating. It was previously highlighted that this process may help to explain why perceived risk may strengthen social connections and motivate individuals to tap into their reciprocal networks to keep safe. In this study, young people identified that they did share information as a means to reduce the perceived risk of encountering dangerous adults and other young people by identifying specific areas in which to avoid when occupying public spaces. As this has been linked to who was constructed as 'other', the findings suggest that perceptions of risk do strengthen social connections. This conclusion is the opposite of Douglas' (1992) conclusion that sharing information and perceptions about the other may weaken bonds.

The findings were also consistent with recent empirical work. Most studies exploring young people and social capital have focused on families as the providers of capital, (Bassani, 2007; Barker, 2012); yet this study suggests that other adults in young people's lives can potentially provide high levels of social capital, particularly bonding capital. Deuchar (2009) found that youth work helped to re-engage young people, illustrating how the positive aspects of youth work helped rebuild social capital amongst young marginalised men. Coburn (2011) also found that youth work has a

significant role to play in supporting disaffected young people in gaining a voice and having a more positive influence in their communities. This is acknowledged by the Scottish Executive (2007) and by a growing body of work by academics in the field (Jarret, Sullivan, and Watkins 2005; Deuchar 2009; Coburn 2011; Cooper 2012). The findings also resonate with a very recent study by Miller *et al.* (2015) which suggests that youth work can play an important role in helping young people develop social capital across social groups and networks, which they can use to improve their own lives and those of their communities.

Whilst there are studies which explore friendship and protection in young people's lives, the literature in this area is limited in making the connection between social capital and reducing risk of harm. This study adds to the literature by demonstrating that according to young people's views, social capital plays a significant role in reducing risk of harm. Young people gave accounts of various ways in which protective behaviours were demonstrated, from sharing information ground in local knowledge or providing transport on avoid perceived risky public spaces. It is important to establish a body of empirical work which demonstrates that young people can be producers of social capital just as adults can. This finding supports wider arguments about justifying research which seeks to present the views of young people, presenting young people as social actors in order to challenge the notion that they are 'becoming beings.'

### **Contribution of thesis and ideas for future research**

The theories of Douglas and Calvez (1990), Douglas (1992) and Becker (1963) suggest the need for interventions to integrate young people in danger of becoming isolated or of drifting away from mainstream society, rather than punitive measures that would expel them to the margins of conventional society. They lend theoretical support to targeted interventions that support vulnerable young people, as well as universal interventions that aim to tie young people more closely to their communities. These theories relating to the need for social connectedness appear to have empirical support. Resnick *et al.* (1997) found that family-connectedness and perceived school-connectedness were protective against every measure of health-related risk-taking except a history of pregnancy. A child's sense of belonging and connectedness to their school, a sense of neighbourhood belonging and parental involvement are all related to lower engagement in health-related risk-taking (Brooks, Magnusson, Spencer, & Morgan, 2012). A whole-school intervention that aimed to increase children's sense of attachment and connectedness reduced health-related risk taking by 25% (Patton *et al.*, 2006). The concepts of social integration, connectedness and belonging are related to the notion of social capital (Almedon, 2005) that sits within an assets-based approach emphasising the importance of enhancing the social capital in young people's lives (Viner *et al.*, 2012.)

The theories suggest that while society does not 'cause' risk-taking, it can nevertheless produce conditions that favour risk-taking, particularly if those conditions result in individuals or social groups becoming isolated and detached from the mainstream (Pound and Campbell, 2015). By consistently embedding risk-taking within its social context and emphasising that risk-taking is not something a single individual does, but

is 'collective action', or 'social practice', the theories both relieve us of the burden of judging young people for their risk-taking and enable a greater collective responsibility for the conditions that give rise to risk-taking (Pound and Campbell, 2015).

Within youth studies, a significant body of work exists in relation to risk of harm as young people increasingly live risky lives according to dominant beliefs. However, at times, this work is insufficiently attentive to the views of young people and their constructions of danger and safety; private and public spheres and how their views compare with those of adults. There is a lack of research which sufficiently explores an in-depth approach to what young people perceive to be risky in their lives as opposed to what young people think about risks which have been identified and defined by adults. Studies on risk have predominantly quantified young people's views whilst discounting the intrinsic relationship between socio-cultural contexts and risk perception formation. The main risks of harm to young people have traditionally been explored using adult definitions of risky behaviours which have largely focused on behaviours which present risks to health, whilst disregarding risks to the social worlds of young people. The significance of locating perceptions on risk of harm and protection within the *context* in which they are formed has been emphasised in this study. The findings have affirmed social constructionist theoretical approaches which advocate exploring people's perceptions and the surrounding cultural characteristics within which they are formed (Douglas, 1995). The study also throws light on why young people may ignore 'expert information' and more often than not, live accordingly to their own perceptions which often means avoiding certain places and people.

This study suggests that young people and adults consider drinking alcohol excessively to be one of the main risks of harm to young people as it leads to multiple risks which are constructed along gendered divisions. Secondly young people and adults constructed public spaces to be a main risk of harm to young people, emphasising the perceived 'other'. The study has made a useful contribution by presenting young people's views alongside adults' views on the same topic. Taking this approach has demonstrated that most adults expressed the view that all young people desire to drink excessively, whilst all the young people in the study asserted they did not desire to drink excessively.

This study highlights the specific concerns young people have for their safety in public spaces and draws on their personal experiences of facing situations which were interpreted as potentially dangerous; arguing that gender significantly structures young men's and young women's experiences in this context. Demonstrating that both young men and young women fear male perpetrators in public spaces, the responses presented here indicates that further research would benefit from exploring both young men's and young women's views, taking into account how age and gender divisions structure such views and experiences significantly. Greater exploration of the impact of sexuality, age, ethnicity and class would be valuable as the sample of the current study was comprised primarily of white, working-class young people.

In order to understand and theorise young people's experiences and behaviours, it is crucial to locate young people's experiences as part of a continuum.

Assessing young people's strategies for protecting themselves and each other must also be viewed in this context. Although adults were found to be mostly protective of



young people, there appears to be some resistance to accepting and practicing this role for several individuals. Young people identified social capital in their response to perceived risk of harm. However it was clear that young people express a resistance to turning to adults for support. It is through these particular findings that the study highlights particular implications and concerns regarding current plans for a 'Named Person' in Scotland, where such a person is likely to be an adult in school (Scottish Government 2014).

Considerable private and public scrutiny exists in relation to young people's behaviour, yet it is an area where their voices are frequently overlooked. This study helps to address this gap by foregrounding the perspectives of young men and women themselves. This study also contributes to the public sector debates about reducing risk of harm to young people and taking a young person centred approach by highlighting both the theoretical underpinnings and the practical implications for safety advice to young people on alcohol, drugs and public spaces directed towards young people. By highlighting young people's specific perspectives on these issues, the study contributes to understanding the complex and diverse responses young people make when faced with the contradictory and gendered discourses around risk when socialising in public and private spaces in their community and, in particular, the reasons why young people may adopt, resist or disobey safety advice.

Finally, by drawing upon empirical evidence and theoretical concepts across the disciplines of sociology, health and youth studies, this study has demonstrated the value of working across disciplinary boundaries in pursuit of a deeper understanding of social problems.

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**APPENDIX 1**  
**Parental Consent Form**

## Parental CONSENT FORM

### ***Research Project on Young People and Risk in the Community***

This consent form confirms that you have read and understood what taking part in this research study will involve for your child. Please tick all boxes that apply.

1. I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study.
  
2. I understand that my child's participation is voluntary and that she/he is free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.
  
3. I understand that any information that my child gives will only be used anonymously and she/he will not be identified in reports, publications and presentations.
  
4. I understand that if my child discloses that they are at risk of serious harm, the researcher may first discuss with her/him concerns, and seek help for them by contacting the relevant person e.g. child protection officer
  
5. I understand that direct quotes from the group discussion and/or interview and comments about the study before and after the focus group/interview may be used in reports and these will be anonymised.

6. I understand my child's responses in the focus group and/or interview will be tape recorded

7. I give consent to my child taking part in a group discussion

Parent's Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Child's Name \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Researcher: Jennifer Pringle

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Name of Supervisor: Kirstein Rummery can be contacted for further questions at: [kirstein.rummery@stir.ac.uk](mailto:kirstein.rummery@stir.ac.uk), Tel: 01786 467 693

## **APPENDIX 2**

### **Interview Guide for Youth Worker**

## Interview Youth Worker Questions

- 1) How did the church become involved with the school?
- 2) Can you describe to me the relationship the church has with the school?
- 3) What work do you do with the young people in the school?
- 4) What work do you do with the young people in the youth club?
- 5) Describe your relationship with the young people in the school?
- 6) Can you describe your relationship with the young people in the youth club?
- 7) What are the strengths/benefits of young people being open with you about their personal life?
- 8) How do you see your relationship with young people affecting their life?
- 9) Do you do any work with the parents? If so, what?
- 10) What do you think it is like for a young person living in this community?
- 11) Reflecting on your work with the young people, what do you think are the main risks of harm to their welfare in this community and why?
- 12) How do you anticipate young people's views towards these behaviours?
- 13) Where do you see your role in these areas of a young person's life?
- 14) How often do you approach these issues in your work with young people?
- 15) Who else do you view to having a role in discussing and responding to these risks?
- 16) Who do you think is responsible for reducing these risks of harm to young people?
- 17) Who do you view young people to be responsible for?
- 18) What impact do young people's friendships have on these risks?
- 19) How do young people's relationships with parents influence these risks?
- 20) What impact do young people's relationships with you have on these risks?
- 21) What impact do young people's relationships with their school teachers and staff have on these risks?
- 22) In your view, what are the most effective means of reducing risk of harm to young people?

## **APPENDIX 3**

### **Focus Group Questions Guide for Young People**



## **Focus Group with Young People Topic Outlines and Discussion Questions Schedule**

### **Topic 1 Defining Risk**

**Qu.** What do you think is meant by risk of harm to young people?

In two smaller groups, write down the words risk of harm on this piece of paper and draw a mind map of the main examples of harm to your age group today.

Can you discuss why you think these are examples of risk of harm to young people?

What do you think is the impact of these risks or the consequences?

Why would you define these as harmful?

Do you see these risks as common for your age group?

Do you think there are risks which young people should experience? Are there 'normal' risks for young people to experience? Why?

Would you say you take part in 'risky' behaviours? If so, what motivates you to take part in risky behaviours?

How have your decisions regarding risky behaviours been influenced?

How do the people you spend most time with influence your understanding of what is harmful to you?

How much do you agree or disagree with your friends about what to avoid?

How much do you feel you can control what happens to you?

How much have other people's decisions influenced your safety?

How often do you make choices about keeping safe and well?

Who influences your decisions about taking risks?

Do you think young people's perceptions and definitions on risk of harm is the same or different to those held by adults? If so, in what ways?

### **Topic 2 Defining Community**

**Qu.** Write down who you think is in your community?

Looking at these examples, why are these people in your community and who you did not write down – why are these people not in your community?

Do you feel you belong to more than one community?

How would you describe your experience of community?

How would you describe your role in your community?

What makes you feel like you belong to your community?

What role do you think the community plays in preventing or protecting young people at risk of harm?

### **Topic 3 Responsibility**

**Qu.** Who do you think is responsible for you?

Why are these people responsible for you?

What characteristics do these people have that make them responsible for you?

Are there any people outside of your community that you would say is responsible for you? Who are these people?

In what ways are these people responsible for you?

Let's go back to the list of risks you wrote down and go through them. Who do you think is responsible for protecting you from each of these risks? Why?

What or who do you think you are responsible for?

Who in your community do you think is responsible for you? In what ways?

### **Topic 4 Responding to Risk**

**Qu.** How do you try to keep safe and well?

How do you respond to the risks you mentioned earlier?

Who is involved in keeping you safe from these risks?

Can you give examples of times when people have looked after you/protected you?

How often do you take risks with your friends?

What are the risks to girls? What are the risks to boys?

In what ways do you feel your friends look out for you?

In what ways do adults look out for you?

What makes a person your friend?

Is there anything you would like to discuss which I have not mentioned?

## **APPENDIX 4**

### **Focus Group Questions Guide for Adults**

## **Focus Group with Adults Topic Outlines and Discussion Questions Schedule**

### **Topic 1 Defining Risk**

- Qu. 1) How would you describe young people's lifestyles in your community?
- 2) How would you describe this community?
- 3) To what extent would you say risk is a part of young people's lives in this community?
- 4) What behaviours or signals in a young person would you consider indicates a young person to be at risk from harm?
- 5) Which of the behaviours you discussed would you say were the most to be concerned about and why?
- 6) What factors would you say increase the risk of harm to a young person?
- 7) What role do you think education plays in young people being aware of risk of harm and how to respond to such risks?
- 8) How would you say adults' and young people's views differ on what is defined as risk of harm to young people?
- 9) What do you think influences young people most when making decisions about their welfare?
- 10) What do you think are the main risks of harm to young people in this community?
- 11) How do you think young people perceive these risks and why?

### **Topic 2 Community and Networks**

#### **Qu. 1)**

- 4) When you think of protecting young people from harm, what comes to mind in terms of who is involved?
- 5) What role do you think the community plays in preventing or protecting young people at risk of harm?
- 6) What community or communities do you think young people belong to?
- 7) What do you think a sense of community can offer to young people?
- 8) What role do you think young people's informal and formal networks with others plays in risk management?

9) Who do you think young people are most likely to turn to when they are faced with risks?

10) Who do you think is responsible for reducing the main risks of harm to young people in your community?

### **Topic 3 Responsibility**

**Qu. 1)** Who do you think you are responsible for in your community?

2) Why do you think you are responsible for these people?

3) In what ways are you responsible for them?

4) What aspects of their well-being would you say you are responsible for and in what way?

5) Who do you think is responsible for identifying young people at risk of harm?

6) What are your thoughts on the resources you have/there are for being responsible/protecting young people?

7) Do you think adults are effective at monitoring the well-being of young people?

8) How does your relationship with a young person influence your responsibility for that person?

9) What resources do you think young people have to reduce risk of harm?

10) What role do you think young people's friendships have in the context of risk?

Is there anything you would like to discuss which I have not mentioned?

## **APPENDIX 5**

### **Interview Questions Guide for Adults**

## Interview Questions for Adults

- 1) How would you describe young people's lifestyles in your community today?
- 2) In your view, what are the main risks of harm to young people in your community today?
- 3) What do you think are the main risks to young people's emotional welfare today?
- 4) What factors do you think contribute to these risks?
- 5) What do you think are the main risks to young people's physical welfare today?
- 6) What factors do you think contribute to these risks?
- 7) In your opinion, what social norms, beliefs and ideas do you think contribute to these risks?
- 8) Why do you consider these behaviours or actions as risky?
- 9) Do you think young people would also view these as risks of harm to them?
- 10) What risks do you think are acceptable risks or risks that young people have a right to experience?
- 11) Can you think of any benefits to young people facing risk of harm?
- 12) How would you describe young people's decisions concerning risk of harm to their welfare?
- 13) To what extent do you think young people make informed decisions about risk of harm?
- 14) To what extent do you think young people are aware of the consequences of actions that can put them at risk of harm?
- 15) What do you think are the main obstacles to reducing risk of harm to young people?
- 16) How would you describe young people's social networks?
- 17) What do you understand to be the relationship between young people's social networks and risk of harm?
- 18) In your view, who should protect young people from the main risks in your community?
- 19) Who do you think is accountable for keeping young people safe and healthy?
- 20) To what extent do you think young people are a part of your community?

## **APPENDIX 6**

### **Focus Group Questions Guide for Young Women**



## Focus group Questions Guide for Young Women

- 1) In the last focus group, alcohol was identified as a main risk of harm to young people. As friends, is drinking something you ever do together?
- 2) If any, what are the good aspects of drinking?
- 3) If any, what are the bad aspects of drinking?
- 4) Under what conditions do young people drink?
- 5) If any, what are the risks with drinking?
- 6) What are your thoughts on young men and young women drinking?
- 7) You said last time that boys get praised for drinking, is it the same for girls?
- 8) What do you think the risks are for a girl who drinks and the same for a boy?
- 9) Can you tell me about who you think looks out for you and how?
- 10) On the subject of friendship, what makes a good friend?
- 11) Are there different types of friends?
- 12) How do you and your friends respond to the risks associated with drinking?
- 13) What role do your friends, parents and adults in the school play in your life?
- 14) How do you deal with the risks attached to being outside and with the risky people you mentioned last time?
- 15) What do you think makes something a risk?

