"Scotland's Shame": A Dialogical Analysis of the Identity of Young People <u>N</u>ot in <u>E</u>ducation, <u>E</u>mployment or <u>T</u>raining

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Mead (1934) states the way we see ourselves and construct our identity is influenced by our interactions with those around us. These people will form our internal dialogue or our dialogical self (Hermans, Kempen, & Van Loon 1992). The theory of the dialogical self was used to explore the identities of one group of young people described by the media as 'Scotland's Shame' (The Herald, 2007). The Scottish Government have defined unemployed young people as a 'problem' and stated that tackling this problem is a national priority. They have labelled this group as NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training - The NEET Strategy 2006). Forty young people defined as NEET or at risk of becoming NEET took part in a series of naturalistic discussion groups. A dialogical analysis revealed eight significant others; teachers, parents, employers, the media, other people in the community, researchers, 'geeks' and their friends. Analysis also revealed a main source of positive recognition for these young people comes from their friends. This research has highlighted the importance of recognition and the need to further explore this notion for this group of young people.

The Social Nature of the Self

Mead (1934) has stressed the importance of everyday social interactions in identity development. His most widely known concept is "the generalised other" which he theorised that the self can only be developed when the individual adopts the stance of the other toward himself or herself (p.106). Our interactions with others allow us to think about ourselves from a variety of different viewpoints and this has been identified as "the key mechanism of identity formation" (Kinney, 1993). Mead (1934, p.140) has described the self as "essentially a social structure" which "arises in social experience". Hence, the social nature of the self indicates the way in which our perceptions of ourselves may change from one social situation to the next. Mead's (1934) theory of the relational self argued that one's sense of self is mutually interdependent with one's sense of other. What we think that others think of us has a great influence on the way we perceive ourselves and in turn shapes our thoughts, decisions and behaviours.

While identities are constructed verbally through our interactions with others Mead (1934) also discussed the conversations we have internally:

> One starts to say something [...] but when he starts to say it he realises it is cruel. The effect on himself of what he is saying checks him; there is here a conversation of gestures between the individual and himself (Mead, 1934, p.141)

As can be seen in the above example, Mead (1934) describes an attempt not to offend or hurt another person. This running dialogue or commentary in our minds in which we, in

a sense, have a conversation with ourselves and imaginary others help us regulate our behaviour and how we feel we appear to others. This notion has become known as the dialogical self.

The Dialogical Self

Barresi (2002) explains how Hermans, Kempen, and Van Loon (1993) brought together James' (1980) theory of the self and Bakhtin's (1973) theory of the polyphonic novel and formed the theory of the dialogical self.   As Hermans et al (1992, p.29) state "the dialogical self, in contrast with the individual self, is based on the assumption that there are many different *I* positions that can be occupied by the same person".   Each *I* position may represent each of the social roles we occupy and each of these forms different voice within our heads. This can be linked back to Mead's (1934) earlier work when he described our internal conversations and the way we take the perspective of the other to gain information about ourselves.   These others form the voices in our dialogical selves.

Hermans et al (1992) describe how Bakhtin's notions of the dialogical self can be traced back to his thesis based on Dostoevsky. Bakhtin argued that every word, as soon as it enters in a dialogical relationship is "double-voiced" (p.42).   He further stated that "dialogue is at the heart of every form of thought" (p.43).   Thinking of the development of the self in this way led Bakhtin to conclude that "the self is not a given but an emergent" (p.44). Wertsch (1991) adds to this by stating that an individual speaker is not simply talking as an individual but that in his or her utterances the voices of groups and institutions are heard (p.76).   This has become known as ventriloquation, a term which Bakhtin (1973) defined as "the process in which one voice speaks through another voice" (p.78).   Hence, our dialogue is multi-voiced and Barresi (2002) concludes that the self and other are always essentially in dialogue.

Hermans & Kempen (1993) describe how our dialogical selves develop throughout our lives.   The dialogical self appears very early on in children's role play and games, for example, a child may act like an adult, police man or villain.   Role reversal usually appears between 2-3 years (p.69). Later in life the dialogical self is apparent in our ability to rehearse scenarios in our heads, however, "the young child is not able to think "silently" in words, as most adults do" (p.64).   This ability develops as we get older and means that most of us can relate to many different situations, even if they are new. During the period of adolescence we encounter many new situations. Our interactions with others increase and become more and more diverse as we move into new social contexts and this has an impact on our identity development and dialogical self.   It is this complex transitional period that is this focus of the current research.

Adolescence

Developmental literature describes adolescence as a distinctive life stage, characterised by biological, cognitive and social transitions (Steinberg, 1993). Adolescence has been of interest to psychologists for decades, beginning with the work of G. Stanley Hall in 1904. Topics of study include adolescent development, peer culture, education, status attainment and delinquency. However, in a time when "many young people experience the responsibilities and privileges of adulthood much earlier" (Lawrence & Dodds, 2007,

p.404) it is important that we understand as much as possible about this complex life stage. The preceding discussion has highlighted the very social nature of our identity development and it is necessary to understand how young people see themselves and others.

In relation to the dialogical self, when facing major transitions and decisions a young person may have a number of conflicting voices within their heads. They may think of themselves as a son or daughter hearing the expectations of their parents, when in school; they may see themselves as a pupil and hear the opinions of their teachers. They may also want to fit in with their peer group and friends or distinguish themselves from siblings. There are also expectations from wider society especially in relation to young people especially when they reach school leaving age, legally 16 in Britain. Society expects young people to be engaged in some sort of employment or training once they leave school. As Hodgkinson (2004, p.12) states we live in a "work- obsessed world", we look down upon people who do not work and use labels such as 'spongers' and 'free-loaders'. It is perhaps for this reason that our education system is geared towards making people as employable as possible and we recognise people in terms of academic achievements. However, there are some young people who do not make a successful transition from school into further training or work and this group have been targeted by the Scottish Government.

NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or Training)

The Scottish Government have defined this group of young people as NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training – The NEET Strategy, 2006). The Scottish Government states that it is their objective to eradicate the problem of NEET the length and breadth of Scotland. They have identified 35,000 young people in Scotland between the ages of 15 and 19 who are NEET. The label is very negative and defines young people by what they are not. Furthermore, by defining young people in terms of their employment status we may overlook other issues which they need support and help with such as homelessness, abuse and criminal behaviour. Research to date has focussed on quantifying numbers of young people who fall into this category (for example Bynner & Parsons, 2002). It is argued that we need to move from quantifying the numbers of NEET young people to exploring the dynamics of their identities.

Research Questions

To add to the existing knowledge base this research aims to answer the following questions: (1) How do young people who are defined as NEET or at risk of becoming NEET see themselves? (2) How are their identities constructed as they make transitions from council run access programmes to un/employment or further training? (3) Who are the significant voices in the heads of young people who are defined as NEET or at risk of becoming NEET? (4) What do these significant others, which will be identified in question 2, say about young people? (4) Recognition. What part does recognition play in the identities of these young people? What is the impact of negative recognition?
The current research has used the theory of the dialogical self to explore the identities of a specific group of young people. Methods involved participant observation, interviews and naturalistic discussion groups. The data generated was subjected to an in-depth dialogical analysis to gain an insight into the way young people see

themselves. For the purposes of this paper an analysis of the significant others appearing in young people's dialogue will be presented.

Methodology

In order to fully explore the experiences of young people it is important to interact with them in familiar environments and contexts. (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). Therefore to gain an insight into how young people's identities are constructed and produced through their dialogue the ideal setting would be to involve them in discussions with their friends or peer group.

Discussion groups give young people a natural and informal setting which provides a good opportunity for them to discuss topics and issues relevant to them. Moreover, as this research is concerned with a dialogical analysis it is crucial that young people are given the opportunity to talk as freely as possible in order to explore who the significant others in their lives are. Confining young people to written methods such as questionnaires would eliminate the researchers' ability to observe peer groups interacting. Discussion groups allow significant others to be identified in the dialogue young people use, for example, when they impersonate another person. At various times during the research process some young people were unable to attend discussion groups. To ensure they did not feel excluded the researcher met with them individually in convenient public place, typically a local coffee shop and had an informal chat with them and invited them to any future discussion groups.

Through participant observation the use of researcher's field notes will also add to the understanding of the discussion groups and interactions. As Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995, p.28) discuss field notes are useful to note "the perspectives and concerns embedded and expressed in naturally occurring interaction". Field notes ensure that any relevant non verbal communication can be noted as well as the atmosphere in discussions which may not be picked up from transcripts of dialogue alone. Further, field notes allow the researcher to document her own thoughts and opinions which will add to and influence to the data produced.

Often the debate surrounding qualitative research has questioned the validity, reliability and replicability of such work. In order to address such concerns researchers have often used a number of different methods in triangulation. As Fielding and Fielding (1986, p.33) state "we should combine theories and methods carefully and purposefully with the intention of adding breadth or depth to our analysis" (cited in Flick, 1992). However, the point here is not to suggest, as done in quantitative research, that if several methods reveal the same data then we can conclusively believe it to be true. Triangulation used in this way assumes a single fixed reality that can be known objectively through the use of multiple methods of social research (Seale, 1999). The use of several different methods (discussion groups, individual discussions and participant observation) in the case of adolescent identities will allow a deeper and broader exploration of the dialogical self and significant others. As Willig (2001, p.71) states "triangulation enriches case study research as it allows the researcher to explore the case from a number of different perspectives". The combination of discussion groups, individual discussions and participant observation will give an insight into the multiple perspectives involved in the

dialogical self and the complex nature of adolescent identity development in a time of transition.

The extensive literature on the topic of adolescent identity provides us with much information about what is going on at this time. However, it is argued that the theory of the dialogical self would prove effective in gaining a greater understanding of how young people see themselves and others. This would not only fill the gaps in the literature but also reveal ways in which we can better prepare young people for leaving school and support them during this transitional time.

Young People

Forty young people, 30 females and 10 males took part in naturalistic discussion groups. The researcher met all of the young people by attending Local Authority Access Programmes. These programmes are run by the local council to try to reduce the numbers of NEET young people locally by supporting young people to make a transition into work or further education. The programmes vary in duration from 13 to 16 weeks. Young people apply for a place on the programme through the local careers advisory service; they are then interviewed by the council and selected based on the identification of multiple barriers to engaging with education and employment. These barriers can include homelessness, criminal activity, and poor performance/attendance at school. The researcher would attend each programme for two days per week to get to know the group and build a trusting relationship. The researcher then told the group about the research and invited them to attend a discussion group/catch-up approximately one month after the programme had ended. The discussion group was held in the same building the programme as the young people were familiar with this space, the researcher provided pizza and some soft drinks and recorded the discussion on an Mp3 player. This context was informal and relaxed and gave the group a good opportunity to catch-up with each other.

Dialogical Analysis

The researcher then analysed all of the recorded material, along with the researcher's field notes using Atlas/ti (Muhr, 1997). For identification purposes each discussion group and programme were numbered and cross-referenced. The data was then coded initially for every instance that a young person mentioned another person or impersonated an 'other'. These instances are also known as traces which are defined as "any content that provides a clue as to the social process that either produce or sustain a given discourse" (Gillespie 2006, p.159). More specifically, traces can be broken down into voices and echoes. A voice appears when young people directly quote or impersonate an 'other' person for example when a young person quotes their parent saying "you should get a job". Echoes occur when there is no direct quote but it clear that the young person is referring to the voice of another for example when a young person says "you're meant to be good at school". They are not directly quoting someone else but the reference to an authority figure is still present. This relates to the theory that we have the ability to imagine different positions or perspectives and these exist as the voices of others in our internal dialogue, Hermans, et al (1992). A dialogical analysis revealed eight significant others which appeared in the dialogues of these young people; teachers, parents, employers, the media, other people in the community, researchers 'geeks' and their

friends. It is out with the limits of this paper to illustrate all the significant others, therefore only 'geeks', parents and peers will be discussed.

In the following excerpt the group are talking about their peer group but more specifically peers who are different from them. They have previously talked about the role money can play in a person's life and I move the conversation on by asking what they think of people that go to university. As all of the group know that I am a student at the local university I then added "you can be honest and say what you like"

> LW: What do you think of people at uni - you can be honest and say what you like
>
> Jennie: I think good on thum
>
> Emma: Some folk tho ye just ken their gonne go to uni and you're like fuck off goin just shut up, my sister went to uni and she was a bit like .. well I thought she was a geek like cause she was a prefect n that but see once they dae (go to uni) is good because they can basically get a good job

We can see here that there is a dialogical tension within Emma. She says that she knows that some people are going to go off to university and she does not like to hear about it, she describes "you're like fuck off goin just shut up". She also calls her sister a "geek" because she was a prefect (school monitor) but then she admits there is a positive aspect as people have a chance of getting a good job if they do go to university. The conversation continues as Jennie reiterates her previous point:

> Jennie: Folk that stay on at school and go to uni dinne bother me I think good on them
>
> Natalie: Why do you still class them as geeks?
>
> Jennie: Ah dinne
>
> Emma: Some ey thum are see if they seen me in the street they turn their nose at ye that's a fucking... aw nut ....I hate that, it's like your no good enough for them

We can see hear that Emma describes the reason why she dislikes "geeks". She feels that they "turn their nose at ye" and this makes Emma feel "like you're no good enough for them". Then Jennie agrees with this but does not feel that this is just because people go to university:

> Jennie: Aye but that's nothing to dae with uni or that
>
> *(P1, DG1)*

We can see from this excerpt that this group of young people who have not made a successful transition from school feel that other people look down on them and this has perhaps led them to label these others as "geeks". There is also a lack of recognition here,

these young people have not been recognised by achieving good grades and are receiving negative recognition from "geeks" who think they are better than them. The same pattern can be seen when some of the young people discuss their parents.

The following excerpt is from a discussion group in which none of the four young people who attended had found jobs, therefore, at the time of the discussion group would all by defined by the Scottish Government as NEET. I started one conversation by asking what their parents thought about them not having a job:

> LW: so what are your mum and dad saying about you not having a job?

> Katie: see, all that it comes down to right I asked my mam if I could get a bottle of lemonade and she said *(in a sarcastic voice)* "if you had a job you'd get a bottle of lemonade" I was like it's only a bottle of lemonade it's only 60 pence and then what I do is if I do the dishes I get a tenner and she says "if you had a job you'd have a tenner"..... but my wee brother just pisses me off, every time I say I'm going up to the job centre he always starts laughing

We can see here that Katie is impersonating her mum's voice in a sarcastic way. Katie feels that her mum is constantly on her back about getting a job and you get this sense by the way she repeats the examples "if you had a job you'd get a bottle of lemonade" and "if you had a job you'd have a tenner". Katie completed a 26 week programme but after trying several work placements she struggled to find a job that she really wanted to do. She feels that her parents and siblings do not appreciate how hard it is to find work, the conversation continues:

> Kayleigh: so your mum won't gee ye no money at all like?

> Katie: nut, I get the same speech every day "if you had a job you could go oot and buy your clothes"

> LW: does she not see that you're trying to get a job?

> Katie: na, my mam thinks its like really easy to get a job but, well, I left school before I was supposed to I've got nae qualifications what so ever

> *(P5, DG10)*

Katie feels fed up of the pressure her mum is putting on her to find a job, she has previously mentioned she hopes to move out of her mum's house as soon as possible even if this means declaring herself homeless. Katie admits that she left school early this was due to her parents divorce. Katie attended school until the age of 14 and achieved good grades, she has even said she "used to be a geek" but during and after her parents divorce Katie felt it easier to stay at home and look after her younger siblings. She describes the struggle to find work with no qualifications. This also highlights that Katie feels that academic qualifications are all that is valued in the search for a job. This again indicates that Katie feels she is receiving little recognition from her family for her efforts to find a job and also from employers who she feels would not recognise other skills.

Indeed, a striking example of the struggle to find work comes from a discussion with Laura who describes how she feels employers judge some young people:

> Laura: yeah cause a lot of people like if you wear a tracksuit... *(pause)* you're a chav if you wear a tracksuit and a cap you're trouble you know I think it would broaden and open people's mind to the fact that you're not branded if you wear a name it's not you it'll open their minds to if someone comes through I mean I've noticed that if you go to find an application form and you're wearing a tracksuit they just won't give you one at all they'll be like oh we've got none left it's simple things but things that they don't experience themselves like to them it'd be like if you don't drive the right car or you haven't got the right wedding ring for example *(referring to the adult world)* it's not as expensive as the next persons.
>
> *(P2, DG4)*

Laura feels that some young people are judged by the way they dress and uses the label "chav", a term used to describe those belonging to a youth sub-culture, often stereotypically associated with a low socio-economic class, a striking dress sense and criminal activity. Laura refers to this research when she says "it would broaden and open people's mind to the fact that you're not branded if you wear a name". She goes on to describe that if employers do not like the way that a young person is dressed they will refuse to give out application forms. Laura is presenting herself here as a young person who is trying to get a job but cannot because of the way employers judge young people based on appearances. Laura then tries to draw a parallel between this and what adults may experience, she likens it to possessions which adults may have such as a car and a wedding ring. This is again illustrative of the way young people feel they are viewed negatively by others.

However, there are one group of significant others which these young people receive positive recognition from; their friends. The excerpt below is from a discussion group in which only two of six young people who attended were still unemployed, everyone else had managed to find work and this was viewed very positively by the group as a whole. Natalie interrupts the conversation with this statement:

> Natalie : here, can I just say something, I've been to ma work everyday and for 20 tae 9 and I've built up 12 hours of flexi-time and you're only allowed to carry forward 7
>
> *(everyone claps)*
>
> Jane : well done you
>
> *(P1, DG2)*

Natalie is extremely proud of the fact that she has held down a job and now earns her own money; she previously described these as her main goals in life. She is keen for the rest of the group to know how well she is doing and this is not to try to boast and make

anyone else feel bad but I had the sense that Natalie was showing others that it could be done. Jane congratulates her even though she herself is still unemployed. Later in the same discussion group Natalie talks to Jane about the best ways to find a job and suggests some places she should try looking for work. It is clear from this excerpt that these young people give their friends positive recognition for finding work which would be considered socially desirable. However, they are also willing to give positive recognition for less desirable behaviours.

In the discussion below the group begin to talk about "happy slapping". This is a term which refers to a staged attack where someone attacks an unsuspecting victim while an accomplice records the assault, commonly on their mobile phone. Most happy-slappers are teenagers or young adults. Several incidents have been extremely violent, and people have been killed.

> Kayleigh: I've never been happy slapped
>
> Katie: I have
>
> LW: Do you think it's funny when you watch the videos?
>
> Katie: Aye, *(laughs)* do you want to see a video of someone getting happy slapped?
>
> LW: No thanks, it's weird to me
>
> Katie: The guy's actually quite nice
>
>
> *They all watch a video on Katie's phone of a man punching another man as he leaves an arcade. None of the group knows the people in the video. Eventually I give in and watch the video.*
>
> *(P5, DG9)*

The group are quite happy to discuss happy slapping openly and Katie admits to finding the videos funny. No one was seriously hurt in the video showed during this discussion group, however, I have also witnessed another group watching a video in which they knew the girl who was beaten so badly she ended up in hospital. The fact that they find these videos funny has always surprised me but they just seem to be a normal occurrence for these young people. While I'm happy to admit that "it's weird to me" it is normal for these young people and all of the young people I have met throughout my research have at least one "happy-slapping" video on their phone.

Conclusions: the dynamics of recognition

To summarise, this paper has discussed some ongoing research using the theory of the dialogical self to explore the identities of a specific group of young people defined by the Scottish government as NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training). Using a dialogical analysis this paper identified eight significant others appearing in the dialogue

of this group of young people (teachers, parents, employers, the media, other people in the community, researchers 'geeks' and their friends). It is clear from the analysis that these young people receive very little positive recognition from many of the significant others in their lives. One main source of positive recognition comes from their friends. However, as this paper discussed these young people give each other positive recognition for socially desirable behaviours such as finding a job but also socially undesirable behaviours such as 'happy-slapping'. It seems apparent that if young people find themselves excluded from mainstream sources of positive recognition, such as academic achievements, then they create their own structures of recognition and one example of this may be taking part in 'happy-slapping' attacks. The emphasis on positive recognition solely for academic achievement is problematic for young people who do not achieve good grades.

Other authors have discussed the detrimental effect that limited structures of recognition can have. Zittoun (2004, p.154) highlights "a young person who has been defined in exclusively negative terms at school may wish to be judged by others on something other than school-related skills". Negative experiences at school can have a profound effect upon a young person's self-perception. Further, failing to make a successful transition from school can lead to a young person remaining in a position where there are few opportunities to gain positive recognition. This has led authors to call for a move away from an emphasis on academic achievement. Cheng, Siu & Leung (2006, p.468) assert that "apart from emphasising academic achievement, there is an explicit need in our secondary schools to promote the recognition of students' constructive behaviours and its positive consequences". The current research supports this call to widen the positive recognition we give young people taking the emphasis off academic achievements. This may have implications for the number of young people wishing to stay on at school and may provide an improved understanding of how best to prepare young people to leave the education system.

The current research adds to the existing dialogical self literature by applying this theory to a specific group of young people defined as a 'problem' by the Scottish Government. This study also has applied implications giving a better understanding of adolescent identity development in relation to the education system. Further, as the current research is ongoing many more questions have come to light for example we have identified what this group of young people say about significant others but what do these significant others say about these young people, what do teachers think about young people who do not achieve academically? Also, more in-depth analysis is needed to explore the notion of recognition and the role it plays in the identity construction of these young people.

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