

**“The child is alone only in the presence of someone”**

-D.W. Winnicott

**The role of the ego in the creation of destructive defence  
mechanisms in young offenders**

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## **Abstract**

*The aim of this paper was to explore the role of the ego in the creation of destructive defence mechanisms in young offenders. This was done by using thematic analysis utilising semi-structured interviews. Six participants who have had in the past or are currently working with young people were chosen for the interviews. Through these interviews the area of attachment and the relationship with others became the major themes of this paper. By examining the theory and the responses to the interview questions a clear link between the ego's defences and early attachment was found. The role of the ego is to protect the infant from harm, this continues into adolescence.*

### **Keywords:**

Ego, attachment, relationships, abandonment, autonomic nervous system, cortisol, emotional regulation, identity, care, young offender, young person, behaviour, trust

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **1.1 Introduction**

This paper aims to explore the role of the ego in the creation of destructive defence mechanisms in young offenders. There is considerable research on the area of attachment and its effect on the mental and behavioural development of the individual. John Bowlby (1907 – 1990) believed that poor attachment to parents was a cause of delinquency (Bowlby, 1944). On researching the causes of conduct disorder and juvenile delinquency, it has been noted that the early activation and regulation of emotion and behaviour are of optimal importance to psychological development (Lahey, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2003). This research points to the link between attachment theory as the basis of behavioural problems associated with young offenders (Lahey et al., 2003).

Most research into the subject of offending is focused on later teenage years and how to treat the behaviour (Feindler & Byers, 2014). While it is important to gain insight from the later teenage years, more focus should be given to why a child is at risk of developing defences that contribute to their inclusion in the detention centres (Gerhardt, 2015). Therefore, examining the source of the defence mechanisms and its link to attachment is an important factor when trying to understand children who are progressing through to the juvenile detention systems, beginning with understanding the attachment of the child (Gerhardt, 2015).

The ideal attachment style for a developing child is Secure attachment (Waddell, 1998). This is the provision by the other of a secure base, without which the infant may feel anxious and grow the belief that they are unable to explore and are left feeling insecure (Gomez, 1997). Bion suggests that a mother's 'reverie' is her primary function, reverie is the others ability to alleviate the child's anxieties and tensions (Bion, 1984). The child projects elements of their inner world in order to alleviate pain and frustrations that they are unable to handle (Bion,

1984). When the attachment is secure, the other can take these frustrations and modify them in order to return them to the child and help the child grow the capacity to tolerate other anxieties and frustrations throughout their development (Bion, 1984). When a child is faced with an Other that is unable to contain these anxieties, they are left with an unmanageable feeling which creates a number of negative effects (Mitchel, 1986).

The ego creates defence mechanisms unconsciously to protect the infant from the outside world (Freud, 1937). During the stage of life when a child relies on his primary caregiver, their ability to mirror during the pre-verbal (Winnicott, 1965) and the ability to contain (Klein, 1949) are crucial to the infant feeling secure and not in need of destructive defences (Gerhardt, 2015). The child's ability to contain and manage their emotions is crucial to a child's ability to be in the world (Sroufe, 1995). The relationship between the infant and Other is vital to the development of the capacity to manage emotions (Gerhardt, 2015).

This research sets out to examine where the behaviour created in early childhood can be noticed as the child develops into adolescence (Waddell, 2018). This will be done by exploring the capacity for relationships, what a relationship might mean to the child and how strong each of these relationships are. It will also explore how attachment and the development of the child's defences has influenced the relationships they currently have and examine how fragile they are when conflict arises. As much detail as possible will be obtained in relation to the original Other that was available to the young offender during their early childhood and what support systems have been in place to help them grow.

The objectives of this research are:

1. To explore the ego's role in the creation of defence mechanisms
2. To explore how early attachment leads to the development of defence mechanisms
3. To examine how attachment has influenced the child's ability to attach to new relationships
4. To examine the fragility of relationships based on the combination of the destructive defence mechanisms created.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### **2.1. Introduction**

The aim of this research is to explore the role of the ego in the creation of destructive defence mechanisms in young offenders. Destructive defence mechanisms are created if a child's primary relationship with the Other is disrupted to a degree that creates a need for these defences. These defences then manifest in negative behaviours which continue into adolescence and again into adulthood (Freud, 1937). For the sake of this thesis when referring to a young offender, the pronoun Him/He will be used. The Primary caregiver will be referred to as the Other. There are copious amounts of Literature on how these defences are created and there is a clear link between these defences and how they come into play in the psyche of a young offender (Lahey et al., 2003). In order to link the importance of the role of the ego, this paper will examine certain areas of early childhood and adolescence. If disruption with attachment to the Other is experienced it will have a negative knock-on effect on building relationships with others (Lósel, Bottoms, & Farrington, 2012). Lack of boundaries and structure will also influence how he is in the world. He is left unable to develop social awareness and is not capable of building strong safe relationships. The ongoing interactions with others become stunted by the initial intersubjective relationship with the Other (Winnicott, 1984). This paper will focus on the fragility of relationships and the need for structure, lack caused by insecure attachment and why the ego creates defences during early development of a child.

## 2.2. The Ego

The ego is responsible for dealing with reality, mediating between the ID and the Superego to produce an acceptable response to a situation (Freud, 1937). Defence mechanisms are created by the ego in order to protect an individual (Freud, 1937). They are unconsciously created to safeguard the psyche against feelings and thoughts that are too much to bear (Cramer, 2000). When an infant is inadequately supported in terms of physiological and emotional needs, the infant's ego defences rely on early defensive structures that bring about relief and acceptance of the reality of the situation, protecting them from what they cannot understand (Green, 2014).

The defences can act in either a positive or a negative way but serve the one purpose and that is to maintain equilibrium (Freud, 1937). Defences such as dissociation, displacement, reaction formation and repression are used in order to protect from fragmentation (Freud, 1937). When a child is insecurely attached, the neurotic response is the utilisation of these unconscious defences that protect the child from the outside world (Maricutoiu & Crasovan, 2014).

Anna Freud (1937) argues that contrary to expectation, a child may exhibit an unexpected reaction to a specific situation, indifference in place of disappointment, exuberant high spirits in place of mortification, excessive tenderness in place of jealousy. She argued that the ego has intervened and caused the effect to be transformed disturbing the normal process (Freud, 1937). Based on A. Freud's argument, when faced with a child displaying aggressive behaviour, the root of that anger could be based on a different emotion, for example, an internalised fear. During adolescence, a teenager having had a secure relationship with the Other experiences an upheaval which includes hormonal changes and finding their identity which provokes anxiety (Waddell, 2018). This is intensified by sexual and aggressive urges

that are part of the developmental process of adolescence (Waddell, 2018). Based on these changes, where a child that has not experienced adequate support in early childhood, the changes become amplified and what had once been kept internal through the armour of defence mechanisms, are projected in the form of uninhibited aggression (Schafer, 1954) (Henry, 1974). This is supported by Hauser (1991) in his theory on ego maturation, where he states that early stages of ego development are marked by a sense of external control and limited abilities to relate to others. Ego maturation is expected to develop from childhood to adolescence to adulthood. When the ego has matured the adolescent is capable of forming and sustaining intimate relationships (Hauser, Powers, & Noam, 1991). If the ego has not matured this will give rise to issues in adolescence and adulthood in forming meaningful relationships. This is expected to be seen among young offenders (Hennighausen, Hauser, Billings, Schultz, & Allen, 2004). When the defences created in early childhood begin to break down later in life, it can have negative effects on relationships (Maricutoiu & Crasovan, 2014).

Waddell (2018) stated that there is a gender difference in relation to how males and females deal with pain. Girls are said to punish themselves, while boys externalise their feelings on to people or things. This occurs when they experience pain, with the boys projecting their pain elsewhere (Waddell, 2018). According to statistics that are currently available for 2018 in one of Irelands detention centres the ratio of male to female was ninety-five to five (*Oberstown-Profile-of-Young-People-Aug-2018.pdf*, n.d.). This defence that males have acquired from early childhood can be deemed as one of the main reasons why this early learned defence can be looked upon as destructive to the outside world.

As infants are completely dependent on the Other, if for whatever reason that Other is unable to provide safety or are the source of that threat, the infant will forever feel unsafe in their

home (Heller & LaPierre, 2012). As the infant will not have known a place of safety they will be wary of every place and everyone they meet which lends to the infant growing up in a defensive-orientating response state (Heller & LaPierre, 2012). When they are stuck in this unresolved state, they become hypervigilant and remain in this state. A symptom of this consists of a diminished and inadequate awareness of the threat, leading to a lack of care and antisocial behaviour (Lahey et al., 2003).

It is important to note that his internal world is also affected by these defences. According to Anna Freud, when the permanent 'armour-plating of character' is analysed, a state of fixation can be seen, the repetition of this procedure or defence can also be seen. This can be likened to a repeat offender, repeating a crime time and time again, this action mirrors Freud as the defence is of no benefit to him (Freud, 1937). Repeat offending can occur if an adolescent is looking to prove his self-worth to a peer or to fit in (Waddell, 2018). The expected conclusion for young offenders is that he will have become part of a group or gang and fit in if he can impress his peers. The group serves as a place of safety where he will feel held and contained with peers of his own age and circumstance. According to Waddell (2018) early on in adolescence becoming part of a gang is a natural characteristic of becoming an adolescent.

Having examined the above aspects of the ego, this paper will now explore how attachment plays a part in the emergence of these defences.

### **2.3 Attachment**

In early childhood, a child that has experienced optimal emotional attachment is said to be capable of tolerating the anxieties of everyday life (Waddell, 1998). When a child has experienced this optimal attachment their capacity for regulating their own emotional states has been achieved (Schoore, 2015). This capacity to deal with emotional disruption develops

in the early stages of development with the Other (Wallin, 2007). This relationship, otherwise referred to as intersubjectivity is vital in the building of this capacity in order to explore and learn about his world and himself through the relationship with the Other (Stolorow, 2004).

A securely attached child is said to have experienced holding and containment, holding by the external Other and containment by the Other of the emotions that are too much to bear by creating an internal safety (Symington & Symington, 1996). This is reinforced by Gerhardt (2015) stating that when a child is securely attached, the infant's intolerable anxiety and extreme emotions are managed and contained. Klein (1949) stated that the primitive mechanism of the paranoid-schizoid and the resolution of the depressive position is needed for an infant to recognise good and bad (Klein, 1949). Without this resolution issues with mental functioning can emerge (Zulueta, 1999). According to Malan (1995) the psyche creates a defence unconsciously, it is used to keep an emotion at a safe distance. This is to keep reality far enough away so that what is happening does not become unbearable (Freud, 1937). Anxiousness may be felt but awareness of why the anxiety is occurring may not be known, this element of the unknown can be unsettling to an adolescent (Malan, 1995).

Sroufe (1996) said that the main role of the attachment system is to become a regulator of emotional experience (Fonagy & Allison, 2012). Winnicott (1958) argued that issues in adult life had their roots in early failures and lack of containment, where the infant is left to internalise their environment, lacking the feeling of safety and being left with internalised fear. The Other must attune and understand the child's varying needs, due to the fact that if these are not managed in early development they will affect the child's affect regulation or emotional regulation (Gerhardt, 2015). Emotional regulation is vital for a child so that emotions felt can be understood and managed in a safe way. When a child has not grown the capacity to maintain their emotion, it can lead to negative destructive outward behaviours that

put the child and others at risk (Lahey et al., 2003). For a child to be capable of regulating their emotion, the Other must be able to contain the anxieties felt by the child (Bion, 1984). This ability by the Other to contain this projection of feeling including but not only, fear, confusion, anger from the child is fundamental to the infant's ability to self-regulate, it also brings about an element of trust between the intersubjective pair (Bion, 1984). When this fails, the infant ego forms defence mechanisms forming adaptive stability within the child, some of which are destructive to the child in later life (Cramer, 2000). When this interactive regulation fails, the following are hindered: regulation of emotion, affect regulation, non-verbal communication and the ability to process anxieties and stressor, this lays an insecure base for future development (Aspinal & Diamond, 2003).

Gerhardt (2015) wrote about the emergence of the reaction of the autonomic nervous system (ANS) occurring in early childhood. This can occur between a stressed Other and child, separation is not always a factor in having a traumatic effect on a child (Gerhardt, 2015). Although a stressed Other may be present in the life of the child, they may not display a safe environment for the child and can produce a poorly regulated child (Gerhardt, 2015). If the Other cannot regulate their own stress response, the Other cannot be mentally available to a child and will give rise to the sympathetic arousal of the ANS, which is an involuntary action that occurs in seconds in the body (Greenberger & Padesky, 1995). An aspect of trauma in an infant is the instinctual contraction of the body which occurs when the infant is exposed to negative emotion. This pattern that has been developed in early childhood is used throughout the lifetime with muscular tension as if to contain what the Other could not. This pent-up emotion will eventually need to be released through symptoms of anxiety and panic. When dealing with the ANS system this can also be expressed by the fight response releasing anger and aggression (Heller & LaPierre, 2012).

The cortisol set point of an individual has been shown to reach its resting point at six months old, stabilising at this and remaining consistent after this point (Gerhardt, 2015). Low cortisol levels amongst young offenders is an expected result as it would result in an expected defence mechanism (Gerhardt, 2015). Although this phenomenon is somewhat of a mystery, the body seems to switch to a low cortisol mode as an emotional defence, cutting off the soma and feelings. This is as an attempt to disengage from painful feelings through avoidance, withdrawal and denial (Gerhardt, 2015). When researching young offenders and their likely punishment, there were copious amounts of literature on punitive punishment not working and recidivism not reducing but increasing should, based on the emotional defence outlined above, the negative punishment would mean nothing to the offender, as the defence would be to feel numb and disassociate from the true feeling (Gerhardt, 2015).

In the case of young offenders, it is assumed that he has been raised in a home with a broken family, this can be as a result of parents being incarcerated themselves, single parents, drug use, psychological or medical illness. It includes numerous factors that could result in the Other not being available to him while in the early developmental stage (Merrell & Caldarella, 1999). It is important to note that not all children lacking in attachment leads on to a life of criminal behaviour (INTO, 1995). This lack is said to lead to feelings of insecurity, fear, a sense of abandonment that leads to anxiety causing apprehension, this leads to a tension needing a form of relief. According to a report on the aetiology of youthful offenders, this will often lead to aggression and criminal behaviour, a vicious circle of insecurity, leading to anxiety, aggression and followed by guilt and back to anxiety (INTO, 1995).

Attachment to the Other sets down the way a person interacts with others from that moment on and this attachment forms the basis of all future relationships due to the social and emotional adjustment needed to be part with the Other.

## 2.4 Relationships

According to Bowlby (1944,1973), if the Other-child relationship is disrupted during the initial attachment stage, there will be negative long-term consequences. The ability to show affection or concern for others, tied in with aggressive and delinquent behaviour (Bowlby, 1944; Winnicott, 1984). It is expected that a young offender will find it difficult to a culture long term secure relationships as their capacity for concern and the ability to contain emotions will be disrupted based on their early attachment and the defence mechanisms created in early childhood (Gerhardt, 2015). Gerhardt (2015) states the lack of regard for others suggests alienation from other people, with a belief that pleasurable human contact is not possible.

Friendships with others are fragile and likely to become confrontational as young offenders tend to mask their lack of confidence and faith in attachment, by their low self-control and reluctance to trust those in authority and others (Lósel et al., 2012). Projection, one of the most primitive defences are re-enacted in relationships, which can be profoundly disturbing to the other participant in that relationship which can cause fragility (Britton, 1981). Emanuel (2002) noted the emergence of projective identification of a care worker who became panic-stricken and anxious after dealing with a three-year-old child, who was in the care of a mother suffering from a terrifying psychotic episode. The child, having no way to verbalise their feelings of terror, confusion and anxiety seemed to have projected this into the Other in the hope that the Other would understand the emotional state occurring (Emanuel, 2002). When two offenders come together to form a friendship, having experienced similar backgrounds and produce similar defences, ego to ego, as the experience is unbearable for both, both will be emotionally vulnerable with the result of a fragile, explosive, ambivalent and demanding relationship (Lósel et al., 2012). This brings about a fear of abandonment if

the relationship fails as it did in early childhood, the pattern of failure is repeated and the young offender is abandoned again (Heller & LaPierre, 2012). This perception happens when the brain searches for a match to previous experience, in the case of an infant who felt abandoned by the Other in early childhood, this repeated perception of loss will occur. This is also true of an Other that was emotionally unavailable to the infant (Henry, 1974) (Heller & LaPierre, 2012). Shifting attachment figures from Other-child to another, the original attachment still impacts the child and this persists throughout the lifetime (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987).

Waddell (2018) talks about Narcissus and his need, narcissistic tendency, pining for his own reflection. She argues that this could also be a need within Narcissus to bolster his self-esteem by seeking a relationship with someone who looks like himself. If this is applied to young offenders forming a relationship with another, it could be the need to belong or to be understood by someone (Waddell, 2018). Humans are a social species and rely on others to survive. It can be said that in some cases young offenders are yesterday's victims as they were born into a home that was incapable of nurturing them enough to feel safe (Kermarrec & Mougli, 2013).

## **2.5 Conclusion**

Based on the literature above the initial stages of development with the Other creates a primitive mechanism to be released in the infant which is created by the ego. This gives rise to negative behaviours in later life. The initial attachment with the Other is the basis of this creation when an infant is not provided with a good enough mother, teaching a child how to bear emotions and pain and survive (Winnicott, 1965). Offending behaviours although tend to be linked back to early childhood can also occur in a loving home when the Other is not

available to the infant because of time constraints. This can take place if the child is left in the care of someone that is not capable of providing them with a secure base. The ego's creation of defence mechanisms is of key importance to the survival of the infant but can cause issues in behaviour and the creation of relationships in later life. The need to belong continues but the lack in attachment from the outset leaves the young person lacking in accepted behaviour with others and ultimately rejection and abandonment.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology Chapter**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter describes how the aims and objectives were achieved with this research. It outlines the research method, the interview style, sample and recruitment, method of data collection and analysis and ethics.

### **3.2 Purpose**

The purpose of this paper was to explore the role of the ego in the creation of destructive defence mechanisms in young offenders. Exploration of the effects of these defences can be mapped through the behaviour of a young offender in social settings. Focusing on the behaviour will not show the true source of the action, but only the manifestation of the defence in an external way. It will also highlight the importance of early attachment and the effects of a failed attachment.

The aim of this research was:

1. To explore the ego's role in the creation of defence mechanisms
2. To explore how early attachment leads to the development of defence mechanisms
3. To examine how attachment has influenced the child's ability to attach to new relationships
4. To examine the fragility of relationships based on the combination of the destructive defence mechanisms created.

### **3.3 Research Method**

The research method chosen is of a qualitative nature. Qualitative research was chosen as it gave the researcher the ability to select participants who can provide meaningful information of the topic rather than numerical data determined from a select sample (Robinson, Tolley, & Ulin, 2005). It also lends to an in-depth analysis of the experience of the participants in relation to the content being researched (McLeod, 2015). The interactions between the participants and the young people give the insight needed to highlight the effects of defence mechanisms that are being used by the young people.

### **3.4 Data Collection**

The interviews were conducted one to one, in a comfortable setting at the choice of the participant. The style of interviewing used was semi-structured with nine open-ended questions (See appendix A). Open-ended questions were used in order to gather knowledge obtained by the participants from their direct contact with the young people at the heart of the study. This method of questioning gives scope to the participant to share more detail on the questions asked. This also gives an opportunity for more themes to emerge from the data collected as the interviews were completed in the here and now with no time for addendums (McLeod, 2015). One interview was hand-written and during the process of seeking consent of the interview, items were added to the data. All others were recorded on a dictaphone with consent being obtained there and then. The recording was transferred to an encrypted computer file and password protected. They were then transcribed by the researcher with each participant being given a pseudonym.

### 3.5 Sample and Recruitment

A sample of six participants were chosen for this paper.

<b>Participants Details</b>		
<b>Name</b>	<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Role</b>
John	12 – 18	Juvenile Liaison Officer
Tim	13 – 18.5	Care worker – Children’s detention centre
Liam	All ages	Foster Father & Care Worker – Children’s Care Home
June	16 – 21	Prison Officer – Juvenile Prison
Imelda	All ages	Mental health social worker and family therapist in CAMHS Service
Ruth	All ages	Project Manager – Homework Club

The participants were found using a snowballing technique for recruitment and were not known to the researcher. Each participant works directly with young offenders or children from disadvantaged areas that tend to have a high concentration of young offenders. The group was of mixed gender. All participants were given a consent form and asked to sign to show they were willing to participate (Appendix B). All participants were informed of the nature of the paper and given the opportunity to cease or withdraw their transcripts up until six weeks before the issue date of the submission date.

### 3.6 Method of data analysis

The method of data analysis chosen was thematic analysis. This is a general approach to qualitative analysis which gained prominence after a set of procedures were set out by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2006). By using this method of data analysis there is a protentional for rich data being extracted from the participant’s experience

of working with the young people. This method of analysis allowed the researcher the freedom to analyse qualitative data in a way that was appropriate to the area of study. Once all interviews were completed and transcribed the analysis of the data was broken down into themes. Themes that were common throughout each interview were compared and analysed with theory for each theme sought and recorded.

### **3.7 Ethics**

The author adhered to the Belmont Principle of Ethics (1979) and guidelines for the protection of human subject's research. Written consent was obtained from each participant ensuring that the information supplied was to be used in the research paper. The subject of the interview and paper was comprehensive and discussed with the participant. Acceptance to participate was voluntary. Efforts were made to minimise risks and maximise benefits to the participants and society in line with the principle of beneficence. In relation to participants wanting to view the completed paper, it was agreed that a copy of this work will be given on request.

As the participants worked with children, the identities and details of the children were never discussed. No children were named during the interviews. The participant's identities were also kept anonymous so that no link could be made to them and the children they had worked with. The wellbeing of the participants and the children were considered at all times.

### **3.8 Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter was to give an outline of the aims and objective of the research topic. An outline of the research methodology chosen and the reasons for this was given. It includes details of the interview style chosen. The recruitment criteria were discussed and explained. The method of analysis was expanded upon. This chapter also includes the ethics used for conducting this research ensuring the ethical considerations of the Belmont Principles of ethics (1979) were adhered to.

## Chapter 4: Results

### 4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, results taken from the semi-structured interviews will be outlined and discussed. The participants were encouraged to share on their experience of caring for young people who are currently involved in projects or incarcerated to examine and explore how early learned defence mechanisms are exhibited through their interaction with others and their behaviour. As thematic analysis is used, the raw data is used to illustrate common themes between the participants' experience of the young people. Table 1 below contains pseudonyms of the participants along with a brief description of the role they had in working with the young people. The age range of the young people is also displayed. Table 2 contains the themes identified from the content of the interviews.

**Table 1**

<b>Participants Details</b>		
<b>Name</b>	<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Role</b>
John	12 – 18	Juvenile Liaison Officer
Tim	13 – 18.5	Care worker – Children's detention centre
Liam	All ages	Foster Father & Care Worker – Children's Care Home
June	16 – 21	Prison Officer – Juvenile Prison
Imelda	All ages	Mental health social worker and family therapist in CAMHS Service
Ruth	All ages	Project Manager – Homework Club

**Table 2**

<b>Themes</b>	1. Defences	2. Attachment	3. Relationships
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## 4.2 Theme One: Defences

The behaviour of the young people noted by the participants indicated that something deeper was happening. The participants reported that the defences of the offenders were robust, and the actions of the young offenders left the participants with an opinion that their work was rewarding but tinged with difficulty. Five of the participants said that it is difficult working with the young people and yet it is also rewarding. John said, 'it can be very rewarding, it can be very frustrating' He went on to describe why it was frustrating:

*'If you put a lot of work into a kid and you are trying to steer them away from crime and you find out that maybe you spend an evening with them, that the following day or that evening they went out and did the same thing again. It can be hard.'*

Liam expressed it to be '*Rewarding. Satisfying. And very difficult*', While describing working in the detention centre June said, '*I wouldn't want to necessarily meet them outside, but you can have really good fun with some of them on the inside and you can work really well with some of them.*' Tim also describes the young offenders in the following way '*sometimes they can be incredibly funny, sometimes they are incredibly all over the place and you just need to find out why that is*'. Imelda felt that it was '*worthwhile*', focusing on the positives of the work.

The behaviours exhibited by the young people were noted by most of the participants as projections. John noticed this and was specific in the phrasing when he stated that that the tried to get a reaction by '*project stuff into you and to get you to react*', June stated '*you could be very easily brought down to a very childish level with them*' so the need for boundaries is really important when working with them. Imelda mentioned '*The aim is to understand the meaning of the behaviour*', which shows an understanding that the behaviour

is as a result of something deeper. John noted this while talking about the young offender's behaviour:

*'Because a lot of the times kids are showing you what they can't say. So, they'll externalise what is happening inside and it's helpful to know that, that they are going around smashing around things, well what's that about.'*

This sentiment was again experienced with Ruth who also discussed emotional regulation:

*'A big issue at the moment is young people and being able to express emotion and the difficulties that they're finding have been able to figure out that emotion that they're feeling and then be able to express it and coping skills to learn how to cope with the emotion that they're facing. Emotional regulation is a huge issue.'*

Tim explained when issues arise with the young offenders there can be one of two responses *'Some will just look down at the floor, the ones who normally never stop talking are not talking'* The ability to express the emotion can be either externalised or disassociated from. The difficulties with everyday life was heard throughout the interviews. Ruth described it as:

*'So, before you can even get a young person to a position where they can even talk about the problem, they want you have to sort out the trauma that they've just gone through in the last hour which takes an hour you know.... you're firefighting so you're very much always just dealing with what you get met with'*

In relation to their behaviour John added the following which highlights the effects of the defence mechanisms the young offender has equipped himself with: *'there is always reasons why people do something. Most of the time it's not apparent to the child or even the family. It's that deep'*

### 4.3 Theme two: Attachment

Attachment was the largest theme which emerged from the data. Each participant noticed its importance, be it by the past relationship with the parents, the need for structure and the behaviour patterns seen in the young offenders. They expressed a need for earlier intervention in the area of early childhood relationships to prevent the offender reaching this stage.

When considering relationships, a lot of aggressive and anti-social behaviour is witnessed. Within the home Liam noticed that *'the child was violent, dangerous in the eyes of the parents.'* According to John the child was used as a scapegoat for all the problems occurring in the household:

*'The parents there could be a family and why the kid is doing what they are doing. But the parents want you to focus on the kid and to fix the kid, but not look at the extended family. And of course, that's not going to work'*

The interactions June witnessed between parents and children echoed the anti-social behaviour between adult and child in the visiting room when she said, *'there was no level of respect, parents would bring drugs in for their kids.... Monkey see, monkey do...is normal in that environment'*. This lack of enforcing standards and structures for the children was noted as a major flaw by Liam, when he said the initial stages of fostering consisted of: *'honesty and setting standards and enforcing those standards...reaffirming what your standards are'* Liam indicated that the children in his care has come from homes *'there's actually no boundaries being set up by the parents at all'*. Ruth stated that the lack of boundaries was present when she said:

*'there's definitely something missing in terms of growing up with that kind of understanding of a social norm of how you are within a public space'*

There was an aspect of counter-transference among the participants. This is best described by the following. Tim stated *'And care for them as best you can. Sometimes they'll push you away, sometimes they'll pull you in'* and again, when he said *'A lot of them don't have great role models and you notice that immediately...they either hate you or love you...you're either their mammy or their daddy'*

Ruth's transference was clear with she stated:

*'we've a lot of young people who would begin to understand the trauma of addiction very early on and then realize well why are the parents choosing a substance over their love for them...another thing that they have to then experience and not know how to deal with'*

She went on to say:

*'then that comes out often in emotions like anger or you know maybe disconnection ...more of the negative emotions...they're trying to deal with that and then try and get through school as well as that and trying to survive in their family home so that can be very difficult as well for them.'*

Tim remarked on the pre-verbal tendencies of acceptance he witnessed with the offenders in his care:

*'They're not great at sharing their feelings, but you have to interpret it... so some of the lads that might be incredibly violent and not tactile, if they're tactile with you that means you're ok. They might walk past and give you a pucker in the shoulder, or if you're sitting on the sofa, they might rub your head. That's their way'*

Expressing their acceptance in this way is a very early childhood response when words are not or indeed not available, often they do not have the language to express trauma. Liam mentioned *'the young fellas don't get hugs anymore and they don't get one to one'* this was

in reference to at home and if in care. June attributed the issues that caused their behaviours pertained to the issues in their home life:

*'Coming from homes that have no structure...they see nothing wrong with being in prison...parents had been in prison...given to their grandparents...If the child's parents are in jail and you are living with the grandmother, then that's not going to be great either.'*

Liam mentioned that they were often abandoned by the care system once they turned eighteen *'Take yourself at 18 after being brought up in a care structure where everything was decided for you...then given a flat and left on your own...they're just abandoned'*. This was corroborated by Tim when he spoke of the young offenders once released. *'90% of them aren't bad lads, they just get caught up in the scene...They would need full time mentors on the outside to mind them for a little bit of time after they get out to be any chance.'* The problem of attachment is echoed in June's answer in relation to what is missing in this interview:

*'I think as a society in lots of ways we fail children... we need to be going back and looking at how can we help parents get from the positions maybe that they are in?'*

#### **4.4 Theme three: Relationships**

The importance of building a relationship between the participant and the young person is a significant theme that ran through each interview. All participants noticed how important building a relationship is in order to work with the young people. Ruth stated *'the core of everything that we do is about building relationships. So, everything, starts from there.'* John identified that by *'just basically try and form a relationship with them ... So, if you can get in and get a good rapport going with them, it can be very beneficial...bringing our human side'*.

He went on to say that this would build trust *'going in all formal and laying down the law, unlikely to have much of an affect'*. Tim strongly believes that due to their *understanding wouldn't be brilliant* one would need to *'fit into each one as you get to know them'*.

When asked about the interaction between their peers and adults varying answers of the strength of the relationships showed through with Tim saying:

*'when they are getting to know each other first... they are very adult...when they get to know each other...there is no egos involved and I suppose they aren't threatened by each other'*

This indicates that at the beginning of a relationship forming there is a battle of the egos between young offenders, which would indicate that after a time the relationship between both would be more secure. However further along in the interview he revealed this not to be the case, Tim referenced the young offenders saying:

*'Would he protect them if they needed it, sometimes they back each other up, sometimes they don't...they would threaten each other quite a lot but loud so that the adults would intervene'*.

Ruth's observations of the young people in her care was similar in the sense of how they treated each other

*'if this is what your friend is, I'd hate to see who your enemy is. There are so painfully mean to each other. You know they're supposed to be friends but the way they treat each other the way they speak to each other is horrific. You know they take the most vulnerable thing about you and they'll say it to you. So, it's really tough going and that's the friendship and then bring that into a social system. And you know try and get a bit bolshie or try to have a bit of confidence and they escalate even worse'*

Liam said in his experience of bringing the young people to social settings twenty years previous, when meeting new people, they needed to have time to settle into this different environment:

*'When they come to the likes of a club...being treated totally different...with respect. They find that difficult to deal with...The they settle down to it and quite look forward to it'*

This is contrary to the present when Ruth said, *'They got kicked out all the time because they couldn't cope within that setting'*. Tim reaffirmed this sentiment when he stated: *'They're never together on their own, they can never be unsupervised together ever'*

June also compounded this sentiment:

*'we would often be told like if one of them developed a good relationship with us...they would often come and tell you if they thought one of their friends was in trouble or there was a problem or there was an issue. before I started this job (psychotherapist now), I always had this belief that people in prison didn't steal from each other, there was honour amongst thieves and that went out of me very quickly when I went in there to work'*.

#### **4.5 Conclusion:**

Three major themes emerged from the data collected from these interviews. The connection with the defence mechanisms created by the ego can be seen with the behaviour exhibited among the young people being cared for by the participants. The demographic chosen included a range of people from different areas of expertise, the opinions expressed by all tied into defences, attachment and relationships.

The next chapter will analyse the data in light of the literature reviewed in Chapter 2.

## **Chapter Five: Discussion**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The aim of this research was to explore the role of the ego and the creation of destructive defence mechanisms in young offenders, while also examining the links of attachment and therefore the effect this has on relationships and behaviour. The theory of attachment was explored and was applied to the knowledge given by the participants of the young people in their care. This was based on early attachment and the relationship with the Other. The theory behind the creation of defence mechanisms was explored and applied to the current behaviour of the young people in order to understand why this behaviour is occurring now. The three main themes that have arisen through interviews were explored in depth in order to give a detailed analysis of the root cause of the behaviour displayed by the young offenders. This in turn explains that the role of the ego in young offenders, is to protect themselves from harm. The discussion chapter will look at how the data collected agrees or disagrees with the theory covered in the literature review. The themes that will be interacted with are:

- The Ego
- Attachment
- Relationships

### **5.2 The Ego**

All of the participants indicated that something deeper than the behaviour exhibited was occurring in the young people in their care. The defensive actions of the young people made working with them difficult. Anna Freud (1937) explains that defences manifest in negative behaviours. This concurs with Maricutoiu et al. (2014) who suggested that an insecurely

attached child will exhibit a neurotic response based on their unconscious defences. June identified that the young offenders she worked with would be feared by her if met outside of the detention centre based on them being '*violent and violent and vicious and cruel and nasty*'. This is reflective of what was said by Schafer (1954) and Henry (1974) who stated, that uninhibited aggression would be seen in these young people, but behind that sits projection, which is a destructive defence in an adolescent.

John mentioned that the young offenders would often attempt to project stuff into you. June noticed how easy it was to be brought down to a childish level with the offenders in her care, their projections had an adverse effect on her authority in her role. Cramer (2000) suggested that defence mechanisms created to defend the psyche of a young person is still at play in adolescence. This statement highlights what John noticed in relation to projection and what June noticed as introjection when dealing with the young offenders in their care.

The participants understood that although the young people were behaving aggressively, that meaning behind this behaviour was something much deeper. This is supported by Waddell (2018) who noted that a child developing through adolescence is provoked by anxiety. As Wallin (2007) put it, an insecurely attached adolescent feeling this anxiety, cannot contain it. Imelda stated that the meaning behind the behaviour should be investigated further. Lahey et al. (2003) backs up this sentiment when he stated that a child develops negative destructive behaviours in order to regulate the emotions that they have not grown the capacity to handle. Gerhardt (2015) calls the negative behaviour an involuntary physical response to the stressor which forms during attachment. Anna Freud (1937) said the root is the ego creating the defence to protect the psyche of the infant. The ego's role in this behaviour is apparent to the participants who work with these young people.

The participants talked about the response of the young person to upsetting issues. Tim described it as the emotion felt was either externalised through aggressive behaviour or the emotion brought on disassociation from the other young offender's where the young person would hide away in their room. This was also experienced in Ruth's work when a child would need to spend an hour or two recovering from an unknown emotion before being able to start any work. This is supported by Anna Freud (1937) when she argues that defences can act in either a positive or negative way, its sole purpose is to maintain equilibrium. Dissociation, displacement, reaction formation and repression are all seen with young offenders as posited by Anna Freud (1937).

Emotional regulation was mentioned in different ways by the participant when speaking about the young people. The young offenders have shown that they are not capable of emotional regulation as young people who have been securely attached in their behaviours which have brought them to be in detention centres. Their destructive nature as described by all the participants is a clear indicator of their ego not reaching maturation. Hauser (1991) states that ego development is exhibited by a sense of external control and ability to relate to others. Their aggressive and spontaneous behaviours would indicate that the ego has not matured as the external control is not there. This was supported by Ruth when she mentioned the inability to express emotion and the lack of coping skills being a huge issue in relation to the young people she is working with. She indicated that *'wide open spaces as much as possible where nobody else is around'* was the best place to bring these young people.

### 5.3 Attachment

The participants recognised that there was a lack of structure and boundaries evident in the young people they worked with. Their initial intervention would be to set up a structure for the young people. The participants were adamant that they needed structure. As argued by Winnicott (1958), issues in adult life stemmed from early failures which include a lack of containment and a feeling of safety. By creating structure and boundaries for the young person, it is putting a physical container around the body of the young person. It shows that they are being cared for in a manner that they are not used to.

Secure attachment was not mentioned by any of the participants, they mostly explained that the young people came from homes where there was one parent or there were issues of drug use. The relationships seen between the Other and the young offender was described by June as '*no level of respect*'. Ruth described young people who began to understand the trauma of addiction very early on and how his parent chose the substance over their love for him. This dynamic is in direct conflict of Waddell's (1998) optimal emotional attachment of being capable of tolerating the anxieties of everyday life. This was echoed in the parent's behaviour and the projection of blame onto the young person 'causing' all the issues. At no point did the parent look at why this behaviour was occurring.

Ruth expressed that there was '*something missing*' in relation to social norm and how one should be within a public space. During attachment these social norms are learned in the home environment and implemented by the Other with the infant, toddler, child, adolescent. Klein (1949) advocated that the paranoid-schizoid which is a primitive mechanism and the resolution of the depressive position must occur in an infant, so that good and bad can be separated by the child, by taking this theory and applying it to social norms, the young person has not experienced the resolution of the depressive and so anti-social behaviour does not

seem to be a bad thing. Zulueta (1999) posited that without this resolution there would be issues with mental functioning.

Some of the participants expressed a need to 'look after' the young people. This is a clear indication of transference between the young people and the participants experiencing counter-transference. This is a projection of the young persons need that they are unconsciously projecting onto the people who are looking after them. Liam who worked with children over twenty years ago said that at that time reading bed time stories and giving hugs to these children meant more to them as they had not had that anywhere else. This element of care was not mentioned in other research but is an important part of attachment. Symington & Symington (1996) posited holding as one of the physical expressions of care between the Other and the infant.

One of the initial stages of development with the Other is mirroring, holding and containment. Heller and LaPierre (2012) indicated if an infant had not known a place of safety, they would be wary of everybody and they will remain in a defensive-orientating state. The link between the young people not having the language to express what they are feeling and the expression through touch in accepting Tim as 'ok' has its early roots in attachment. This expression is so early and primitive that it indicates the young person does not have the language to express acceptance in any other way. As expressed by Schore (2015) this confirms that emotional attachment was lacking between infant and the Other.

## 5.4 Relationships

All of the participants agreed that building a relationship with the young person was as Ruth put it '*the core*' of what they do. This was followed up with John stating that '*bringing our human side*' would help build trust with the young people. Tim insisted that you needed to '*fit into each one*' to help with this. Lósel et al (2012) indicated that friendships with others would be fragile and likely to become confrontational as the lack of confidence they have in themselves and faith in their own past attachment reduces their ability to trust those in authority.

In relation to the interaction with other young people Tim said that when the offenders got to know each other the relationship grew stronger. Gerhardt (2015) said that the capacity for concern and the ability to contain emotions once disrupted in early attachment, creates defence mechanisms that make it difficult to culture long term secure relationships. Tim also spoke of them threatening each other. This was echoed in the other interviews where it was insinuated that the young people would be cruel to each other and steal from each other. Bowlby (1944) and Winnicott (1984) wrote that long-term negative consequences caused by a disrupted attachment, were tied to aggressive and delinquent behaviour. This is confirmed with Gerhardt (2015) stating that the lack of regard for others suggests alienation from other people, the young offender believes that it is not possible to have pleasurable human contact with another.

It seems the experience of interactions with adults has changed, as Liam mentioned the level of respect, he received from the young lads in his care was good twenty years ago. He also said that he would not work '*in that*' area now as the level of respect and boundaries are just not there at all. The other participants spoke of what looks like an increased level of anger and aggression from the young people. June said that where she worked was once known as

the most dangerous prison in Ireland and at the time held only young offenders. This could indicate that the level of crime is increasing, while the level of respect to others is decreasing. Britton (1981) described projection from the young offender towards the Other can be profoundly disturbing and this was felt by the participants in their dealings with the young people now. Armsden and Greenberg (1987) both wrote that shifting attachment figures from the Other to another, for example those in authority, caused confusion in the young person. As he would feel that the same outcome would occur again as he had learned nothing different. Therefore, in order to build a relationship with a young offender a new way of showing them that the support they are receiving is different is needed. Kermarrec and Mougli (2013) said that young offenders are yesterday's victims, this is as a result of being born into a home where the Other is incapable of nurturing them enough to feel safe.

## **5.5 Summary**

In summary, it is impossible to discuss the role of the ego without considering the environment of which the infant is raised. Family circumstances are of key importance when exploration of the ego is taking place as the influence of the Other has the initial effect on the infant. This interaction between the child and the Other can have devastating effect on the life of a young person. Some young people will internalise this failing and cause destruction to themselves. Some may externalise exhibiting risky and dangerous behaviour onto others. Given that those who externalise are known to have these behaviours it gives the opportunity to focus on this as a topic.

The area of attachment and the importance of that initial relationship was mentioned by every participant as being vital and the main cause for the young people being in the position, they are in. This is down to the defences, behaviours that have manifested due to the defences, the

effect that this has had on ongoing relationships and the fragility of the relationships they young people currently have. As stated by one participant '*as a society in lots of ways we fail children*'. With the right supports in place for children growing up in disadvantaged areas or who are living in homes that are not safe for them, this development can be changed for the next generation.

## **5.6 Limitations**

This paper is an exploration of young offenders which include both strengths and limitations to the work. The semi-structured interviews made it possible to gather relevant knowledge in relation to the experience of working with young people. The low number of participants gives only a small sample for a study of this nature. In order to get a full picture of how to improve life for young offenders and possibly reduce the number of offenders in the system a larger population should be chosen. The time constraints of this paper would not lend itself to a study of this size as if a more accurate portrayal was possible a larger population of each sector would be chosen to participate in this study. Thematic analysis is a useful tool for exploration a topic of this choice, but due to the limit on word count and time a lot of valuable themes are cut from examination. Direct contact with the offenders is not possible as this would be unethical to the offenders and unsafe for the researcher. If the offenders were open to this kind of study, it would give a more accurate account of the reasons they have found themselves incarcerated.

## **5.7 Further Recommendations**

From the participants interviewed, the researcher found that three areas would warrant further research and implementation. The first is to provide more help to the primary caregiver on the birth of their infant, as this was discussed by all the participants and they felt strongly that this was the root cause of children offending. A support system that would aid the caregivers in raising a securely attached child. This could be offered on the birth of the child. A programme of this nature would need to be enforced and freely available. The second is provision of support to young offenders that have been released. A mentoring programme that would give one to one support to the young person once they are released to decrease the likelihood of repeat offending, death due to drugs or involvement in more dangerous crime as this is currently high as mentioned by some of the participants who work directly with young offenders. The third recommendation would be a multidisciplinary team working together to understand why these children are ending up in detention centres. If all could work in tandem with each other to find better options and more obtainable sanctions to deter the young people from repeat offending. This topic would warrant further exploration based on what can be done to ensure young people do not end up in detention centres.

## **5.8 Conclusion**

This paper set out to explore the role of the ego in the creation of destructive defence mechanisms in young offenders. The research on failed attachment links in with the destructive coping mechanisms of the young offenders that were the main subject of this paper. The prevalence of Others who were either not in a position to care for their infants was a common factor that came up throughout all the interviews. This compounds the theory that secure attachments with the Other is the most important factor when raising a child. Destructive defences are created by the infant from an early age and they continue to protect

a child from the outside world as needed. In adolescence when even a securely attached young person is going through an emotional upheaval, they have the means of regulating themselves emotionally. With young offenders this seems to be lacking. What is seen is aggression and anger filled behaviours that are an externalisation of the emotion the young offender is unable to contain. The theory included and the observations of the participants that took part in this paper, gave reason to believe that the expression of emotion by the young offender is not necessarily the emotion being felt by him. It could stem from fear, anxiety or protecting himself from something he doesn't fully understand. The lack of that initial containment between infant and the Other has not been available to him and so his primary defences shine through causing destructive behaviour.

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## **Appendix A: Interview Guideline**

1. How do you refer to the children you work with?
2. What is the best way to work with children?
3. What is it like working with them?
4. From the kids that you work/ed with, why do you think they are the way they are and what reason do you think they are there?
5. In relation to their behaviour – What do you notice when the children are interacting with each other and when they are interacting with the adults.
6. How rigid is the structure of your organisation?
7. How does the structure effect your way of working with the children?
8. How do they progress to the next level of detention/What happens when they are released from this stage?
9. Is there anything you would like to add regarding the children in your care that we haven't mentioned yet?

## Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

### INFORMATION FORM

My name is Caroline Conway and I am currently undertaking a BA in Counselling and Psychotherapy at Dublin Business School. I am inviting you to take part in my research project which is concerned with understanding the development of defence mechanisms of children going through juvenile detention centres. I will be exploring the views of people like yourself, all of whom have experienced working with children in this area.

#### What is Involved?

You are invited to participate in this research along with a number of other people because you have been identified as being suitable, and of having interaction with children in this area. If you agree to participate in this research, you will be invited to attend an interview with myself in a setting of your convenience, which should take no longer than 30 minutes to complete. During this I will ask you a series of questions relating to the research question and your own work. After completion of the interview, I may request to contact you by telephone or email if I have any follow-up questions.

#### Anonymity

All information obtained from you during the research will be anonymous. Notes about the research and any form you may fill in will be coded and stored in a protected file. The password to the file will not be shared and will be kept in a separate device. All data stored will be de-identified. Audio recordings and transcripts will be made of the interview will be coded by number and kept in a secure location. Your participation in this research is voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any point up to six weeks of the due date of the thesis, which is May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2019.

If you have any further queries please do not hesitate to contact me, Caroline Conway at [10003973@mydbs.ie](mailto:10003973@mydbs.ie) or my Thesis Supervisor, Siobáin O'Donnell at [siobain.odonnell@dbs.ie](mailto:siobain.odonnell@dbs.ie)

#### DECLARATION

**I have read this consent form and have had time to consider whether to take part in this study. I understand that my participation is voluntary (it is my choice) and that I am free to withdraw from the research at any time without disadvantage. I agree to take part in this research.**

**I understand that, as part of this research project, notes of my participation in the research will be made. I understand that my name will not be identified in any use of these records. I am voluntarily agreeing that any notes may be studied by the researcher for use in the research project and used in scientific publications.**

Name of Participant (in block letters) \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date     /     /