



**The Mind of the Moratorium**

**A psychosocial exploration of the concept of self in Irish male adolescents**

**By**

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## ABSTRACT

*“The reasonable man adapts himself to the world: the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.”*

*(Shaw, 1903)*

Erikson (1968, p. 143) discusses George Bernard Shaw granting himself a ‘psychosocial moratorium’, a time, he describes between childhood and adulthood for identity and role experimentation. A time to find a defined section of society uniquely made for him. Erikson refers to self as evolving. The self evolves as an individual negotiates and resolves psychosocial crises and integrates life experiences and relationships into a sense of who they are. In his theory of psychosocial development, Erikson discusses the fifth stage as Identity v Role Confusion where he links the concept of self and identity during adolescence. He believed the social and psychological outcome of adolescence is critical for forming a coherent identity based on an evolving sense of self. Shaw suggests that the courage to resist conformity, to question and be ‘unreasonable’ creates change. For Erikson, the ‘unreasonable’ individual who actively explores and experiments with roles and beliefs, not just discovers identity but creates it through resistance, reflection and action. During his exploration, Shaw was drawn to the Socialist revival of the 1880s and eventually settled down to study and write extraordinary work. This study aims to explore the concept of self in Irish male adolescents today. The study is rooted in theories of development from Erikson and the discussion is supported by contemporary research and writings. The researcher employed a qualitative approach within the context of the psychotherapeutic relationship and interviewed seven psychotherapists working with male adolescents in Ireland. The qualitative data gathered was analysed using Thematic Analysis. From the perspective of psychotherapeutic theory, three major themes were identified and discussed: 1. Role exploration; 2. The therapeutic relationship, and 3. Messages to leaders. The study concluded with recommendations for further exploration.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Rationale

The creator of the term ‘identity crisis’, Erikson writes (1968, p. 132) that if the ‘delinquent’ in the stage of identity confusion is diagnosed and treated, criminal incidents do not have the same fatal significance or cause life defining damage. He suggests that by treating and labelling them as criminals, leaders in society are indeed encouraging the adolescent to put their energy into becoming exactly that. He offers (p. 196) that his theory of identity can contribute to understanding this problem in careless and fearful communities. Erikson (1968, p. 156) describes a ‘psychosocial moratorium’ (1968, p. 156) as the time between childhood and adulthood for role experimentation. The Global Peace Index (2020) found that the average level of country peacefulness has deteriorated for nine of the past 12 years, with a sharp rise in the level of civil unrest over the last decade. Ireland was ranked joint 39<sup>th</sup> with Slovenia as having a very high state of peace in the country. However, the 2023 riots in Dublin highlighted the rise of tension and unrest in the capital and a sense that an undercurrent exists. There was heated debate about the role of male adolescents in the violence and disorder, with young boys openly rioting and looting. In light of rising tension, misogyny (O’Rourke et al. 2024) and domestic violence (Women’s Aid n.d.), there is an urgency to examine self-identity in this demographic and to evaluate what is presenting in clinical practice. The rationale behind this study lies in the desire to understand identity development among young boys in this adolescent stage of life, how society and their environment are shaping their concept of self, and to examine what is presenting in the psychotherapeutic space.

## 1.2 Aim and objectives

The study is a psychosocial exploration. The aim is *to explore the concept of self in Irish male adolescents*. The objectives are to:

1. Evaluate seminal work on identity formation from Erik Erikson;
2. Examine the contemporary social bond and discourse among adolescents that informs their self-conception;
3. Investigate identity issues in male adolescents through the therapeutic relationship.

The literature review has a theoretical focus, reviewing Erik Erikson's framework of development, and a contemporary focus on other current literature, research and publications. The methodology section presents the proposed approach to research planning, implementing and writing the study. The findings offer a comprehensive overview of the data collected and its interpretation, followed by a discussion section that goes into more detail of the meaning of the data from a psychotherapeutic perspective.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section is organised in a conceptual format, beginning with a theoretically-focused review of seminal material from Erik Erikson, followed by a contemporary focus on literature and research.

### 2.1 Theoretical Focus: Erik Erikson

*“In the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity.” (Erikson, 1968, p. 130)*

Erik Erikson was a German-born psychoanalyst, one of the most influential of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The rationale for concentrating on Erikson’s concepts for the research is twofold. Firstly, because his holistic approach to encompassing external social and psychological factors in identity formation, supports the author in the study as a psychosocial exploration of the concept of self in Irish male adolescents. Erikson’s theory emphasises the significant role that social and cultural factors play in shaping identity (1968, p. 22). Erikson carefully explains the dilemma with identity and how we deal with a process *“located in the core of the individual”* and also *“in the core of his communal culture”*. He presents that the process involves the complex establishment of two identities, achieved through reflection and observation of self as perceived by self and others. It is primarily unconscious and always changing as one increases differentiation (p. 23). The second rationale is because of his empathy towards adolescents in the moratorium stage of development (1963, p. 236). During the age of Identity v Role Confusion, Erikson suggests that the adolescent mind is at a psychosocial stage of moratorium between childhood and adulthood. With an ideological

mind and an ideological outlook of society, eager to be accepted, the adolescent is in search of social values to guide identity. This stage of development is a vital phase during adolescence, and it is in this stage that the complex process of establishing identity has its normative crisis. The author experiences Erikson as having empathy for this demographic, in particular those on the margins of society, as he appears to question teachers, judges and psychiatrists as contributing to the development of negative identity (Erikson, 1968, p. 196). By diagnosing and treating such adolescents as criminals or misfits, these leaders may be contributing to those same young people choosing the negative identity that such communities expect them to be or have. His theories and considerations provide insight for the author when remaining focused on the thesis aim to explore the concept of self in Irish male adolescents. This section of the literature review will present Erikson's stages of development (Erikson, 1963). For context only, it will begin by offering a short overview of seven of the eight stages and more detail about the stage of Identity v Role Confusion. The rationale for this approach is to keep the literature review focused on the aim to explore the concept of self in Irish male adolescents, to which this fifth stage is most applicable. It will lay the foundation for synthesising and comparing Erikson's ideas with the ideas of others and contemporary research later in the literature review and throughout the thesis.

### ***2.1.1 Eight Ages of Man***

Erikson (1963, pp. 222 - 243) presents that we must recognise the place of identity in the human life cycle if we are to explore identity problems of our time. Although influenced by Freud, Erikson's work centred around psychosocial development over psychosexual development, believing that personality was formed over a number of stages, impacted by social experiences. Although written in the sixties, for the author his concept is still relevant and powerful for today as we live in a world obsessed with identity and how we share it in society. Erikson introduces his psychosocial theory of Eight Ages of Man and 'crises' or

stages across a person's lifespan. Conflicts that arise in each stage are created by the interplay between biological development and social environment. To successfully move through the stages and contribute to healthy personality development, Erikson presents that each individual must resolve the conflicts. Failing to resolve them may result in lacking the skills to develop a strong sense of self. Erikson (p. 221) describes ego qualities that emerge from the stages of development. Ego strength is achieved through a sense of mastery if the stage is managed successfully, and a sense of inadequacy is experienced if not. He (p. 224) presents that each stage has a relation to a basic element of society, because human life cycle and human institutions have evolved together. He acknowledges that a person may revisit unresolved conflicts throughout their life.

Basic Trust v Basic Mistrust is the first stage of development, when the infant learns to trust others to feed, comfort or care for them. If the caregiver is unreliable and inconsistent the infant may develop mistrust, and trust if the caregiver is attuned and reliable. For the therapeutic space, the author takes from this that the re-building of this trust is essential when working with those in adulthood who have not resolved this conflict. As a toddler, Autonomy v Shame and Doubt emerges. The freedom to let the child learn how to feed and dress themselves results in a sense of autonomy. Lack of encouragement or criticism results in shame and doubt in their capabilities. Muscular maturation and learning to control bodily functions lead to this sense of independence, toilet training being a prime example. Erikson (p. 226) describes holding on and letting go as the two social modalities and conflicts to be resolved. Holding on may lead to destructive or controlling behaviour whilst the opposite may lead to letting go of destructive forces. Interesting to the author is Erikson's (p. 229) point that a sense of autonomy fostered in the child, and modified as life progresses, serves as a sense of justice in life and how this might translate in adolescent years. The third age,

Initiative v Guilt falls in preschool years. The child who is encouraged to take the lead, plan a game and ask questions will feel able and confident. The child who may be punished for appearing too bossy or too inquisitive, may develop feelings of guilt.

The first three ages have prepared the inner stage for 'entrance into life', school life being the environment for this stage of Industry v Inferiority (p. 232). A sense of industry is developed as the child learns from adults how to use the tools and the fundamentals of technology to produce, to perform, to contribute. The crisis lies in the child's sense of adequacy or inadequacy. The student who is praised and encouraged with positive feedback on school work will feel competent. The child who is criticised or discouraged may develop a sense of inferiority. Erikson (p. 234) presents that this is socially a decisive stage because of the industrious nature involving being and doing with others. The child begins to feel their differences with others, whether that is background or race; the beginnings of their sense of identity. Childhood ends and youth begins at the fifth age Identity v Role Confusion, which will be discussed in more detail later. In young adulthood, Erikson (p. 234) discusses the crisis of Intimacy v Isolation and the importance at this age and stage of development to form intimate relationships with others. Emerging from youth, the young adult is eager to fuse and is ready for intimacy and commitment. Failure through avoidance of intimacy due to fear of ego-loss or mistrust, may lead to a sense of isolation that is carried through life.

In middle adulthood, Erikson (p. 240) writes that generativity is essential on the psychosexual and psychosocial schedule. There is a need to nurture or to create, to make positive change. For the adult who contributes to society through mentorship, career success or parenting, they have a sense of fulfilment. For the adult who feels unproductive or stuck in less fulfilling life experiences, stagnation may be felt or occur. A critique of this 'crisis' for the author lies in

the definition of what success and contribution mean in today's society (p. 240). Erikson (p. 240) writes that productivity and creativity cannot replace generativity. The author would argue that since the 1960s in a society where more people choose not to have children, individuals have and can find fulfilment, without stagnation. The final psychosocial stage and age of man, Integrity v Despair, occurs in old age (p. 241). It is a time to reflect on one's one and only life and find acceptance. Those who can accept and integrate the experiences and achievements or lack of, can find peace and prepare for death. Those who have regrets and a fear that time is now too short to begin again, experience bitterness and despair. Erikson (p. 242) eloquently creates, with wisdom, the link between healthy children without fear of life who have elders with integrity and who do not fear death.

Erikson's theory of development stages offer a very male-centric, childhood and adolescent perspective which lends itself to the aim to explore the concept of self in Irish male adolescents. Although broad, it offers a valuable framework for the exploration. Questions do arise for the author in terms of what measurement can be used on the experiences in each stage, what constitutes the resolution of a crisis and what societal and cultural factors are taken into consideration. A deeper evaluation of the most relevant stage to the aim of the thesis, Identity v Role Confusion, is offered to set the scene for further discussion and synthesis of ideas.

### ***2.1.2 Identity v Role Confusion***

Erikson (1968, p. 16) recalls first using the term 'identity crisis' when working with veterans during the Second World War. Together with other psychiatric professionals, Erikson identified a loss of ego in the patients due to confusion within themselves caused by the demands of war. He likens this to conflicts in young people with inner confusion, who in turn wage war on their society. In keeping with the aim to explore the concept of self in Irish

male adolescents, this section will focus on the stage of adolescence (12-18 years) Identity v Role Confusion (1963, p. 234). Questions arise of identity and self-definition combined with roles, beliefs and values, as the adolescent mind is a stage between childhood and adulthood, ideological and ripe.

At this stage of psychosocial development for Erikson (p. 234), the child may or may not have established good initial relationships, and mastered, or not, the skills at entrance to life in the previous stage. Similar to early childhood, the rapid growth of the body in puberty evokes questions for the adolescent. Adult tasks lie ahead of them and the integration of how they feel, the skills they have cultivated and how they are viewed by others is challenging (p. 235). Erikson (p. 235) describes this as the formation of ego identity. The adolescent is integrating the experiences from early childhood and identifications established from the interplay with them and others. These experiences, combined, include a collection of factors: changes in emotional and sexual energy, opportunities of roles in society and the talents and abilities the adolescent is born with. A sense of ego identity begins to form from the levels of inner sameness and continuity of one's meaning for others. A strong ego identity offers consistency in the inner world, allowing the individual to have different experiences with others while maintaining a stable sense of self. The inability to integrate these experiences and establish greater levels of inner sameness and continuity may cause an unstable sense of self and role confusion. If left unresolved, this can lead to low self-esteem, feelings of isolation and inability to maintain healthy relationships. Exploration and experimentation, without commitment, and with various roles, values, and beliefs during this stage, without making firm commitments, may help the adolescent establish their identity and find the sameness and continuity they are searching for. Support and guidance from family and peers play an important role to offer encouragement and guidance to the adolescent in their

decisions. This stage is particularly significant for identity development. Successfully navigating this period leads to a robust sense of self, while failure results in role confusion and a fragmented self-concept. Erikson illustrates that the crisis for the adolescent is identity versus role confusion. While acknowledging that resolving identity-related challenges in early life has a lasting positive impact, research by Mitchell et al. (2021) found that those who struggled with identity formation in emerging adulthood can make up for it in later stages of life.

Marcia et al. (1993) expanded on Erikson's fifth stage of Identity and Role Confusion by offering the concept that neither resolution nor confusion occur in this stage and suggests that the individual explores and commits to an identity. Marcia considers identity in three aspects, Structural, Phenomenological and Behavioural. The structural aspect consolidates at late adolescence during a state of ego growth. Marcia presents (1993, p. 11) defining criteria of identity states. Identity Diffusion status means the individual has not yet explored or committed to alternative identity options. Uncertainty about beliefs and values exist and the adolescent seeks others and information. At the Foreclosure stage, the individual has made a commitment without much exploration or questioning alternatives. This can cause a lack of authenticity and depth in the identity, choosing to adopt the values and identities of others. During the Moratorium stage, individuals are actively exploring identity options and engaging in experimentation. This is an interesting stage in the context of the adolescent and their interaction with others and social life as they seek out new experiences. Having explored various options, Identity Achievement represents the ideal identity outcome. The individual is authentic and has a clearly defined sense of identity.

Erikson (p. 235) places emphasis on the importance of the tangible promise of a 'career' at this stage of development. The author's interpretation is that successful resolution

of this crisis is in the ability to settle on an occupational identity. One that meets the expectations of the individual's society and that matches the endowed talents of the individual. Applying this concept to adolescents in 2025 feels narrow in thinking with a rigidity to 'settle' at a very young age. Children are leaving school later and engaging in further education longer. (p. 236). What Erikson (p. 236) offers that is valuable today, and for the aim to explore the concept of self in Irish male adolescents, is the idea that the adolescent mind is ideological and the mind of the moratorium. He describes this as a stage between morality learned in early childhood, and ethics yet to be developed in adulthood. Ideologies in society speak to this adolescent as he seeks affirmation (p. 237). He (p. 237) posits that the industrialised world and society provides many opportunities for exploration. He introduces challenges with ideology and aristocracy and the dangers arising when human ideals are used to control and exploit others in society.

The resolution or 'virtue' established is fidelity, and as a defence, adolescents can become clannish and intolerant to others. (p. 236) Erikson offers empathy in understanding that the intolerance and cruelty sometimes expressed by adolescents, is a defence against a sense of identity confusion. This highlights the delicate stage of development and identity formation for the adolescent. It is this empathy and understanding in his theories that drew the author to Erikson's work and to consider them in the context of adolescents today and with a contemporary focus.

## **2.2 Contemporary Focus: Social bond and discourse**

*"Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are."*

*(Michel Foucault, 1982, p. 785)*

Erikson lived in the second and third industrial revolutions, witnessing technological advances that no doubt influenced his thinking on identity formation. The fourth industrial revolution in which we live today, is driven by technologies that have radically changed the way we perform tasks, communicate, connect, and consume and share information. Contemporary social bonds among adolescents differ considerably to Erikson's time. More digital communication is used than face-to-face, resulting in quick and superficial connections versus more meaningful ones. Global connection with others from different cultures and social networks is available in comparison to a more localised social community of the past. Influences are experienced through social media with access to individuals shaping ideas that the adolescent may not have had exposure to in the past, changing the dynamic of influence from family and friends, to external groups and ideologies. In Erikson's time, the adolescent's world was smaller and identity development was influenced by local community norms and beliefs. Expanding and broadening social bonds can bring many opportunities for diversification and critical thinking, with technology allowing for exploration of identity and education. It can also leave the young adolescent mind vulnerable. The ability to create online personas different to offline personas can lead to fragmentation. Cyber bullying and peer comparisons are intensified online. The adolescent seeking belonging can more easily be targeted by groups with engaging content and forums creating echo chambers of ideas and values.

Erikson ponders "*To have the courage of one's diversity is a sign of wholeness in individuals and in civilization. But wholeness, too, must have defined boundaries*" (1968, p. 60). Written in the 1960s, it is interesting to read his foresight to question dangers with emerging technology and scientific progress. For the author he is making a link between the future power of communication and the wider spread of mis and dis information for the manipulation and exploitation of identity. Erikson (p. 87) warned of the dangers that

ideologies can be used to manipulate the young mind. The adolescent seeks new, reliable identifications with peers and leaders outside the family. In doing this, the adolescent may define, over define or redefine themselves. When integrating and synthesising identities becomes too difficult, the youth can be driven to align totally to one side or another. It is at this point when society plays an important role in supporting the youth to create a positive or negative identity. Both primitive and civilised societies adopt their own means of doing this, whether it is dramatised rituals in primitive cultures or fraternities and styles in advancing civilisation. Erikson (p. 88) speaks to the importance of studying wilful switching to a negative identity in the adolescent, in particular in larger cities with economic, ethnic and religious marginality. This urban environment does not offer the same foundation for a move towards positive identity for the adolescent. Youths find refuge in radical groups where rebellion and confusion and unquestioned ideology are considered universally righteous (p. 89). Manipulation can occur in the dynamics of the interplay between the identity of the adolescent as an individual and the collective identity of the group. The contemporary social bond that exists today offers a multitude of platforms and spaces for such refuge and manipulation.

Erikson discusses the impact of historical and technological changes that unearth deep rooted identities that may cause a sense of fear of loss of identity for the youth. This can lead to alignment with extreme ideology like racism, classism and nationalism. As part of the adolescent exploration during this stage of psychosocial development, the group dynamic deeply influences the adolescent, offering a sense of belonging and freedom and in some cases a totalitarian regime that exploits and justifies behaviour. Erikson (p. 89) makes the interesting point that it is important to see that these conditions can also impact the identity of adults, paralysed in this negative identity by losing their own sense of identity and aligning with that of the adolescent alternative. The author wonders if his acknowledgment of

totalitarian propaganda concentrating on the claim that the youth are left high and dry is a direct call to the deep-rooted fears of the adult with unresolved conflict from Erikson's fifth stage of development, Identity v Role Confusion.

It is interesting to link Michel Foucault's concepts of power, knowledge and discourse with Erikson's theories of identity development at this adolescent stage. Powers (2015, p. 26) discusses Foucault's claim that power relations in modern western civilisation are a result of conceptual changes in societal thought from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The rise of capitalism, the industrial revolution and physical sciences, ran parallel to the emergence of the humanist perspective from philosophers. Foucault argued that these activities brought about a change in the management of people and reframed assumptions around society, science, power and human agency. He (p. 28) presented that *'power creates tensions between, within and among individuals and groups'*. Foucault (1980) offered a contradiction to the Enlightenment ideal, the European intellectual movement of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, suggesting that power is knowledge rather than knowledge is power. Discourse then, is a system to represent, organise and share knowledge, with meaning and in a controlled way in society, and is intrinsically linked to power. He suggests that power is exercised through discursive practices such as ideology and oppression in society. The discourse creates subject positions with defined roles and identities.

For the adolescent in the psychosocial stage of moratorium, exploring roles and identities, they will encounter different societal discourse that might shape their understanding and expectations of what is possible. In a contemporary context, they are bombarded with information, influenced by far reaching external players, setting expectations on gender roles, success benchmarks, behaviours and desires. Navigating and negotiating the power dynamics and knowledge shared will impact their identity formation. As presented by Erikson, those who reflect and challenge may resolve the crisis at this stage of development,

leading to an authentic and cohesive identity. Those who do not may experience role confusion. Branje et al. (2021) conducted a decade long review, synthesising research on the development of identity. Within the research paper, the authors discuss identity and psychosocial adjustment. It cites research (Crocetti et al. 2012) that states adolescents with strong identity have higher levels of psychosocial adjustment than those with ongoing identity uncertainty. The latter are at increased risk of developing aggressive behaviour, substance abuse and delinquent behaviour. In some instances, the adolescent develops negative identity with roles opposed to societal expectations. In a systematic literature review, Ragelienė (2016) found that identity development is positively related to relationships with peers based on respect and acceptance. The sense of belonging and involvement in peer groups contribute to achieving identity. What is less clear are the problematic implications of low levels of differentiation of self and the susceptibility to peer pressure and conformism resulting in anti-social behaviour. A key objective of the study is to examine the contemporary social bond and discourse among adolescents that informs their self-conception. To meet this objective, the researcher reviewed multiple articles from mainstream media, broadsheets, industry reports, articles from umbrella body, the Irish Association of Integrative and Humanistic Psychotherapists, and Government publications. Trauma informed literature from Herman (2015) and Bessel van der Kolk (2014) were studied to provide understanding of the impacts of trauma in the body. And neurobiological perspectives from Siegel (2020) and Morgan (2013) were helpful in understanding the teenage brain and how relationships shape emotional regulation and behaviour. The study also examined the work of collaborative projects such as art, performance and social project *What Does He Need?* (Whelan et al.) and TV drama series *Adolescence* viewed on Netflix (Graham et. al 2025). This literature is used to support the interpretation of the findings in the discussion section.

## 2.3 Conclusion

The qualitative research gathered and presented later in the study, explores the concept of self in Irish male adolescents through the lens of the psychotherapeutic relationship. Erikson's theories of development are highly relevant for deeper understanding of identity issues among this cohort. They lay the foundations for exploring the psychological point at which these young boys are at in their lives and the role played by society and their environment in shaping who they are. Understanding the backdrop of the contemporary social bond and discourse that informs their self-conception, compliments this and offers a route to explore how Erikson's theories are relevant today. The discussion section will explore more deeply the findings against the backdrop of this literature, synthesising the data with the theory presented.

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Introduction**

According to the Association for Psychosocial Studies (n.d), the area of psychosocial studies is a vibrant field of academic inquiry that has emerged since the 1980s. It is described as inter and trans-disciplinary, non-positivistic, and orientated towards social and personal change and has strong links to the field of psychotherapy. The researcher chose a psychosocial study due to the encompassing and progressive approach to understanding how the subjective experience of the individual is interwoven with the social life. With the primary focus of the study rooted in psychotherapy concepts and theory, the researcher concluded that a psychosocial study was the best approach to address the aim to explore the concept of self in Irish male adolescents. This chapter outlines the methodology to conducting the research, including the research approach, sample, data collection and analysis, and ethics.

### **3.2 Qualitative Approach**

The researcher adopted a qualitative research approach to address the objective to investigate identity issues in male adolescents through the psychotherapeutic relationship. This approach offered the researcher rich understanding and insight from the perspective of professionals working with the specific demographic of the research aim, to explore the concept of self in Irish male adolescents. It facilitated an environment for deeper discussion and data for analysis. The qualitative approach meant that the researcher could learn from the subjective experience of the participants, hearing directly the issues presenting in the psychotherapeutic space with the thesis demographic of Irish male adolescents. The semi-

structured qualitative interviews allowed for flexibility in exploring aspects of self-concept while also ensuring consistency across all interviews.

### **3.3 Sample**

Central to the thesis was the exploration of identity issues in Irish male adolescents through a psychotherapy lens. The agreed representative sample was chosen to maintain this focus and to avoid generalisations. In consultation with the researcher's Thesis Supervisor, it was agreed to only recruit psychotherapists qualified and working with adolescents. Although their input is highly valuable to the thesis topic, it was agreed not to include Social Workers considering the specific psychotherapy focus of the study. An initial sample list of almost twenty individuals and organisations was sourced from the Irish Association of Humanistic and Integrative Psychotherapists and the Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy websites, and direct contacts of the researcher. Immediately upon sign off of the sample list by the Thesis Supervisor, the researcher began the recruitment campaign. Consent from eight psychotherapists working with adolescents was received and seven interviews were conducted. A suitable time for the eighth consenting therapist was unfortunately not secured. All those interviewed met the recruitment criteria and offered deep insight from experience working with adolescents. Six of the participants are located in Dublin and one in Galway. All participants secured were through college and personal contacts of the researcher. Forward planning and organisation allowed ample time for the researcher to conduct the interviews and analyse the data.

### **3.4 Data Collection**

The qualitative method of open-ended, probing questions asking the “why” and “how” related to the aim to explore the concept of self in Irish male adolescents, resulted in

rich exploration of the different presenting issues. It created a space for the opinions of the qualified professionals to offer a deeper understanding and insight from a clinical perspective. Individual interviews were held, and each discussion was guided by the interview schedule, included in Appendix A. The researcher chose open-ended questions to allow for a semi-structured approach to the interview. The reason for this approach was to ensure that the interviewee had the opportunity to offer additional information that came to mind, and that the researcher had the opportunity to ask questions outside of the schedule and that were relevant to the flow of discussion. During the writing and development phase of the interview schedule, and before the formal research interviews, the researcher chose to do an informal pilot interview to test the wording and flow of the questions. This allowed the researcher to practice asking the questions and make amendments needed. Feedback from the Thesis Supervisor and this mock interview were very helpful in refining the questions and making them less academic in advance of the formal interviews.

One interview was held in person and six online. On average each interview was 30-40 minutes in length. In each interview the researcher allowed for flexibility in the discussion which resulted in additional thoughts and information to flow from the psychotherapists. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher clearly outlined the thesis aim and relevant objective to investigate identity issues in male adolescents through the therapeutic relationship. In-person and online interviews were audio recorded using a PLAUD recording device. The researcher maintained a conversational tone throughout, using the questions as a guide, while allowing the discussion to flow. This allowed for a less rigid approach to structured interviews because it was led by the participants' thoughts and the freedom to express their views, which resulted in richer feedback for the researcher. All information obtained from the data collection remained confidential. Digital and written notes about the

research were coded and stored in a password protected file and all data kept about the participants was de-identified.

### **3.5 Analysis**

Argued by Braun and Clark (2008) as an accessible approach to analysing qualitative data, the researcher chose a Thematic Analysis of the data due to the flexibility it offered. Thematic analysis offered clearer patterns and themes in the data, directly from the highly qualified and relevant participants' feedback. Using a thematic analysis approach allowed the author to identify the themes and patterns and subsequently interpret their meaning. The researcher adopted the six-phase approach from Braun and Clarke (2006) of Step 1. Becoming familiar with the data, Step 2. Generating initial codes, Step 3. Searching for themes, Step 4. Reviewing the themes, Step 5. Defining the essence of each theme, and finally, Step 6. Writing the report.

The researcher explored the use of Thematic Analysis software Nvivo to help with the data analysis. After becoming familiar with the software through online tutorials and on deeper reflection, the researcher chose to analyse the data manually in Microsoft Word. The data from the recorded transcripts was split into a table to allow for coding to create meaningful groups of information and themes. As the researcher became familiar with the data, codes were generated against pieces of data from each interview transcript. Themes began to emerge, and all themes were initially included in the analysis, whether or not there were inconsistencies or tensions. Themes were then analysed further and prioritised. The final stage of the Thematic Analysis was to develop a concise story of the data, going beyond description. Text was highlighted using colour codes to identify relevant sections of the data that fell under each of the themes. Extracts from the transcripts were embedded in the narrative of the analysis to illustrate the relevance to the aim of the study to explore the

concept of self in Irish male adolescents. Three major themes emerged with subthemes within them. Appendix B presents a snapshot of the analysis process including codes, emerging themes, final themes and an extract from three interviews showing the process of coding to identify themes. Chapter 4: Findings presents this report and outcome of the analysis, describing the themes found.

### **3.6 Ethics**

The thesis aims and objectives were reviewed and approved by the author's Research Lecturer and Thesis Supervisor from Dublin Business School. The research adhered to the Belmont Principles of research (1978) when conducting research involving human subjects, by adopting respect, beneficence and justice. Using Microsoft Forms, the Consent and Information form included in Appendix C was emailed and/or sent by WhatsApp to the interview participants. Each individual reviewed and agreed to be a participant by completing and returning the Microsoft Form online. The Form included the contact details of the Research Lecturer in the event that the participants had queries or ethical concerns. They were also given the option to withdraw. The researcher generated a Microsoft Excel Sheet to record and capture the consent from each participant. Each individual was assured that their name and contact information would remain confidential and anonymous, respecting an integral component of research (Bell 2005). At the beginning of each interview, the interviewee was reminded that the interview would be recorded. The transcripts of each interview were saved on a password protected folder using pseudonyms for each participant. The researcher offered to share the final thesis with each interviewee. The data and outcome from these interviews are presented in the following section, and describe the themes found.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the research data gathered from seven participants which was then analysed using Thematic Analysis as described in Chapter 3: Methodology. Included are three themes that emerged when addressing the aim to explore the concept of self in Irish male adolescents: 1. Role exploration 2. The therapeutic relationship and 4. Messages to leaders. Within two of the major themes, subthemes were interpreted.

**Table 1**

*Themes and subthemes*

	Major theme	Subtheme
1.	Role exploration	1.1 Masculinity 1.2 Anti-social behaviour 1.3 Influencers
2.	The therapeutic relationship	2.1 Gestalt 2.2 Expressing feelings 2.3 Critical thinking
3.	Messages for leaders	

Excerpts from the participants' transcripts are offered to support the themes and the interpretation of the data. The excerpts are presented within quotation marks and in italics. Deeper analysis and interpretation of the data are presented in the subsequent Chapter 5: Discussion.

**Table 2***Sample pseudonyms and demographics*

	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Qualifications</b>	<b>Sector</b>
1.	SC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Psychotherapist</li> <li>• IAHIP</li> <li>• IACP</li> <li>• Children &amp; Loss</li> <li>• Team Based Approaches to Child, Adolescent and Family Mental Health</li> <li>• Addiction</li> </ul>	Private Practice
2.	FC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Psychotherapist</li> <li>• IACP</li> <li>• IICP</li> <li>• CBT</li> <li>• Adolescent Psychotherapy</li> </ul>	Public/Community Private Practice
3.	GC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Psychotherapist</li> <li>• IACP</li> <li>• Understanding and Responding to Self-Injury</li> <li>• Adolescent Psychotherapy</li> </ul>	Public/Community
4.	BC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Psychotherapist</li> <li>• IACP</li> <li>• BACP</li> <li>• WPATH/EPATH</li> <li>• Adolescent Psychotherapy</li> </ul>	Private Practice
5.	CL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Psychotherapist</li> <li>• IAHIP</li> <li>• ECP</li> <li>• Adolescent Psychotherapy</li> </ul>	Public/Community Private Practice
6.	CC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Psychotherapist</li> <li>• IACP</li> <li>• BACP</li> <li>• Adolescent Psychotherapy</li> </ul>	Public/Community
7.	AC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Psychotherapist</li> <li>• Synergetic Play Therapist</li> <li>• Autplay Therapist S.P.A.C.E.</li> <li>• Adolescent Psychotherapy</li> </ul>	Public/Community Private Practice

## 4.2 Theme One: Role exploration

As discussed in the Chapter 2: Literature Review, exploration and experimentation of various roles, values, and beliefs during this stage of development, helps the adolescent establish their identity. A pattern emerged from the data in relation to what and how this exploration is happening today. Within this theme a number of subthemes unfolded as the researcher identified patterns of topics and areas where role exploration was present.

### 4.2.1 Masculinity

The topic of masculinity and what it means to be a man came up in discussion with each of the participants. There was a sense that boys are open to exploring different areas of their identity and that masculinity plays a big part of that. CL makes the point

*CL3 “I do feel that they are somewhat hindered still by this idea of what it means to be masculine, and I suppose we do obviously see it through a kind of sexual and gender identity, but they seem to be in cohorts.”*

GAA and rugby were raised by some as one of these cohorts and the researcher interpreted that as being presented in both a positive and negative light. For example, CL said

*CL2 “Where I work there seems to be this GAA culture and having to fit within that... and if you don't, how that impacts development of identity if you're seen to not like sport.”*

GC offers that **GC3** *“GAA, rugby, football all that kind of stuff helps them promote their development into being a man, into a healthy, masculine person by having that kind of rough tumble”*

The interpretation taken from both is that the discourse is if you are not sporty you are not masculine and if you are sporty you are healthy masculine. GC raised an interesting point about toxic masculinity saying

**GC6** *“While we’re all about toxic masculinity.. we’re not really talking about toxic femininity and I think we need to start looking at that because it’s really unfair.. girls can’t be going around being all feminist and angry and this hatred towards men or all men.. naturally it gets them (boys) really defensive.”*

Statistics show (Women’s Aid, n.d.) that there are valid reasons why girls and women feel threatened by men with research finding that more than one in three women in Ireland have experienced psychological, physical and/or sexual abuse. For our young developing adolescent males, our future men, the message around masculinity being toxic is creating a defence to protect it, something that is at the core of their own identity. From a young age boys are encouraged to engage in rough play with aggressive rather than gentle feelings more accepted, they are given a message to be ‘a man’. As they become adults this masculinity is labelled as toxic. There is mixed messaging in this. BC speaks to this experience when working with adolescents saying

**BC4** *“..they’ve built up the persona, usually from the age of about seven, where they are told to stop crying, it’s almost like an enforced or an imposed alexithymia.. the only feelings that are acceptable as a young boy or as an adolescent are aggressive play or ‘act the maggot’ stuff.”*

As the boy moves from childhood to adulthood this belief that vulnerability is not what masculinity is, creates a stuckness with an inability to connect with feelings. The work in the therapy room is about deconstructing these beliefs and creating a space to explore the vulnerability. From experience, FC said

*FC3 “You will get young males that hold their own who you’ll find are probably in smaller or mixed gender groups. The ones in larger groups tend to follow the norm or the script.”*

Without support and positive male role models, the question is what happens young men as they transition to adulthood and where is the sense of community for them. BC11 says

*BC11 “I would say if you have unsure parents, you are going to get kids whose peer groups are important. The peers become more important, they feel special and important. Whatever the view of masculinity is of the group, he embraces as his identity”*

#### **4.2.2 Anti-social behaviour**

An interpretation of the data suggests that there is always an individual reason why an adolescent is acting in a way that they are, and it is not always for the generalised reason society puts on them. Many times, they are not sure of that reason themselves and often do not like what they are doing. Discussing anti-social behaviour CL suggests from experience that

**CL7** *“If you are going to stay at that level [behaviour] you’re not supporting them. It’s okay to ask if it is clear [to them] the reasons behind it... there might be abuse in their background or they have been taught to fight to fit in. They don’t like what they’re doing but it gives them a sense of status and identity and belonging.”*

This sense of identity is shaped through bonding with others. For example, BC speaks about experience with men engaging in anti-social behaviour during the Dublin riots

**BC12** *“It gave them a sense of identity ‘we’re in this together, we’re patriots, we’re real Irish men’... it was nothing to do with asylum seekers. This is dangerous because it becomes a pack mentality.”*

Personal meaning making and exploring what lies underneath the identity and behaviour is involved in the therapeutic work. Challenging this behaviour and supporting them to be directional in terms of choices is not colluding with the behaviour but is more effective in creating awareness of the consequences. And this identity can be traced back to family relationships, for example CC spoke about those who look up to Dad might say

**CC9** *“..it would be very much that [he would say] ‘I need to be masculine I need to be angry I need to stand up and protect the family.’”*

GC echoed this when discussing experience with adolescents in care

**GC9** *“...his identity would be really focused around his family even though he’s not with his family, but the need for him to identify with them even though they’re quite*

*criminal... not safe at home and lives outside of what he knows... it's really difficult for him"*

An interpretation from the data that resonated with the researcher was that the need to be aggressive or ready is very often a symptom of trauma. A poignant example from GC was

**GC14** *"If you're walking down the street at 14 and you need to be ready all the time for a fight, there's something going on yeah, you're holding it. As a therapist working with them one hour a week they can be safe in that room. Then they have to go back out and be ready. It is a tender balance of trying to help them learn about themselves and develop awareness in order to survive."*

#### **4.2.3 Influencers**

As discussed in the Chapter 2: Literature Review, the way in which we communicate and create the contemporary bond is, in the majority for adolescents, through technology. The data suggests that this is shaping and impacting their sense of identity. For example, FC said

**FC14** *"So yeah, definitely social media and influencers are impacting how they see themselves, how they live, what's expected of young people nowadays. We've had it for years with footballers.. it wasn't in the same way that they could reach young people.. social media wasn't there."*

It was interesting to note conflicting views on how much parents and caregivers should know about social media. SC recalled the advice of a cybersecurity expert, Dr. Mary Aiken, who suggests that

**SC13** “..parents, don’t waste your time trying to get to know social media.. every one of the big companies have thousands of employees whose purpose in life is to make sure you don’t get your head around it.”

The point here is that parents need to parent and set the rules not necessarily understand the technology. BC on the other hand suggests

**BC6** “We have to be at the cold face with them, we have to have our finger on the pulse and know what’s going on.”.

Similarly GC said

**GC5** “Because Andrew Tate was huge, I was like ‘who is this guy’ so I went on YouTube... males shouldn’t be blasted for doing something or thinking something, fine, but then it goes down and it starts into real separation and total disrespect for women.”

There is an interpretation from the data that male adolescents are unable to separate what influencers like Andrew Tate say from what they see i.e. him as a cool rich man. The data shows that misogyny is evident in the content presented in therapy by adolescents. FC spoke about experience of a client

**FC11** “..sees the role of father being quite stereotypical, head of the house who makes decisions and that’s what he wants from his girlfriend.”

These influencers are also acting as role models, showcasing lifestyles, achievements, body image, behaviours that the adolescent is aspiring to. They offer an unrealistic portrayal of success and happiness and that can lead to feelings of inadequacy and setting expectations on relationships with others. GC continued by saying

*GC5 “If that is your influence then how on earth are you going to begin to try and understand a future girlfriend’s relationship.”*

An interpretation from the data is that rather than dismiss these influencers, it is important to challenge their views. As FC said

*FC15 “..instead of just going around with this stance.. find some empathy or relate it to a real life situation or person. So that they are not as accepting of an influencer..”.*

### **4.3 Theme Two: The therapeutic relationship**

One of the objectives of the thesis was to investigate identity issues in male adolescents through the therapeutic relationship, to meet the aim of exploring the concept of self in this demographic. Addressing this, each participant spoke about their therapeutic approach and interventions when working with adolescents. Patterns emerged in relation to the work, with subthemes interpreted from the data when exploring the identity issues of these young men with whom they work.

#### **4.3.1 Gestalt**

Five out of the seven psychotherapists interviewed mentioned Gestalt as a modality and approach that works well with the male adolescents they see. The interpretation is that it

allows for a rich framework for creative exploration during this critical phase of identity formation. Working in the here and now awareness focuses them on what they are experiencing in the present moment which encourages mindfulness and helps them connect with their emotions. The non-pathologising approach concentrates on growth and awareness as opposed to diagnosis, and encourages empowerment through self-expression and taking responsibility for their actions and feelings. Explained by BC,

*BC13 “.. their creative adjustment, to use Gestalt, is that they’re frustrated, and it has nowhere to go so what are they going to do, they’re going to smash something, they’re going to attack somebody.”*

CL describes the use of the concept of the contact boundary and where the self meets the environment and how they connect

*CL1 “I work very much in a Gestalt way, looking at how the adolescent contacts themselves, makes contact with the world, and how the world makes contact with them.”*

Art therapy and sand play were also mentioned by several participants as interventions used to complement a Gestalt approach. An area that was new to the researcher was synergetic play therapy that is influenced by Neuroscience and Gestalt and is heavily placed on being attuned. AC says

**AC1** *“So if we’re feeling something in the room, we’re naming it and we’re regulating through it. An example might be a kid who is super angry.... Their behaviour is anger but the feeling in the room is absolute sadness.”*

For the researcher, the meaning that arises from adopting a Gestalt approach is that it welcomes every feeling into the room and working with personal meaning making to understand what lies beneath. Words can be difficult for the adolescent, so this approach offers a way through non-verbal cues. It creates a space to explore the deeper meaning and an opportunity to express feelings more organically.

#### **4.3.2 Expressing feelings**

From the data, there is an interpretation that male adolescents believe in a script that there are limitations around what and how they express their feelings. For example, CL says

**CL2** *“I’ve heard it out of the mouth of adolescents that I’ve worked with that ‘I can’t show my emotions’.”*

The therapeutic relationship and space is a place for them to express their feelings in a safe and non-judgmental way and from the data, it would appear that this occurs in a very bottom-up way. GC says

**GC4** *“I think with boys, they find the words really difficult to find to express themselves. I don’t think they ‘know’. It’s a gentle kind of probing that helps.. not direct questions, ‘I wonder’ or ‘give an example’ or ‘how do you feel about that’. Vulnerability can bring shame and with a lot of shame you have defence.”*

The data suggests that creating a space to hold those defences is important. BC suggests that

*BC12 “..it is a real question around how safe they feel with you.. they really need to know are ‘you going to be able to hold me in what I’m about to say, are you going to be able to regulate me and can we co-regulate’.”*

The expression can manifest in extremes because they, generally speaking, are struggling to regulate the feelings. How the adolescent has been exposed to expressing feelings in his family setting plays a significant part in how they then express their feelings outside of that. An example from experience from FC,

*FC4 “..for someone who has always expressed sadness through anger, this becomes part of how they express.. it is what they’re exposed to, what they experienced from childhood up and what was encouraged. Role models are kind of part of learning how and why they express.”*

Why they feel more comfortable expressing their feelings in such a way, whether it be a good or bad thing, appears rooted in what they have been exposed to in their childhood, their learned experience. The therapeutic relationship is an opportunity for them to explore this experience and how they express their feelings in a safe environment. FC expresses that

*FC2 “What always surprises me is how emotional they are when they feel comfortable and safe... they’re actually quite unregulated and they find it hard to manage the extremes they can go into... they either hate, or love or obsess. I think it is*

*self-consciousness and fear of being judged without knowing that that's what is happening."*

### **4.3.3 Critical thinking**

A strong theme that emerged during analysis of the data was to encourage and practice critical thinking when working with male adolescents. This theme was touched on by each of the participants. In all cases they began by iterating the importance of first coming from a place of understanding and meeting the adolescent where they are at and without judgement. To accept and respect what they are saying. For FC the approach is

*FC15 "It's to accept okay this is what you're saying and this is your view and this is your belief, let's break it down and try to deconstruct it all, to put it out for them. In a way then that you can certainly get them to challenge themselves in terms of their own real moral".*

Psychoeducation plays an important role in challenging their thinking and helping them to understand how both their history and stage of development is impacting their behaviour and how they are feeling. SC explains

*SC7 "I try to unhook their sense of blame. Highlight why they are in trouble through psycho-ed. It's a way of explaining to them the messages they may have had as a kid and because of their stage of development now.. their brain develops differently and say 'you have a different understanding of the world and that's where you are right now'."*

In their minds they are in the adult world, but they are still young and immature and hormones are also playing a role in their behaviour. It is their reality, and it is important to listen and understand what that reality is like for them. Within the therapeutic relationship, there is an opportunity to challenge the behaviour and beliefs if they are proving harmful. Encouraging empathy by placing a loved one in an example of their negative thinking or behaviour is helpful. Underpinning this was a recognition of their reliance on family relationships or the presence of someone in their life who they can place in scenarios to see things differently. Highlighting that this is not always the case, FC says

*FC15 “And sometimes it is what it is, you know, that is as well the work.. you’re just planting seeds sometimes.”*

#### **4.4 Theme Three: Messages to leaders**

With identity formation crucial at this age of adolescence, each participant had a message they would give our leaders, teachers and policy makers around the narrative used about Irish male adolescents. There was a common theme of the need for greater understanding of the “why” and “what” lies behind the behaviour. The themes of critical thinking and stages of development were evident in each of the messages offered. To respect what influences male adolescents rather than dismissing it and lecturing them. To challenge their sources of information and to interact with them to learn the reasons why they behave the way they do. FC appeals by saying

*FC16 “I think just be respectful of what influences them, and talk to them about it, gently challenge it with the respect that this is their source of information... people*

*have a short time with young people. So they want to get a message across.. rather than interact with them..”*

At this stage of development, adolescent thoughts change rapidly. GC suggests that

**GC10** *“And they’ve great ideas. And you know, they are our future.”*

An important reminder that as a society we must not be quick to judge and dismiss them as they are growing and learning from us. SC reflects on how adults in therapy talk about their younger selves:

**SC11** *“If you look at the way adults talk about themselves as troublemakers and describe themselves as ‘little shits.’”*

During the research CL said

**CL7** *“A lot of the time adolescents come in the room and they expect to be really shamed by an adult. They’ve been brought to therapy because of something.”*

This resonated with the researcher as something that is perhaps reflected on a wider scale in society among adolescents, that perhaps with those who are not in therapy and still feel this sense of shame from an adult. Resources were raised in terms of the need for more safe spaces for adolescents to be around adults. SC said that

**SC11** *“So what would I say to policy makers – I’d say more resources for just talking and safe spaces to just be around adults.”*

This message is reinforced by BC when asked, saying

**BC13** *“We are not listening to them and we’re not listening to what it is like to be them. The message is to stop othering them in the way we speak about them and stop speaking about them as a problem to be fixed.”*

Those male adolescents that do come to therapy, and according to participants those numbers are disproportionately low, are feeling othered and don’t feel part of community. This is impacting their concept of self. CL asks for leaders to try to not misunderstand male adolescents, to not assume they are threatening.

**CL9** *“Maybe when you see them walking down the street in their North Face tracksuits that they’ve got their hoods up because they’re cold, or they are cycling in gangs and having fun, not up to mischief. They’ve got every right to do that.”*

It is the experience of the psychotherapists interviewed that male adolescents are met with negative messages about their demographic that is causing confusion. CL continued

**CL9** *“Don’t misunderstand them.. in a way their identity is becoming fragmented because of all the mixed messages and they are very lost. How can we instil confidence and work with them.. to sustain them to adulthood.”*

An interesting theme that emerged was that male adolescents are underestimated and judged very quickly. From CC's experience

*CC10 "We don't give them enough credit, they're a lot more emotionally intelligent than we might assume."*

Similar to CL, CC talks about the importance of the work to support male adolescents as they develop their concept of self at this stage of development

*CC10 "I want to support them during those formative years and that they don't have really strong unhealthy beliefs.. so they feel supported to have a voice." Calling on leaders, "We need to involve young people into the conversations.. they don't feel heard."*

Expanding on this point, AC speaks to experience with adolescents that

*AC6 "If it's hysterical and big it's historical"*

This meaning that an overreaction is coming from a pattern that was laid in the past. Through a neuroscience lens, the brain goes back into the same stress cycle. The work with adolescents is to slow this down.

*AC6 "We are all working from scripts that were written by players who have left the stage."*

And GC comments on how as adults, we must listen and watch our own defences when discussing and describing male adolescents.

*CG10 “I think there's a need to be a bit more gentle, you know, and to be able to hold the dis-ease, that they have in themselves because they're only growing and they're only learning, but it's about trying to listen a bit more.”*

The adults in the room are writing the scripts for our young people and so we must be mindful of the message. When discussing the narrative about male adolescents

*BC13 “These are our children not thugs.”*

## **4.5 Summary**

Data from the seven interviews offered rich insight into the concept of self in Irish male adolescent at this crucial stage of development. It gave the researcher the opportunity to hear real life experiences within the context of the psychotherapeutic relationship. The themes that emerged were common across all participant discussions with the overarching feeling that deep empathy, understanding and a willingness to understand the lives of young boys was at the heart of the work that they do. Chapter 5: Discussion will discuss the meaning and implications of these three major themes and subthemes from the perspective of psychotherapeutic theory, using Erikson’s framework of development.

## **5. DISCUSSION**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The development of self is a fluid and evolving process, shaped by early relational experiences, environmental contexts and cultural frameworks. Erikson (1968) framed identity as a lifelong developmental process, recognising adolescence as the critical stage. The aim of the thesis is to explore the concept of self in Irish male adolescents. The primary data was collected through a qualitative research approach of conducting semi-structured interviews with seven psychotherapists working with adolescents in Ireland. The researcher used Thematic Analysis to analyse the data collected and identified three major themes with subthemes. The three themes interpreted were 1. Role exploration 2. The therapeutic relationship and 3. Messages to leaders. Central to the research was the exploration of identity issues in young Irish men through the therapeutic relationship and so the sample chosen was specific to psychotherapists to avoid generalisations. The previous Chapter 4: Findings presented the data captured with some interpretation of participants' experience from the adolescents they work with. This chapter will discuss the themes in more detail in relation to the literature presented in Chapter 2: Literature Review.

### **5.2 Theme One: Role exploration**

At the time of conducting the study, a four-part hard-hitting UK drama called *Adolescence* was released on Netflix (Graham et al. 2025). It tells the story about a 13-year-old schoolboy who is arrested for killing a female classmate. On foot of a spate of violent crimes against women by young men, the producers wrote the script to address the question about what was happening with boys. Described in the Guardian as a vital call to action for parents and their teens, it received widespread critical acclaim and sparked a global public

debate about societal concerns (Hogan 2025). For this study as a psychosocial exploration, the drama is of interest to the researcher as it holds themes of masculinity, anti-social behaviour and the impact of influencers; themes found in the real-life findings of the primary research. One remark from a research participant referred to teenagers being safer on the street than in their bedrooms where they become isolated, alone on the internet with tunnel vision. Identified in the findings in the case of online influencers, the adolescent mind is unable to separate the content and discourse from the person. According to Foucault (1980), discourse functions as a structured system through which knowledge is represented, organised, and communicated within society. It operates within a framework of meaning and control, inherently tied to power relations. Foucault (1982) argues that power is enacted through discursive practices—such as ideology and mechanisms of oppression—which shape how individuals and groups are perceived and treated. Through discourse, specific subject positions are constructed, assigning individuals particular roles and identities. The author wonders if young boys have become the subjects of the current discourse about masculinity and expectations of identity within that are being set for them.

O'Rourke et al. (2024) produced a comprehensive report to address the influence of online masculinity influencers on teenage boys. This was a direct response to the harmful impact reported of those promoting misogyny, rigid gender roles and violence. In parallel with the thesis research, it recognises social media and online influencers like Andrew Tate and others who promote regressive views of masculinity including misogyny, homophobia, physical aggression and emotional suppression. (p. 11) The report identifies challenges facing teenage boys such as mental health, identity and gender backlash, and how these masculinity influencers claim to offer simple solutions to complex problems. The study offers a snapshot into the mind of the adolescent and how this is impacting their concept of self. Young boys are receiving messages from influencers to behave in a way that speaks to a certain view of

masculinity. Mainstream media is creating the critical and imperative awareness of women's experiences of sexual harassment by men. Multiple mixed-messages are leading to fragmentation and confusion that for male adolescents, their masculinity is to blame for the actions of other abusive men. (p. 33) Defined as the 'manosphere', there is an online community that focuses on issues relating to men and masculinity, promoting anti-feminism and misogyny and the narrative that men's rights are being eroded. Erikson (1968, p. 22) highlights the crucial influence of social and cultural contexts in the formation of identity development. The research supports this, emphasising that identity development is a complex process involving the integration of two selves, shaped through introspection and through perception by others. The study shows that male adolescents are feeling lost. Combining Erikson's concept (1968) of the ideological mind of the adolescent during the Identity v Role Confusion stage of development, and Foucault's belief (1980) that power is knowledge, the concept of self in the male adolescent is fragile for exploration and ripe for exploitation. Online spaces for role exploration for the young mind are easily accessible and form sources of information for adolescents.

The thesis research shows that these themes of masculinity are present and encouraged by influencers. A study found (Baker et al. 2024) that once an online account showed interest in 'manosphere' content, the amount of content rapidly increased with the vast majority of content being problematic or toxic with TikTok 76% and YouTube Shorts 78%. A direct connection between the promotion of regressive forms of masculinity through influencers and anti-social behaviour is not as obvious in the research findings. There is an interpretation that deeper rooted individual reasons lie behind this behaviour. Cotter's chapter in *Contemporary Irish Social Policy* (2005) discusses how the Irish criminal justice system operates within the broader context of social policy. In it is a theme about the intersection of criminal justice with social inequality highlighting the overrepresentation of marginalised

groups in the justice system. It discusses the need for preventative approaches that address root causes of crime such as social exclusion, poverty and lack of education. It struck the researcher that there was no reference to evidence of anti-social behaviour from therapists working in more affluent parts of Ireland and in private practice. Through the lens of discourse, and considering that all male adolescents have access to the same information, it is interesting to note the class difference interpreted. Suggestions were made by participants that this was due to access to better resources and less exposure to crime or community violence. Branje e. al. (2021) reveals that adolescents with a weaker sense of identity and continuously reconsidering their identity, are at higher risk of aggressive or delinquent behaviour. Erickson's (1968) theory of psychosocial development during the stage of Identity v Role Confusion speaks to this when the adolescent is vulnerable to external influences as their identity is still forming. Marcia (1993) also explains how adolescents form identity through exploration and at the foreclosure stage, the adolescent has made a commitment without much exploration or questioning of alternatives. Adopting influencer-promoted masculinity without exploration may make the adolescent more vulnerable to rigid or negative behaviours. A small sample research conducted by Silke et al. (2020) explored social values and civic behaviour among secondary school students in Ireland. It sits against a sociological backdrop of civic engagement as the positive development of individuals and communities. It found that five aspects – parent social responsibility, parent civic engagement, prosocial friend norms, classroom social analysis and community connectedness – were associated with the adolescents' civic values.

The study also reflected that the need to be aggressive or ready is very often a symptom of trauma. According to Starrs (2014) adolescents are especially vulnerable to the effects of trauma and its impact on development. Seminal work by Bessel van der Kolk in

The Body Keeps the Score (2014) suggests that trauma is stored in the body and can manifest as aggression or hypervigilance when activated. According to van der Kolk, unresolved trauma intensifies a sense of helplessness. The body becomes trapped in the moment of trauma, remaining in a persistent state of perceived threat and a 'need to be ready'.

Psychiatrist Judith Herman (2015) discusses how trauma affects identity, relationships and behaviour. Siegel (2020) offers a neurobiological perspective in relation to how early childhood relationships shape emotional regulation and social behaviour. Marginalised backgrounds, environments lacking emotional support and childhood trauma makes the adolescent more susceptible to emotionally simplistic and, in some cases, aggressive narratives. As they explore roles, mixed-messages reinforce emotional suppression that may be at the root of behavioural issues.

### **5.3 Theme Two: The therapeutic relationship**

The findings from the study underscore the centrality of the therapeutic relationship in supporting male adolescents through identity development. What was interesting to the researcher was not just the interventions themselves, but the role of the therapeutic relationship itself. McConville (1995 p. 124) writes that adolescents become stuck in their developmental process. Ultimately, the therapeutic relationship becomes a space of possibility, where male adolescents can be seen, heard, and supported as they navigate the complexities of self-development. A notable finding was the widespread use of Gestalt therapy among the participants. Stripling (2021) writes that Gestalt is highly effective in promoting emotional expression, self-esteem and well-being in young people. It offers a flexible and creative framework for emotional exploration, while the therapeutic space itself provides a rare opportunity for boys to express feelings and challenge internalised scripts. Foran (n.d.) suggests that adolescent development is the development of contact. The work

with adolescents involves clients that present with complex interpersonal situations rather than symptoms. The emphasis on present-moment awareness, emotional expression, and non-pathologising perspectives aligns well with the developmental needs of adolescents navigating identity formation. The focus on the “here and now” encourages adolescents to become more mindful of their internal experiences, helping them to connect with emotions that may otherwise be difficult to articulate. The reference to contact boundary raised in the study refers to where the self meets the environment and highlights how Gestalt therapy facilitates awareness of relational dynamics. This is particularly relevant for adolescents, who are in the process of negotiating their place in the world and concept of self. Oaklander (2006, p. 22) presents that this contact has the ability to be present with all aspects of senses, body, emotional expression and intellect available. The meaning, for the researcher, from adopting a Gestalt approach is that it not only validates the adolescent’s experience but also creates a space for deeper exploration. Art therapy, sand play and synergetic play therapy all appear to be complementary interventions to support this explorative work.

Oaklander (n.d.) writes about the importance of strengthening the inner support structure of adolescents to facilitate emotional expression and growth. The data suggests that many young boys internalise a cultural script that limits emotional expression, particularly in relation to vulnerability. This reflects a broader societal narrative that equates emotional expression with weakness. The therapeutic relationship in this context offers a counter-narrative and a space where emotions can be explored and expressed. Most importantly the study reveals that once the adolescent feels safe, he is capable of profound emotional expression. Incorporating Bion’s (1962) concept of containment, enabling the therapist to hold and process his emotions and then return them to him more gently, is a powerful way to practice co-regulation with the adolescent and is reflected in the findings. This is particularly

supportive for the boy who may not have consistent emotional modelling in his family environment. The findings speak to the fragility of the developing concept of self in male adolescents and the importance of the therapeutic relationship that can hold intensity without pathologising.

Critical thinking emerged from the data as a powerful tool in supporting identity development. Deconstructing beliefs without judgement is helpful in examining the adolescent's beliefs and values, encouraging them to take ownership of their thoughts and behaviours. Helping the boy understand the impact of their stage of development and childhood experiences can reduce self-blame and increase self-awareness. This is aligned with Erikson's concept (1968) of psychosocial development that emphasises the adolescent's task of forming a coherent identity amid internal and external pressures. From a neuroscience perspective, adolescence is a period of intense brain remodelling. Morgan (2013) presents the concept of rewiring of the teenage brain. As it develops it becomes more efficient by eliminating unused or unnecessary neural connections through a process of synaptic pruning. This neuroplasticity means the adolescent brain has the ability to change in response to experience and exposure to diverse perspectives and critical dialogue (Mills et al., (n.d)).

#### **5.4 Theme Three: Messages to leaders**

Since 2018, a powerful project called What Does He Need? (Whelan et al.) has been exploring how men and boys are shaped by and influence the world they live in. A collaboration of arts practice, performance, qualitative research and youth work, Dr. Fiona Whelan, theatre company Brokentalkers and Rialto Youth Project in association with a network of other Dublin city stakeholders, have created a significant public dialogue about the current state of masculinity. Themes are not prescribed but emerge over time through

group facilitation with boys. Interesting to the researcher are themes from the project that include the search for dignity and respect, social conditioning, vulnerability and survival - themes that are emerging directly from Irish male adolescents. A spin off project in 2025 called Boys in the Making that saw young boys create characters with support from artists and social workers, received significant coverage in mainstream media. Quoted in the Irish Times, one of the boys, Reece, says *“It lets other people know that young men aren’t just b\*\*\*\*rds running around on their bikes. And even if they dress like that, everyone still has their own dreams. Everyone still has stuff that they want to do.”* (Freyne, 2025). This sentiment was shared by the psychotherapists interviewed in this study and working with similar boys, and suggests a validation of what they want to communicate to society. The project also highlights, directly from adolescents, how they are developing their concept of self. Reece continued in the article by saying *“It was interesting because it made me see how we thought we looked and how other people would look at us on an average day. The way we dressed him. The way we described him. It was like we took a little piece of ourselves and put them into this one character. So, he feels like he represents us.”* This to the researcher is a wonderful example of Erikson’s theory (1968) playing out in real life. The concept of identity, achieved through reflection and observation of self as perceived by self and others. Dannielle McKenna from Rialto Youth Project says that *“I think young people know a lot more than we give them credit for.”* And Dr. Fiona Whelan comments *“Ultimately, they have something to say to the world. It’s not just an educational process [for the boys]. You’re hoping there’ll be a wider dialogue around formations of masculinity.”* (Freyne, 2025). Both messages are strongly reflected in the research conducted with psychotherapists working with male adolescents when exploring their concept of self.

Addressing the Dublin riots in 2023, then Minister for Justice, Helen McEntee T.D. (2023), referred on multiple occasions to those rioting as ‘thugs’. Whilst the behaviour was anti-social and thuggery, the direct labelling of the youths involved, seemed simplistic and unhelpful. The study reflected the views of some of those men involved, as having a deeper meaning and a symptom of a society that is failing to address their lack of connection and marginalisation. The message from psychotherapists is for greater care in how we describe young men. An observation is that many carry an underlying expectation of judgement or shame from adults. This dynamic may shape how they engage with authority figures and how they view their own concept of self. Each research participant explained that listening without judgement does not condone behaviour, and allows for understanding and a space to critically analyse. The sample interviewed communicated that male adolescents are frequently confronted with negative societal messages about their identity which contributes to a sense of confusion and internal conflict. The tendency to underestimate and quickly judge male adolescents was identified by the research. It is interesting to note that this theme emerged from male adolescents who participated in the art and community project What Does He Need?, reflecting the same message from psychotherapists researched for this study.

In light of rising misogyny from influencers in the manosphere (O’Rourke et al. 2024) and increases in gender-based violence (Women’s Aid, n.d.), the researcher believes there is an urgency to examine self and identity in this demographic of Irish male adolescents. Erikson argues that by prematurely labelling adolescents as ‘delinquents’ (1968, p. 132) societal leaders may inadvertently reinforce and solidify that identity. An outcome of this study may be to bring a message of understanding and wisdom from the psychotherapy profession to the public sphere and communities in fear, a contribution previously offered by Erikson in 1968. As the study found, “*planting the seeds*” of awareness and critical thinking

at this crucial stage of development is essential to help young boys transition to healthy male adults. During adolescence, a critical stage of psychosocial development, group dynamics play a powerful role in shaping identity. These dynamics can offer adolescents a sense of belonging and autonomy, but in some cases, they may also foster rigid, even authoritarian environments that validate and reinforce problematic behaviours. Erikson (p. 89) insightfully notes that such conditions don't only affect adolescents and that adults, too, can become entangled in these dynamics, losing touch with their own identity. The research reflected this by recognising that adults in therapy speak harshly about their younger self. A consideration here is to question if adult leaders and policy makers have lost empathy and compassion not only for adolescents but for themselves and their past mistakes. The study offers insight on the importance of engagement, listening and respect. This message is also coming directly from the boys who were asked, in a thoughtful and collaborative way, through the Boys in the Making project. This is an example of how, as a society, we must work together to understand challenges and create meaning. For the researcher the message in society is too quick to blame the male adolescent and too slow to place it with the adults. The adults who raise young boys, who provide community resources, who run the tech companies with no boundaries to challenge influencers and who write the legislation to support this. Equally society is too quick to blame the technology, when the power of it is in the hands of the adults not the adolescent. As shared by the participants, individual rather than generalised understanding of what lies behind the behaviour of male adolescents is recommended and needed. Pathologising plays an important role in this understanding and responding to the challenges facing male adolescents today. So too does considering how societal structures such as community resources, media influencers and policy shape adolescent behaviour. Psychotherapists can play a role in advocating for healthier environments that support adolescent development, including digital spaces. Psychoeducation for parents, leaders and

policy makers about their role in shaping adolescent behaviour is a priority to address the root causes of distress and aggression in young males. There is a role for psychotherapists to contribute to the narrative and to reframe the adolescent as the inherent problem. To instead explore the societal, environmental and emotional factors contributing to their behaviour. Acknowledging disparities in access to mental health resources is critical. Calling on a reflective stance, psychotherapists must be mindful of their own biases and assumptions about role exploration among adolescents and the themes raised in the study of masculinity, anti-social behaviour and influencers. A call to action for psychotherapists is to not only continue the work with adolescents, but to advocate and challenge societal narratives that may harm them.

## **5.5 Limitations**

The sample chosen was strictly psychotherapists working with male adolescents. This was correctly decided to avoid generalisation and to keep the thesis in line with the psychotherapeutic context in which it is intended. A limitation considered by the researcher was the absence of the voice of the social worker. As seen in the reference to qualitative research work by the collaborative project *What Does He Need?*, there is rich insight to be gained from social workers working directly with Irish male adolescents.

## 6. CONCLUSION

*“But who gets to decide who are the weeds and who the flowers. How can a child know its worth. When we label them as ragwort and we stamp them in the dirt.” (A Lazarus Soul, 2024)*

Self is not shaped by conformity but by acts of defiance and courage. There is a vast amount of existing research, reports and articles written on the topic of self and identity formation in adolescents. This study highlights the complex and evolving nature of self in Irish male adolescents today, within the psychosocial context. The themes that emerged from this study are not necessarily new. What does appear urgent is the need to address the growing negative perception of young boys and how that is impacting their development. Through the experience of psychotherapists, the research shows how role exploration, the therapeutic relationship and societal messaging all intersect to influence their concept of self. The findings underscore the fragility of identity during this stage of development and the powerful impact of external influencers and discourse. The psychotherapeutic relationship emerged as a vital space for emotional expression, critical reflection and identity formation. The study calls attention to the need for societal empathy, nuanced understanding and responsible leadership in addressing the challenges faced by young men today. The study is a call to rethink how we consider the behaviour of adolescent males. It advocates for a shift in perspective from blaming adolescents for behaviour, to examining the broader societal structures and adult responsibilities that shape their development. To listen, engage and co-create environments where young men can safely explore who they are and who they wish to become. At a time of increased mixed messages and social tension around masculinity, the psychotherapy community can contribute to the discussion and treatment of adolescents as suggested by Erikson in 1968.

Further exploration of class-based differences in adolescent experiences, particularly between those in private therapy and those in public or under-resourced settings could inform more equitable mental health strategies. Equally, research into how parents, teachers, community and leaders perceive and influence adolescent identity development could help bridge gaps between adult expectations and adolescent realities. Another area of interest that warrants further exploration, is what marks the transition from boy to man in today's society. It is less clear than from girl to woman. Girls experience biological milestones like menstruation that are acknowledged as signs of womanhood. Boys lack such a significant milestone. Gender stereotypes of emotional maturity are assigned to girls whilst achievement and strength to boys. As discussed in this study, masculinity is often defined negatively making it harder to define a positive identity. Perhaps further research on the existence and need for clear rites of passage for young boys into adulthood is needed.

This study attempts to clearly present and synthesise the findings of the research for the DBS examiners and those participants who contributed to the qualitative study. It is hoped that the wider public sphere of policy makers, educators, law enforcement and the public at large would benefit from the study. An intention is to offer a deeper insight to the concept of self in Irish male adolescents and to contribute to the discussion about how they are labelled, supported and allowed to explore as they grow into adulthood. The study shows the relevant and vital role that art and community work play in this, highlighting the importance of strong commitments to funding and support. Erikson's concept (1968) of the ideological mind of the adolescent and Foucault's belief (1980) that power is knowledge, are invaluable contributions to encourage critical thinking and thought-provoking discussion.

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## APPENDIX A

### Interview schedule

1. Can you tell me about your therapeutic approach and interventions when working with adolescents?
2. What are the commonalities, if any, in identity issues emerging in therapy with this client demographic?
3. How, in your view, are male adolescents exploring roles and what roles are they exploring?
4. How do they express their feelings?
5. How do you believe contemporary discourse influences identity formation in this client demographic? (Conversations, descriptions, narrative, arguments on social media, in school, on the street, mis and disinformation)
6. How does this present in therapy?
7. What is your experience, if any, of a connection between identity issues and aggressive anti-social behaviour?
8. What role do you experience family dynamics and peer relationships playing when informing their self-conception?
9. If presenting, how do political and social influencers shape their identity formation?
10. With identity formation present at this crucial age of adolescence, what one message would you give our leaders, teachers and policy makers around the narrative used about Irish male adolescents?

## APPENDIX B

### Analysis

#### 1. Emerging themes and subthemes during analysis

	EMERGING THEMES	EMERGING SUBTHEMES
1.	Modern day exploration	Anti-social behaviour Challenge rather than dismiss Class Discourse and expectations Domestic violence Family Feelings Influencers Masculinity Misogyny Peers Porn Resources internally Rite of passage Role exploration
2.	The therapeutic approach and relationship	Anger Anxiety Behavioural connection CBT Commonalities Critical thinking and challenging Culture Expressing feelings

	<b>EMERGING THEMES</b>	<b>EMERGING SUBTHEMES</b>
		Gender Gestalt Internal resources Keeping it simple Neurodiversity One strong adult Play therapy Presenting issues Psychoeducation Role exploration Stages of development Trauma Validation and acceptance Vulnerability
3.	Messages from psychotherapists	Compassion Empathy External resources Gentleness Inclusion Listening Validation Vilification

## 2. Final themes and subthemes agreed

	<b>MAJOR THEME</b>	<b>SUBTHEME</b>
1.	Role exploration	Masculinity Anti-social behaviour Influencers
2.	The therapeutic relationship	Gestalt Expressing feelings Critical thinking
3.	Messages for leaders	None

### 3. Analysis sample

PSEUDONYM	RELEVANT DATA	CODES	MAJOR THEMES	SUBTHEMES
BC	<p>BC4 "...especially with male adolescents, you know, because they've built up the persona, usually from the age of about seven, where they are told to stop crying, it's almost like an enforced or an imposed alexithymia, and on them from that late childhood moving into early adolescence. You're not allowed to have feelings and the only feelings that are acceptable as a young boy or as an adolescent are kind of those aggressive things or 'act the maggot stuff.'" So I suppose all of that informs and it's really, very much who it is that's in front of you, who it is in front of you because you could have this real hard young lad who is, you know, you're going to have to connect with him on some level to make that, when you make that connection and then there's that revealing of the vulnerability."</p>	<p>Masculinity            Discourse and expectations            Influencers            Role exploration            Family            Peers            Rite of passage            Feelings</p>	<p>Role exploration</p>	<p>Masculinity</p>
CL	<p>CL1 "So I work very much with developmental stages and to identify how they're developing an identity through each development. And then on top of that, I suppose you've got the, your 'normal' adolescent development, but of course, put</p>	<p>Gestalt            Stages of development            Trauma            Presenting issues            Commonalities            Expressing feelings</p>	<p>The therapeutic relationship</p>	<p>Gestalt</p>

PSEUDONYM	RELEVANT DATA	CODES	MAJOR THEMES	SUBTHEMES
	<p>a trauma lens on top of that and then you put a diagnosis lens on top of that to see how that's impacting on you know development from whether it's kind of social or you know um different forms of identity yeah and development yeah. <b>I work very much in a Gestalt way, looking at how the adolescent contacts themselves, makes contact with the world and how the world makes contact with them.</b>"</p>	<p>Contact Validation and acceptance Vulnerability One strong adult Psychoeducation Internal resources</p>		
FC	<p><b>FC16</b> "I think just be respectful, of what influences them, and talk to them about it and gently challenge it with the respect that this is their source of information. This is their life. This is where they're at. And get them to question it, you know, in terms of is this really who you are and who you want to be? But I think, you know, lecture mode never works or being talked at never works.</p> <p>I think this is happening in some quarters of society. It can be because people have a short time with young people. So they want to get a message across, you know, rather than interact with them more because given that time and space for interaction, action can be a luxury."</p>	<p>Validation Vilification Empathy Compassion Gentleness Listening Inclusion External resources</p>	Messages to leaders	

## APPENDIX C

### Consent and Information Forms

#### 1. Consent Form (via Microsoft Forms)

##### Research

**A psychosocial exploration with the aim to explore the concept of self in Irish male adolescents.**

##### *Researcher Declaration*

At the interview stage, I the researcher, Fiona Barclay, agree to take the time to fully explain to you the nature and purpose of this study. I will invite you to ask questions on any aspect of the study that concerned you. In line with GDPR regulations, data will be retained for no longer than is necessary. All records where the participant can be identified (e.g. recordings) will be destroyed after all phases of data collection are complete and the data has been fully anonymised. At this point, data can no longer be withdrawn from the study as it is no longer identifiable.

##### **Please tick/insert the appropriate answer**

<i>I understand that my identity will remain confidential at all times.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Yes</b> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>No</b>
<i>I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time, without giving reason.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Yes</b> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>No</b>
<i>I am aware that audio recordings will be made of the interview.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Yes</b> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>No</b>
<i>I confirm that I have read and understand the Information Form detailed in 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 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.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Yes</b> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>No</b>
<i>Please include your name, email address and phone number.</i>	
<i>Submitted on what date.</i>	

## **2. Information Form**

My name is Fiona Barclay, and I am in the final year of an MA in Psychotherapy at Dublin Business School. I am writing to ask if you would consider taking part in my research project. The study is a psychosocial exploration with the aim to explore the concept of self in Irish male adolescents. One of the objectives is to investigate identity issues in male adolescents through the therapeutic relationship.

### **What is Involved?**

You, and a small number of other professionals, are invited to participate in the research because of your work with adolescents. If you agree to participate in this research, you will be invited to attend an interview with me in a setting of your convenience. The interview will take no longer than an hour, during which we will discuss a series of pre-prepared questions relating to the research question and your work. After completion of the interview, I may request to contact you by telephone or email if I have any follow-up questions.

### **Confidentiality**

All information obtained from you during the research will remain confidential. Digital and written notes about the research and any form you may fill in, will be coded and stored in a password protected file. This means that all data kept about you will be de-identified. All data collected will be kept in this confidential manner and if it is used for future research, will be handled in the same way. The interview will be audio recorded, and transcripts will be made of the interview for analysis and interpretation. These notes will be coded by number and kept in a password protected file. Your participation in this research is voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any point of the study without any disadvantage.

If you have questions regarding your rights as a participant in this research, please contact Dr. Stephen McCoy, Research Co-ordinator, Dublin Business School [Stephen.McCoy@dbs.ie](mailto:Stephen.McCoy@dbs.ie).