

Challenging Interactions:  
An Ethnographic Study of Behaviour  
in the Youth Club

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## **Declaration**

I affirm that this thesis was composed by myself and that all of the work herein is original research. This work has been submitted for no other degree or professional qualification.

.....

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## **Acknowledgements**

My first note of heartfelt thanks goes to the workers and young people at the JU youth club. The knowledge in this thesis was created only through my interactions with them and I hope that I have done justice to the complexities of their social relations and actions.

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# Abstract

Young people's challenging behaviour in the school classroom and elsewhere has long been subject to research and policy attention. Despite inherent definitional difficulties, challenging behaviour is often constructed as a product of an individual young person's pathology (whether biologically, psychologically or socially determined). Adopting an alternative starting point, this study focuses on a youth work setting and conceptualises challenging behaviour as something created in and through social interaction. The aim of this study is to contribute to a contextualised understanding of challenging behaviour as a social phenomenon that ordinarily arises when working with young people.

As an exploratory study of everyday youth work practices, a year-long ethnographic study was conducted of an open-access youth club, located in a Scottish secondary school. Data were generated through participant observation, interviews, question sheets and written evaluation records. The data were analysed to identify significant themes facilitating the construction of a meaningful and accurate account of challenging interactions in this youth club.

The thesis suggests that 'doing' and drawing attention to challenging behaviour functions to delineate the boundaries around acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in the youth club. Challenging behaviour plays a substantial role in the social interactions of this setting, linked to personal and professional identities. The youth club is described as a chaotic (dynamic, bodily and playful) space, where challenging behaviour is expected and normalised yet it is still identified and disciplined. The study suggests it is difficult to reach a subjective contextual definition of challenging behaviour because although certain types of behaviour are

repeatedly acknowledged as problematic, in practice there are inconsistencies in whether and how these behaviours are challenged. Challenging interactions are argued to emerge in the negotiation of control over the behaviour of self and others. The research identified 'humour' and 'playfulness' as significant in the construction, diffusion and emotional management of recurring challenging interactions. The study concludes that it is fruitful to conceptualise challenging behaviour as a social phenomenon - something created in the moment - in advancing an understanding of the complexity of working with young people perceived to be challenging.

The findings, and limitations, of this study suggest that it would be useful to conduct further research into: the emotional aspects of challenging interactions; potential age and gender differences in negotiating challenging interactions; and the relationship between challenging behaviour, creativity and transformative actions.



# 1. Introduction

“Children’s behaviour, its definition, assessment and regulation, is rarely out of the news. It remains the focus of both professional and popular discourses, constantly labelled and regularly evoking calls for greater intervention”

(Coppock, 1997:146)

## 1.1 The Issue with Challenging Behaviour

Young people’s challenging behaviour in the school classroom and elsewhere has long been subject to research and policy attention. In professional and popular discourse young people are often categorised in official and unofficial ways as *having* challenging behaviour. In response to this, as Coppock (1997) notes above, individual interventions (both therapeutic and punitive) and behavioural management strategies are developed to address this perceived social problem. The causes of young people’s challenging behaviour are often perceived to be multiple, with biological, psychological and/or social determinants, ranging from neurological abnormalities to chaotic home environments. This dominant approach to challenging behaviour assumes the concept can be objectively defined, constructs it as inherently problematic, and locates that problem within the young person.

Yet, the exact nature of challenging behaviour remains open to debate (Lyons and O’Connor, 2006:217). The meaning of challenging behaviour is widely acknowledged to be socially constructed (Bennett, 2005:14); created and recreated through social practices, discourse and interaction (Pomerantz, 2005). The judgement of any behaviour as problematic or challenging is always a matter of interpretation and context (Clough et al, 2005:9), what may be unacceptable behaviour in one situation at one time will be tolerated or even valued in another (Cooper, 1999a:10-11). The meaning of challenging behaviour is, thus, changeable yet as a label for young people and their behaviour its definition often appears fixed

and a shared understanding is assumed (Visser, 2006). This raises the question of whether dominant conceptualisations of challenging behaviour are overlooking what the concept means in their haste to categorise young people and their behaviours.

## **1.2 The Scope of this Study**

As much research about challenging behaviour is conducted with regards to young people labelled as having a behavioural disorder, such as Social Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (SEBDs), there is potential for challenging behaviour to become associated solely with this group of young people. Equally, the issue of challenging behaviour is argued to be part of the normal rather than exceptional experience of working with young people (Grundy and Blandford, 1999:5). This study takes challenging behaviour as its unit of analysis, rather than young people labelled as having challenging behaviour. Hence, the focus is not on the experiences of those categorised this way, but on the concept of challenging behaviour itself.

Despite the term challenging behaviour having currency across child and youth professions, there is very little empirical research into the issue of challenging behaviour outside of the school. Current theories of challenging behaviour when working with young people are predominantly based on the classroom environment and observations of teacher-pupil interactions. This is a setting within which the young people have relatively little power to negotiate the boundaries around behaviour as they are obliged to attend and the teacher is obliged to maintain order to teach. This study asks what contribution can be made to current theories of challenging behaviour in regards to young people by observing other professional settings.

In this thesis, I examine the practices that produce and surround challenging behaviour in a youth club in Scotland. The youth club was selected as it offers a potentially insightful, yet neglected, context in which to observe the negotiation of the boundaries around behaviour between adults and young people. In youth work the young people participate voluntarily and behavioural interventions are often deemed ethically problematic. Starting from the theoretical position that the meaning of challenging behaviour is socially mediated, I conducted an ethnographic study focusing on the social processes involved in everyday naturally occurring interaction. I examined the processes in operation in the construction of certain behaviours as problematic; in the ongoing negotiation of the boundaries around behaviour; and in the development and progression of challenging interactions. The overall aim of the thesis is to contribute to a contextualised understanding of challenging behaviour as a social phenomenon in work with young people. The structure of the thesis is outlined in the following section.

### **1.3 The Structure of the Thesis**

To locate this thesis in relation to existing knowledge on the topic area, chapter 2 reviews key debates and findings within the vast literature on the issue of challenging behaviour and young people. The review begins by considering the ongoing and rising concern about the perceived challenging behaviour of young people in the UK. This is linked to the policy attention currently given to pupil behaviour in schools and to the anti-social behaviour of young people in communities. The review outlines research into the negative representation of young people as inherently challenging in the media and the potentially discouraging effect of this on the willingness of adults to work with young people.

With the wider context set, the chapter explores the different approaches taken to conceptualising the issue of challenging behaviour when working with young people. The review looks at the difficulties in delineating the conceptual uniqueness of challenging behaviour from related terms before considering objective and subjective definitions of challenging behaviour. This is followed by a review of the literature on how to understand and explain a young person's perceived challenging behaviour. The review then attends to the literature on the principles and practices of working with young people perceived to be behaving in challenging ways. This includes the specialist literature on working with young people labelled as having a behavioural problem, the general literature on managing challenging behaviour within different settings (mainly the classroom), and the youth work literature on the ethical dilemmas of challenging behaviour in practice.

Chapter 3 explains the methodology of the study and the research process. The chapter begins by outlining the overall aim of the research - to contribute to a contextualised understanding of challenging behaviours as a social phenomenon when working with young people – and the objectives that guided (but did not prescribe) the data collection and analysis. The chapter explains the process of selecting and gaining access to the youth club and the development and nature of field relations with both the workers and the young people. The chapter goes on to explain the different methods used to collect data: from the primary method of participant observation to supplementary methods of interviews with workers, question sheets with young people and the gathering of internal evaluation records. This is followed by a discussion of the process of analysing this data set, both during and after the fieldwork, including the ways in which themes emerged and developed during the study. The chapter ends with a discussion of the ethical strategies and dilemmas involved in the research process, including the participation of the researcher in challenging interactions.

Chapter 4 provides a detailed picture of the nature and culture of the youth club. This scene setting is done to guard against inappropriate generalisations from the findings presented in later chapters and to encourage a contextualised reading of those findings. The chapter begins by relating generic youth work principles and practices to the purpose of this youth club and the values underpinning the role of the youth workers within it. A vignette of an everyday youth club session, a description of the youth club environment, and an analysis of the way in which space and time is organised in this setting create an image for the reader of what it is like to participate in this youth club. An overview of the youth club across the whole of the research year is presented in this discussion as important events and changes to the everyday patterns of interactions are marked out. The chapter goes on to describe the different social groups who participate in the youth club to illustrate who comes to the youth club and the need for these different groups to find a way to co-exist. This is followed by a discussion of the general nature of interaction in the youth club. Throughout the chapter links are made to the specific issue of challenging behaviour where appropriate.

Moving from the broad picture to a closer look at micro-interactions, chapter 5 focuses on those behaviours most commonly challenged in practice in the youth club. This is done to examine the way in which certain behaviours and young people become constructed as, and widely known to be, a 'problem' in this setting. The chapter begins by considering the existence of rules and rule-breaking behaviour in this setting, and the processes by which the boundaries around behaviour are identified. The chapter then examines, from observation and the perspective of the workers, four common types of 'problematic' behaviour: fighting; swearing; littering; and 'not playing properly'. These are used to illustrate the nature of behaviour perceived to be problematic in the youth club, why are these behaviours considered problematic? And also the realities of challenging these

behaviours in practice, why are there inconsistencies in the way these behaviours are responded to?

Building on the discussion in chapter 5 about rule-breaking behaviours and responses to those behaviours, chapter 6 examines interactions that develop once a worker challenges the behaviour of a young person. The chapter discusses the nature of worker authority in the youth club, how workers attempt to control the behaviour of the young people, how the young people comply or resist, and what follows. This examination of challenging behaviour in the moment of interaction (challenging interactions) engages with the notion of 'control in practice' from the youth work literature. The chapter as a whole provides a detailed analysis of confrontations between the workers and the young people as they engage in mini-power struggles over certain behaviours. Findings are presented on the processes involved when a challenging interaction is defused (accommodated within the everyday experience of being in the youth club) or escalated (into something undesirable outside of the norms and/or values of this setting).

The final findings chapter, chapter 7, returns the focus of the thesis to the broader picture, bringing together aspects from the previous chapters in an analysis of the significance of humour in the overall process of challenging behaviour in practice in this setting. The chapter begins by discussing the general culture of having a laugh in the youth club, followed by a discussion of the parallels between challenging and humorous behaviours. The chapter considers what can be learnt from these parallels regarding the nature of challenging behaviour in practice, judgements and interpretations of behaviour as it occurs, and the nature of the boundaries around behaviour in the youth club. The chapter then explores the use of humour in managing potentially problematic behaviour and defusing challenging interactions. This is followed by a discussion of the function of humour in worker interactions

concerning the perceived challenging behaviour of young people and their role in challenging the behaviour of young people.

The thesis concludes by explaining how the findings of the different chapters can be interwoven to further current conceptualisations of challenging behaviour. The conclusion explores the significance of these findings for those experiencing challenging interactions when working with young people. The conclusion goes on to present possible areas for further research based on the questions raised by, and limitations of, this study. Throughout, the conclusion is in a dialogue with the original review of the relevant literature, to which the thesis now turns.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

Challenging behaviour is an issue of concern to those working with young people. It is a complex, often contentious, issue and the subject of much research and policy attention. This chapter reviews literature related to the issue of challenging behaviour when working with young people in a variety of settings. Within the vast literature that exists on the issue of challenging behaviour (Lyons and O'Connor, 2006:217), this review focuses on those categories of writing in the literature that theorise challenging behaviour in work with young people and those that study interactions between adult professionals and young people around challenging behaviour. Reviewing the literature on challenging behaviour requires a multidisciplinary approach as the issue is relevant to educational researchers, childhood and youth researchers, medical professionals, psychologists and sociologists as well as a variety of practitioners working with children and young people. The literature review demonstrates current understandings and approaches to challenging behaviour in work with young people, providing both a back drop to, and springboard for, the approach taken in this study.

This thesis is positioned within the growing multidisciplinary field of childhood and youth studies, adopting a broadly sociological approach to the issue of behaviour and at times drawing on complementary ideas from social psychology. Aligned with those studies that seek to engage in research of practice and policy 'relevance', the work also draws from, and speaks to, the writings within the disciplines of youth work, education and social policy that focus on the issue of challenging behaviour when working with young people.



The literature review begins with the wider context, looking at the general positioning of young people as problematic in UK society and the concern generated around young people's perceived challenging behaviour. Following on from this, the chapter reviews the key approaches to defining and explaining challenging behaviour. These conceptual issues lead into a critical review of the literature that discusses current practical approaches to challenging behaviour in work with young people. There is a focus throughout on the link between theoretical perspectives and everyday practices. Both dominant and marginal perspectives are explored.

## **2.2 In Theory: Conceptualising Young People's Challenging Behaviour**

This section critically approaches the way in which challenging behaviour in conceptualised in the literature. The section begins with a discussion of the wider context framing this study and the representation of young people's behaviour in UK society. Attempts are then made to define challenging behaviour using definitions from the research literature. Finally, explanations for young people's challenging behaviour are reviewed. As young people's challenging behaviour is an issue predominantly discussed by educational researchers, the majority of the literature is drawn from that field<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> There are also studies of the issue of challenging behaviour in relation to disabled people (Emerson, 2001), including disabled young people (Cheung Chung, and Nolan, 1998, Porter and Lacey, 1999), However, studies of non-disabled young people's challenging behaviour tend to treat disabled young people's challenging behaviour as a separate and distinct issue, referring to the body of work but not including it in their analysis (Visser, 2006, Lyons and O'Connor, 2006). This distinction is an interesting phenomenon in itself but beyond the scope of this thesis. It does, however, need to be noted that where the disability is partly defined by displays of challenging behaviour, such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) these are usually incorporated into the discussion of challenging behaviour and work with young people (O'Regan, 2006a; 2006b).

### **2.2.1 Context: Young People as a Problem**

The very specific focus of this study is situated within much wider debates about the behaviour of children and young people. The young people involved in this study are predominantly aged 11-14. Their biological age positions them at the fuzzy boundary between late childhood and early youth. Because of the terminology of the youth work setting through which they were accessed, the term 'young people' rather than 'children' is used throughout the thesis. The age of the young research participants is being raised here because the specific issue of challenging behaviour in work with young people is framed by the more general representation and understanding of young people as behaving in ways that 'challenge' adult authority in adult society and adult run institutions. This section takes a brief foray into the wider issue of the construction of young people's behaviour as "inevitably and inherently problematic" (Smith et al, 2007:223).

The 'problematic' behaviour of children and young people has long attracted policy and research attention in the UK and is a part of both professional and popular discourses about 'youth' (Coppock, 1997; France, 2004). Within Westernised models of adolescence those of teenage age are, in particular, believed to experience a troubling and turbulent time and are expected to behave in 'challenging' ways (Coleman and Hendry, 1999; Finn, 2001; Finn and Nybell, 2001; Goosens, 2006; Graham, 2004; Griffin, 2001; 2004), leading to the pathologisation of all teenagers as 'problematic'. Yet, at the same time, a minority of young people are also constructed as particularly or 'abnormally' problematic as they come to bear the label of having a behavioural and/or mental health disorder. The concept of challenging behaviour relates to both groups in confusing ways<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Definitional difficulties are attended to in more detail below in section 2.2.2.

Further to the well-established relationship between 'young people' and 'problematic behaviour' there is also now "a commonly held belief that young people are more badly behaved and more troubled by emotional difficulties than those in the past" (Collishaw et al, 2004:1350). Statistically, there are increasing numbers of children and young people being labelled with medically and/or educationally defined behavioural problems (Farnfield and Kaszap, 1998:3, Maughan et al, 2004; Secker et al, 1999:730); being excluded from Scottish schools<sup>3</sup> (Scottish Government, 2008); and being prescribed medication to manage their challenging behaviour over the past twenty years<sup>4</sup> (Coppock, 2002:139). Some authors, like Coppock (2002), question the legitimacy of these statistical increases arguing they are as much about the need of adults to control and contain children's, behaviour as they are about an actual increase in behavioural problems. The increased numbers of children and young people having their behaviour identified as problematic does, however, serve to create the perception that the concern over, and desire to do something about, young people's behaviour is justified.

This perception is also to some extent fuelled by the media. Media portrayals of young people often negatively stereotype young people. A study in 2004 found, in an analysis of 603 'youth' related articles in tabloid, broadsheet and local papers, the majority of articles (3 in 4) portrayed young people negatively and a third of the articles discuss young people in the context of violent crime or anti-social behaviour (MORI, 2004). Such media portrayals are suggested to influence adult's fear of

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<sup>3</sup> The number of exclusions has risen each year since 2002/03. Compared to 36,496 cases of exclusion in 2002/03, during 2006/07 there were 44,794 cases of exclusions from local authority schools in Scotland. The figure in 2006-07 showed an increase of four per cent from 2005/06.

<sup>4</sup> Using data from the Department of Health, Vikki Coppock (2002:139) describes how prescriptions of Ritalin rose from just 2000 prescriptions in 1991, to 14,700 by 1995, to 47,900 by 1996 and then to 158,000 by 1999.

teenagers, a fear identified as one of the most common barriers to Scottish adults' wanting to work with this age group (SCCYP, 2007<sup>5</sup>).

Within the general construction of young people's behaviour as problematic, certain social groups of young people are more likely than others to be identified as abnormally challenging. Statistically, there are a disproportionate number of boys and ethnic minority young people bearing educational labels of behavioural problems (Visser, 2003:31) and disproportionately high rates of exclusion from school for young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Kikabhai, 2002:2). Davies (1999:198) notes that most delinquency research shows that "most disruptive behaviour in school is perpetrated by males". This reflects the perceived "gender dimension" to challenging behaviour where boys are thought to externalise behaviours, and girls to internalise their behaviours (Kilpatrick et al, 2008:5). This suggests that boys are more likely to have their behaviours identified as problematic as they are more obvious and likely to be disruptive to others. However, it also suggests girls with externalising behaviours are likely to be perceived as particularly problematic as they are not expected to behave in that way (Lloyd and O'Regan, 2000). Davies (1999) also suggests that resistance to school rules and the creation of an anti-school culture is a response to an education system that does not fit the values and needs of working class children. Such commentaries draw attention to the potentially racialised, gendered and classist nature of interpreting acceptable and unacceptable behaviours, and labelling a young person as having challenging behaviour.

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<sup>5</sup> The research, commissioned by the Scottish Commissioner for Children and Young People (SCCYP) provides findings from a face-to-face survey of 1,093 people across Scotland and 6 focus groups with 53 people participants looking at *Adult's attitudes towards contact with children and young people*.

The representation of youth behaviour as problematic is argued to provide a rationale for policy makers and service providers to intervene in the lives of young people (Smith et al, 2007:224). Such interventions often involve an awkward mix of care and control<sup>6</sup> and as Wise (2000:10) contends “it is important to recognise that research into the behaviour of difficult children may be motivated by more than a desire to better support and meet their needs”. In some cases, the need for control is made explicit. For instance, Davies (1999:91) argues that the perception of pupils today as less compliant, deferential, and obedient means that “social control has emerged as a preeminent problem for schools” (Davies, 1999:191). Whilst, there are ongoing debates about the desirability of maintaining and enforcing control over young people perceived to behave in deviant ways (Wise 2000:10), there is also a sense of urgency that something needs to be done to discipline and control young people in the immediacy of working with them.

Across the UK there are initiatives and guidance in place to support those working with children and young people to manage challenging or problematic behaviour (see for example DfES, 2006; Ofsted, 2005). In Scotland, Munn et al (2007:57) note that there are a variety of initiatives in place in schools to promote positive behaviour and share good practices, including the *Better Behaviour-Better Learning* national intervention programme. In addition, there are many textbooks providing practical guidance (see Hallam’s list, 2007:206) as well as training and resources for those working with young people and dealing with the issue of challenging behaviour<sup>7</sup>. Societal and practitioner concerns about the challenging behaviour of young people and the perceived need to do something about this ‘problem’ provide

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<sup>6</sup> The awkward relationship youth work has with the construction of youth as ‘other’ and in some way ‘deficit’ (Jeffer and Smith, 1999; Skott-Myhre, 2006) is discussed further at various points in this review under section 2.3.4.

<sup>7</sup> Taking Edinburgh as an example, a snap shot of available training Autumn/Winter 2009 includes a training session on ‘Challenging Behaviour’ (dealing with difficult children/young people) offered by the Lothian Association of Youth Clubs (LAYC website, November 2009) and training courses offered by Children in Scotland including: ‘Understanding and Managing Problematic Behaviour’ and ‘Dealing with Conflict, Anger and Aggression’ (Children in Scotland website, November 2009).

the wider context against which the specific topic of this study is set. But how is challenging behaviour being defined?

### **2.2.2 Definitions: The Nature of Challenging Behaviour**

Given the ongoing concern about young people's challenging behaviour and the development of interventions and policies to address the issue, it appears imperative that the concept of challenging behaviour be clearly defined. Definitions of the nature of challenging behaviour can be inferred through diagnostic criteria or other descriptions of semi-official behavioural labels (see for instance elements of Visser's 2003 approach to defining challenging behaviour), but inferring a definition of challenging behaviours in this way assumes that behaviour can be interpreted objectively and a definitive typology of challenging behaviour created. In actuality, challenging behaviour is widely acknowledged to be an area fraught with definitional difficulties (Visser, 2003), where the exact nature of the behaviour remains open to debate (Lyons and O'Connor, 2006). Whilst this is widely acknowledged in the literature, explicit discussions of the nature of challenging behaviour are relatively rare (exceptions are Axup and Gersch, 2008; Lyons and O'Connor, 2006; Visser 2003; 2006). This may be because, as Lyons and O'Connor (2006:230) suggest "[A] discussion of definitions of challenging behaviour may seem like the worst kind of academic navel-gazing to a practising teacher". However, definitions are important since how challenging behaviour is defined shapes the perception of, and approach to, the 'problem', not least defining who or what is 'responsible' for the behaviour<sup>8</sup> (Jones, 2003:150; Lyons and O'Connor, 2006).

Defining challenging behaviour is difficult because of the confusing ways in which the term 'challenging behaviour' is referred to in the research literature. Challenging behaviour is used inter-changeably, and often synonymously, with more semi-

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<sup>8</sup> Explanations for challenging behaviour are discussed following the discussion of definitions, but the two should be seen as inextricably linked.

official educational and medical labels such as social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBDs<sup>9</sup>) or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). 'Disorder' is a term commonly used in the medical profession to categorise behaviour, whereas 'difficulties' is used in education. Furthermore, it is part of a vast array of overlapping and ambiguous terminology such as 'troubled' or 'troublesome' (Lloyd and O'Regan, 1999); 'disturbed' or 'disturbing' (Alderson, 1999); 'mad, bad or sad' (Macleod, 2006); and 'deviant' (Barton and Meighan, 1979; Davies, 1984; Davies, 1999). Challenging behaviour is also an umbrella term encompassing a wide range of specific behaviours such as: talking out of turn, not waiting quietly, spitting, and punching and so on. Despite the confusing ways in which it is used, challenging behaviour is always associated with something problematic, and that aspect is seemingly unquestionable.

Despite a lack of a shared understanding of challenging behaviour it is commonly used in the day-to-day professional discourse of those working with children and young people (Visser, 2006:59). Researchers, who make a strategic decision to adopt the terminology 'challenging behaviour', argue that they do so because of their theoretical preference (Wise, 2000:110). The term 'challenging behaviour' is preferred "because it emphasises the challenge of the behaviour to the system, rather than locating that behaviour within the individual" (Lyons and O'Connor, 2006:223). Challenging behaviour is deemed to be an inherently interactive process – behaviour can only be challenging if it challenges something else, or is perceived to be challenging by someone else. This is reflected in the working definitions of challenging behaviour that define challenging behaviours as "behaviours which are deemed to violate social norms of acceptable behaviour and therefore are undesirable" (Epsom and Hamilton, 2004:113); behaviours by children and young

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<sup>9</sup> SEBD is a Scottish educational term. In England and Wales, the term used is Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties (BESD), and was until recently referred to as Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (EBD). For shorthand, SEBD will be used in this review to encompass the various terms when referring to this kind of label unless quoting verbatim from a source that used BESD or EBD.

people that cause “difficulties” (Lyons and O’Connor, 2006:217) or “present specific challenges” (Cooper, 1999a:9) to adults working with or charged with responsibility for the children and young people. Additionally, ‘challenging’ (more so, for instance, than problematic or disturbing) can be defined as something “*difficult but stimulating*” (O’Regan, 2006a:6); thus challenging behaviour can have positive as well as negative connotations.

This does not mean that everyone shares this understanding of the meaning of challenging behaviour, or that it ushers in a new way of thinking about the issue. For instance, in the field of intellectual disabilities the term challenging behaviour was introduced to evoke a more constructive approach to the issue (Emerson, 2001:4) but as Ephraim (1998:11) points out it has now acquired a pejorative meaning. Developments in the terminology used to categorise young people with regards to the behaviour may more reflect “the changing mores regarding socially acceptable ways of categorising children” (Brown, 2004:1). The extent to which language actually reflects a change in attitude is debatable. In a study based on participant observation in a school, socially acceptable terms such as ‘disabled’, ‘disruptive’ and ‘disadvantaged’ were used by teachers in public yet in private the teachers described the same pupils using different, less socially acceptable, terms such as: ‘vandals’, ‘thugs’, ‘mad’, ‘nutters’, ‘hooligans’ and a ‘waste of space’ (Thomas and Glenny, 2000:291).

The lack of a shared understanding of the meaning of challenging behaviour is argued to be because its definition is heavily dependent upon the context (environment and conditions) within which it occurs (Clough et al, 2005:9; Munn et al, 2007:54). This is to the extent that “behaviour that is unacceptable in one context may not only be tolerated but actually valued in a different context” (Cooper, 1999a:10-11). The context includes not only the institutional expectations of



behaviour but the characteristics of those involved such as the size of the child and the tolerance levels of the adult (Lyons and O'Connor, 2006:222; Visser, 2006;59-60) as well as the emotional state of those involved, the relationship they have and so on. The contextual nature of challenging behaviour has been used to argue that any definition of challenging behaviour is to some extent socially constructed (Porter and Lacey, 1999) "in that individuals have different views of what behaviour is unacceptable at different times" (Bennett, 2005:14). It is therefore suggested to be situational as well as contextual.

Related to this, the subjective nature of labelling or interpreting behaviour as challenging creates further difficulties in coming to an 'objective' definition of challenging behaviour (Clough et al, 2005:9). The subjectivity involved in categorising behaviour is illustrated through the acknowledgement of the subjective nature of labelling young people as having an 'SEBD' (see Lloyd and Munn, 1999, Lloyd and Norris, 1999, Lloyd and O'Regan, 1999, Thomas and Glenny, 2000, Visser, 2003 and Wise, 2000). This is a process which has led some authors to question the very basis of the category of 'EBD' (Thomas and Glenny, 2000). An acceptance of the subjective nature of labelling a young person or their behaviour as challenging suggests that research into challenging behaviour looking solely at young people labelled as having challenging behaviour is potentially limited<sup>10</sup>.

There is a strand in the literature that seeks to define the nature of challenging behaviour within a specific social setting. This is done through studying

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<sup>10</sup> Although there is not the scope to discuss it here, it is important to note that not accepting the subjective nature of the process of labelling a young person or their behaviour as challenging can also serve to unfairly pathologise a young person with potentially serious implications for how they are treated (Alderson, 1999:56).

practitioner<sup>11</sup> definitions of challenging behaviour. Practitioners are asked to list behaviours or choose from a list those they consider to be challenging (Axup and Gersch, 2008; Lyons and O'Connor, 2006; Visser, 2006). This has led to some writers claiming that verbally or physically aggressive behaviour towards others and non-compliant/defiant behaviours can be regarded as challenging per se to teachers, regardless of the micro-situation (Lyons and O'Connor, 2006:222; O'Regan, 2006a:8; Visser, 2006). In addition, disruptive behaviours (disruption to classroom activities and learning) are consistently described as challenging behaviour by teachers (Lyons and O'Connor; 2006:222). Such disruptive behaviours are related to the everyday "low-level" indiscipline perceived to be the most problematic for teachers (Boyle et al, 2005; Axup and Gersch, 2008:147; Munn et al, 2007:71). Such behaviours include "pupil's persistent infringement of rules, unruliness while waiting, and general rowdiness" (Munn et al, 2007:71) and 'pupils being out of their seat' and 'work avoidance' (Axup and Gersch, 2008:147).

This practitioner definition approach of listing types of challenging behaviour implies that behaviour can be objectively defined within context. The contextual nature of the behaviour is accepted, for instance the low-level disruptive behaviours are perceived to be inherently challenging because they are inevitable and ongoing, making the job of teaching and facilitating learning stressful and wearying (Axup and Gersch, 2008; Boyle et al, 2005; Munn et al, 2007). They are, like aggression and non-compliance, behaviours that threaten the social role of the teacher to teach and the need to create an orderly and safe environment in which to do so. Yet this remains at odds somewhat with the research literature that suggests interpretations of behaviour are affected by personal characteristics, relations between those involved and very subtle differences in the tone of the interaction (Visser, 2006; Munn et al, 2007). For instance, is the difference between physical playfulness and

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<sup>11</sup> Practitioner is being used here to refer to a range of adult professionals or volunteers that work with children and young people. In the context of this review, it mostly refers to teachers and youth workers – but also youth counsellors and residential care workers.

physical aggression a matter of interpretation or can it be objectively measured? Discussions of how to define challenging behaviour also raise questions for those trying to understand and explain challenging behaviour. These debates are considered in the following section.

### ***2.2.3 Explanations: Searching for the Source***

Much of the research literature is devoted to understanding why young people behave in challenging ways; searching for the source of the problem so that it can then be addressed. This has led to competing, as well as complementary, explanations of challenging behaviour, reflecting the common perception that challenging behaviour is a multi-faceted and complex issue (Bennett, 2008; Elton Report, 1989; Munn et al, 2007). The majority of this literature can be categorised into those who see the problem as a within-person malaise, those who view the problems as created in the interaction between a person and their surroundings and those who view it as a mix of both.

The field of challenging behaviour is argued to be dominated by perspectives that conceptualise it as a within-person malaise (Humphrey and Brook, 2006:20; Munn et al, 2007:55) that may be caused by either internal or external factors (whether biologically, psychologically or socially determined). These include factors such as genetic or biological traits like a neurological imbalance (Pomerantz, 2005) or a psychological problem, an “unmet need” that is communicated through challenging behaviour (Cooper, 2006a:11). The source of the psychological problem may come from outside the young person (for example, an emotionally impoverished family life) but the problem lies within them and they are seen to bring the problem with them to the setting.

Alternatively, others search for environmental and cultural explanations of challenging behaviour, exploring the role of the immediate environment in causing or facilitating young people to behave in ways perceived to be problematic. This includes the physical environment, such as the size and nature of the school buildings (Wise, 2000) or the design of the youth centre space (Dimoulas, 2004, 2005)<sup>12</sup>. It also includes the ethos or cultural climate of the school that can promote or discourage indiscipline (Munn et al, 2007). For instance, aspects of the current UK schooling system are argued to create a situation where young people are likely to behave in challenging ways because it neither allows for the space for necessary relationships and mutual communication to develop between teachers and pupils in the classroom (McNamara, 2006; Sage, 2006a) nor does it account for racial and cultural diversity in the curriculum creating a disempowering and un-inclusive experience for some pupils (Faupel, 2006; Sohal, 2006). In these instances the immediate environment is deemed important and changes to the environment may lead to changes in behaviour so the focus is not solely on the individual as having a problem, rather the problem occurs because of the nature of the situation the individual finds themselves within and the way in which they respond to it.

There was traditionally perceived to be a divide between the various explanations for challenging behaviour, however, there is an increasing recognition within the research literature that many different factors interact to 'cause' young people's challenging behaviour (Wise 2000:25-6). This has led to the development of various multi-factor causal models to explain challenging behaviour<sup>13</sup> (Bennett, 2005:9-10; Jamieson et al, 2000:3).The multi-factor model approach represents a shift from

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<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that there is confusion here between causal factors and influencing factors. The environment cannot really be considered the 'cause' of challenging behaviour, it might encourage or discourage certain behaviours from occurring in that space but it does not necessarily explain where the behaviour comes from.

<sup>13</sup> Examples of the various multi-factor models include: the integrated and shared frameworks of Bennett (2005) and Hunter-Carsch et al (2006); the systemic approaches to behaviour as advocated by Bennett's (2005) and Wise (2000); Cooper's (1999a; 2005) biopsychosocial approach; and Jamieson et al's (2000) interactive model within an ecosystemic view.

viewing different explanations for challenging behaviour as competing, to viewing them as complementary (Wise, 2000:11). Laudable in its aims and making a lot of common sense, there are however, potential tensions in such an all encompassing approach.

In some ways the acknowledgement that challenging behaviour, like any behaviour, is a product of interacting factors with biological, social, cultural, physiological, psychological, and environmental elements is to a certain extent nothing more than truism. There is a need to reflect critically on the consequences of adopting such a broad approach in terms of whether it is helpful to those young people whose behaviour is being categorised as challenging and to those encountering challenging behaviour as part of their everyday work with young people. It does not, for instance, clarify the conceptual dilemmas involved in defining challenging behaviour. Furthermore, adopting a multi-factor approach places great demands on those working with these models of understanding challenging behaviour in everyday practice. Is it feasible to take into account the complex web of possible factors contributing to the behaviour presented by a young person when faced in-the-moment with certain behaviour? It is also likely that multi-factor models will emphasise certain elements over others so whilst they claim to examine the interaction between a number of possible factors, a theoretical preference remains likely that prioritises one explanation over another. Whilst the complexity of challenging behaviour necessitates a multi disciplinary research base (Macleod and Munn, 2004:175) benefitting the state of knowledge in this field, there are potential limitations of the value of this approach for individual research studies and practitioners.

Throughout the literature young people are overwhelmingly referred to as *having* challenging behaviour or as young people *with* challenging behaviour, this remains

the case even when environmental and contextual factors are being discussed (Tobell and Lawthom, 2005:90). Such language reinforces the conceptualisation of challenging behaviour as belonging to the individual young person. The young person may not be blamed for their behaviour but the way in which challenging behaviour is produced, for instance, in the interaction between the individual pupil and the teacher becomes overshadowed by the language which suggests it is the young person who is deficient in some way (Lloyd and Munn, 1999:164). To avoid this, some writers adopt different terminology. For example, Kilpatrick et al (2008:2) chose to use the term 'challenging situations' over 'challenging behaviour' in their study. They do so on the basis that: "[T]he term 'situations' is used to refer to the total context while, in general, behaviour relates more specifically to the young people." In other words, 'challenging behaviour' implies a within-person problem whereas 'challenging situation' firmly locates the problem in a situation rather than in any individual.

Locating the issue of challenging behaviour firmly outside of the individual requires a focus on social interaction<sup>14</sup>. Such approaches tend to emerge from a social constructionist and interactionist position towards challenging behaviour. It involves looking at the way challenging behaviour is constructed through the ongoing processes of interaction, both as a label and as a phenomenon. This has led to accounts in the literature exposing how labels for challenging behaviour are created in the interaction between an individual and their social world (Macleod and Munn, 2004:169 discuss approaches like this in relation to SEBDs) and to a focus on the societal function of these labels (Munn et al's, 2007:56). This kind of approach draws on interactionist perspectives in the study of deviancy as a social phenomenon (see for instance Becker, 1973; Clinard and Meier, 1985; Rubington and Weinberg, 1987) looking at the social processes, interpretations, reactions and power

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<sup>14</sup> Approaches to studying interaction are also further attended to in chapter 3, section 3.2.

relations that produce and 'make stick' the label of deviant (see for example Waterhouse's, 2004 study of deviant identities in the classroom).

As well as a focus on the sociological processes involved at the level of the relationship between society, institutions and the individual, a social constructionist and interactionist approach also involves looking at the way challenging behaviour develops and progresses during micro-interactions. This includes observing the social processes involved in the escalating and defusing of a challenging encounter. There is a tradition of doing this within social psychological research using recorded conversations and video recordings from lessons. For example, Pomerantz (2005) observes the linguistic devices used by teachers and pupils to gain and maintain power in classroom interactions around challenging behaviour and Admiraal et al (1996) observe the way student teachers respond to 'daily hassles' in the classroom. In these studies challenging behaviour is suggested to arise out of the social interaction and the authors seek to explain strategies teachers can use to avoid or defuse challenging behaviour in their daily relations with young people. These studies are less prominent than those that locate the challenging behaviour within a young person.

Section 2.2 began by considering the way 'being young' is associated with causing or having problems. It was shown that young people are generally expected to behave in ways adults perceive to be challenging, but that some young people become categorised as 'abnormal' on the basis of their challenging behaviour. The challenging behaviour of young people is therefore on the one hand associated with 'normal' behaviour yet, on the other hand, associated with 'abnormal' behaviour. It is argued that this makes challenging behaviour a slippery concept to study. Either way challenging behaviour is consistently constructed as 'wrong' or 'problematic' in some way. This construction of challenging behaviour and the statistical increase in

the prevalence of the young people being labelled as having behavioural problems was argued to have led to an increased call for intervention (control and support) into the lives of young people, in particular those bearing a label of challenging behaviour, to change or alter their behaviour in some way. This study asks whether the perceived challenging behaviour of young people can be conceptualised in ways other than 'as a problem'. This literature also suggested it is important to be clear what is meant by challenging behaviour as it is referred to frequently in public, policy and professional discourse with potentially negative implications for young people.

Next, the literature around definitions of challenging behaviour was reviewed. This suggested that the meaning of challenging behaviour in regards to work with young people was anything but clear. Whilst the term can infer a certain philosophical stance, viewing behaviour not as an individual problem but as a challenge to a system or someone, this is not necessarily a shared meaning. The term was shown to overlap with other equally fuzzy concepts, at times synonymous with medical disorders and educational difficulties and at other times used as a socially acceptable front to more derogatory ways of speaking about young people's behaviour. Despite the lack of a shared or clear understanding about the meaning of challenging behaviour, it was found that the term remains popular in professional discourse. This suggests that there is a need to further investigate the meaning of challenging behaviour as it occurs in everyday practice. The literature also suggested, that within the context of teaching, it was possible to identify certain behaviour as more likely to be challenging than other. Such studies, focusing on practitioner definitions of challenging behaviour, do not address the very situational nature of interpreting behaviour and how distinctions are made in practice between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.



The literature also showed that the construction of challenging behaviour, as a problem in work with young people, led to much research in the area being devoted to searching for the source of this problem so that it can then be addressed<sup>15</sup>. Competing explanations of challenging behaviour, from biological to cultural determinants, were shown to exist. It was argued that the current trend was to see the perceived challenging behaviour of a young person as a result of various interacting factors. Questions were raised about the usefulness of this model in the immediacy of everyday practice and to what extent one factor is not perceived to dominate over the others. Such models are often referred to as interactionist, as behaviour is viewed as the result of an individual's interaction with their environment. It was argued that many writing in this area accepted the socially constructed or socially mediated creation of challenging behaviour, but that relatively few studies attend directly to the social processes involved in the creation of challenging behaviour in everyday micro-interactions between adults and young people. Further research is needed, that 'holds' the problems of defining the meaning of challenging behaviour as central in the research. This will help to further understandings of challenging behaviours as a social phenomenon, something created through social interaction rather than coming from an individual. To do this, it is necessary to study challenging behaviour as it occurs in the processes of social interaction.

### **2.3 In Practice: Challenging Behaviour in Work with Young People**

Section 2.3 reviews the bodies of literature relating to challenging behaviour in work with young people; it asks what does the literature say about how child and youth practitioners work with challenging behaviour, and how do these practices relate to the theories of challenging behaviour described above? It attends to the literature

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<sup>15</sup> The body of literature devoted to dealing with young people labelled as challenging and the perceived challenging behaviour of young people is the substantive focus of section 2.3, this includes therapeutic interventions (section 2.3.1) and behaviour management strategies (section 2.3.2).

about work with young people specifically labelled as having challenging behaviour and also the literature that looks at challenging behaviour as ordinarily arising in work with young people. The section is divided into four key (sometimes inter-related) approaches and/or positions to challenging behaviour in work with young people: therapeutic interventions; behaviour management; core values and principles; and ethical dilemmas.

### ***2.3.1 Therapeutic Interventions***

The dominant conceptualisation of challenging behaviour as a problem and the subsequent attention given to the causes of challenging behaviour imply a desire to 'cure' that challenging behaviour (Munn et al, 2007:55). This desire is reflected in the growth of the literature base evaluating the effectiveness of various different interventions to help young people to stop behaving in ways perceived to be challenging (for example: Cooper, 2006b; DeSylva, 2006; Doucette, 2004; Hallam, 2007; Hasse, 2006; Humphrey and Brooks, 2006; Sage, 2006b). This literature, predominantly focused on young people bearing an SEBD label, is a mix of research evidenced writing and practitioner reflective writing looking at 'what works' in relation to young people formally labelled as having challenging behaviour.

Interventions reflect understandings of the primary cause of the behaviour. For instance, if the young person is diagnosed as having a neurobiological problem then a chemical intervention may be introduced to make the child behave more 'normally' (or in a less oppositional way) (Coppock, 2002). If poor parenting is seen as a key factor then the parents may be targeted for parenting classes. Most commonly (and sometimes alongside the targeting of familial or biological factors) the 'psychological problem' of the young person is targeted through some form of therapeutic intervention. This reflects the dominance of psychological understandings of challenging behaviour (see section 2.2), where the behaviour is "more often than not best viewed as evidence of unmet need at the individual level"

(Cooper, 2006a:11). The existing myriad of different therapeutic interventions is based on a range of psychological theories around socio-cultural learning, attachment, cognitive development and communication. This includes: music therapy (DeSylva, 2006), nurture groups (Cooper, 2006b) and cognitive-behavioural management and development groups (Humphrey & Brooks, 2006, Sage, 2006b). There is a large body of literature that explains how these interventions operate and the effectiveness of these interventions.

Such therapeutic interventions aim to change the way in which young people behave into more acceptable behaviour. Like much of the literature in the area, Humphrey and Brooks (2006) found that the intervention they researched was effective in reducing problem behaviours amongst the young people. They note however that this approach roots the problem firmly within the individual and underplays the impact of environmental factors, for example the participants in their study suggested that key anger triggers came from a perceived abuse of power by teachers (Humphreys and Brooks, 2006:20). Similarly, researchers note that whilst the nurture group (Cooper, 2006b) and 'the communication opportunity group' (Sage, 2006b) were found to be highly effective ways of working to reduce young people's challenging behaviour within the group these improvements did not always transfer into the classroom environment.

Therapeutic interventions are based on the assumption that individual young people can learn to behave in different, more acceptable 'normal' ways with the right support. They are usually focused on the challenging behaviour of a very specific group of young people – those labelled as having a behavioural disorder – usually outside of everyday 'mainstream' settings. Whilst valuable to learn what works for this group of young people, these approaches do not necessarily further an understanding of the nature of challenging behaviour in practice in everyday

work with young people. A different type of intervention labelled behaviour management strategies and policies are considered next. These are used with young people in a variety of everyday settings as a means to manage behaviour perceived to be challenging yet link to therapeutic interventions as they also draw on social learning and behaviourist theories.

### **2.3.2 Behaviour Management**

Although a little outdated, the paragraph below from The Elton Report is of interest in understanding the normalisation of the role of behaviour management strategies in schools:

“Reducing bad behaviour is a realistic aim. Eliminating it completely is not. Historical and international comparisons help to illustrate this obvious but important point. Children have a need to discover where the boundaries of acceptable behaviour lie. It is natural for them to test these boundaries to confirm their location and, in some cases, for the excitement of a challenge. The proper answer to such testing is to confirm the existence of the boundaries, and to do so firmly, unequivocally and at once. This will often involve the use of an appropriate punishment. An uncertain or delayed response invites renewed challenges which can draw children into more serious misbehaviour. They should never be left in doubt as to what is and what is not acceptable behaviour. A lack of firmness and clarity does no service to children.”

(Elton Report, 1989, chapter 2, section 29)

The paragraph suggests that challenges to the boundaries around behaviour are inevitable, boundaries create challenges, and challenges establish boundaries. The redefinition of the issue of challenging behaviour as a “permanent part of formal educational culture in the UK” (Grundy and Blandford, 1999) and “an endemic part of institutions that organise themselves in particular ways” (Thomas, 2005:72) shifts the focus from short term interventions to long term and ongoing strategies to make that behaviour manageable in the context it occurs.

Within the practice-based literature, there is a commonly held view that behavioural policies are the cornerstone of working with ‘difficult’ young people:

“Every school, children’s home or other organisation should have a behaviour policy. Staff need clear policy guidelines and practice statements on handling troubled and troublesome young people”  
(Jamieson et al, 2000:10)

In response to government policy on the issue of challenging behaviour in school, all schools in England are expected to have a stated policy on the promotion of good behaviour and discipline (Rowe, 2006) and in Scotland all local authorities have policies on behaviour management in schools (Munn et al, 2009). There has also been a recent surge in books providing practical advice regarding behaviour management for all classrooms (for example Cowley, 2003; Gribble, 2006; O’Regan, 2006a; 2006b; Rogers, 2004b; 2006) and government booklets (for example DfES, 2006). Outside of the UK, there is also embryonic work in the area of behaviour management in youth work settings (Dimoulis, 2004; 2005; Stuart, 2003; 2004; 2005). Munn et al (2007:72) also note that in addition to policies and books, there are an abundance of supplementary materials such as video and inter-active resources and as noted in section 2.2.1 a range of training courses related to the issue. This large body of practical literature reflects the popularity of behaviour management strategies with practitioners. So, what are the key features and assumptions underlying behaviour management policies and strategies?

Behaviour policies and behaviour management strategies are broadly based upon behavioural and social learning theories (Doucette, 2003), mostly adopting a behaviourist or quasi-behaviourist approach (Munn et al, 2007:72). The purpose of a behaviour policy is to provide a clear, consistent and fair approach to managing perceived challenging behaviour across an institution; helping reduce different reactions and approaches by different practitioners (Rowe, 2006:520; Visser, 2003:29). This consistency is deemed important for it is argued that when staff inconsistently enforce a behavioural policy this has a negative on individual pupil behaviour and the general body of pupils (Bennett, 2005:10). A whole-school approach to behaviour management is argued to create an “environment that is

conducive to good discipline” and orderly behaviour (Hallam, 2007:106). The aim is to create an environment that generally reduces instances of challenging behaviour and one that also makes the management of challenging behaviour easier for the teacher.

Within the classroom, it is suggested there is a need for firm but flexible boundaries, “rubber boundaries” (O’Regan, 2006a:48; Visser, 2003:49). O’Regan (2006a:48) notes that this may seem like a contradiction but argues structure and flexibility are actually complementary. Rubber boundaries are defined as “structures, routines and systems for all which bend to meet and absorb individual needs but never break” (O’Regan, 2006a:48). To achieve this, O’Regan (2006a:53) suggests having two bands of rules (one with little or no room for compromise and one where the rules can be transgressed if the young person is struggling with them). This is argued to provide young people perceived to be displaying challenging behaviour the necessary flexibility they need. The issue of consistency when being flexible, however, remains problematic. There is a further tension in these approaches. They appear to locate the ‘problem’ of challenging behaviour with the young person yet the focus on teacher-pupil interaction implies that that challenging behaviour arises (or at least is defused and escalated) through social interaction.

Within the behaviour management model, the boundaries around pupil behaviour are to be established through clearly specified rules and related consequences. Consequences are argued to be one of the most powerful tools that teachers use to encourage pupils to engage in ‘good school behaviour’ (Laws and Davies, 2000:210). This includes the use of positive consequences such as positive verbal and non-verbal responses, material rewards and being allowed to take part in activities and negative consequences such as: negative verbal and non-verbal responses; additional work; and sanctions and punishments. The use of consequences rests

upon the assumption that recognising and rewarding desirable behaviour reinforces the display of those behaviours (Grundy and Blandford, 1999:8) and vice versa for negative behaviours and negative consequences. This approach also relies upon a clear hierarchy of authority, control and power between the adult and the young person (Doucette, 2004).

More so than in the educational literature, the issue of power in behaviour management is problematised in the youth work literature. Youth workers are argued to be uncomfortable with the notion of 'behaviour management' – because it implies a control over young people that compromises certain youth work principles - yet at the same time managing behaviour is deemed to be an essential part of their work if they are to provide a safe, healthy and inclusive environment (Stuart, 2004:34). Youth workers are argued to need to find ways of managing young people's behaviour that is different to the coercive approaches often taken to behaviour management in schools (Jeffs and Banks, 1999:96), not least because the voluntary nature of the young people's participation suggests that overtly coercive strategies would be counter-productive (Stuart, 2005:33) and because youth workers "have a more relaxed orientation to questions of discipline" in comparison to school teachers (Smith, 2002; 2009:11).

There is a desire to create a behaviour management approach based less on direct intervention and more on the modelling of behaviours during a youth group session (Jeffs and Banks, 1999:99). Stuart (2004:31) argues that a consideration of power relations is essential in developing behaviour management strategies and that non-coercive cooperative strategies show how power can be shared with young people in attempts to "involve young people in creating a positive, nonviolent and safe environment" (Stuart, 2004:31). Whilst these approaches may seem idealistic in the face of say a 'dangerous' or physically threatening challenging situation, they do

disrupt the assumption implicit in behaviour policies and strategies that young people's behaviour should simply be controlled and contained in a clear and authoritative manner (Doucette, 2004). The ethical dilemmas involved in challenging behaviour in youth work practice are considered in section 2.3.4, following an introduction to the 'core values and principles' argued to underpin 'effective' working with young people perceived to be challenging.

### **2.3.3 Core Values and Principles**

There is a strand in the challenging behaviour literature that seeks to articulate a set of core values and principles argued to underpin all effective practice in this area, from different therapeutic interventions to various behaviour management strategies (Jamieson et al, 2000; Richardson, 2001; Rogers, 2004b; Visser, 2002; 2005a; 2005b). The product of years of working with, and/or researching, young people's challenging behaviour this approach emerges from the observation that there are many causes of challenging behaviour and many possible ways of approaching and managing the problem. It is therefore argued that rather than looking for the perfect intervention it is more useful to be aware of the 'key factors' apparent in the approaches that 'work' when working with young people perceived to be 'challenging' (Visser, 2002) and/or in managing young people's challenging behaviour (Rogers, 2004b). Principles and values differ from interventions and techniques as they do not tell the practitioner what to do in the face of a specific behaviour, but they do provide a framework from within which to make professional judgements (Visser, 2002:79). It is suggested that the benefits of having a core framework of principles is that it enables a practitioner to have faith in what they do when policies and practices are ever-changing and sometimes contradictory (Visser, 2002:73-4).

As a work in progress these various values and principles present a complicated framework of 'how to be' and 'how to think' when working with 'challenging'



young people. However, despite cultural and professional differences there are certain overlapping principles in the lists of Rogers (2004b), Richardson (2001) and Visser (2002; 2005b) including: the value of a positive relationship with the young person; having and conveying empathy to the young person; and belief in the young person's ability and efforts to change. Jamieson et al (2000:5) summarise the pre-requisites of these core values as: "respect for the integrity of the individual and an empathetic, non-judgemental approach coupled with honesty and genuineness". These core values and principles suggest that positive social relations are fundamental when working with 'challenging' young people; that developing these 'soft' inter-personal skills are as important as using firm disciplinary techniques and demonstrating authority.

### **2.3.4 Ethical Dilemmas**

Exploring another aspect of value-based practices around challenging behaviour is a small strand of writing in the youth work literature on the ethical dilemmas involved in intervention. Work with young people is argued to be a 'value-based' profession where the work, by its very nature, involves ongoing ethical issues and dilemmas (Banks, 2009:48-49). General principles for ethical conduct may guide youth workers but they do not tell them how to act in specific situations (NYA, 2005). Banks (2004:218) defines a dilemma as "a choice between two equally unwelcome courses of action" where there is not always a clear right or wrong answer. Ethical dilemmas arise in work with young people for different reasons but they are often related to the challenging of young people's behaviour in practice:

"[...] many of the biggest day-to-day ethical dilemmas arise for workers: for example how much influence or control should they exert without compromising the freedom and responsibility of the young people"  
(Jeffs and Banks, 1999:94)

There is also the possibility of compromising relationships with, and the participation of, individual young people in the process of challenging their behaviour. For instance, in the interests of the welfare of others a young person may be excluded from a youth club session because of 'aggressive' behaviour, yet

excluding that young person may lead to them feeling rejected and missing out on a service they need (Banks, 2004:218).

Challenging behaviour is presented as a moral, as well as practical, issue. Through their role, youth work practitioners are in a position of power over a young person, they are, for instance, able to ban a young person from a setting. This is argued to create the potential for conflict between their 'caring' and 'controlling' functions (Banks, 2004:220-221). Writers within the youth work literature have a long and ongoing history of debating the uncomfortable role of youth workers as agents of social control in the lives of young people (Hine and Wood, 2009; Jeffs and Banks, 1999; Skott-Myhre, 2006; Smith, 2001). Renewed policy interest in youth work, apparent in the development of youth work strategies for England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales (DfEE, 2001; Northern Ireland Executive, no date; Scottish Executive, 2007; Welsh Assembly Government, 2007), has ignited debates about the purpose of youth work and the nature of youth work practice, in particular around the 'control agenda' (Hine and Wood, 2008; Spence et al, 2006). Yet, despite the "long concern with behaviour deemed anti-social or deviant within youth work" (Smith, 2001:5) and discussions amongst early practitioners about the role of discipline, there exists almost no research or contemporary writings about the issue (Jeffs and Banks, 1999:94-5) or indeed about the nature of everyday interactions in youth work settings altogether (Halpern et al, 2000:471)<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Exceptions to this in UK are Banks 1999, 2004; 2009; Jeffs and Banks, 1999; and outside the UK Dimoulas, 2004; 2005; Halpern, 2000; Stuart, 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2005. There is also a strand of literature interested in the relationship between participating in youth work settings and engagement in problematic (anti-social or risky) behaviours (for example: Mahoney & Stattin, 2000; Mahoney et al, 2004, Piko & Vazsonyi, 2004; Robson & Feinstein, 2007; Weber et al, 2001), but the focus there is on youth club participation as a factor in developing problem behaviour as opposed to a focus on challenging situations during a youth club session.

So how do youth workers respond to these dilemmas as they arise and how do they become aware of and use the professional principles underlying their practice? Banks (2004:224-5) suggests that whilst models of creative problem solving exist in relation to ethical dilemmas, in reality most decisions made in professional practice are made intuitively 'in-the-moment' drawing on professional wisdom and experience, although they should be reflected on later. This approach draws on ideas about the 'reflective practitioner' - a concept taken from the work of Donald Schön (1983) - and is an approach often adopted in work with young people in a variety of settings (Turney, 2007:78). Reflective practice is argued to be:

"[...] an approach to professional practice that emphasises the need for practitioners to avoid standardized, formula responses to the situations they encounter. Reflective practice involves coming to terms with the complexity, variability and uncertainty associated with human services work"  
(Thompson, 2005a:195)

Those working with young people are argued to need to use their professional judgment, tacit knowledge and internalised practice wisdom (Schön, 1983), during interactions with young people, including those interactions involving challenging behaviour. A focus on the dilemmas of challenging the behaviour of young people and the use of reflective practice provides a contrast to relying on behaviour policies and clear rules in the behaviour management approach described in section 2.3.2. There is, however, little empirical research into how these reflective practices are implemented in every day interactions around challenging behaviour in youth club (or indeed other) settings.

Section 2.3 reviewed the literature interested in how to work with challenging behaviour and young people and practices around challenging behaviour in child and youth practice settings. This literature was shown to be predominantly concerned with how best to meet the needs and psychological 'deficiencies' of those young people deemed 'abnormally' challenging and how to manage the 'normally' occurring challenging behaviour in work with young people, most notably in the

school context. The former focused on techniques to 'help' the young people, and the latter focused on techniques to 'control' the young people (although the boundary between care and control, when an intervention seeks to change a person, is not clear cut). The majority of these approaches were shown to be based on social learning and behaviourist theories, developed on the assumption that an individual can learn to change their behaviour and that others (in these instances trained professionals and those in a position of power) can influence them to do so. Again, acknowledging this influence suggests that a closer attention to interactions around challenging behaviour will reveal the ways in which challenging behaviour is related to social processes as well as to individual pathologies.

Evaluations and observations of different forms of therapeutic interventions and various behaviour management tools were argued to show that there is no single correct way of working with challenging behaviour and young people. There was found to be a strand of literature that considers certain values and principles to underpin all effective work in this area. This literature suggests that attention needs to be given to the characteristics of practice, such as having and showing empathy with the young person, rather than on the development of a set of rigid, mechanical rules for practitioners or the search for the 'magic-bullet' solution to challenging behaviour. It was suggested that practitioners could use this framework to make professional judgements in their everyday work. Effective practice (whether based on a specific theory or broader value framework) does, however, continue to be constructed unproblematically as practice that leads to a change in a young person's behaviour or change to the behaviour of a group of young people. I argue that whilst the issues of power and control are implicit in this literature, they are not critically attended to.

Section 2.3 went on to review the literature on challenging behaviour in youth work practice. This literature brought the issues of power and control to the forefront. Intervening to change the behaviour of a young person was constructed as an ethical dilemma. Youth workers were argued to have to make professional judgements as behaviour occurs on whether to try and manage the behaviour or not, and in what way. Although not necessarily a conscious process, this judgement was suggested to be supported through reflective practice within the guidance of their professional value framework. Their professional role was, however, noted to have conflicting aspects causing potential tension in this process and it was argued that there is not always a clearly right or wrong response to take. This complex take on challenging behaviour in practice is currently mostly theoretical; there is a dearth of empirical work into the actual everyday interactions between youth workers and young people. This study envisages value, therefore, in conducting observations of such interactions to explore what goes on in practice around challenging behaviours in settings where this kind of approach is advocated.

## **2.4 Conclusions**

Building up a picture of the current state of knowledge available to academics, practitioners and policy makers, this review has mapped out key concerns and debates in the multi-disciplinary literature concerned with current conceptualisations of, and practices surrounding, challenging behaviour in work with young people. The chapter began by critically exploring the continued representation of young people as inherently challenging, and also the construction of a further group of young people as abnormally challenging. The topic area was established as one of continued public, policy and practice concern. At this point, questions were raised about the societal function of labelling young people's behaviour as challenging and the role categorising young people plays in establishing control over them.

The review went on to explore discussions in the literature about the meaning of challenging behaviour. The difficulties in defining challenging behaviour were found to be widely acknowledged. Definitions of challenging behaviour were argued to be subjective and problematic given: the socially mediated and situated interpretation of any behaviour; the contextual nature of the boundaries around acceptable and unacceptable behaviour; the lack of a shared understanding between those using the term and the way it is often used interchangeably and synonymously with other terms, including more static labels for behaviour. Some researchers approached the issue by looking at the ways in which teachers define challenging behaviour, offering opportunities to explore the meaning of challenging behaviour in this way. Such studies create contextual definitions of challenging behaviour but do not overcome the concerns about the very situational nature of any interpretations of behaviour in the immediacy of it occurring. The literature around defining challenging behaviour would benefit from research into how challenging behaviour is constructed in the immediacy of interaction; what behaviours are challenged, and in what way, in practice?

Next, the chapter reviewed another substantial debate in the literature; searches for the cause of challenging behaviour. The review found that various theoretical explanations are given for challenging behaviour, ranging from internal to external factors oscillating between biological, social, cultural and (in the main) psychological understandings. There is a push in the literature towards more integrated frameworks of understanding, seeing the behaviour as a product of many interacting determinants as well as being created in the interaction between an individual and their environment. The review went on to consider the more practice-based literature looking at the core ways in which practitioners approach challenging behaviour in work with young people and work with young people perceived to be challenging. Therapeutic interventions were found to be popular for those young people labelled as having a behavioural problem whilst behaviour

management strategies are common in everyday interactions around challenging behaviour, particularly in the school context. Both are aimed at influencing young people to behave differently; to prevent, treat or manage their challenging behaviour. Much of the literature is devoted to explaining and evaluating these interventions, and the principles that underpin effective practice. These interventions are based, as you would expect, on the different explanations for the existence of challenging behaviour – both within-individual and interactionist perspectives. The construction of the issue remains, as before, as a problem to be managed.

To research the cause and ‘treatment’ of challenging behaviour it is necessary to first have a static definition of what the behaviour is. Yet, it was shown earlier that definitions of challenging behaviour are open to interpretation, often subjective and very situational. Despite this, very little research was found to attend directly and in a sustained way to the conceptual complexities surrounding challenging behaviour. This raises concerns as the term continues to be widely used. The literature overwhelmingly positions challenging behaviour as belonging to the young person and not as a product of interaction; the young person is described as being *with* challenging behaviour. I suggest that in the haste to categorise and deal with challenging behaviour, much work in this field overlooks what the concept means.

The majority of our understanding about the nature of challenging behaviour in regards to young people was shown to come from the school context and from research about young people bearing an official label of challenging behaviour (such as SEBDs). This was suggested to raise questions about the limitations of current conceptualisations of challenging behaviour and understandings of the practices surrounding challenging behaviour in work with young people. Towards the end of the literature review, attention was turned to the issue of challenging behaviour in

the youth work literature. Within this literature, the management of young people's perceived challenging behaviour is constructed as an ethical, as well as practical, dilemma and issues of control are critically considered. The nature of youth work practice was argued to offer an interesting context within which to study challenging behaviour in practice. How do youth worker-young person interactions compare to teacher-pupil interactions around challenging behaviour? What is the nature of challenging behaviour in youth work practice? However, there is very little empirical research on challenging behaviour in practice in youth work, indeed there was found to be a dearth of research into everyday youth work settings and their goings-on. Thus, questions were raised about the theoretical and practical insights that could be gleaned from observing interactions around behaviour in a youth work setting.

This review found that the dominant literature on the theory and practice of challenging behaviour in work with young people to be based within the educational context; to predominantly view challenging behaviour as a problem; and to construct that problem as located within the individual young person. The review also found that the socially constructed nature of challenging behaviour is widely accepted but not fully attended to. In response to the gaps identified in the literature review, this study is interested in observing how challenging behaviour is created through and from social interaction; challenging behaviour in practice. The study is grounded in, and develops as the thesis progresses, a more fluid and dynamic notion of challenging behaviour than previous research in this area. It does not attempt to define challenging behaviour (in any static sense<sup>17</sup>) nor search for the 'cause' of challenging behaviour. Rather, it seeks to understand what else can be learnt about challenging behaviour in work with young people by focusing on social

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<sup>17</sup> There are, however, tensions in trying to study challenging behaviour without first defining what is meant by challenging behaviour (section 3.4.3 discusses this in more detail).



processes rather than individual problems; it looks at what is going on when challenging behaviour occurs.

Overall, the thesis aims to contribute to a contextualised understanding of challenging behaviours as a social phenomenon when working with young people. This is done through an ethnographic study of everyday social interaction in a youth club. The youth club was chosen because very little research has been conducted in this setting around challenging behaviour providing an opportunity to learn something new. The following chapter, chapter 3, details further the methodological framework of this study.

# 3. Methodology

## 3.1 Introduction

This chapter documents and reflects upon the research practices adopted in this ethnographic study of challenging behaviour in the youth club. The aim of the study was from the start to contribute to a contextualised understanding of challenging behaviours as a social phenomenon when working with young people. To fulfil this aim the study was guided by certain research objectives:

- to examine the nature of social interactions within the research setting and its relationship to 'challenging' behaviours in practice
- to explore how the boundaries around behaviour are known and negotiated within the research setting
- to explore what behaviour is constructed as 'challenging' in this context, why and what this means in practice
- to explore the inter-related process of 'being challenging' and 'being challenged' in interactions
- to examine the processes in operation when a 'challenging' interaction is defused or escalated

These research objectives provided direction, but not prescription, to the research process to allow the incorporation of any salient issues that arose during the study. The research process discussed here includes selecting and accessing the research setting, data generation, data analysis and ethics. The creation and analysis of data was an iterative process, permeated with intellectual, ethical and practical concerns throughout.

### 3.2 An Ethnographic Approach to Studying Interaction

Observation is deemed the best way to study social interaction, as it allows the researcher direct access to what people do, rather than relying on what they say they do and associated problems (Bryman, 2008:254)<sup>18</sup>. There are different forms of observational research in social research from quantitative approaches that use structured observational techniques to gather data about behaviour usually as non-participants in the setting to less structured methods of collecting data within the qualitative research paradigm where the researcher adopts varying levels of participation in the behaviour being observed (Bryman, 2008:257). Interested in the meaning of challenging behaviour within youth work practices and to come to a contextualised and situational understanding of the issue an ethnographic approach to studying interaction was adopted.

Ethnographic research like this into a single setting has many parallels with case study research entailing extensive analysis of a unique case (Bryman, 2008; Creswell, 2007:230). Yet, as Bryman (2008:53) notes, case studies focus on the 'case' – the single setting - as the unit of analysis. The context of the youth club is of interest as it was chosen for its theoretical insight (see section 3.2.1) and as such is viewed as an important backdrop to the interactions around challenging behaviour<sup>19</sup>. The focus, however, of analysis in the study is 'challenging behaviour' not the youth club itself. The study also relies on the core ethnographic method of 'participant observation'; as such the study is conceptualised primarily as an ethnographic approach over and above a case study. The methodology chapter, therefore, draws principally on the discourses and writings of ethnographers rather than case study researchers (Creswell, 2007:231). First it is important to explain what is meant by an ethnographic approach and how this relates to the nature of this research.

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<sup>18</sup> For example, difficulties in articulating much of what is taken for granted in everyday life and the gap between what people say they do and what they actually do.

<sup>19</sup> A detailed analytical description is presented of the youth club in chapter 4.

Ethnographic approaches are popular with childhood and youth researchers (Gallagher, 2009a:72; Heath et al, 2009:99) as a means of engaging with the experiences and lives of children and young people in context (see for example Corsaro, 1985; Emond, 2003, 2005; Punch, 2004; Thorne, 2004). Within educational studies, ethnographic approaches have been adopted to study the cultural and social practices within the institutional setting of the school, including interactions and relations between pupils and teachers (see for example Russell, 2005; Swain, 2006). Ethnographers are concerned with interpreting what people do and say within 'naturally' occurring settings (Heath et al, 2009:99, Silverman, 2006:69) in a "fuller, more meaningful context" (Tedlock, 2003:165). Additionally, the exploratory nature of the research is suited to an ethnographic approach that allows for a more flexible research design; one that evolves with the nature of the research setting.

Ethnographic approaches have various identifying features: an emphasis on exploring the nature of particular social phenomenon rather than testing out a hypothesis about them; a tendency to work primarily with 'unstructured' data beginning with an open analytical framework; an explicitly interpretive approach to the data analysis of human actions; and saliently sustained observation and engagement with the research participants/setting over a prolonged period of time (Heath et al, 2009:99; Silverman, 2006:79). These features are important in producing the rich data associated with ethnographic research (Lofland and Lofland, 1984:11). This research study involved sustained although episodic participation in a youth club and engagement with the youth workers and young people who interacted in that social setting for a period of one year, from January 2006 until December 2006. The details of this engagement and participation are described throughout section 3.2 and 3.3 of this chapter.

Collecting such rich data often involves the use of various data collection methods “gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:3). Whilst participant observation is synonymous with ethnographic research, ethnography may also involve interviews with informants as well as the collection of documents about the social setting and/or social group (Bryman, 2008:402-3; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:3). Participant observation is the main source of information in this study, but data were also collected via interviews, group discussions, question sheets and internal evaluation records (these are discussed in greater detail in section 3.3 below). The philosophy of the thesis is to view challenging behaviour from a social constructionist and interactionist position ( see Chapter 2, section 2.3), to do this, it is necessary to study challenging behaviour as it develops in an interaction, rather than as a problem of an individual. The value of relying on the method of participant observation in this study is that it enables the researcher to observe behaviour as it occurs rather than relying on what is said about behaviour (Bryman, 2008:465). The immersion of the researcher into the setting facilitates an understanding of participant’s social practices (Gallagher, 2009a:77) and the social processes underpinning interaction.

A further feature of ethnographic research is that the researcher is part of the social world they study and represent, something that must be recognised and reflected upon by the researcher (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Jennifer Mason’s (2002) conceptualisation of ‘active reflexivity’ is useful to explain the purpose of such reflection in the research process:

“Reflexivity in this sense means thinking critically about what you are doing and why, confronting and often challenging your own assumptions, and recognising the extent to which your thoughts, actions and decisions shape how you research and what you see”  
(Mason, 2002:5)

Mason (2002:5) is clear that reflexivity adds value to the research process through monitoring the impact of the researcher and research practices on data creation and analysis. This includes the impact of the researcher on the research setting and reactions to the researcher from the research participants. This 'reactivity' is not considered a problem for the validity or reliability of the study findings as long as it is included in the analysis. It can even inform the findings (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:16). Reflexive acts are imbued into my research practices, both through informal self-analysis and formally in the process of keeping reflective notes alongside the field notes throughout the designing, doing and writing up of the research. Of central concern to any ethnographer is gaining, and maintaining, access to a social setting (Heath et al, 2009:99). Issues relating to this are now discussed.

### ***3.2.1 Selecting the Youth Club and Gaining Access***

A social setting for a research project is usually chosen on the basis that the nature of that setting provides a context in which relevant data can be generated to address the research problem (Bryman, 2008:403; Mason, 2002:131). A youth work context was suggested in chapter 2 to provide an interesting setting in which to explore challenging behaviour in practice. Developing an empirical study in this area would provide findings to compare and contrast with the existing body of work on the classroom setting. The aspects of youth work practice that suggest it will further current understandings of challenging behaviour include the voluntary participation of the young people and the debates youth workers are engaged in around the dilemmas of intervention and their (uncomfortable) role in controlling young people. Youth work is also a context where relationships between the adults and the young people are prioritised (YouthLink Scotland, 2005). These aspects suggest that there will be interesting social practices and processes in operation when youth workers and young people negotiate the boundaries around behaviour. There is very little known about what actually happens in practice when young people push against the boundaries or behave in ways youth workers perceive to be

challenging<sup>20</sup>. To further theorise challenging behaviour in work with young people, necessitates a consideration of social interaction in the youth club as well as in the classroom, in the youth worker-young person relationship as well as in the teacher-pupil relationship. There is also potential in comparing these potentially different approaches in different settings in considering the kinds of ways in which challenging behaviour and work with young people perceived to be ‘challenging’ can be approached.

There are many different types of youth clubs and youth work practices operating in Scotland (Machin: no date); therefore it was necessary to think about what kind of youth club offered the best opportunity for generating relevant data. To do this, I developed a list of necessary criteria an ‘ideal’ research setting would have:

*Table 3.1 Characteristics of the ‘ideal’ youth work setting for the research*

Criteria	Reason
A mainstream group setting	To focus on challenging behaviour in social interaction in everyday relations, rather than on a therapeutic intervention for targeted individuals
Youth workers believe they encounter challenging behaviour	To ensure the focus on challenging behaviour is relevant to those participating in the setting and to generate the necessary data for the study
Regular youth club sessions with funding for at least 12 months	Sustained participation is crucial to ethnographic research

<sup>20</sup> A more detailed discussion of the values and principles underlying youth work practice is undertaken in section 4.2, chapter 4.

Voluntary participation of young people.	To ensure the young people have some control over their participation in the youth club, and space to negotiate the boundaries around behaviour
Open to secondary school aged young people	This age group is often associated with 'normal' 'challenging' behaviour as they approach, and enter, their teenage years in the transition to secondary school. Also a focus on this age group means the findings will be comparable to studies of challenging behaviour in secondary schools.
Open to a range of young people	To include young people of different genders, ethnicities, social class and young people with or without 'official' labels of challenging behaviour in the study
Located within commutable distance of the city centre of Edinburgh	For logistical reasons

Using these criteria I constructed a list of potentially suitable youth clubs through researching various agencies and then talking to contacts in the youth work field. One of these contacts suggested the Junior Underground (JU)<sup>21</sup> youth club as a particularly appropriate social setting for this study in relation to the above criteria. To ensure suitability and as part of the process of negotiating access I went informally to the JU in December 2005 to meet the staff and spend time in a youth club and found the youth club to offer many opportunities in relation to the research problem.

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<sup>21</sup> The Junior Underground (JU) is the pseudonym given to the youth club where this research was undertaken. Throughout the thesis 'the JU' and 'the youth club' are used interchangeably to refer to the research setting.



The chosen research site, the JU, is an open-access youth club located in a co-educational state-run secondary school in an area of relative socio-economic disadvantage<sup>22</sup>. During term-time, the youth club session operates over the school lunch break. A mixture of paid and volunteer youth workers work in the session (usually 2-4 workers) and it is open to all young people in the first two years of school, aged between 11 and 14 years. Largely based in one room, the youth club session generally lasts around 50 minutes involving unstructured play around various games such as pool, table football, table tennis and board games. The young people attend voluntarily, and can drop in and out of the youth club session as they please. Those working in the JU believe they encounter 'challenging' young people on daily basis and that behaviour in this youth club is usually rowdy. A more detailed analytical description of the JU is provided in chapter 4, but it is necessary at this point to draw out the main advantages and disadvantages of the particularly unique elements of this setting.

School-based youth provision, like the JU, arose in the 1970s with the expansion of community schools (Smith, 1996). Whilst less popular now, such school based youth clubs offer insight into a certain type youth work practice that may be quite different to youth work in other settings for example, in a dedicated youth centre or detached street-work. The location of the JU within the school and operating within school time has certain implications for this study. The advantages include the opportunity: to observe how the potentially conflicting value of 'schooling' and 'youth work' operate side by side in relation to the perceived challenging behaviour of young people; to observe the way in which the young people negotiate the different rules and roles within the youth club space to other areas in the school and the differences between term-time and holiday sessions; and to observe relatively

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<sup>22</sup> Census data for the area shows, for instance, the area to have higher than city average numbers of working aged people in the lower end of the socio-economic classification scale and to have much lower than city average numbers of owner-occupied properties.

large numbers of young people as the timing and the location make participation logistically 'easy' for the young people.

There were also disadvantages to the school-based location and timing. Although one 'excluded' pupil did attend the youth club during the holidays, the main disadvantage of choosing this setting is the exclusion of those young people not attending school from participating. The nature of the setting also sets certain unique limitations and possibilities around the practices of the youth workers and their interactions with the young people. For example, the timing of the session was very strictly adhered to due to the young people having to go to afternoon classes. The youth workers were also able to draw on the 'higher authority' of the teachers when negotiating challenging behaviour. The contextual details of the setting are discussed in more detail in chapter 4.

It is important to note that before any contact was made with the JU, the proposed research went through the University's research ethics process for approval. With approval granted, and the subsequent successful preliminary 'casing' of the JU in December 2005 I began to formally negotiate access with relevant 'gatekeepers'. On request, a proposal was sent to the management committee of the youth agency (see appendix 1) detailing the focus of the research, why I wanted to conduct the research in the JU and what my participation in this youth club would mean. I offered to meet the management committee in person but this was deemed unnecessary. The management committee approved my application and the fieldwork formally began January 2006.

Gaining access to the research setting was relatively unproblematic, and I believe greatly facilitated by having a respected contact within the agency that managed the

JU<sup>23</sup>. The benefits of my relationship with this contact were apparent when the trust this contact held were transferred onto me. This is shown clearly when I meet one of the members of the management committee at a later point and I mention the proposal I had sent to the committee for approval:

*“Paul<sup>24</sup> told me he hasn’t had a chance to look through all of it [the proposal] yet but that he trusts Sarah’s judgement and if it fine with her me being there then it is fine with him. Again, I feel my access to this youth club is based on trust rather than anything else. He does, however, ask me to tell him about the research at this point so I explain what I am doing.”*

(Field notes, 9<sup>th</sup> visit)

Whilst this is only one member of the management committee, it raises concerns that the gatekeepers did not fully consider the information given to them; this is perhaps also a consequence of producing a relatively long proposal<sup>25</sup>. Access into a youth work setting was also, I believe, facilitated by my experience of working with young people. At the time of the fieldwork, and for two years previous, I had been employed as a sessional worker with young people, some of whom were labelled as having behavioural disorders. This experience suggested to the youth agency that I could behave ‘appropriately’ and ‘professionally’ in their youth club. This experience was a benefit to me when trying to engage and communicate with the young people and the workers, as I was not totally unfamiliar with youth work practice however the situation was still strange to me – something I had to learn how to be a part of (Emerson et al, 1995). This was partly because my own experience of working with young people was in a very different environment and also because I was now in a very different role. I was no longer co-ordinating and managing sessions as a worker but participating and observing in as a researcher. Roles and relations in the field are considered next.

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<sup>23</sup> There are other benefits and challenges of having a pre-fieldwork relationship with someone in the research setting and these are discussed in section 3.2.2 below.

<sup>24</sup> Throughout the thesis pseudonyms are used for the workers and the young people. To make it easy to distinguish between a worker and a young person, the worker’s pseudonyms are in italics.

<sup>25</sup> There is a tension in designing and delivering information leaflets between providing enough information to ensure participants are fully informed but not so much information that participants are unwilling or unable to read it.

### 3.2.2 Maintaining Access and Field Relations

I asked Danny what he would say if I asked him to chat with me for my research. Danny said something that I did not understand. I asked him what he had said. Danny said very clearly to me, that he would tell me to “spin on it<sup>26</sup>”. This made him and the two girls laugh loudly. I repeated what he had said to me back to him and he said “yes, spin on it”.

(Field notes, 38<sup>th</sup> visit)

Once in the research setting, it was important to develop and maintain social relations with both the youth workers and the young people to become part of this social setting, to observe and understand interactions around challenging behaviour. This process of gaining and maintaining social access within the setting is far more complicated than gaining physical access to the setting. It involves negotiating different roles and relationships, finding a position in the youth club that is ethically sound and generates relevant data. These roles and relationships are dynamic and change over the course of the research.

#### Roles

The research was conducted overtly<sup>27</sup>, with the intention of becoming a participant-as-observer (Bryman, 2008:410-411). I wanted to be involved in the activities of the youth club, as experience of working with young people and integrating into new youth work settings suggested to me that taking part was the best way to develop relations and trust with both the youth workers and the young people as well as to gain the necessary immersion into the social setting (Bryman, 2008:411). One of the youth workers, *Kelsey*, affirmed this as she told me that my participation was essential to her being willing to engage with me and my research:

I would just be like if she [the researcher] cannae make an effort to get involved with the young people and talk to me then fuck her [K: laughs].

(*Kelsey*, Interview data)

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<sup>26</sup> ‘Spin on it’ is usually accompanied by raising your middle finger to someone, and in effect means ‘get lost’ or go away.

<sup>27</sup> How this was approached and the extent to which an overt observational role was achieved is discussed in more detail under the heading ‘Informed Consent and Privacy’ in the discussion of ethics below.

Whilst there are disadvantages to taking on a fully active role in the youth club, for example being unable to take detailed notes during participation or being preoccupied with an activity to the exclusion of observing other social interaction in the space (as discussed under 3.3.1 below) taking on a more observational and less participatory role was, at times, challenged by the young people:

One of the girls, Becky walks across the room towards me. She asks me “what’s your name?” pleased to be asked I say “Vicky”. She then says something like “my friend said to tell you to stop staring at her”.

(Field notes, 9<sup>th</sup> visit)

At other times the researcher gaze was perceived to be an aggressive action as one of the boys accuses me of “eyeballing” him (Field notes, 11<sup>th</sup> visit) and another asks “what’s she looking for” (Field notes, 21<sup>st</sup> visit) as I watch, but do not join in, their activities. Throughout the fieldwork it was necessary to try and get fully involved in the activities and conversations going on in the youth club – by learning to observe in appropriate and invited ways. Active observation is actually one of the ways of participating in the youth club, for example the young people spend a lot of time watching and commenting on the pool games of others, and the youth workers spend time monitoring activities in the room commenting on behaviour.

Within social interaction in the youth club I was mainly positioned and took upon the roles of ‘helper/pseudo youth worker’ (setting up and tidying up the room with the youth workers, helping the young people set up games or access resources out of their reach) and as a ‘friend/play-partner’ (playing games and joining the youth people in their activities, chatting and bantering with the youth workers and the young people). These roles were not mutually exclusive, and I was always in some form in a researcher role. On the whole, these roles were successful means to form relations with some of the young people and many of the youth workers. By helping out, I felt I was being useful to participants in the youth club and by playing with others I had the opportunity to learn how to interact and become part of this social scene.

Ethnographers researching with children and young people often talk about taking on a 'least-adult' role to become accepted into the children and young people's cultural worlds as well as the dilemmas and challenges in doing so (Mandell, 1988). In this study, as described above, I was attempting to take on a non-authoritative adult-as-friend role with the young people (Mandell, 1988:434; Nukaga, 2008:353). In particular, given the topic area, I was keen to avoid intervening to manage or control a young person's behaviour "assuming the less threatening role of non-interfering companion" (Mandell, 1988:434). To do this, I made various attempts to be seen as someone who was different to a 'real' youth worker in this setting to avoid this expectation being placed upon me by either the youth workers or the young people. This involved repeatedly reminding the young people that I was not a "youth worker" (particularly when asked to act in an adult role of authority) and by not reprimanding the young people if I witnessed them breaking the rules. I tried to avoid being placed in a position of responsibility over the young people, for example by avoiding being the only 'adult' in the room.

The non-authoritative adult image was not, however, easily maintained as the participants and I tried to make sense of where I slotted into the social relations and hierarchies in this setting. My problems in establishing myself as different to a youth worker were compounded because the role I was undertaking was, in essence, very similar to that of a volunteer worker<sup>28</sup>. Volunteer workers were, like me, there to learn about the nature of interaction in the youth club, to engage with the young people and had the option of deferring responsibility (where possible/desirable) to the paid members of staff. It is somewhat unrealistic to expect, as I initially did, that participants in the youth club would see me as someone different, as a researcher. Also, I had used my previous experience of working with

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<sup>28</sup> Although often referred to collectively as 'workers', there are actually five distinguishable types of worker involved in the JU: salaried workers, paid sessional staff, local volunteers, European volunteers and young volunteers (these are discussed in more depth in chapter 4, section 4.5.2).

young people to negotiate access to the youth club. On occasion, I would find myself directly referred to as another worker:

After the session I spoke to *James*, I asked if it would be okay for me to come in tomorrow. He said that was okay “the more workers the better”.  
(Field notes, 2<sup>nd</sup> visit)

Also, the young people had certain expectations of me as an adult in this setting, an adult behaving in many ways like the other youth workers. I was frequently asked to intervene and resolve conflict or be asked by one young person to “tell off” another young person. Whilst, the dilemmas of intervention became a central discussion point of this study for the youth workers (see chapter 6), and my own experiences of it allowed for further insight, at the time I was very aware of the ethical and practical issues that acting in a position of authority over the young people had for me as a researcher.

Whilst I remained committed to not adopting an authoritarian role, and on the whole sustained this, there were times when I did try and control the behaviour of a young person. This occurred when I was in a situation where there was no other adult for me to defer the responsibility over to. In the instances where I chose to intervene, my intervention was never clear cut, but would occur usually when I felt I could not stand by and do nothing, for example when a young person I was friendly with and who trusted me appealed to me when another young person was exerting control over them I felt I had to help them out and when the physical safety of a young person was in potential jeopardy. Reflecting upon my own emotional and professional reactions to these situations helped me to understand the nature of challenging behaviour in practice, and the influence of social roles in this, but remained an uncomfortable role for me.

## Relationships

Related to roles in the field are the relationships formed with different participants and how these relationships influence the data collected and how it is interpreted (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1993; Russell, 2005). Developing good field relations is argued to be at the heart of what ethnographers do; impacting on the 'authority' and authenticity of which the ethnographer can claim to be presenting an 'insiders' perspective of social processes and social interaction (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1993:599). Such relations are also argued to be complex, especially when it involves the need to develop trust with two groups engaged in an unequal power relationship like teachers and pupils (Russell, 2005) or in this case youth workers and young people. Of course, it was not possible to develop a relationship with all of the people participating in the youth club over the research year as I came into contact with 13 workers and over 62 young people<sup>29</sup>. What was important was to develop relationships that enabled a close and detailed look at the interactions around challenging behaviour. I will look at this firstly in regards to my relations with the workers and then with the young people.

Over time, I developed open, friendly and trusting relations with those workers I most frequently interacted with in the youth club. The workers seemed comfortable in my presence including me in their banter, making jokes with and about me:

I feel like I am settling in better with the staff at the provision as they laugh at me for getting the wrong bus and walking all the way up, especially as one of them, had told me at the last session which buses I could get and where to get off them!

(Field notes, reflections, 7<sup>th</sup> visit)

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<sup>29</sup> I estimated the number of people I had contact with through the number of different pseudonyms I used in my field notes. I created 57 pseudonyms for young people aged 11-14 (14 female, 43 male), 5 for young people aged 14-16 who visited the JU to say hello to the workers or to act as young volunteers (2 female, 3 male) and 13 for workers (5 female, 8 male).



The workers were keen to talk to me about the behaviour of the young people, often telling stories to me about things that happened when I was not there or in other youth clubs they worked in as well as drawing my attention to behaviours in the JU. I spend most of my time with *Kelsey* and *Johnny* and came to rely on them as key informants. *Kelsey* had particularly good relations with the young people and was a dominant character within the team of workers. Her acceptance and approval of my presence in the setting was a useful 'in' with some of the other workers and also some of the young people. Other workers such as *James*, who had studied at the same university as me, often engaged me in conversation about how my research was going. The residential trip that I went along to in the summer of 2006, 3 days and 2 nights in a 'bothy<sup>30</sup>' strengthened my relationships with the workers also on that trip. My strategy of making friends with the workers was simply to be as non-judgemental as possible about what I observed in the youth club, to defer to their authority, to be interested in what they did and to be friendly. I developed good relations with those working in the JU and I was invited along to the work Christmas do and to the leaving party of one of the volunteers.

As in all work-places, I had to negotiate the existing internal politics and sometimes unhappy relations between different workers. For example:

*Graeme* said that he would get the bus with me as he was heading into town. On the bus he told me how he thought he was going to 'get a lecture' in the evaluation from *Kelsey* about letting Lianne use the iron [as part of an arts activity]. I started to feel uncomfortable, in the same way I had when *Kelsey* had been talking to me earlier about this incident and complaining about *Graeme*. Again I tried to be polite and engage in conversation but I tried to respond to *Graeme* in a neutral way whilst also trying to change the focus of conversation by asking how old Lianne was.  
(Field notes, 38<sup>th</sup> visit)

In the example above both *Kelsey* and *Graeme* had complained to me about the behaviour of the other one, whilst I tried to remain as neutral as possible. I was also

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<sup>30</sup> A bothy is a basic shelter, where on this trip I shared a room with the other workers.

aware of the possible effects of my longstanding relationship with *Sarah*, who was in a position of authority over most of them. Luckily, *Sarah* appeared to be well-respected and well-liked by the workers. My contact with her and her 'vouching' for me with the workers facilitated their acceptance of me. I was aware that my pre-existing relationship with *Sarah* may have made it difficult for the workers to refuse to grant me access to the setting and that they may have been guarded about doing/saying certain things in front of me, but I think the length of time I was in the setting and the way in which I developed relationships with them negated this as far as possible.

It also meant that during the fieldwork, *Sarah* and I had to re-negotiate our personal and professional relationships slightly. We were friends but now her workplace was also the focus of my research study. Whilst she did not work that often in the JU, I remained aware about the possible influence our friendship had on the way I recorded and interpreted data, especially interactions she was involved with. Also, when we discussed her work between the two of us, we constantly checked with each other whether this was material I could use in my study, and I was aware again how these more personal conversations may influence my interpretations. An issue of 'at-home' ethnographies, the boundaries around my research life and other lives was further blurred when one of the workers at the JU, *Johnny*, began a volunteer placement at the youth organisation I was working at. We negotiated our new relationship as it occurred, clear that my involvement at his work was to remain a secret from our colleagues at my work to retain the anonymity of the setting, and it also served to strengthen our relationship which made *Johnny* more open with me at the JU.

Whilst, I was able to spend time with the workers in social events and in the evaluation sessions, my time with the young people was limited to the youth club

session. The unstructured, drop-in and often busy nature of the youth club session proved challenging as a space in which to develop good research relations with some of the young people, especially those who had come to the youth club to be with their friends and not to talk to me. When I joined the youth club in January 2006 it was midway through the school year and I was a newcomer to the established social interactions and relations. On many occasions, at the beginning of my fieldwork, I would try and join the crowd of boys around the pool table to find the conversation stopped when I arrived. I would go up 'cold' to talk to a young person and she or he would ignore me or walk away. Whilst it was ethically important that the young people could refuse to be involved in this way in my research it was disconcerting initially. I learnt to develop a tough skin when being rejected or insulted and to keep on trying (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:44). Other young people were friendlier with me right from the beginning of my time in the youth club inviting me to play with them, such as Callum and Luke. Invariably this was the 'quieter' less popular young people and so even when involved I was still, at these early stages of the research, often on the 'social' margins of the youth club.

In a predominantly male youth club, my gender (as well as my 'middle-class' English accent and older age) were potential barriers to the building of relations with these teenage boys from a relatively deprived Scottish neighbourhood. Gender, social class and age are all argued to be important variables in the conduct of participant observation (Silverman, 2006:85). Keen to engage them in conversation as means of building relations, this did not always prove to be easy. Indeed, in general boys are represented as being more challenging to engage in more disclosing research conversations (Bradford et al, 2004:16) It took me a while to realise the social importance of being able to play pool well, or any game well, in the youth club. Once my pool skills improved, my status in the youth club did too. I learnt to value social interaction without having to have an in-depth conversation

and to also adopt a more relaxed and serendipitous approach to building relations with the young people waiting for them to include me in their conversations and invite me to participate in an activity. This meant I had to hand over the control of my participation to them which sometimes led to sympathy from the young people when I was not involved in any social interaction:

As I was stood at the table football, Mark said something like “oh look at poor Vicky playing by herself”.  
(Field notes, 56<sup>th</sup> visit)

Handing over control also involves being able to deal with unanticipated events and unpredictable turns in conversations (Russell, 2005). There were times, for instance, when I sought out inclusion in a conversation only to then become uncomfortable by the conversation:

Davie said something about me that I did not hear properly. I said “sorry?” to indicate that I had not heard what he said. Both Davie and Duncan were laughing. Davie said “that was fucking funny what I said”. Now suspicious, I said “actually maybe I don’t want to know what you said”. Davie then turned to a laughing Duncan and said “you have blow job lips too”.  
(Field notes, 53<sup>rd</sup> visit)

Experiences like the above provide useful material to reflect upon the nature of challenging interactions between the researcher and a young person but can at the time be difficult to deal with.

My experience of participating in the youth club shifted from a marginal to a more central position in September 2006 when a group of young people were no longer allowed into the youth club and a new cohort joined. By this stage I was also more confident of my role in the youth club, had good relations with the workers, and could play pool relatively well. These changes offered me a fresh perspective on social interaction in the youth club, helped by that fact that I developed particularly good relations with a group of boys: Duncan, Donald, Mark and Richard. There were two further boys, with whom my relationship with is worth mentioning: Tom and Danny. I had fluctuating relations with both these boys, but they were relations

I valued highly because of their position as 'naughty' boys in the youth club. There were also young people who I only met a few times but with whom I quickly developed a rapport with, such as Lianne, a rapport that led to useful data being created as she was friendly with Danny and seemed 'in charge' of the small group of girls that surrounded her.

This section has discussed how the research setting was chosen and accessed, and the roles and relations experienced during the fieldwork. The youth club was established as a theoretically interesting setting in which to study challenging behaviour in practice. In discussing the kind of research roles and field relationships developed during the fieldwork, my various positions within the social processes and social interaction of the youth club were presented. Throughout the study I was balancing my relations with individuals, across different social groups. These positions facilitated the use and value of certain data collection methods, the particular methods used to gather and record data are discussed next.

### **3.3 Data Collection Methods**

The main method of data collection for this study was participant observation. The study also collected data through: ethnographic interviews with 7 of the volunteer and paid sessional workers; the facilitation of a group discussion with 4 salaried workers from the management team; question sheets with 12 young people; and 129 evaluation sheets filled in by the workers during their evaluation session after each term-time youth club session<sup>31</sup>. These are attended to in turn.

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<sup>31</sup> Appendix 2 provides a timeline of the various data collection activities.

### **3.3.1 Participant Observation**

Interested in the interactions around challenging behaviour, field notes about observations of social interaction are the main source of data used in this study. All participant observers have to make two inter-related decisions: what to observe and how to observe it; questions of selectivity and perspective (Mason, 2002:89). I chose to observe interaction in, and evaluations of, the JU youth club at various points over one year. Participant observation was conducted in 58 JU youth club sessions (53 during the school term-time and 5 during the school holidays)<sup>32</sup>, as well as in any pre or post planning/evaluation sessions involving the workers. During the school term-time the youth club ran 4 days a week and I would vary the day I attended, coming in at least one day each week. Observing over the whole school year and varying the day I observed was important to avoid drawing inferences about behaviour in this youth club that may actually, for example, only be valid mid way through the year or on a Monday (Bryman, 2008:417), allowing exploration of different patterns of activity during throughout the week and the year (Emerson et al, 1995:40). This strategy also created opportunities to establish when a practice was unusual or routine in this social setting (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:37).

A JU youth club session lasts for 50 minutes during school term-time and around 2 hours in the holidays. Over the research year, an average of 31 young people and a few workers participated in each session<sup>33</sup> and their participation was spread across different activities and spaces. As it was impossible to observe all social interaction, I would record my general impression of each session and chronologically record

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<sup>32</sup> I also participated in other activities involving the same young people and/or workers, using these 'extra' interactions as a means to develop relations with the youth work staff and the young people. For example I took part in a residential trip in the summer holidays; an in-house training day for the workers; an evening youth club. Data are not drawn directly from these experiences for analysis in the thesis as the focus of the research was about interaction within the youth club and talk about those interactions.

<sup>33</sup> Details about the number of young people participating in the youth club and how these numbers were recorded are given and discussed in chapter 4, section 4.5.1.

specific encounters and interactions that seemed relevant to the aim of the study and my general research questions (see section 3.1 above). I was interested in social interaction around challenging behaviour, but did not want to start off with a pre-conceived idea of what was meant by this thus I began by recording everything I could about what happened within the youth club – such a relatively unfocused approach is quite usual at the beginning of this kind of research (Bryman, 2008:418; Mason, 2002:89). As the research progressed, I continued to follow this unstructured approach following up opportunities to participate and observe as they arose but as I wrote up my field notes and began to reflect upon the nature of what I was observing I was able to adopt strategic elements within this approach to guard against the possibility of missing something important. For example, I began to limit the time I spent playing games with Callum (with whom I was beginning to spend a disproportionate amount of my time) and I made a conscious effort to observe girls in the youth club due to the relatively low numbers of girls in the youth club.

Issues with the reliability of the human memory over time, mean that writing timely, regular and systematic notes based on what has been observed are a crucial part of the ethnographic research process (Bryman, 2008; Emerson et al, 1995; Sanjek, 1990). Writing field notes is a process of turning observations into text, and this is usually done by initially writing down brief jottings as soon as possible during or after an interesting event and then turning these into full field notes with specific details later in the day (Bryman, 2008:417). I chose not to write notes during the immediacy of the youth club session itself choosing to adopt a fuller participatory role seeking immersion in the goings on of the youth club (see Brown, 2007:101; Emerson et al, 1995:17; Nukaga, 2008:354-355; Spence et al, 2006:14). Writing field notes whilst trying to have conversations or play pool and move around the room would have been awkward and disruptive whilst sitting at the side writing in a notebook was incongruent with the 'culture' of the youth club. Whilst written exercises are common in the classroom, it would be an unusual

activity to adopt in the youth club. Writing notes would have prevented my 'natural' participation in everyday activities, possibly generating distraction and distrust (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:142-3).

As the youth club session and evaluation ran for around only an hour and a quarter, it was viable for me to make all my notes after the youth club session. So, immediately after each session I would briefly jot down everything of interest from the previous session to help me to recall and write about note worthy events later on (Emerson et al, 1995:49). Once these jottings were complete I would use them to reconstruct my observations of what I had seen and heard in more detail (Nukaga, 2008:354-355). I always completed these full field notes before I re-entered the field again to guard against possible confusion of events and to ensure the field notes retained the necessary freshness, excitement, and nuanced detail (Emerson et al, 1995:40-41). The illustrations used in this thesis, are extracts taken from these full field notes form<sup>34</sup>.

Relying on memory in this way does raise concern in terms of what can be remembered, in what detail, and how accurately it can be remembered. Whilst issues of memory cannot be fully overcome, I was clear in my notes when something was a strong memory and when I simply thought something had happened or had been said. The notes, whether taken during or after an event, are always a product of interpretation and I think constructing the notes after rather than during made me even more sensitive to how I was doing this interpretation

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<sup>34</sup> Because of the haste with which the field notes were written up in full to capture the memories and experience of 'being there', the field notes were not always grammatically correct and often included a lot of contextual information to aid my interpretation. In presenting the data within the thesis for illustrative or other purposes I have, at times, felt it necessary to edit the field notes. This editing was only to where it improved either the grammar of the data or cut out details not needed at that point in the thesis – I was careful not to change what was observed to be done or said: simply editing my expression of it. Editing decisions in the reconstructing of the excerpts is often done by ethnographic researchers (see Emerson et al, 1995:186-194).



and how I was representing events. My concerns about how much I would remember were tempered when I found that I could recall more than I had imagined. What was done and what was said was recorded in as much detail as possible, including the words, or approximate words, used by those in the youth club as the 'situated vocabularies' have analytical significance (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:145) in understanding the construction of 'challenging' behaviour in this setting. I was clear in my notes whose 'voice' was being represented and whether I was directly or indirectly or indirectly quoting a participant. Such paraphrasing or indirect quoting is common practice when direct speech cannot be remembered in writing up full field notes (Emerson et al, 1995:51).

The field notes were constructed the same way for all of the 58 sessions to enable a systematic analysis. The field notes all begin with information about the date, the number of the visit, the number and names of the workers, the estimated number of female and male young people, how I was feeling when I arrived at the session and if there was anything unusual about the session (for example is it the school holidays, is it the first day of a new worker etc). The field notes were then split into four sections. The first three sections were observational notes of what happened in the pre-session, session and evaluation. The fourth section was my reflections on aspects that appeared significant, emergent ideas for the analysis (documenting the development of my analytical ideas) and improvements/challenges to my research practices. Sections one to three also incorporate reflective notes, but these were about the way I was interpreting and recording the specific interaction being described. This approach was adopted because it enabled me to see, on reading back through and analysing my field-notes, not just what I found out but how I found it out. This facilitates sensitivity to the multiple interpretations of events and the possible influences of my own emotional responses and social relations in the field (Emerson et al, 1995:11-12). In other words, the data is viewed as a subjective, but

systematically and reliably constructed, interpretation of the social world under study.

### **3.3.2 Session Evaluation Records**

A second form of data used in this study were the evaluation records. These evaluation records were developed by the service and routinely completed by the workers following each term-time JU youth club session. They are a 'behind-the-scenes' part of the process of constructing and responding to challenging behaviour in interaction in the youth club. Following negotiation with the manager of the youth club all the evaluation records completed throughout the research year, 129 in total, were collected and entered into an excel spreadsheet.

The evaluation records provided valuable 'factual' information about the nature of this setting including the number of workers and numbers of female and male young people per session. Saliently, for the research, the evaluation records were also used to record "comments" about the youth club session including any concerns about behaviour, what the workers did in response to that behaviour and a general description of the nature of interaction that session. The evaluation sheets, therefore, provided a written record of the workers views on behaviour in the youth club over a whole year, something to cross-reference with my own interpretations of the individual sessions I attended (53 of the 129 term-time sessions). The evaluation records were useful in understanding how behaviour and certain young people become represented and recorded as a problem in the youth club over a period of time. The evaluation records were treated as social products as I was interested not just in what they recorded but how these records were produced (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:130) and their influence on how the workers behave during a youth club session.

### **3.3.3 Question Sheets with Young People**

The predominant concern in this study is with what people do – with observing naturally occurring interaction and talk. There were occasions, however, when I attempted to engage the participants in reflecting upon their behaviours and interactions to clarify certain aspects of interaction (for example, the existence or not of official rules in the youth club) and to generate data on issues that may not always be directly observable (for example, personal experiences of challenging behaviour) (Bryman, 2008:402).

As part of this, a third form of data came from question sheets conducted with 12 young people, 10 males and 2 females. The questions sheets were developed as the most appropriate way of engaging the young people in researcher-led conversation about behaviour in the youth club during the youth club session and their experience of coming to the youth club. The question sheets were used as a tool, through which to engage the young people, many of whom were boys, directly with my research questions. They were designed as a form of mini-interview: questions and answers that could be recorded during the session around the young people's other activities and priorities because playing pool or another game during this short break times was far more attractive than talking at length with me about behaviour. For information, the content and structure of the question sheet can be seen in appendix 6 and the information leaflet in appendix 7. In designing the question sheets I conceptualised spending time with each young person, going through the questions with them and asking further questions about their answers, however the majority of the young people wanted to fill the question sheet in, on their own (9 out of 12). This created fairly superficial and sometimes incomplete data, and it is treated cautiously on the very infrequent occasions it is drawn upon in this thesis. A table was created in a word document to record the data from all of the question sheets. I also documented the process of doing the questions sheets

with the young people and the conversations we had around the questions within my field notes.

Although they did not generate much data on the young people's views and experiences of challenging behaviour, the question sheets did play an important role in the overall research process: helping to clarify my research role and the nature of the research study (issues of informed consent are discussed further in section 3.5.1 below); in generating methodological insights in regards to studying this topic in this context; and also as a source of data about challenging behaviour as it occurs. In regards to the latter, the question sheet was, for instance, used creatively by one young person to insult a young volunteer:

For question 8, 'What do you not like about the JU?' Stephen wrote "Ginger [name of a young volunteer]". This was a reference to a new volunteer in the club, a 5<sup>th</sup> year pupil who was also sat around the board games table. Stephen read out the question to the table and to the volunteer and said he had put "Ginger [name of a young volunteer]". Stephen laughed as he said this and the way he had said it implied he thought it was funny, the volunteer laughed and I did nothing in response.  
(Field notes, 35<sup>th</sup> visit)

On a different occasion I observed two boys discussing their answers to one of the questions, acknowledging to each other they would sometime 'play fight' in the youth club but that they were not going to write that down. On another occasion, I had the opportunity through using the question sheet to ask one boy about an incongruence in his answers, where he had written he would get annoyed by other people messing up his pool game, yet at the same time he did this to other people. The question sheets did not provide the thrust of the data but they did offer sensitising insights that would have been difficult to glean from observation of naturally occurring interaction alone.

It is important to note at this point that this study does not claim to represent the views of young people labelled as having challenging behaviour as other studies have (Wise, 2000), rather it is focused on the interactions around challenging behaviour and the way challenging behaviour is created through interaction. The research objectives did not demand that the young people verbalised or visualised their views of challenging behaviour; the data gathered through the question sheets was intended to be supplementary. Indeed, in this study of what people do, the 'voices' of the young people are present in the conversations and actions recorded in the field notes. The decision to interview the workers (see section 3.3.4) and not the young people was taken because in the context of this study, the workers are more likely to have a conceptualisation of what they do in regards to challenging behaviour because it is part of their role. Additionally, in contrast to the young people, the workers volunteered readily to speak to me about this aspect of their role (section 3.3.4) and in the case of the group discussion (section 3.3.5) invited me along to facilitate a meeting they were 'naturally' having about challenging behaviour in the youth club.

#### ***3.3.4 Interviews with Sessional Workers and Volunteers***

A fourth form of data used in this study arises from semi-structured interviews with 7 sessional workers and volunteers who participated in the JU over the research year. These interviews were designed to facilitate a discussion of the workers' individual experiences of negotiating challenging behaviour in practice, to reflect upon what they do and why they do it in the youth club. It was also a chance for me to check details about the running of the youth club about which I was unsure. In addition, the individual interviews served an important role in the overall research process reminding the workers about the purpose of my research, offering an opportunity to ask me questions about what I was doing in the youth club and also a space to develop relations and rapport with these key individuals away from the busy youth club session.

The structure and content of the interviews can be found in the interview guide appendix 8. There was a large element of flexibility to the interviewing process, whilst I designed the interview guide and was keen to cover the majority of topics, I was also open to the workers discussing issues deemed important to them (Bryman, 2008:438). This meant that whilst certain questions were asked across the 7 interviews, for example what type of behaviour the workers found difficult to deal with, the workers were also able to tell their own story of being a part of the youth club. This led to the development of different narratives of belonging in the youth club, often related to different levels of confidence in dealing with challenging behaviour.

The interviews lasted from 30 minutes to just over an hour dependent on how much time the worker had (usually in between working at various youth groups) and how much they had to (or wanted to) say on each topic area. I tried where possible to interview the workers after a youth club session as, although they were more likely to be tired, it was more convenient for them and they could reflect upon behaviours in the preceding youth club session - allowing the discussion of behaviours to be more tangible. The interviews were transcribed in full. This allowed for an analysis of what the interviewee said and also how they said it (Bryman, 2008:451).

The 7 workers interviewed: *Alexander, Dave, Johnny, Kelsey, Luca, Miya* and *Shona*, had varying levels of engagement and roles within the JU. *Johnny* and *Kelsey* were working at almost every youth club session I observed in, and *Miya* was present in many before the summer holidays, and *Alexander* in many after the summer holidays. The other workers worked in the JU but less frequently. Other workers feature in my field notes but were not interviewed because their participation was fleeting. The study may also have benefited from the views of the 3 young

volunteers but their involvement in the youth club was relatively brief and their position in a worker role had proved problematic. Thus, as well as being difficult to contact, it might have caused them 'distress' to be asked about their experiences and their views on challenging behaviour.

I conducted the first interviews 5 months into my observational fieldwork. By this point I had developed the necessary rapport with many of the workers and thus felt they were more likely to trust me and to be open with me in their answers (Bryman, 2008:201). I was also able to ask relevant 'ethnographic' questions based on my participant observation. The interviews were held in a variety of locations of convenience and comfort to the workers. Most of the interviews were held on the workers' territory in private spaces within the school building belonging to the youth agency. One interview was held at a local cafe. The interviews held within the school were open to interruption from telephones ringing, other workers, and young people and janitors entering the space. After each interview, I constructed an interview record sheet reflecting on the interview process and emerging themes; these were used to develop later interviews. The topics remained the same for all interviews but the questions were adapted to suit the participant and in response to any previous interview experiences.

The interview data supplements and complements the observational data, helping to articulate what the workers do in relation to challenging behaviour in practice. The value of the interview data lies in the way it can access the views of the participants that may not be amenable through observation (Bryman, 2008:469) and in offering the workers an opportunity to talk about their conceptualisations of challenging behaviour in practice on their own terms (Heath et al, 2009:79). This created a space for individual stories about challenging behaviour to emerge, further sensitising me to the different emotional reactions the workers have when

encountering challenging interactions and the situated nature of challenging behaviour in practice.

### **3.3.5 Facilitated Group Discussion with Salaried Workers**

A fifth opportunity to collect another form of data came about during the fieldwork when, on the request of the youth agency's manager, I facilitated a group discussion between the salaried workers about challenging behaviour. The aim of this meeting was to enable this group of workers (who work at a development level as well as in face-to-face work with young people) to discuss current concerns that had arisen around challenging behaviour across their youth clubs, including the JU, and to discuss possible approaches in the future. As the topic area was the focus of my research in the JU, I obtained permission from those present to record the discussion and to draw on it where relevant in my study. My role in the discussion was to facilitate a dialogue between the workers, to enable them to discuss current issues around challenging behaviour. I was not there to ask questions directly relevant to my research or to run a focus group for my own agenda. Present at the group discussion were *Chris, James, Paul* and *Sarah*. All had some experience of the JU, with *James* and *Sarah* most regularly participating in it. The group discussion lasted around two hours.

I fully transcribed the group discussion, and extracts from the transcript are referred to as 'group meeting data' in this thesis. In the writing up of the findings much of the material from the group discussion was excluded as marginal to the focus of the thesis, however, the group meeting data did provide an insider perspective of the more 'powerful' members of this organisation and the ongoing discussions behind the scenes about how to challenge behaviour, when to challenge behaviour and the usefulness of behavioural policies. With diverging views, the group discussion was a forum in which these tensions could be verbalised, tensions mirrored in the everyday practices around challenging behaviour. It also provided a space for me to



hear about the unique (or not) experience of challenging behaviour in contrast to the other youth clubs the youth agency ran.

Section 3.3 has documented the process of generating data within the ethnographic approach adopted in this study. Because of the interest in what people do in regards to challenging behaviour and because some of this will always remain 'unsayable' and 'unknowable', primacy was given to observing naturally occurring talk and action in this study. Field notes constructed from participant observation provide the leading data, but the ethnographic approach afforded further opportunities to gather supplementary data, to both sensitise interpretation of my own observations and to provide information that is unobservable. This was done through the collection of relevant internal records of behaviour, participation and observation of a group meeting about behaviour and through researcher-led questioning. In documenting the various data collection methods, I have explained the approach adopted in relation to methodological reasons and also practical reasons. The ethical issues permeating all these decisions and the ethical implications of my approach are discussed in further detail in section 3.5. First, I attend to the management, analysis and representation of the data collected; the process of how the data became findings.

### **3.4 Process of Data Analysis**

This section provides a detailed report on the analytical procedures and processes of this study (as suggested by Patton, 2002:443). Beginning with a description of how the data was organised, the rest of the section is split into two inter-related parts: exploring and developing themes; and producing knowledge. These parts all contributed to the ethnographic writing – culminating in the thesis presented here.

### **3.4.1 Organising the Data**

It was important to organise the data so that they could be systematically and rigorously explored and analysed. The way in which the data is managed affects how it can be analysed – all data was written up whether as full field notes or as full transcripts. The end result was a large volume of ‘typed up’ data: over 190,000 words of field notes, 8 transcripts from the individual interviews and group discussion, data from 129 session evaluation records and data from the 12 question sheets. As Emerson et al (1995:142) note this felt, at times, overwhelming. To manage the volume and variety of data a research project was created in NVivo, a computer software programme designed to aid the analysis of qualitative data.

The management of all the data in this way facilitated the cross comparison of themes across all the different, or only some selected, forms of data as appropriate. Records were stored chronologically in the first instance and any data retrieved, in the form of coding reports, were extracted from the data set without losing the sense of time and progression. The NVivo software facilitated the process of data reduction (as ‘significant’ data could be identified and retrieved leaving behind ‘irrelevant’ data). It also, paradoxically, facilitated the process of data expansion (through the creation of internal memos and another layer of analytical data). This process of coding and memo-ing is explained in greater detail below.

### **3.4.2 Exploring and Developing Themes**

Analysis in an ethnographic approach begins during fieldwork but gathers pace and intensity once the researcher has withdrawn from the field (Emerson et al, 1995:142). During the period of fieldwork I engaged in the analytical process at various stages: in the ‘reflective comments’ section of my field notes; in structured reflection following an interview situation; in a separate PhD diary kept throughout the study; in producing summaries of emergent themes; and in the writing of ideas papers trying to link these themes to existing literature. These “analytical commentaries”

(Emerson et al, 1995:142) also facilitated the fieldwork process as they helped focus my subsequent observations.

On withdrawal from the field, my attention turned to re-reading the field notes closely and systematically from session 1 through to session 58, whilst also making notes on the data (Emerson et al, 1995). From this process of deep familiarisation with the data, I developed a coding strategy (over a lengthy period of time of trying out and reworking different approaches) that linked with my original research aims and the emerging structure of the thesis (another lengthy process that grew from the process of writing rather than being developed first and 'written to'). Primarily the purpose of the coding strategy was to categorise the data for retrieval (Mason, 2002:158) not the definitive element of analysis. Simplified coding can serve to reduce the meaning of social interaction, as the interaction is broken apart. As Mason (2002) points out, a single chunk or gathering of chunks of text may not serve to represent or express the social process in question. These 'chunks' of text were at risk of losing their significance if the coding strategy was not sensitive to this.

To address these concerns, the coding strategy was developed alongside and in conversation with a strategy of writing internal memos within the field notes. The ability to write these internal memos and attach them to specific bits of data within NVivo was an invaluable part of the process of interpretation. I would attach a memo to any interaction, behaviour or moment that appeared potentially significant for the aim and objectives of the study. This is similar to what Emerson et al (1995:143) describe as the process of inscribing theoretical memos on the data – elaborating insights on a particular idea, describing how this piece of field note data illustrates a theory or confuses it. In such memos I described my interpretation of the data and what was significant about it. I also coded, where appropriate, the data, using the current coding framework, modifying and adapting the framework

as necessary. I would also, if a new theme developed as significant in the writing and/or revision of the thesis, go back and recode the data to see if the idea was supported, and how it was supported, in the field note evidence. The coding 'framework' for the field note data was always evolving reflecting the ethnographic approach to analysing data in a more open-ended way "seeking to identify issues and ideas" (Emerson et al, 1995:166). The role of theory in this process is discussed below in section 3.4.3.

To gain a better sense of key events, people and changes over time (difficult within such a swathe of field notes) I reduced each session onto one flashcard. Reducing the field note data in this way meant I could carry around a mini-interpretation of each session with me for reference and also enabled me to link ideas, events, people and processes across the whole year. On these flashcards I noted five or six key 'learning' events from that session for the study, such as the 'locking the workers out incident' or the day 'Tom swore repeatedly at the worker'. The learning events are those events deemed significant in learning about challenging interactions or those events that traced my integration into the setting. Where necessary, I added to the flashcards as I returned to the data and would return to the full field notes to examine the interaction in more detail. Thus I went through a process of making jottings about everything, writing up full field notes and then in the process of analysis producing further jottings (this time about what I could now recognise as most significant).

The questions sheets were integrated into the field note data as I recorded my observations of the young people filling them in and also our interactions around the questions sheets. Their oral accounts in response to the question sheets are thus analysed within the approach to the field notes above. The question sheets also provided some, limited, information on the young people's views about the JU and

social practices within it. This data, very small in volume, was referred to when themes were being developed checking if there was anything remarkable in it or if it corresponded with the points being made through the more substantive data. For example, it was useful in looking at the young peoples' knowledge about the existence of rules in the JU, in relation to observations of 'rule-breaking' behaviour in the youth club as well as the workers' view on the existence of rules.

Another part of the ethnographic data set is the session evaluation records. The records were analysed in two ways. Firstly, because I had been a participant observer in nearly half of these sessions, the evaluation session and the process of creating the records were analysed within the process of analysing the field notes, as described above. This provided insight into the function of the evaluation session and record in relation to practices around 'challenging' behaviour and allowed for an analysis of workers' accounts of behaviour away from the young people. It also provided insight into the different interpretations of one session, or one incident, as it was discussed. This included those moments when my own overall interpretation of a session was quite different to the workers. For example:

At the staff evaluation the workers commented that it had been 'nice in here today' and 'quiet'. This was different to my impression of the session.  
(Field notes: 4<sup>th</sup> visit)

The second approach taken to session evaluation records was a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the records as official documents of what happened in the JU over the field work year, including those sessions I did not observe. This analysis involved producing basic frequencies of the available numerical data – numbers of young people, workers by gender and how many times certain people or behaviours are mentioned. It also allowed a more qualitative consideration of the way behaviour was represented and constructed in this document, patterns in this recorded data over the year and the identification of 'critical' points across the year.

This leaves two further types of data: transcripts of the individual interviews with workers and the group meeting of the workers. The interview data were analysed in two ways. Firstly, the data were looked at in their own right. The data produced under each topic area across the interviews were reviewed and summarised systematically. This was done by extracting discussions on the same topic, for example on behaviours a worker found difficult to deal with or their perception of rules in the youth club, and comparing and contrasting them. This allowed a comparison of the different interviews and to see any patterns and discrepancies. Each interviewee had a particular narrative about their experience of working in the JU, in relation to challenging behaviour, which helped to create a more nuanced analysis of the way in which behaviour is interpreted and responded to in this setting. Secondly, the data in the interview was analysed in relation to the ideas emerging from the field notes; comparison were made between what the workers as a collective said about challenging behaviour and what I had observed them doing around challenging behaviour in practice.

The group discussion was also initially analysed as a coherent whole. I looked for the way this group constructed the issue of challenging behaviour within youth work practice in this agency. The group discussion was also dissected to analyse any discussion about challenging behaviour specifically in the context of the JU, in relation to the themes emerging in the field notes and interview data. This dual approach was important as it serves as a reminder that the immediacy of the practices observed around challenging behaviour in the JU are linked to a wider context and also sensitised me again to possible multiple interpretations of challenging behaviour.

Of importance throughout the analysis, and the process of data creation, was the analytical separation of 'workers' from 'young people'. This was deemed important

because of their opposing social roles in the youth club in relation to challenging behaviour<sup>35</sup>. This is not to imply, however, that challenging interactions only occurs between a 'worker' and a 'young person' in this setting, indeed interactions around challenging behaviour within the groups, as well as across the two groups, were included in the observations and analysis. Finally, although not used as an analytical category, attention was paid to 'gender' when considering the category of 'young people' in the analytical process. This was necessary because of the large number of boys attending the youth club over girls<sup>36</sup> and the potential gender differences in interactions around challenging behaviour.

As well as the challenges of coherently analysing different types of data (as was observed in this study), a further ongoing challenge in the qualitative analysis of ethnographic data is moving between the complexity of reality and our simplification of that reality (Patton, 2002:481). This was the case in this study, where in analysing the data a balance was being constantly struck between structuring the data too early and coming to conclusions too soon whilst also trying to find a way to structure the data meaningfully, truthfully and coming to some conclusions (see Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:230). This is also about retaining a 'truth' about the everyday social interactions as they become more abstracted in disciplinary concepts and language (Emerson et al, 1995:171). The backwards and forwards motions involved in the analytical process are paralleled in the process of writing up – indeed the processes of analysing and writing are deeply entwined (Emerson et al, 1995:171). The value of this process is that unexpected findings can emerge. The way in which knowledge was produced through the writing of this thesis is now attended to.

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<sup>35</sup> Chapter 4, section 4.5.2 discusses the importance of the two categories 'worker' and 'young person' in more detail.

<sup>36</sup> The gender of the young people and workers participating in the JU is attended to in more detail in chapter 4, section 4.5.2.

### **3.4.3 The Production of Knowledge**

Lianne asked me what my research project was about. I explained that I was looking at behaviour and what sort of things annoyed people in the JU, both workers and young people and then what happened when someone behaved in a way that other people did not like. I said that I was doing observations in the JU and then I go home and write about it. Danny said to me “you lie about it”. I told him that I said “write about it, not lie”. I said I definitely was not lying about it.

(Field notes, 38<sup>th</sup> visit)

Ethnographic texts tell a story around a general theme. In the process of developing this story the ethnographer chooses what to include and thus ignores other potential stories (Emerson et al, 1995:174). This thesis tells the story of challenging behaviour in practice in a youth club; it is concerned with the story of challenging behaviour as a social construction, something experienced through and constantly being (re)created within social interaction. This story is a representation of the interactions and conversations of those in the youth club setting, created by me as the researcher (Emerson et al, 1995:209). Hammersley and Atkinson (2007:191) contend that the principle of reflexivity running through ethnographic approaches acknowledge that researchers shape the phenomenon that they study in both the collection of data and in their ethnographic writing. The interpretive knowledge produced in this study claims to be an authority on challenging behaviours in the youth club, yet it is also recognised that it presents a particular interpretation and construction of challenging behaviour. Therefore, my assurance to Danny (in the above quotation) that I would be telling the ‘truth’ when I wrote about what I experienced in the youth club does not acknowledge that this ‘truth’ is only one of the multiple truths apparent in any social situation dependent on situation and position (Emerson et al, 1995:3). I do not claim to be speaking on behalf of the young people or the workers; the findings are my interpretations. I endeavour to offer multiple perspectives, but invariably will lean towards (for defined reasons) a particular interpretation – an interpretation that Danny might challenge but one that I believe will be meaningful to those who work and participate in this and similar settings.



Sanjek (1990:395) argues that “[v]alidity lies at the core of evaluating ethnography”. Validity is, in part, generated if the reader can trust what the researcher has written. This trust is often created in the description of how the research was carried out and written up (Sanjek, 1990) – the focus of this chapter. For instance, there is a degree of data-source triangulation in this study, as data were collected through observation, oral accounts and official documents. Data-source triangulation provides a possible validity check (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:183). The data were not however used to check the validity of the data against each other; they were used to provide multiple routes towards collecting data to meet the research aim. Data were (as noted above in section 3.3.1) also collected at different points of the year and on different days to link ideas together and increase the validity of any general findings (Sanjek, 1990:397).

Field note data is used throughout the thesis to illustrate the findings presented. On the one hand this is a rhetorical device to establish the authority of the ethnographer as having been there, and part of the social interaction, but this can also aid the process of ethnographic validity (Sanjek, 1990:403-4) – assuming the reader agrees with the interpretation of the field note data (Emerson et al, 1995). In addition this field note ‘evidence’ also demonstrates the range of participants and daily activities I observed and participated in, demonstrating the necessary level of immersion in everyday social interaction to produce authoritative findings about interaction in the youth club (Sanjek, 1990:399). Whilst I developed certain key relations in the youth club, my interactions were not limited to these (see also section 3.3.2 above on roles and relations). The time spent in the field and the confusion over my role, whilst causing ethical issues<sup>37</sup>, implied that the young people and the workers often ‘forgot’ I was there as an observer and therefore were not consciously altering their naturally occurring behaviour on my behalf. This is not to suggest that as a researcher I did not influence what I was studying by my presence there, but that

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<sup>37</sup> Section 3.5.1 below attends to the concerns over informed consent in this context.

this influence can be reflectively accounted for and that the processes involved in the interactions around challenging behaviour reflect the reality of being in this setting – they were not put on as a ‘show’ for me.

The data included in this thesis was chosen because of the insight it proffers. Attempts were made to include a range of observational data and to ensure certain voices did not dominate or if certain voices are dominating for this to be done consciously and with good reason. For example, the voice of one of the workers *Kelsey* is used frequently in the initial two findings chapter; this reflects *Kelsey's* dominant position in the youth club, particularly in relation to challenging behaviour in practice, and as a key informant and social gatekeeper in the study. The data is presented as ‘excerpts’ rather than integrated into the flow of the writing, to distinguish clearly between observations and interpretations made at the time of doing the fieldwork and later analysis (Emerson et al, 1995:180-1). This strategy is argued by Emerson et al (1995:181) to encourage the reader to engage with the ‘excerpts’ as illustrations of the analytical points being made by the researcher.

As the researcher immersed in the setting, my interpretation of the data is drawn from a detailed knowledge base, that is in-depth not only in terms of the amount of detail but in being able to recall the ‘feeling’ of being in the JU and of ‘knowing’ the persons and places being described<sup>38</sup>. As Silverman (2005:182) points out, every way of seeing the data is also a way of not seeing the data - there are always different theoretical lenses and positions through which to interpret data. When presenting data and findings in the thesis, I am clear about the context of my interpretation. Each chapter begins with a short discussion of the literature and approach framing

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<sup>38</sup> Chapter 4 aims to provide some of that rich contextual detail to the reader.

the particular story of challenging behaviour being told and reflections of the context within which my interpretations are made (Mason, 2002:194).

In many ways, the test of the 'validity' of my findings will be in if they prove useful in reconceptualising challenging behaviour as a social phenomenon in work with young people; if they are of value to those experiencing these issues in practice and/or if the experiences described resonate with participants' view of challenging behaviour. A limited form of 'respondent validation'<sup>39</sup> has taken place as salaried workers at the youth club have drawn upon the early findings from the study to describe the nature of their work in promotional literature. The respondents were not explicitly asked to validate findings avoiding the problem of creating further data to analyse (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:182), but the response of some of the workers serves to positively validate some key (if simplified) findings (appendix 11 shows the findings as presented to those in the research setting).

In developing a valid story about challenging behaviour, it was necessary to make connections between the various emerging and developing themes and issues. These connections were made (but not always resolved) in the drawing of concept maps and in attempts to develop typologies or models in the process of writing (and revising) the data chapters. Theory sometimes drives the process of ethnographic writing and on other occasions data does and theory is given no guiding role (Sanjek, 1990:390-1). In this thesis theoretical insights were drawn from the literature in a pragmatic manner. They were used when they were judged helpful to explain the issues observed and described. Meaning and theoretical frameworks from outside of the setting were not rigidly imposed onto the data (Waterhouse, 2004:70):

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<sup>39</sup> Respondent validation refers to the process whereby researchers ask the research participants - those whose beliefs and behaviours are being described - to validate the researcher's interpretations. This is problematic as well as potentially useful as it can create more data and there is little guidance on what to do if the researcher and participants fundamentally disagree (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:182).

they were developed in line with the data. Analysis was, therefore, closest to a form of 'abductive' reasoning – an interpretive approach “moving back and forth between our own data, our experience, and broader concepts” (Mason, 2002:180-1). I went into the field with the idea that challenging behaviour could be viewed as an interactive process as well as an individual problem, but I was exploring rather than trying to verify this approach to thinking about challenging behaviour – looking to the literature where necessary to guide analysis as ideas emerged from the data. This process of analysis is explained well by Emerson et al (1995:144):

“[...] analysis is at once inductive and deductive, like someone who is simultaneously creating and solving a puzzle, or like a carpenter alternatively changing the shape of a door and then the shape of the door frame to obtain a better fit”

Once writing about an issue, I would return to, or venture into a new set of, literature<sup>40</sup> to provide a conceptual framework for my ideas – linking the very specific findings from this research with other settings and other research. This approach was especially important for this study because I had not wished to pre-define challenging behaviour yet at the same time I needed to work with a concept of challenging behaviour. This involved identifying certain behaviours as challenging, in doing so some behaviour become defined, and fixed in that definition of challenging. Thus, challenging behaviour became a 'static entity' which was problematic for my notion of challenging behaviour as contextual, situational and constantly being recreated in interaction. This created an ongoing tension in the thesis – how to talk about challenging behaviour without defining challenging behaviour – a problem that was never fully resolved.

In what way can the findings from this study be generalised? The conclusions chapter, chapter 8, suggests that the findings in this study have wider implications.

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<sup>40</sup> This occurred, for instance, with the issue of 'humour' – an unanticipated theme that became the focus of chapter 7.

Like most qualitative research, this study is interested in the 'theoretical generalisation' (rather than the empirical generalisation) of its findings (Mason, 2002:195). Theoretical generalisation takes different forms, and for this research includes: asking questions about the lessons for other settings where adults work with young people (in particular other youth work and the classroom setting) and the development of a base for strategic comparisons with previous and/or future studies that adopt a similar theoretical framework. The overall aim of the study, to contribute a contextualised understanding of challenging behaviour as a social phenomenon when working with young people, itself implies a form of theoretical generalisation or theoretical 'usability' of the findings.

Section 3.4 has shown that there was throughout this study a "process of explication" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:151) as analytical categories were developed through immersion in the field and in the data. Themes were honed during the process of writing about the interpretations of the data and reconnecting with relevant (and/or new) literature. Concerned with issues of validity, this section has also described how a systematic approach was taken to the organisation and reorganisation of the data but that the process of analysis was a messy one reflecting the messiness of the social reality it purports to represent. Ethnographic data does not neatly organise itself into chapters (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) and theories were argued to be both verified and created in the process of this ethnographic writing. A finished and coherent story of challenging behaviour in practice was created (after many structural and content changes). Each chapter is argued to offer a different way into understanding challenging behaviour as a social phenomenon. Other routes could be taken (for example bodies and objects emerged as a potential substantial theme) and these may have created a different overall story. It is likely, however, that the key findings would remain the same if the interpretation of the data was guided by a constructionist and interactionist framework.

### 3.5 Ethics

“[...] researchers need to be prepared to be flexible in terms of collecting data and ready to make ethical decisions during as well as before entering the field. The specific situational contexts will condition the nature of the relationships that develop with children and their adult carers and the research design may need spontaneous alterations. Rather than considering ethics as a pre-stage of field work, researchers need to be prepared to deal with ethical issues emerging in the field and should reflexively engage in decisions in relation to these”

(Sime, 2008:76)

Ethical practice was, as Sime (2008) suggests, an ongoing consideration in this study from the design through to presenting the findings. Whilst not the panacea to ‘being ethical’, ethical guidelines such as those produced by professional associations like the Social Research Association and the process of going through the ethics committee at the University of Edinburgh provided a framework of how I would be ‘ethical’ in the conduct of the research. Such forms and policies helped to anticipate obvious ethical concerns, raised difficult questions and made me consider what my action would be before entering the field (an approach advocated by Alderson and Morrow, 2004). The broad ethical framework I began my fieldwork determined to work within was:

- To avoid physical and emotional harm to any research participant as a result of the research practice
- To interact with all of the research participants respectfully and transparently throughout the research process

I adopted a reflective approach to the ethics of my research practice and a form of what Hammersley and Atkinson (2007:219) call ‘ethical situationism’:

“This point of view usually places particular emphasis on the avoidance of serious harm to participants, and insisted on the legitimacy of research and the likelihood that offence to someone cannot be avoided. It leaves open to judgement the issue of what the benefits and costs of particular research strategies are in particular cases, and how these should be weighed. No

strategy is proscribed absolutely, though some may be seen as more difficult to justify than others”  
(Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:219)

This approach necessitated that I made ethical judgements in the moment as social interactions unfolded around and with me in the youth club. With little written about the ethics of conducting research in youth work settings<sup>41</sup> this section provides a specific account of how these ethical principles play out in this context. The implementation of the above ethical framework is considered here in relation to 4 core issues: informed consent and overt research; anonymity and confidentiality; reciprocity and exploitation; and preventing harm.

### **3.5.1 Informed Consent and Overt Research**

When conducting the research, I had to learn that whilst my main focus was to generate data for the study, this was not the focus, or necessarily even of interest, to those working and playing in the youth club. Expecting many questions about who I was and what I was doing in this youth club, I actually found my identity as a researcher was generally greeted with ‘indifference’ from the young people and the workers, apparently a not uncommon reaction towards ethnographers (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:61). Uninterested young people, including those resisting intrusion into their personal time, is argued to be part of the reality of research in a youth work setting, indeed of youth work itself (Spence et al, 2006:16). Whilst there was interest in who I was from the young people, reflected in the questions directed towards me and the workers asking about my name, or what I did outside of coming to the youth club, or how long I would be coming to the youth club, there was, on the whole, minimal interest in my actual research project from many of the young people.

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<sup>41</sup> Whilst this reflects the relative lack of published empirical work about youth work practices and settings, see chapter 2, section 2.3.4, Spence et al (2006) did conduct participant observation in youth work settings but their discussion of ethics (perhaps due to the nature of the publication) is limited to noting that the project received ethical approval from the relevant University ethics committee and the researchers were criminal bureau checked.

There are some notable exceptions to this, including conversations I had with some boys about the kinds of behaviour I might write about and whether or not I was similar to a journalist (Field notes, 16<sup>th</sup> visit), and with another boy about whether I would be publishing what I wrote in the local newspaper (Field notes 33<sup>rd</sup> visit) as well as a discussion with another group of boys and girls about whether I was writing 'lies' about them (Field notes, 38<sup>th</sup> visit). These conversations provided opportunity for the young people (and me) to make sense of who I was to them in this setting. These interactive and fruitful discussions about the research came about when initiated by the young people arising in unexpected moments rather than as part of a strategic introducing of myself to those in the setting. In regards to the workers, there was opportunity in the pre and post session times to introduce my research, and then later on to discuss my research. Such discussions were, however, mostly raised by me. The workers might suggest (in jest and in seriousness) that I put certain incidents into my 'report' but they did not tend to ask any questions about the project or show any suspicion towards the research.

This general indifference towards my role as a researcher raised ongoing anxieties in this ethnographic research in regards to issues of consent and my status as an overt researcher, as reflected in the conversation below with the workers:

I took the opportunity to ask the workers their advice on how to ensure further that the young people know why I am here and what the study is about. I am glad I raised the issue as *Johnny* said he thought that most of the young people wouldn't know what I was doing. They suggested going round and telling them, talking to them about the research, doing a short questionnaire and going around with that and they thought that if I handed out small leaflets to the young people that might also help.

(Field notes, 16<sup>th</sup> visit)

As a matter of respect for their right to privacy and autonomy I wanted those participating in the JU youth club to be fully informed about the research and to consent to being a part of the data. In social research, whilst critiques of the concept exist (see for example Malone, 2003), much emphasis is given to the importance of



informed consent, particularly when it involves those in a position of relative powerlessness such as children and young people (Crow et al, 2006:84; France, 2004:183, Heath et al, 2009:23). Informed consent involves providing honest and accessible information to potential research participants to enable them to decide whether or not they would like to participate in the research (Bryman, 2008:121). Observational studies of social settings can, because of the range of people the researcher comes into contact with and the potential disruption to everyday social interaction, pose particular difficulties in adhering to the principles of informed consent (Bryman, 2008:121; Crow et al, 2006:92-3). The very unstructured, informal and dynamic nature of interaction in the youth club, with a changing young person population<sup>42</sup>, made adhering to the principles of informed consent impossible and the conduct of overt research challenging.

I made many ongoing concerted attempts to ensure that both the workers and the young people knew that I was in the youth club as a 'researcher' and what the general focus of my study was. In the absence of the opportunity, as there is in more formal and structured social settings like the classroom, to introduce the research to all participants at once and open up the floor for the questions, I had to convey the information to the young people as I met them within the youth club session. I did this by putting up posters on the wall (see appendix 3) handing around leaflets (see appendix 4) as well as taking the opportunities as they arose to talk about the research. The information I provided made it clear that I am observing and writing about behaviour in the youth club. The information is necessarily brief to ensure a larger readership and as noted above (section 3.3.3) the question sheets with the young people also served as a means to communicate information about the research. In regards to the question sheets, further information was provided and the young people individually consented to fill in or not a question sheet, with some

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<sup>42</sup> Whilst some young people regularly attended the JU and attended for the whole session, there were also many fleeting visits from young people during the session and 'new' faces appearing and 'old' ones disappearing – see chapter 4, section 4.5 for further details.

refusing to do so. The workers also proved to be a valuable means of communicating information to the young people about the project. I did not ask the workers to do this, but the young people – perhaps feeling more comfortable talking to the workers that they trusted and knew – appeared to be asking them questions about the research. I found that the new cohort of young people who joined the JU after the summer holidays already knew about me and the study through information given to them by one of the workers.

I chose to put up posters around the youth club about the research, as this was the way other information, such as health education, youth group timetables and rules, was conveyed to the young people participating in the youth club. Also, the posters could remain on the wall throughout the field work, important with a population of participants open to change. However, I am unsure how many young people read the posters. The workers did however read them and would direct the young people towards them so they served some purpose. Handing out leaflets about the study to the young people in person and talking to them if they were willing about the study was more successful in communicating information and opening up the opportunity to challenge my presence in the youth club. This said, many young people simply politely accepted a leaflet and then placed it on the pool table or shoved it straight into their pocket. Many leaflets were found at the end of the session crumpled up or in the shape of paper aeroplanes on the floor. I did find it a valuable means of making contact with young people who I had previously had trouble finding a 'way in with'. After a whole session of handing out the leaflets I also found young people who had previously ignored me called me by my name for the first time as they left the session. For a period of time, I also wore a label identifying my name and my status as a 'researcher' (see appendix 5) to draw attention to who I was in the hope that this would lead to some kind of dialogue. One young person did comment on the sticker and we had a short chat about my study, but not a great success rate!

Overall, the information giving was ongoing but this had to be balanced with integrating into the setting, developing relations and observing everyday activities. My concern that all the young people were always fully informed about the study led, for a while, to a very stilted engagement with them as I would insist on always making sure they knew who I was and what I was doing when they asked me to play or join in with their conversations. This was not very productive and after a while I accepted, as Hammersley and Atkinson (2007:210), that “[...] the people being studied may not be very interested in the research, and an insistence on providing information could be very intrusive”. For instance, my attempts to constantly reassert my researcher status were met with indifference, and sometimes impatience, as my interactions with Callum reveal:

I asked Callum if he wanted to know what I was doing my research on. He said no and asked if we could play the game of table football now.

(Field notes, 22<sup>nd</sup> visit)

The next day...

Callum came over to me and asked me to play table football. I handed him a leaflet telling him it was about what we had been talking about yesterday, about me not being a worker but a researcher in the club. He took the leaflet and shoved it in his pocket and asked me to ‘come on’ and play table football.

(Field notes, 23<sup>rd</sup> visit)

Whilst I was concerned that Callum was not fully aware of my role as a researcher, he was much more concerned with playing table football with me. This does not negate the responsibility of the researcher to inform participants in an ethnographic study they are being observed and to give them options to not be part of the study, but it highlights the potential challenges of doing so if the participants tacitly accept the researcher’s presence but reject the attempts of the researcher to inform them in detail about the project.

Rather than informed consent I appeared to have a more of a tacit consent from most young people; they were happy for me to be doing my study on behaviour in

the youth club. These responses from young people are illustrative of the wider response I received:

One boy stood out to me. He was watching the game on pool table 2. When I was explaining about the leaflets and what I was doing. He asked me to tell him what the project was about before I had given him a leaflet. He asked me without smiling and as soon as I started to tell him he turned around and seemed to be ignoring me. I continued to speak and briefly outline the project. I asked him directly if it was okay with him that I was doing the project in here, he said "whatever".

(Field notes, 23<sup>rd</sup> visit)

Because my focus was not on the personal histories of individual young people or the 'causes' of their behavioural problems, my interest was the phenomenon of challenging behaviours in practices within the youth club I felt their active individual informed consent was not ethically essential. I was recording very public social interaction within the youth club. To have sought consent for everything I was observing would have been impossible:

"Ethnographers often try to give people the opportunity to decline to be observed or interviewed, but this is not always possible, at least not without making the research highly disruptive, or rendering it impossible"

(Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:211)

Instead I chose to adopt an approach that respected the privacy of the young people in their inter-personal interactions, accepting that when conversation stopped when I joined a group or when young people actively moved away from me they were communicating a desire to not have those interactions recorded. There were also times I stopped observing behaviour when directly challenged by a young person.

For instance:

As I was staring at the group of boys who were facing towards the room and coming back down the corridor I heard Danny say loudly, something like 'what's she looking for?' I decided to go back into the room, I am not sure whether I did this because I was embarrassed to be thought to be staring or because I feared if I continued to stare that would invite confrontation or if I thought I was being voyeuristic watching their game with this worker.

(Field notes, 21<sup>st</sup> visit)

There were also times I did not pursue a conversation about behaviour if the young person appeared uncomfortable. For example:

At one point, Danny and Kirsty became engaged in a physical tussle (like a play fight). Whilst this was happening one of the workers leaned over to me and said in an explanatory kind of way that Kirsty was Danny's sister. Tom who was sat with us at the time then added something about 'being allowed to hit girls when...' I didn't catch the end of his sentence so I asked him when are you allowed to hit girls, he answered 'when they're been nippy'. He said this quite quietly and then almost corrected himself by saying 'you shouldn't hit your sister', I asked, whilst smiling, as I was aware this might seem like I was judging his concept of okay or not okay behaviour, if it was okay to hit your brother? He didn't answer this and was no longer looking towards me.

(Field notes, 19<sup>th</sup> visit)

This process of tacit consent and refusal relied a lot on my judgement and on my ongoing reflective research practice in the field. As attendance at the youth club was voluntary, the young people could also leave the youth club whenever they chose to thus excluding themselves from the research. Whilst undesirable, it did mean the young people had an element of control in removing themselves from the research situation as the girls who challenged my research gaze (see section 3.2.2) do shortly after our interaction:

Becky laughed and walked out of the room quite fast. The second girl, Samantha shrieked and ran out after her. One of the workers, *Shona* looks over at me and gives me a sympathetic but querying glance. I feel bad that the girls left so soon after they came in to the club in case it is my fault for 'staring' at them.

(Field notes, 9<sup>th</sup> visit)

In conducting the interviews with the workers a more formal process of informed consent was adopted (see appendix 9). Whilst this did give the workers the opportunity to opt out of being interview, it was unlikely that they would do so given the relationship we had developed and their knowledge that the other workers were taking part in interviews. Therefore, the 'freedom' they had to say no is perhaps limited. I did, however, believe it was important to be more formal with the interviews as it would be probing into more personal aspects of their lives and experiences and I wanted to record their views and use their verbatim. Formally

approaching consent in this way, mid-way through the ethnographic research, perhaps seemed incongruent to the friendly relaxed relationships I had developed with many of the workers, as some of them attempted to skip past my explanations of the consent form saying they would just sign it – that they “trusted” me. Another worker made a joke as I explained how she could stop the interview at any point or stop the recorder, likening what I was saying to statements made by the police in police interviews. At the beginning of the group discussion I also checked if anyone objected to the meeting being recorded for use in my study and there were no objections. Again, however, it is important to think about how ‘real’ the opportunities to not take part are in this kind of research where relationships and trust have developed. What it does is place the onus on the researcher to use the knowledge these methods generate in a responsible and ethical manner.

### ***3.5.2 Reciprocity and Exploitation***

“Sometimes it is claimed that research involves the exploitation of those studied: that people supply the information which is used by the researcher and yet get little or nothing in return”  
(Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:217)

I did not want to leave the young people or the workers at the JU youth club with the feeling I had exploited them for my research yet unlike an action research, participatory or evaluation project, I was not aiming to empower or improve the services for those participating in the JU youth club. This meant I had to find another way to give something back to those who were helping to further my academic career. This principle of reciprocity evolved in implicit and explicit ways during the research process.

As my role in the youth club was closely aligned with a ‘volunteer worker’ (see section 3.2.2), I was positioned as an ‘extra’ pair of hands in the youth club useful to the staff team as I had prior experience of working with young people. The manager in particular often referred to me as a ‘volunteer’, on one occasion insisting I

claimed volunteer expenses (which I refused) and when on my last day of fieldwork I had brought in various thank you gifts the manager told me I did not need to bring presents as “I had already given a lot with my time and being in the club with them” (Field notes, 58<sup>th</sup> visit). Mirroring the view that I had ‘given’ something to the youth club through my interactions there was the sadness expressed by some of the boys (who I spent a lot of my time in the youth club with) as I departed from the youth club. In addition, some of the workers seemed to have enjoyed or taken something from talking to me about their work and experiences of challenging behaviour. During their interviews *Shona* told me it had been good to have a “good blether<sup>43</sup>” about behaviour and *Alexander* ended his interview by stating “I think this is really good for me to think about my work in the Underground [V: oh okay] to think about the JU”. Creating space and opportunity for people to reflect upon their practice is argued to be one form of reciprocity in this kind of research process (McDonnell et al, 2000:389).

I decided that one way to give something to the young people at the youth club was to provide gifts that could be used in the youth club. I discussed what kind of gifts would be valued and appropriate with the workers and a couple of the boys I had good relations with in the youth club. We decided upon some new pool cues and a few board games that could be used by those participating in the youth club. I adorned these with stickers saying thank you (see appendix 12) and brought them with me to my last session with some sweets and big thank you card (see appendix 10). Inside the thank you card I produced a short page of early findings for the young people and the workers (see appendix 11). I brought in spare copies of the findings; these were put up on the wall of the youth club and in the youth agency’s office. The early findings have proved valuable to the youth agency, who were interested in the interpretations I had made of their practices, the manager adapted

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<sup>43</sup> Blether is a Scottish term roughly translated as engaging in a long conversation – a good chat or natter.

the information using it in their annual report and in promotional literature about their work.

A few months into my fieldwork, the management committee at the youth agency where the JU was based were looking for somebody with knowledge of youth policy and practice to fill a skills gap in the committee and asked me to join. After much consideration and discussion about this with my PhD supervisors and the youth agency, I took on this voluntary position. I respected the ethos and work of the youth agency, and saw this particular role on the committee as one that could make good use of my skills – a means of giving something back to the organisation. My involvement was carefully negotiated so that I would be excluded from any decisions pertaining to the employment of the workers involved with the JU this was to ensure my researcher's 'neutrality' would not be jeopardised nor my relations with the workers and young people.

### ***3.5.3 Anonymity, Privacy and Confidentiality***

“How do we reconcile the front-stage assertions of anonymity with our back-stage doubts and struggles about anonymity?”  
(Van Den Hoonaard, 2000:149)

To protect the identity of those involved in the JU youth club it was necessary to make the youth club anonymous. This was something I promised when negotiating access and when giving information about the study to the young people and workers. In instances of observational research where informed consent may be difficult to obtain, Nancy Bell and members of the Glasgow Centre for the Child and Society (2008:96) argue that “researchers must take steps to protect the safety and privacy of those individuals under observation.” Anonymity, particularly in light of the problems with active consent, was deemed essential to protect the individuals and organisations concerned from receiving any negative attention as result of my research. For example, the practices of the workers and the youth organisation are



open to scrutiny from the wider professional community of youth work practitioners. This became particularly apparent to me when presenting a paper on the use of humour in challenging behaviour at a conference about work with young people. Some of the audience were critical of what they deemed to be the 'unprofessional' way a worker had responded to the behaviour of a young person in my study. This was a stark reminder of the need to protect the identity of the workers and the organisation.

To ensure the anonymity of the youth club pseudonyms are used for the youth agency, the youth club and for individuals within the youth club. Ethnographic research creates a vast array of background information and interesting idiosyncratic details about places and people. However, to ensure the anonymity of the setting and so that the participants are not unjustifiably jeopardised only information deemed relevant to this thesis is presented and details (when the meaning of the knowledge is relatively unaffected) have been altered or blurred. This was to try and avoid the use of pseudonyms becoming redundant (Walford, 2005:87).

Yet, whilst I believe the youth club is anonymous to those from 'far away' places, it is likely to be recognisable to those who already know of it, and the individuals within it are likely to remain recognisable to those who already know them and their 'uniqueness':

"[...] the inadvertent description of unique settings and events may reveal the identity of the research participants. It seems that every person is identifiable by a unique set of expressions and experiences that set him or her off from other human beings."

(Van Den Hoonaard, 2000:145)

The recognition of one participant by another participant may not be as obvious as suggested. Before giving a presentation about some methodological findings from

the research, I shared three cases studies of the process of engaging with young people in the youth club with one of the workers. After reading the presentation, the worker told me she had been trying to work out who the young people were but was still not completely sure. Even if the young people and workers are recognisable to those within the setting, any observations made during a youth club session could theoretically have been seen by others. The worker's interview data is more complex as it is told in a more private space. This is potentially problematic as although the study was not evaluating the practices of the workers it provides 'evidence' for those who may wish to do so. For example their manager who is in a position of authority over them:

"Moreover, the people who are in a position to identify individuals are exactly those to whom exposure has the greatest potential risks of harm or embarrassment. For a teacher to be identified in a book or article as behaving in an incompetent or racist or sexist way, for example, could bring great harm on that person."  
(Walford, 2005:88)

I was prepared to exclude data if I felt the data would create problems for a young person or a worker<sup>44</sup>. However, I had no cause to do this and given the time between the events occurring and the actual presentation of the data (years) plus the uneventful nature of much of the data any such action on the basis of the data is unlikely.

All data collected for the thesis is securely stored. All original paper copies are filed away in locked cabinets and electronically stored data (such as the interview and group meeting recordings) are accessible only by password. Interview and group meeting transcripts, field notes, evaluation records, and the results from the question sheets are anonymous. The non-anonymous data (original recordings, initial field note jottings, identifying material) will be destroyed on completion of the PhD.

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<sup>44</sup> Exceptions to maintaining the anonymity and confidentiality are discussed below.

I have included 'confidentiality' in this section on anonymity, because I would have broken the anonymity of the setting and individuals by revealing what they had told me in confidence if I had felt unethical practice was occurring on their part or a vulnerable person, particularly a young person, was at risk of harm. This is in line with current child protection procedures when working and/or researching with children and young people (Heath et al, 2009:35) of which I had experience of training in from working with young people in other contexts. If a young person or a worker had disclosed something to me that indicated a young person was at risk of significant harm I had a strategy in place. This involved talking to the individual who had disclosed the information to me explaining that it would be necessary to tell the lead youth worker about this in line with the youth agency's child protection procedures. Nothing occurred in the relatively safe space of the youth club that led me to break confidentiality or expose individuals. However, in my everyday research practices, I was faced with the ongoing dilemma of intervention when witnessing potentially oppressive or harmful behaviours as a participant observer. This forms part of the following discussion about the prevention of harm in the research process.

#### ***3.5.4 Preventing Harm?***

It is generally accepted that research that harms participants is unacceptable (Bryman, 2008). What constitutes 'harm' is often considered a matter of judgement (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:222). In some research projects the potential for harm can be quite obvious and in others more implicit (Bryman, 2008). It was important therefore, before doing this research, to consider carefully the potential harm to research participants in this study and following the research to reflect upon any harm done. My research practices did not cause any (known) physical or mental harm to individuals. The potential for harm to the young people and the workers by those in a position of power over them, and to the professional standing of the organisation are minimised by the anonymous presentation of the findings. There was potential for the workers, particularly in their interviews, to have found

it stressful having their professional practices observed and questioned. I hope, however, that my informal style and the non-judgemental approach I adopted and my repeated assurance that I was not evaluating them relieved some of that potential anxiety.

Whilst the topic area of the interviews was not a particularly sensitive one in the context of the setting, challenging behaviour is a part of the everyday discourse of the setting; any questioning can raise an unexpected emotional response. In one interview the worker had a particularly negative experience of the JU and there was definite potential for the interview to leave her feeling upset. During the interview, in response to her negative experiences, I found myself encouraging her to think of the positive aspects and I was able, through my observations in the youth club, to point out the relationships she had developed with certain young people and the positive impact she had. Because I had also experienced challenges in building relations in the youth club and knew what the JU was like as an 'outsider' I was able also able to empathise with her experience.

Having spent a year in the field and up to a year building up relationships with some of the workers and young people there was potential for harm when I left the youth club. Researchers are argued to have a responsibility to develop a strategy for ending research with participants in a way that is sensitive to the nature of the relations developed and that provides the participants with some feedback on the research findings (Bell and the GCCS, 2008:97). I prepared for this by developing an exit strategy preparing myself and those I had become friendly with in the youth club for my last visit to the youth club and explaining why I would no longer be coming. I brought gifts and a card with four key findings from my study within it (appendix 11). I was careful not to make promises to return when one of the boys suggested I should later in the year. This strategy was an appropriate way to say

goodbye to those I had become friendly with over the year, and a means of leaving a thank you to all.

More problematic ethically, was my role in the production and/or prevention of harm in everyday social interaction in the youth club. In what way did my presence in the setting influence potentially harmful behaviour; and was my (in)action in the face of potentially harmful behaviour ethically justifiable? Because oppressive practices and power relations infiltrate everyday social life, they were a feature of my experience in the JU. Whilst I tried to avoid exerting power and control over others, I was implicated and witness to these power relations. The dilemma of how to respond to the witnessing of potentially harmful behaviour is further complicated as the focus of this study on interactions around challenging behaviours meant I was interested in, and thus needed to be able to observe, potentially oppressive practices

From the start of the research I was clear I did not want to have to engage in dealing with the behaviour of the young people, not wanting to influence the data in that way and not wanting to exert power over the young people. I had not anticipated the fact that I would find myself on many occasions to be the only adult in close proximity to potentially harmful behaviour – having to make a decision on whether and when to intervene, sometimes being requested to by the young people and expected to by the workers (see section 3.2.2). Nor, more importantly, had I accounted for the unequal power relations amongst the young people, simply focusing, like many childhood and youth researchers do, on the adult-child power relation (Gallagher, 2009:24) and not thinking through my role in their friendship politics (Morris-Roberts, 2001). Witnessing exclusionary practices that could also be potentially defined as bullying led to unsettling moments, for example when I was confronted by one boy trying to extort money from another:

Jonathon said to Duncan something like “do you know what day it is?” Duncan did not answer. The boy asked again and the girl also spoke saying it was Thursday and that meant it was “payment day”. The girl repeated that it was payment day. Duncan seemed to be ignoring them [...] All the while this was happening I was sat at the table close to Duncan and watching and listening what was going on. A couple of moments later Jonathon and his small group came back into the room. He came and stood near to Duncan again. He must have said something to Duncan as I heard Duncan reply something like “I don’t have any money on me so I can’t give you anything”. Jonathon said something about Duncan getting a fiver a day so he should have some money. Duncan did not seem to reply. Jonathon then walked away from the table. I asked Duncan if they [meaning Jonathon and his group] were causing him “problems”. Duncan said yes. I asked him if he had told anyone about this. He said that he had told his house director. I asked him if this had helped. He said that it had become a little better. I said good.

(Field notes, 48<sup>th</sup> visit)

I felt disconcerted following this interaction, not sure of what the ‘right’ or ethical thing to do was. Should I have intervened? Would that have made things worse for Duncan? At what point would I have intervened? Horton (2008) relates a similar sense of failure or anxiety when he relays a series of ‘ethically’ troubling but very everyday occurrences in his research that reflect the messiness of research that involves relations and human participants.

Knowing what the ‘right’ thing to do in situations was difficult. At times, I knew what I would do as a ‘youth worker’ in the situation, but without this practitioner identity, as a ‘researcher’ I was less sure. Was I behaving unethically, for instance, when I witnessed sexist talk or homophobic comments without challenging them? As Curtis et al (2004:169) note “the literature tends to skate over just how non-judgemental researchers should be when confronted with for instance, racist or homophobic behaviour”. Horton (2008:364) tells us he responded with an “awkward silence in the face of children’s racist, sexy, uneasy questions” and a sense of (small) failure at doing so. In the youth club, the boys often made offhand comments that implied girls were the weaker sex or that implied girls were unable

to play pool. The majority of the time these comments went unchallenged in the setting by others, an interesting observation but is the researcher implicated in the act if they do not challenge such sexist remarks? At one point when one of the boys called me a “little bitch” (in a relatively friendly way) during a table football match I did respond with an “oi” to which he responded with a “sorry” (Field notes, 22<sup>nd</sup> visit). Whilst my protest at being called a ‘little bitch’ might have more to do with it being personally directed at me than it being an offensive term to women, in the following example (with a boy I am friendly with) I am unable to stop myself reprimanding his potentially sexist comment:

The boy threw down the pool cue onto the table when he missed another shot. He looked like he was sulking. Richard said something like ‘look at him when he’s losing, he’s acting like a woman’. I said casually (without thinking), something like ‘watch it’ as he was being derogatory to women. (Field notes, 30<sup>th</sup> visit)

In the extract above, I automatically make a challenge to Richard’s behaviour, “without thinking”, suggesting that if I was thinking I would have avoided making this challenge.

Interestingly, I had less of a dilemma when it came to being the only witness to potential physical harm to a young person from his/herself or another. Whilst I was still uncomfortable about intervening I did so, asking a girl not to balance precariously on the top of a chair (Field notes, 54<sup>th</sup> visit) and asking a boy to put down a metal bar he was chasing people with and swinging around (Field notes, 15<sup>th</sup> visit). These ethical dilemmas remained unresolved throughout the fieldwork; I dealt with each incident as it arose, within my own frame of reference of what I found morally acceptable and what fitted with being ethical in the research practice. The process of dealing and reflecting on these dilemmas was fruitful in providing insight into interactions around challenging behaviour. For instance, why was I happier intervening in the threat of physical rather than emotional harm? What kind of judgments are workers making in the immediacy of the moment about

'challenging' behaviours? What difference did it make if I was performing my 'researcher' or 'worker' role when observing oppressive behaviour, and why?

The findings of this study (assuming the setting and individuals remain anonymous outside of the setting) are unlikely to bring harm to the participants. The findings I shared with the workers and young people were responded to positively by the workers and I do not think there is anything in the final thesis report that they would react negatively to. There is potential, however, for research findings to impact more broadly on young people influencing public and policy opinion (Alderson and Morrow, 2004:125). Findings from this thesis, could be misinterpreted and misused to increase the perception of young people, especially boys from lower socio-economic groups, as problematic, badly behaved and out of control - fuelling the negative representation of this group as discussed in chapter 2, section 2.2.1 and lead to arguments for further discipline or control over their activities. It may also bring into question the value of types of youth work practice. Whilst, neither of these representations is supported by the approach taken in this thesis, in fact quite the opposite, all data and interpretations are open to reinterpretation and what the researcher may consider a misrepresentation. This potential harm perhaps infers a level of influence this PhD is unlikely to have. Being aware of it, however, ensures attention to the presentation of findings in a way that minimises a sensationalist or 'mis-reading' of the research.

Section 3.5 has explained the ethical framework guiding my research practice, as well as the realities in upholding certain principles in practice. The research was conducted in an ethical manner, with respect towards the research participants and careful thought about the implications of my practices. Much of this relied on my own judgement, and therefore brought with it a lot of responsibility and reflection. Ethics were at no point considered a "done deal" during the study, ethical practice



was presented as an “ongoing process of questioning, acting and reflecting, rather than the straightforward application of general rules of conduct” (Gallagher, 2009:26). Adopting this approach also opened up a possible lens through which to view the processes surrounding challenging behaviour in practice.

### **3.6 Conclusions**

This chapter has provided a reflective account of the research process from design to doing to writing up. Beginning with a discussion of the value of an ethnographic approach, in particular participant observation, in studying interaction in context, the chapter began with an introduction to the research setting: the Junior Underground youth club. Whilst physical access to this youth club was eased by two ‘ins’: an inside contact and my experience of working with young people, gaining and maintaining social access to individuals within the two social groups in this setting, the workers and the young people, was described as ongoing and not always within my control. The nature of the researcher’s relations with the various individuals and social groups in the setting was important for reasons of validity, data quality and ethics. It was argued that whilst I developed good relations with all the workers and a group of boys; it was impossible to establish and maintain a relationship with all of the young people given the nature of the setting. Once I stopped reiterating my position as a researcher, and accepted the terms on which the young people, in particular the boys, were willing to allow me into their activities and interactions I became more socially integrated into the setting.

The chapter went on to explain the way in which the data were collected. Field notes from participant observation drove the study, but were supplemented with information gathered through questioning the workers and, to a lesser extent, the young people and through internal evaluation records. This created a large volume

of textual data to organise and analyse, a process developed through coding and memo-ing. The study was shown to be situated within an interpretivist framework, and theory was used pragmatically as the researcher moved between the data and the literature. Analysis was shown to occur from the beginning of writing the field notes and continue into the writing of the final thesis. The credibility of the thesis is argued to rest upon the description of the research process.

Ethical issues permeated the chapter, but were brought to the fore in the final section. A discussion of the four key (often inter-related) ethical principles: consent and privacy; reciprocity and exploitation; anonymity and confidentiality; and prevention of harm revealed the ethical dilemmas in this research practice and detailed how these were attended to, if not always resolved. My research practices, including ethical practices, were shown to evolve with the research setting, relying as much on judgement as on planning:

“Indeed there is an important sense in which all research is a practical activity requiring the exercise of judgement in context; it is not a matter of following methodological rules, nor can all problems be anticipated, or for that matter resolved”

(Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:20)

The chapter aimed to show the complexities of the reality of doing this research well. By ‘well’, I mean researching in a methodologically and ethically sound manner, being honest about the problems as well as the more straightforward successes.

My experience of fieldwork for this research was professionally challenging. As a novice to ethnographic research and to participant observation, I learnt a lot of valuable research skills ‘on the job’. My time spent in the youth club was an enjoyable personal experience, with much humour enabling me to reflect upon my own practices when working with young people elsewhere. The freedoms (as well

as the challenges noted above) of being an unusual adult rather than simply a worker provided me with the opportunity to engage with some of the young people in ways I had not done before. I looked forward to spending time in the youth club and often came away feeling revived and excited by what I learnt in each session. Whilst the field work was at times emotionally tough, it was on the whole a positive experience.

All research has disadvantages or limitations, things that if done differently would produce different, potentially 'better' research. If I was doing this piece of research again, I would be less preoccupied at the start with establishing myself as a 'researcher' and more open to allowing the participants to categorise and respond to me on their terms. I think this would lead to a more positive start to the research in terms of engaging with the young people. I would also 'trust the process' more, whilst this valuable advice was given to me when embarking on doing participant observation for the first time, it remains difficult to trust a process you have not yet been through. Yet, trusting the process would allow for more creativity and more enjoyment of the experience, and potentially richer information.

In hindsight, I could also have taken more advantage of the location of the youth club in a school. Whilst, negotiating access into the classroom setting may have been time-consuming and the time spent in the classroom may have meant less time overall to observe and analyse data from the youth club, it was an opportunity to directly compare challenging interactions in the classroom with the youth club, giving the research a more comparative angle. Also, given that challenging behaviour was very much a 'live' issue for those working at the JU, a research design more relevant to the setting, whilst remaining true to the approach taken to understanding challenging behaviour in the thesis, could have led to a more participatory approach with the research and led to a more interested engagement

from the workers and the young people in the study itself. This is, again, a more complex approach with potentially more work involved, and one that would have involved approaching the youth agency with an idea and working with them to develop it into a proposal (if they were interested in doing so).

The nature of the research setting is argued throughout chapter 3 to have influenced the methodological decisions undertaken and the way in which the research developed. Chapter 4 that follows provides a more detailed ethnographic description of what it is like to be a part of that youth club and the characteristics of the setting and those that participate there.

## 4. The Youth Club

### 4.1 Introduction

Accepting the argument that definitions and experiences of challenging behaviours are contextual, this chapter undertakes an analysis of the social and physical environment of the youth club under study. A contextual approach to challenging behaviour adopts the premise that challenging behaviours are those actions which challenge the boundaries around normal behaviour in the social setting where they occur (Thomas, 2005:61). Clough et al (2005:6) neatly summarise this point:

“Behaviour is a matter of experience. ‘Bad’ or ‘challenging’ behaviours are defined by the parameters of the environment and conditions in which they take place.”

Therefore, in focusing on the socially determined nature of challenging behaviour, rather than on challenging behaviour as a problem located in an individual child, it is important to understand the nature of the youth club as a social setting and what it means to behave ‘normally’ or typically in this context.

Providing an analytical description of the research setting is also argued to be an important component in the writing of case studies and ethnographies (Creswell, 2007:192-196). Such an analytical description enables the interpretation of specific phenomenon within a setting (Macpherson et al, 2000:52), helping to avoid inferring a generalisability that does not exist but may be implied if the details of the context are ignored (Walford, 2005 and Nesper, 2000). This chapter serves the purpose of creating a “baseline of meaning” for the interpretation of the data (Waterhouse, 2004:76), constructing a more general ‘reality’ of the Junior Underground (JU) youth club. This is a reality that is recognisable, beyond individual encounters and sessions, across the whole year of participant observation accounting for ordinary and extraordinary events. In doing so, the chapter provides the relevant background

and context within which to situate the challenging behaviours and interactions under examination in this thesis.

This analytical description is particularly important for a study situated within a youth work setting. This is because, unlike the school and the classroom, very little is externally known about everyday practices within youth clubs, youth centres and youth programmes in various settings. There is a dearth of literature in the UK and other English speaking countries on:

“how typical average-expectable youth programmes [...] actually function day-in, day-out, week-in, week-out; what activities are offered; patterns of participations; the nature of interactions and relationships between youth workers and youth; and tensions in providing these services”  
(Halpern et al, 2000:471)

Recent exceptions to this are research projects undertaken by: Spence et al (2006) on what youth work practice entails in England; by Dimoulas (2004, 2005) on the effect of the environmental context on behaviour in youth centres in Australia; by Halpern et al (2000) on the nature of everyday practices in youth programmes in Chicago, US; by Stuart (2003, 2004) on the process of managing behaviour in youth work practice in Australia; and by Wilson and White (2001a; 2001b) on interaction and experiences of an inner city recreation/drop-in centre in Ontario, Canada. This chapter adds to this literature on knowledge about everyday youth work practice.

The background information and contextual details provided in this chapter are founded on the range of ethnographic data collected; observational field notes; interviews; and internal documents. The first section explains what is meant by youth work/work with young people in the UK. Outlining key themes in the youth work practice literature, this helps to situate the practices in the JU in a wider context. The second section explains the emergence of the JU and the purpose it is perceived to serve. It also highlights the core principles officially underpinning the

practices of those working at the youth club and explores the implications of these when working with young people perceived to be challenging. The third section creates an image of this youth club. This section is interested in the more tangible aspects of the youth club describing the physical environment, objects in this space and location and timing. These are all discussed in relation to behaviours in the youth club. The fourth section attends to the nature of interaction in the youth club analysing who participates and the ways in which they participate. But first, what is meant by youth work in the UK?

## **4.2 Youth Work: Principles and Practices**

In recent years youth work has received an increase in policy attention<sup>45</sup>, and has also become embedded in a broader notion of work with young people. The phrase ‘work with young people’ incorporates practitioners working in a broad range of contexts and roles. This includes those working in education, health and the criminal justice system and in roles from counsellors to youth workers to sports leaders (see recent edited collections on ‘work with young people’: Harrison and Wise, 2005, Harrison et al, 2007, Woods and Hine, 2009). It is argued that in recent years a more “complex pattern of provision” for young people has emerged that has both expanded the remit of the traditional youth worker and diluted professional boundaries in this field (Harrison and Wise, 2005:1). There are now a range of agencies interested in intervening in a young person’s life, working often in multi-agency contexts and in partnership with each other (Woods and Hine, 2009:1). The distinct identity of a ‘youth worker’ has been somewhat diluted in this process. In the context of the JU, situated in a school, the tensions of working in a multi-agency setting are apparent as discussed further in section 4.4 below.

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<sup>45</sup> See for example the recent publication of policy strategy documents across the UK governments (DfEE, 2001; Northern Ireland Executive, no date; Scottish Executive, 2007; Welsh Assembly Government, 2007)

The phrase 'work with young people' is an umbrella term referring to a melting pot of professions and their associated ways of working. It is also, however, heavily influenced by traditional youth work, arguably acting as a contemporary synonym. For example, many chapters in the edited collections about work with or working with young people are written by those with youth work backgrounds and are about youth work values, principles, practices and occupational standards. As Hine and Wood (2008:255) note, in the collection they edited, "how frequently different chapters [in the text they edited] refer to the need to work with young people in ways that can be attributed to traditional youth work". Throughout this study the terms youth work and work with young people are used inter-changeably. This is appropriate as the workers in the JU are a mixture of paid professionals (some with traditional youth work and community education training), volunteer workers and workers from the UK and beyond. Most of the workers refer to themselves as a youth workers and as what they do as 'working with young people'. Further details on the characteristics of the workers are given in section 4.5 below.

#### ***4.2.1 Defining Youth Work/ Work with Young People***

In the literature, youth work and work with young people are taken to refer to interventions in the lives of young people, "one in which the participation of young people is voluntary and the aims are broadly educational" (Harrison and Wise, 2005:1). These principles are reflected in the three essential and definitive features of youth work outlined in the statement on the nature and purpose of youth work in Scotland as: young people choose to participate; the work must build on from where young people are; and that youth work recognises the young person and the youth worker as partners in a learning process (YouthLink Scotland, no date). The National Youth Agency describes the purpose and nature of youth work (NYA: 2005:17-18) in similar ways, noting that young people choose to participate and that youth work encourages young people to think critically, make informed choices and fulfil their potential. Education in this context refers to learning through 'informal



education' to facilitate the personal and social development of a young person (Spence et al, 2006:1). Distinguishable from formal education it is described as:

“[...] the kind of work which emphasises responsiveness to a situation and needs of young people, rather than the completion of a syllabus or the realisation of pre-determined outcomes”

(Harrison and Wise, 2005:2)

There is an educational or developmental element to work with young people but this is distinct to formal educational processes. So what does youth work entail in practice?

Within the above guiding framework of principles, youth work practices are diverse. Youth work includes street or 'detached' work, open-access youth clubs, youth work in schools, girls groups, issue related groups, residential trips, arts-based work, sports based work, faith based work, group work and one-to-one work to name a few. This makes it difficult to describe universal practices of youth work (Ingram and Harris, 2005:13). Adding to the difficulty of knowing what youth workers do is the argument that youth workers are not, or in the past have not been, very good at articulating what they do in a way that enables those outside of the profession to understand and value (Ingram and Harris, 2005, Spence et al, 2006). Bradford et al (2004) suggest the nature of youth work as responsive and unpredictable also makes it difficult to evaluate and be accountable, again adding to a confusion over what it is youth workers do and if and how they achieve their aims. Smith (2001:2) suggests it is more “helpful to think of competing and different forms of youth work rather than a single youth work” but goes on to argue that there have been some central discourses of youth work practice throughout the twentieth century. A picture of UK contemporary youth work practice can be created. Such a picture centralises the “abiding professional commitment to the *non-compulsory nature of the relationships* that form its distinctive ethos” (Bradford et al, 2004:8 – my emphasis).

Successful youth work practice is perceived to depend upon a youth worker's ability to build positive relationships with young people, from which their work with the young person stems. Developing a relationship is viewed as paramount (Ingram and Harris, 2005:15, Smith 2001:3). This relationship is conceptualised as equal (Ingram and Harris, 2005:15) and interactive as the young people are not being 'worked on' by the adults but 'worked with'. In other words a young person is constructed as an active participant in the process rather than someone passively receiving a service (Woods and Hine, 2009:254-255). As such, a dominant discourse is that, unlike schools, "youth work starts from where young people are, not where we would like them to be" (Ingram and Harris, 2005:14). It is about working in ways appropriate to the needs and interests of the young person (Smith, 2001:3). There are, however, historical and ongoing overlaps between schooling and youth work (Smith, 2002; 2009) not least the school-based youth club – the focus of this study. The placement of youth workers in schools is argued to be part of the growth of surveillance and control of those young people perceived to cause a problem to the social order of the school, particularly in recreational spaces and times (Smith, 2002; 2009). Thus, youth work practices are implicated in similar practices to schooling practices. The tensions that arise when youth workers work within a school context are attended to in further detail in section 4.4.2.

In practice, the principles of voluntary participation, equal relationships and the centring of young people's needs can result in daily dilemmas for the youth worker. Banks (2004:220) and Spence (2007:287) suggest that workers also have policy, legal and organisational frameworks that can create tensions for workers as they balance the rights, needs and interests of the young people they are working with - the immediacy of worker interventions in a young person's life - with external demands and strategies. Such dilemmas relate to the ongoing theme of 'ethics' in the discourse of youth work practice (see Banks, 1999, 2009; Bessant, 2005; 2009; NYA, 2005, Sercombe, 1998). As part of their role, youth workers are argued to need "to be

capable of appropriate thinking about ethics in practical situations” (NYA, 2005:19). To help with this the NYA produced a set of general principles with the aim “to develop ethical awareness and to encourage reflection as a basis for ethical conduct” (NYA, 2005:17). These principles refer to the way a youth worker should treat young people with respect such as valuing individuals and working in an anti-oppressive and non-discriminatory manner (Chouhan, 2009; Thompson, 2005b).

The principles also suggest youth workers should: promote the rights of young people to make their own decisions and choices; promote and ensure the welfare and safety of young people; and contribute towards the promotion of social justice (NYA, 2005:4). These principles can be conflicting. For example, the young person’s right to autonomy versus promoting the young person’s welfare. As the literature review notes, this particular ethical dilemma can arise when a youth worker decides whether or not to intervene and manage the behaviour of young people during a youth work session (Jefferies & Banks, 1999).

A further defining feature of youth work or work with young people is somewhat obvious, it is an age specific activity (Smith, 2001:2): “[t]he decisive pre-requisite for a young person’s participation in youth work remains their youth” (YouthLink Scotland, no date). However, what is meant by ‘youth’ is changeable. The YouthLink Scotland statement on the nature and purpose of youth work defines ‘young people’ primarily targeted in Scottish youth work as aged between 11-18 but states that it can go up to those aged 25 and those below 11 if necessary (Youthlink Scotland, no date). The JU is aimed at young people aged 11 to 14, an age group on the cusp of being identified as ‘youth’ but still also seen as children. At times younger and older young people also participated. Further details of the characteristics of the young people attending the JU are given in section 4.5 below. Regardless of the age range of youth, the concept of youth is closely related to youth

work. Understanding youth and being able to work with youth is integral to the professional identity of the youth worker (Smith, 2001:2). The discussion of the concept of youth and young people within the youth work literature is attended to next.

#### **4.2.2 The Concept of 'Youth' in Youth Work**

'Youth' and 'young person' are often used interchangeably but convey different meanings, have different professional linkages and are used to convey different messages in policy and societal discourse (see Spence, 2005:46 and Jeffs and Smith, 1999 for a short but insightful discussion on these differences). Youth and young person refer to the biological fact of being of a young(er) age (as it is a relative concept), of being not quite adult but yet also somehow different to child. Youth and young people are social, as well as biological, categories as understandings of 'youth' or 'young people' are socially mediated (Spence, 2005:46). A young person, as a potentially more neutral term to a youth, is the preferred terminology in some quarters, reflected in recent books titled working with young people (e.g. Harrison and Wise, 2005; Wood and Hine, 2009) in contrast to previous books on youth work practices (e.g. Smith, 1988; Young, 1999). However, the two terms refer, in many ways, to the same social group in society. This section considers how 'youth' and 'young people' are imagined within the youth work discourse and the implications of this for youth work practice.

Whilst "[i]t is difficult to define precisely the notion of a young person" (Corby, 2004:207), it can be seen as a professionally created category – that of 'client hood' in youth work (Jeffs and Smith, 1999:7). Young person is the preferred terminology in youth work and often used by academics writing in the field of childhood and youth studies to refer to the subjects of their research and theorising. There is a sense that the term young people is more respectful than 'youth', as youth is, as Jeffs and Smith (1999:8) contend, "almost exclusively employed to signify discussion of a

social problem or behaviour being portrayed in a negative light". For these reasons, and because it is the most commonly used terminology in the research setting 'young people' is used throughout this thesis to categorise and group together the participants of the youth club.

A fundamental feature of work with young people is that the young people are defined as 'other' (Skott-Myhre, 2006:220), "as not adults" (Banks, 2004:219). Jeffs and Smith (1999) believe this to be problematic because the construction of the social category of 'youth' in the adult-youth relations "characteristically involves viewing those so named as [youth] being in deficit and in need of training and control" (Jeffs and Smith, 1999:2). In particular, youth workers (usually in a bid to get funding for their services) make claims to being able "to develop provision for young people that deals with and prevents anti-social and destructive behaviour" (Jeffs and Smith, 1999:4). The deficit model of youth/young people is apparent in the ongoing debates about the uneasy relationship youth work has with state surveillance and the control of problem youth (Smith, 2001:5). Although 'empowerment' of young people is an important principle of youth work practice (YouthLink Scotland, no date) in reality youth work occupies an ambiguous position between liberating and constraining young lives. However well intentioned youth work provisions are, they operate as a:

"[...] mechanism of social control; at the same time it makes space for young people, it is implicated in the containment of their energies and in the delegitimation of alternative, unsupervised activities. Youth work and 'leisure' provision is thus an accommodation, both literally and figuratively".

(Hall et al, 1999:507-8)

It could be argued that youth work and work with young people relies upon a certain construction of youth – that is the construction of them as a problem. The validity of the professional identity of the youth worker partly relies, therefore, upon the construction of young people as behaving in challenging ways. The youth

worker is then someone who has an ability to work constructively with challenging young people.

In summary, the dominant discourse about UK youth work is that it is a skilled profession based on adults and young people entering into a voluntary relationship that facilitates a learning process developed from the young person's needs and interests. Youth work is suggested to be fraught with ethical dilemmas that emerge in everyday practice. A key dilemma is the role youth workers play in the control of young people's lives and in the reproduction of youth as a unique and challenging period of the life course. Thus, youth work can be argued to be sustaining an image of young people as being 'challenging'. With this broad picture of youth work in mind, this chapter now moves on to look at the specific purpose and practices of the youth club under study.

### **4.3 Background to the Youth Club**

Behind the running of the JU youth club is a Youth Development Agency<sup>46</sup> (YDA). This YDA operates a number of projects and clubs in the local area. To understand the JU youth club in context, it is helpful to know the reasons why the JU was set up and what those who work there perceive their role and the purpose of the youth club to be. It is also important to have insight into the core values that guide the work of those involved in this YDA, especially as youth work is argued to be value driven; values argued to distinguish it from related professions such as teaching and social work (Spence et al, 2006:1). Without a behavioural policy in place<sup>47</sup>, the

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<sup>46</sup> The YDA is, like the JU, a pseudonym, to protect the anonymity of the organisation that manages the JU.

<sup>47</sup> The YDA have policies in place for dealing with specific issues, such as Child Protection concerns, but not for dealing with challenging behaviour. At the request of the management, I facilitated a group meeting with development staff to create a space for them to discuss concerns about current practices in relation to challenging behaviour. At this meeting the possibility of taking a more procedural approach to challenging behaviour was discussed.

workers in the JU are acting on principles rather than adhering to a formalised set of rules. As noted above in section 4.2, this is not unusual in the context of UK youth work. For example, the principles of ethical conduct for youth work in the UK aim “primarily to develop ethical awareness and to encourage reflection as the basis for ethical conduct rather than to tell youth workers exactly how to act in particular cases” (NYA, 2005:17).

#### **4.3.1 Purpose**

The JU was established over ten years ago in response to the perceived anti-social behaviour of young people at a nearby shopping centre during the school lunch break. Thus the youth club was associated with the challenging behaviour of young people from its conception. According to publicity about the JU (published by the YDA<sup>48</sup>) the official remit of the JU is, and always was, to provide an additional and appealing recreational space for year 1 and 2 school pupils to relax and socialise in during their lunch break<sup>49</sup> - an alternative to being at the shopping centre. The JU is also advertised as being a place where young people and youth workers can make contact regularly and informally. The JU runs most school days and operates as a drop-in session.

Many young people still go to the local shopping centre for all or some of the lunch break and there is no record of whether the JU has altered the perceived anti-social behaviour at the shopping centre in the school lunch break. The ‘success’ of the youth club does not appear to be measured in these terms. The JU is, however, perceived to be a successful service by the YDA, because of the high numbers of

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Such a policy was not introduced before I left and it appeared unlikely as the benefits of being flexible to fit the needs to different young people was used to argue against a set of rigid procedures.

<sup>48</sup> The exact wording of the publicity material has been changed here to preserve anonymity. This is necessary when much publicity is now available on-line and exact phrases can be searched for.

<sup>49</sup> The JU has a counterpart youth club running at the same time but in a different space in the school named, the Senior Underground (SU) youth club with the same remit and origin but for school pupils in year 3 and 4.

young people that attend daily, the relations that emerge from this contact and the youth club's longevity in a context where youth provision is often unstable and short term. The JU began life with a small number of volunteer workers who established themselves in a spare space in the school bringing with them some board games for the young people to play. The youth club grew organically from this into a well established provision. This provision now has a permanent base (two rooms and an office) within the school with resources such as pool tables and a team of paid and voluntary workers.

In addition to the 'official' literature the workers also hold their own views as to the purpose and value of the JU, some of which correspond with the official version and some which differ. There exists a general perception amongst the workers that the JU operates to contain the behaviour of young people and protect young people from getting "themselves in trouble because they're just hanging about [elsewhere] for an hour or however long lunch is" (*Kelsey*, Interview data). So by being in the JU, where they are welcomed and in a space designated for them, the young people avoid being elsewhere where their behaviour may be perceived as a problem and they may be reprimanded. The workers do not suggest that problematic behaviour and discipline are non-existent in the JU. Indeed, the JU is conceptualised as a space where behaving in ways that in other settings might be seen as problematic, is (within certain boundaries) acceptable, a space where the young people can be "hyperactive" and let out "frustrations" (*Alexander*, Interview data). The space is seen as belonging to the young people.

The workers also talk about the JU as providing an alternative and 'safer space' for a young person to be in during their lunchtime. In the JU, under the protection of the workers, a young person is suggested to be less likely to suffer emotional and/or physical harm than in spaces where behaviours are not being monitored. The



implication is that, although behaviours like physical and verbal aggression occur in the JU they do not escalate in the way they might if they occurred in an unmonitored space. The JU is also perceived by the workers to protect young people from social isolation, as it is a space where friends can be made and friendships facilitated through activities and the involvement of workers. The workers construct themselves as providing a simultaneously liberating and protective gaze over the behaviours of the young people, a gaze that is empathetic in nature. The youth club is providing a space where young people can “conduct their social lives in safety and away from the supervision of more controlling authorities.” (Spence et al (2006:21). The control and containment of young people through youth clubs like the JU is an ethical dilemma for youth workers seeking to empower and make young people more visible in their community (Jeffs and Banks, 1999). The implications of this ongoing process of removing young people from public spaces are also discussed in the childhood and youth studies literature (see for example, Valentine, 1996). The JU is caught up in these processes but also has other purposes driving its existence.

The workers talk about the JU as somewhere they can build relationships with young people, in particular with those young people who do not come to the more structured youth clubs<sup>50</sup> they run. There is a perception amongst the workers, reflected in the literature on youth clubs (Robertson, 2000:71), that the more ‘challenging’ young people are those who are also least likely to attend a more structured youth club, thus having this very informal drop-in youth club is essential in initiating contact with them. The workers hope that once they have built up a relationship with a young person in the JU, they can then use this relationship to encourage the young person to participate in other programmes they run. So the JU

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<sup>50</sup> The unstructured nature of the JU youth club is described in more detail below, in section 4.5.3.

is perceived to be an important link to the more 'challenging' young people the workers wish to engage with.

The value of the JU in facilitating the development of the young people who participate is debated amongst the workers. Some workers suggest the nature of the JU makes it difficult to do 'development' work but that it is crucial as it gets the young people onboard for future, more structured, work. One worker was particularly unconvinced of the value (in terms of youth development) of more unstructured youth clubs, stating that the young people "don't learn from, from these places [youth clubs]" (*Luca*, Interview data). Others did, however, feel quite strongly that the JU does have a role in 'development' work viewing the JU as it was somewhere "to show the young people good behaviour" (*Alexander*, Interview data), where a young person can learn different behaviours.

Overall, the JU has origins in containing and controlling young people perceived to be behaving in problematic ways. The workers perceive the purpose of the youth club as somewhere that serves to: protect young people from potential harm; protect young people from getting into trouble; and provide a space to build relationships between workers and young people as well as (potentially) facilitating the personal and social learning of the young people.

#### **4.3.2 Values**

Certain values are suggested to underpin the work done within the JU. These values include: to be inclusive and accepting; to provide positive experiences; to be flexible, responsive and youth centred; and to remain grounded in the community. This section briefly considers these values in relation to working with young people perceived to be 'challenging'. Information about these values is garnered from

promotional material about the YDA and communication with those involved in running the YDA.

Those working at the JU aspire to be inclusive and accepting of all young people – what does this mean in relation to young people perceived to be ‘challenging’. There is a general perception amongst those working in this organisation that they are particularly skilled in attracting and engaging with ‘challenging’ young people; young people that other organisations refuse to work with and young people who refuse to engage with other organisations. The manager of the YDA discusses how the organisation is known amongst local service providers as the agency that works with the “bad laddies”<sup>51</sup> (*Paul, Group meeting data*).

Furthermore, those working at the JU aim to provide a service that places the needs of young people at the centre – to be flexible and responsive to their needs. To do this involves accepting the young people for who they are and building on their individual strengths. Spence et al (2006:2) describe this model of youth work as:

“[...] underpinned by a commitment to working with an open, potentiality model of young people, beginning with their present experiences, responding to their present needs and enthusiasms, and building upon this to situate their learning within a wider social context”  
(Spence et al, 2006:2)

The potentiality model contrasts with the deficit model of “problem based interventions” (Spence et al, 2006:2) often taken in approaches to young people perceived to be challenging or to have problem behaviour (see chapter 2, section 2.4). Being youth centred means accepting the young people for who they are. Of course, as with any youth *development* work, there is potential for an ongoing

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<sup>51</sup> The reference here is to problematic boys rather than boys and girls. The JU attracts many more boys than girls to participate as discussed in more detail in section 4.5.2. However, concern over challenging behaviour is not limited to boys and comments about ‘challenging’ girls are also made at other times.

tension between accepting people as they are, in their current situation, and encouraging them to want to change their current situation for the 'better', including reducing their engagement in behaviours perceived by others to be anti-social, problematic or challenging. Being flexible and responsive to a young person's needs in principle includes being flexible and responsive to behaviour perceived to be challenging.

As an organisation the YDA aims to be grounded in the community actively working to forge sustainable links with the local community. There is a history and commitment to involving people from the local area in voluntary and then paid worker roles within the JU – often people who themselves participated in the youth groups as a young person. This is perceived to be valuable to those local people involved as it is seen to provide an opportunity to receive training and potential employment, important in the local area as unemployment levels are high.

Having local workers is also perceived to be highly valuable to the youth club. Those workers who grew up and who continue to live in the local area are thought to be able to capitalise on their connection to the local area and to the young people in encouraging the more 'disaffected' and 'challenging' young people to participate. There is an implicit suggestion that local workers have greater empathy with the young people that facilitates their work with young people perceived to be challenging, a suggestion that is supported in the literature (see chapter 2, section 2.3.3). One of the local workers supports this proposition as she describes the young people most often in trouble at the JU as her "favourite kind of young people" because she "was just like that when she was younger" (*Kelsey*, Interview data). This assumption can, however, serve to homogenise those living in the local area and does not account for the differences amongst individual workers and young people. Those working at the YDA also discuss some of the challenges in working and

living locally. *Johnny*, who is from the local area, talked about how “being known” to the young people causes him difficulties when trying to assert authority and deal with problem behaviour in the youth club (*Johnny*, Interview data).

This discussion of the purpose of the JU, and values underpinning practices at the JU, suggests certain points of interest to this study of challenging behaviour. The JU is a space where the behaviour of young people is expected to be ‘challenging’, a place where the workers pride themselves on working with ‘challenging’ young people and also a space where workers have a responsibility to challenge behaviour they perceive to be harmful. There is an emphasis on building relationships with the young people, especially those with whom this is perceived to be difficult. The values suggest that the workers will approach the management of behaviour in a flexible and responsive way and be open to negotiating the boundaries around behaviour. These principles are suggested to guide the practices of those working at the JU but they remain ‘ideal’ ways of working and in practice may be difficult to uphold. Contradictions and tensions, between ideology and practice, that emerge in this study of challenging interactions in the youth club are not considered to be a failing of the work of those at this youth club, rather they reflect the complexities of working with young people. To create an image of what being a part of the youth club is like, the next section begins with a vignette of a ‘typical’ session at the JU.

#### **4.4 Imagining the Youth Club**

*It is a Monday afternoon at a Scottish Secondary School. The school lunch break has just started and a group of 5 boys are running across the school field towards the school building. The boys slow down a little as they enter the building through an open door. Two of the boys say hello to a youth worker who is standing at the entrance. The boys quickly move through this room, out into the school corridor and into another room. They are now in the main Junior Underground room. Inside this room there are two more youth workers. One is setting up the pool balls ready for a game on the pool table and the other one is sitting on a table. The 5 boys head straight for the pool tables. They appear excited to be the first into the youth club. They begin to bicker over who gets which pool cue.*

*Over the next ten to fifteen minutes more young people, mostly in small friendship groups, come into the room. There are over 20 boys in the room now and 4 girls. The room takes on a slightly manic atmosphere. It is noisy and busy and there is lots of laughter and chatter. People are doing different things. Some are playing table football and table tennis; others sit on the sofas or join the small crowds gathered around the pool table. A youth worker is asked by one of the boys to resolve a disagreement over whose turn it is to play. A decision is made but the boy is not happy. He throws his pool cue down on the floor and walks out of the room. The games console sits untouched for the moment. A couple of boys begin chasing each other around the table tennis table; one of them has hold of the other's hat.*

*Suddenly the room is nearly empty. A large group of boys have left to 'go fight' the older pupils outside. After a few moments most of them come back in. The youth workers are moving around the room. They make repeated remarks to the young people about their 'language', attempting to curb the amount of swearing. There is a boy sitting quietly by himself at the table. One of the youth workers picks up a board game for two players and invites him to play. Suddenly a rotten smell hits the room. Fart gas has been sprayed. There is a lot of laughter. People hold their nose and waft the air in an exaggerated manner. The level of noise and excitement in the room increases. One of the youth workers shouts out: "five minutes left". 45 minutes has passed in a flash. A few moments later many of the*

*young people grab their belongings and leave the room. The fire extinguisher has been used. No-one saw who did it. Rumours begin identifying various possible culprits. There are only a few boys left in the room now. They are on the pool tables. A youth worker removes all but the black ball from the table. The boys take one more shot each on the pool table before leaving.*

*Within the calmed quiet room the youth workers move around picking up bits of litter, making jokes and complaining mildly about the behaviour of some of the young people. The youth workers sit down to evaluate the session. Estimating the number of different faces they saw today, they decide upon 31 young people: 25 boys and 6 girls. "Comments on the session?" the youth worker holding the pen asks. They look at each other and talk about what happened. On the evaluation sheet this conversation is reduced to officially record: "Good session. Fire extinguisher set off again. Boys were very hyper, but manageable".*

The above vignette is composed of behaviours and interactions across different JU sessions. It is intended to create an impression of what it like to be part of a typical, average session at the JU youth club. These everyday mundane activities are part of the processes and interactions that make the experience of the youth club what it is. As Horton and Kraftl (2006:259) suggest:

*"[...] much can be learnt, practically and theoretically, from things that go on and on and on in the background; stuff that is often unnoticed, often unsaid, often unsayable, often unacknowledged and often underestimated"*

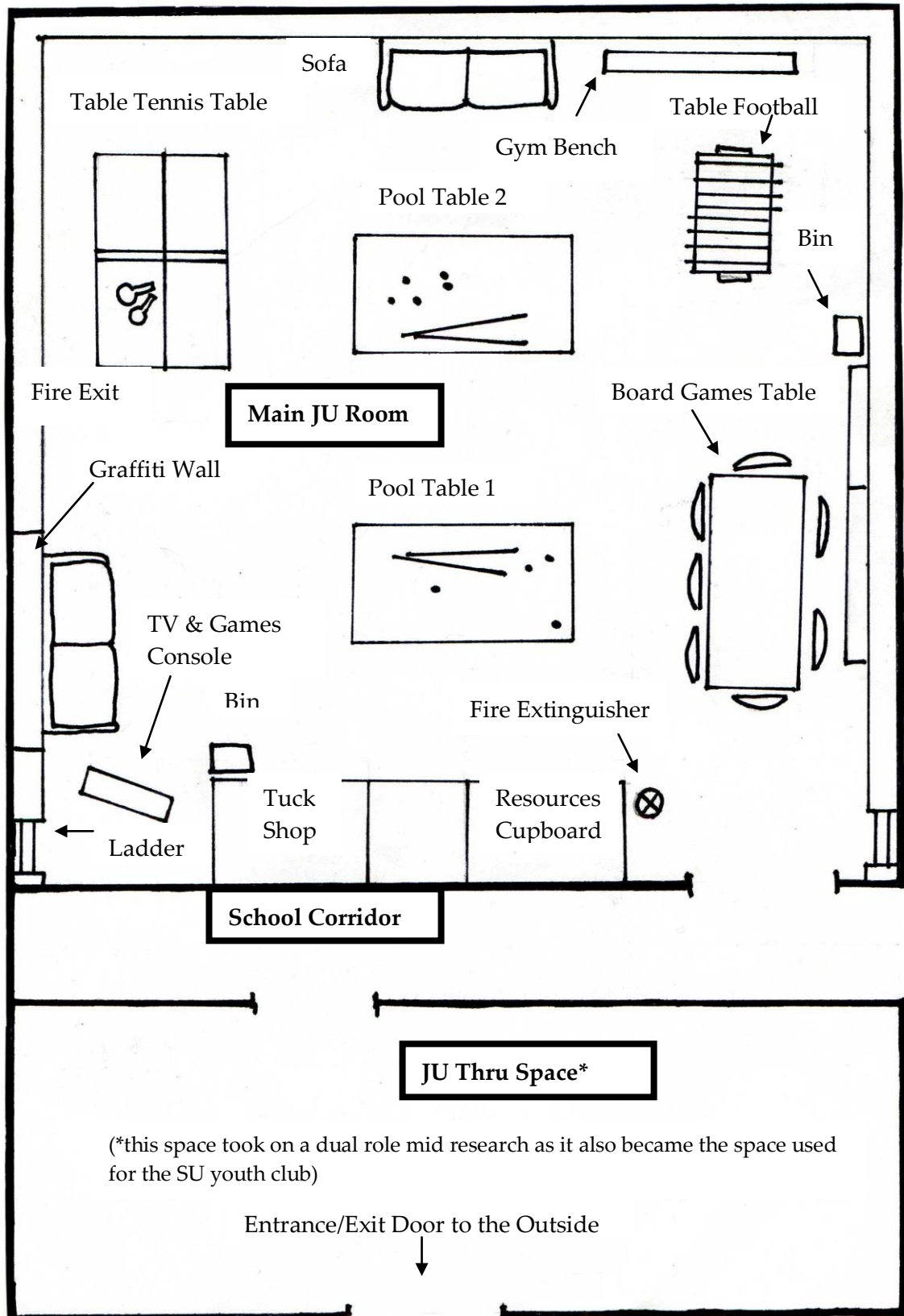
In this section I attend firstly to the environment and objects of the JU, and secondly to the position of the youth club within school space and time. These are the spaces, structures and rhythms that form the context within which social interaction occurs in this setting.

#### ***4.4.1 Physical Environment and Material Objects***

Because many social interactions in the youth club, including the challenging ones, occur in particular spaces and over/across various objects it is useful to have an idea of the layout of the setting. The annotated sketch below (figure 4.1), referred to in the text that follows, offers an impression of the layout of the JU and surrounding spaces, including the Thru Space, school corridor and doorways.



Figure 4.1: Annotated Sketch of the JU and Surrounding Spaces



The main JU room is not a purpose built youth club; it was previously used as a school drama room. Working within the confines of this existing architecture, the youth workers and young people over time have adapted the space to look more like a traditional youth club: bringing in furniture and games and decorating the walls. The JU is located inside the main building of a secondary school. It is positioned in a corner of the school building some distance from the main school front entrance and accessible via a 'back' door. The young people access the main JU room by coming in via the entrance/exit door in the thru space, into the school corridor and then into the main JU room. This route is reversed when a young person leaves the youth club.

During a JU session, the activities on offer are centred in the main JU room. However, interactions are not limited to this room. Much social interaction also occurs in the thru space, school corridor and doorways. The spatial arrangement of the furniture and the activities on offer in the main JU room remained relatively consistent throughout the research year. The main JU room is a large open plan space with three very small rooms to the left as you enter. These smaller rooms can fit one or two people in them and some small furniture, like a desk and chair or a bookcase. The smaller rooms are used for storing arts and crafts materials, spare equipment and one of the rooms houses the tuck shop.

As well as the entrance door to the main JU room there is a fire door into an adjoining classroom. The main JU room has no source of natural light. The room is decorated with brightly coloured murals painted by young people, photographs of young people on trips, and a 'graffiti wall' with writing and drawings by the young people. These artefacts brighten up the room. There is a selection of furniture in the room to sit on and/or to sit around including two sofas, a long wooden gym bench, tables and chairs. This furniture has a worn-in, second hand look. In the centre of

the room are two pool tables. Around the sides of the room (going anti-clockwise from the entrance door) are a board games table, chairs and storage for the board games, a rubbish bin, a table football, a gym bench, a sofa, a table tennis table, another sofa, a television set with games console (before it was stolen), another rubbish bin, the three small rooms and the fire extinguisher. There are two ladders on the wall that reach up to a mezzanine level that runs around three sides of the room. The JU room is a fairly open space with many different vantage points from which to survey the whole room. There are some areas of limited visibility, for those trying to monitor the space from afar, such as the corner behind the television, the corner by the entrance door and underneath the various tables.

The main JU room is divided socially. Different spaces correspond to different types of activities often dominated by certain groups of young people. Often groups of young people will group around an activity, such as the table football, which in effect creates a 'barrier' separating that activity off from the rest of the room. Of note, is the central positioning of the pool table reflecting also the positive social status attached to playing pool (well) in the youth club. The pool table is something of a desired object amongst many of the participants. The young people rushing to arrive first at the youth club head straight for the pool table and at the end of the session the young people tend to be reluctant to leave their game on the pool table more so than the other activities. Certain spaces within the main JU room are designated as out of bounds for the young people. These are the three small rooms that store various resources, the mezzanine level and the ladders that lead up there.

To access the main JU room those participating in the youth club have to go through the thru space. The thru space changed in its use and contents during the research year. Initially the thru space had a disused pool table in it with a board covering the top of it, preventing it from being used as a pool table. For a while there were also a

sofa and two large chairs in the thru space. There is also a kitchen area in this space with a sink and a breakfast bar dividing the room. As well as being used as a room to go through to get to the main JU room, groups of young people and workers would occasionally gather in the thru space around the disused pool table and in good weather around the entrance/exit door to the outside.

The thru space posed challenges to the workers to monitor as there was not always enough staff available to supervise both the main JU room and the thru space. This is clearly demonstrated when, with the absence of any workers in the thru space a group of young people locked the workers out of the thru space from the inside (Field notes, 16<sup>th</sup> visit). Trouble with controlling the thru space is also noted in the session evaluation records:

“[...] a little bit rowdy where the couches are next door [the thru space], ok as long as they [referring to a group of girls who appropriated this space for a short period] are quiet and enough staff”  
(Evaluation records, spring 2006: 19<sup>th</sup> session)

The thru space is intended as a place to move through not a place to stay in. Yet it was a space where some young people would choose to gather and socialise. Doorways, another area designated for access not sustained interaction, caused recurring problems for the workers to control, leading to the entrance/exit door to the outside being described as a “nightmare” (Evaluation records, spring 2006, 9<sup>th</sup> session) by the workers.

During the last two thirds of the research year the layout and use of the thru space changed dramatically, becoming the main room for the SU youth club<sup>52</sup>. The young people coming to the JU stopped using the JU thru space for recreational purposes. They still had to go through it to enter and exit the youth club but they no longer

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<sup>52</sup> As noted earlier, the SU was the corresponding youth club to the JU but for older pupils in year 3 and 4.

gathered in there. There were now at least two youth workers in this space at all times to monitor the SU youth club and to thwart any attempts of young people who should be in the JU youth club attempting to stay in there<sup>53</sup>. In the transformation of the thru-space to the SU youth club, two pool tables and a table football were brought into the area. The implementation of the SU youth club into this space was given considerable thought and there was an uncertainty of the effect of this change on the JU. In particular, the workers had feared conflict between the JU and SU participants when the main SU room moved to the thru space area due to the new proximity and past experience of the young people in the JU youth club declaring they were off “to go fight” the older pupils. What they used to do was throw stones at the window of the room that housed the SU youth club – on a different floor and part of the school. However, once the youth clubs were positioned next to each other there was no visible conflict between these two groups during the lunch break and the young people who attended the JU appeared to adapt to this potentially negative alteration to their space well.

#### ***4.4.2 Within School Space and Time***

The school within which the JU is located caters for 11-17 year old pupils. It is a mixed gender state school located in an urban neighbourhood of social and economic disadvantage. The operation of a youth group, or some other community organisation, within a school is not unusual within the context of community high schools in Scotland<sup>54</sup>. In addition to the YDA, other community organisations also occupied spaces in the school grounds, operating independently but in co-operation and communication within the school.

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<sup>53</sup> The workers tended to police participation in the youth club to ensure that only those young people from years 1 and 2 were in the JU, and from years 3 and 4 were in the SU.

<sup>54</sup> In 1998 integrated (then New) Community School initiative was launched in Scotland. Taking a more integrated approach to delivering services to children and young people, it is common to develop multi-agency working in and around schools. For further information see the information pamphlet from the Scottish Executive (2006) and the New Community Schools prospectus published by the Scottish Office in 1998.

The JU youth club space operates over the whole year, most frequently and regularly during the school term-time with a less frequent service during the school holidays. During school term-time the JU is routinely open for the 50-60 minutes around the school lunch break, every Monday to Thursday. During the school holidays there is more flexibility around the timing of the session. Whilst still opening around lunchtime, the hours of operation are longer (up to two hours) but the sessions are not as regular - held only once or twice a week.

The distinction between school term time and school holidays is important because the length of the session and its regularity or irregularity affects the experience of being in the youth club<sup>55</sup>. During the school term time the youth club session is 'squeezed' into the school day often in-between more sedentary activities. The lunch hour provides a relatively short session where the timing has to be strictly kept to ensure the young people arrive on time to their afternoon classes. This gives these sessions an intensity and energy that differs to the general atmosphere in the youth club in the school holiday sessions. During the school holidays the sessions are longer and feel more relaxed, often coming to a natural end when the young people decide to leave rather than being forced to leave. The longer, more relaxed, nature of the holiday sessions also allows for different kinds of interaction and activities to take place as section 4.5 discusses in more depth.

Being located within the wider institutional setting of the school has implications for participation in the youth club as attendance is limited during term-time to those attending the secondary school. The JU is, however, very accessible to those who are at the school as it slots into the school day, is on every lunch break and is in the school building. This accessibility is likely to contribute to the high numbers of

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<sup>55</sup> Participant observation was predominantly conducted during the school term time as chapter 3, section 3.3.1 discusses in further detail.

young people, mostly boys, (a discussion of gender differences in attendance is discussed in section 4.5.2) participating in term-time. During these sessions the young people are identifiable as school pupils within a youth club space. They are organised according to their school year and are interchangeably referred to as 'pupils' and 'young people', young people being the professional terminology of youth work and pupils the terminology of schooling. The young people, on occasion, have school work with them, carry school bags and are often wearing some form of school uniform. The young people also bring social relations from the school environment into the youth club environment including friendship groups and power relations. Conversations occasionally turn to what has already happened that morning at school, from who go into trouble earlier in the classroom to discussions of school grades. During the school holidays young people not attending the school (including those excluded from the school) can and do attend the JU.

The distinction between the JU as a youth work space and the rest of the school is at times blurred. Although a rare occurrence, teachers are occasionally present in the youth club during a youth club session. This happened only once in the sessions I participated in. On this occasion, two young people burst through the fire exit doors out of the youth club and into the next door classroom. A teacher then entered the youth club from the next door classroom and presented his concerns very publicly about this behaviour to one of the youth workers (Field notes, 54<sup>th</sup> visit). In a different session, where the young people locked the youth workers out from the thru space at the end of the youth club session, the teachers offered advice to the workers with one of the teachers telling a youth worker they should prohibit the young people responsible from coming to the youth club. This comment was not appreciated by the youth worker involved who retorted in private that "he was

more interested in getting back into the office<sup>56</sup> right now rather than thinking about banning people" (Field notes, 16<sup>th</sup> visit).

A teacher being present in the youth club space or becoming involved in the affairs of the youth club is generally perceived negatively by the workers. This is explained by *Kelsey*:

K:[...] but I dinnae think it's right for them [teachers] just to poke their head in the JU and see something going on and then shout at the young people, that's not their time, that's our time that they're accessing. It's our base and if they're [the young people] smashing up the wall or chucking something at the wall then ken<sup>57</sup> it's our base and we'll deal with it, I dinnae think it's right for the teachers to do that.

(*Kelsey*, Interview)

However *Kelsey* also discusses later in her interview how she will "use the teachers as a weapon" to control the young people threatening, often without any intention of actually doing so, to phone the deputy head teacher if the young people are defying her authority. From observations, this threat is rare, and the actual intervention by the teachers even rarer. However the possibility, real or imagined, of teachers becoming involved in interactions in the youth club complicates slightly the idea that the youth club is an independent entity within the school and also the traditional youth worker-young person relationship<sup>58</sup>. The school acts as a subtle but omnipresent disciplining force within this youth work space and time. This links to the discussion of the blurring of professional boundaries in work with young people in multi-agency contexts in the discussion in section 4.2 above. Practices around challenging behaviour in work with young people are affected by this blurring.

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<sup>56</sup> The office was located off the thru space at this point and only accessible through the thru space.

<sup>57</sup> In Scotland, the word 'ken' is about knowing something, for example: "ken it's our base" can be roughly translated as "you know it's our base".

<sup>58</sup> Youth workers in other contexts can call on the higher authority of the police or threaten to contact parents in an attempt to discipline behaviour; however using teachers as a means to control is unlikely outside of the school context.



That the workers threaten to call upon the teachers when the young people are not listening to them suggests that they perceive the young people to view the authority of the teachers as different - more powerful - than the authority of the youth workers. This has implications for understanding where the boundaries around behaviour lie in different spaces in the school. Some of the young people are clear that they distinguish between the youth club space and other school spaces in terms of how they can and cannot behave. Richard talks about the youth club space as feeling different to other parts of the school stating "you can do more of what you want in here but there are limits" (Field notes, 57<sup>th</sup> visit). This differentiation of space within the school by the young people is further demonstrated in the moments when the young people purposely use the youth club space as a refuge from getting into trouble with the teaching staff:

A small group of girls came into the JU main room towards the end of the session. They went to talk to *Kelsey*, asking her to cover for them if a teacher asks where they had been this lunchtime. They were asking *Kelsey* to tell the head-teacher, if asked, that they were in the junior underground room the whole time. The girls want *Kelsey* to do this to avoid getting in trouble for being involved with the fighting outside. *Kelsey* neither agreed nor refused to do this.

(Field notes, 12<sup>th</sup> visit)

In the above example the girls assume that *Kelsey* will side with them and not tell the head teacher the truth if asked to. This shows a level of trust in *Kelsey* and indicates a construction of *Kelsey* as being on 'their side' rather than on the side of the school, of the head teacher.

The school corridor offers further insight into the intersections between the school and the youth club. The young people need to enter the school corridors to get to and from the main JU room. However, school pupils are not allowed to socialise in the corridors at break times. It is acceptable for the young people to use the corridors as a route to get from the thru space to the main JU space (as long as they walk and do not run or play in the corridors). It is not acceptable, according to the

school rules, for the young people to be in the corridors for any other reason during their lunch break. This includes using the corridors after the youth club session to access nearby classroom blocks. Instead, the young people must exit the youth club session the same way they came in (through the 'back' door) and walk around the school building to another entrance to re-enter the school building and head to their class. Although a school rule, the youth workers have to enforce this rule in the time around the youth club session. Whilst the workers do on the whole enforce the rule, they are very clear with the young people it is a "school rule" not a youth club rule. In private, away from the young people, the workers also discredit the rule noting the tension it causes and pointing out its flaws. The workers disregard for the rule is evident on the occasions when a youth worker engages in play with the young people in the corridors directly contravening this school rule but having a lot of fun in the process (Field notes, 13<sup>th</sup> visit; Field notes 21<sup>st</sup> visit).

As a school based youth club the JU operates within the wider school system but also desires, and achieves, some distance from it. It has carved out its own micro-social space within the school. Although practices in the youth club are linked to the school (as the youth club operates according to the school timetable and some of the school rules) and although young people bring their 'school identities' into the youth club space with them, it is also a unique space within the school, with different figures of authority and different boundaries around behaviour. The nature of interaction between a worker and young person is suggested to be quite different to that of the nature of interaction between a teacher and a pupil. The social identities of the youth club participants and the nature of interactions in the JU are now considered in more depth.

## 4.5 Participants Participating

Over the research year, no one day at the JU had the same combination of participants. The voluntary participation of the young people and the team of youth workers meant that those participating in the JU varied from session to session, with some more regularly seen than others. Certain 'types' of young people are identifiable within the discourses and behaviours of the youth club. Whilst the categorisation of people, and the assumptions made from these categories, should be treated cautiously such categorisations offer a picture of who comes to the JU and what kind of space it is. To explore the nature of participation in the JU section 4.5 begins with a discussion of the attendance figures. Following this is a discussion of the social groups present in the youth club. These social groups are based on the traditional social categories and more contextually appropriate categorisations. The section ends with a discussion of the predominant ways that people act and interact in the youth club.

### 4.5.1 Nature of Attendance

The workers record the number of young people who participate in each term-time JU sessions on an evaluation sheet at the end of each session. This number varied over the research year: the lowest number of young people participating in any one session was 10 and the highest number was 51. The mean number per session was 31.2. These figures are shown in table 4.1 below.

*Table 4.1 Term-Time Participation of Young People at the JU*

Mean number of Young People	31.2*
Lowest Attendance of Young People	10
Highest Attendance of Young People	51

\* The mean is calculated from 128 sessions. There were 129 sessions recorded in total; one session had missing data for the young people's attendance.

These figures are estimated by the workers as no register or systematic head count is taken during the youth club session. The production of a single attendance figure is also misleading as attendance fluctuates over the course of a session. A record of 31 young people attending means that 31 different young people came to all *or* part of any session. The workers actively try and recruit more young people through advertising, as well as monitoring and reflecting upon any significant declines in numbers at the youth club. On a particularly quiet session in the holidays two workers went out into the local streets to see if they could encourage any more young people to come. Attendance figures are deemed important in a climate of competition for youth group resources and accountability. Evidence of effectiveness of a programme is partly judged by the number of young people it reaches (Bradford et al 2004:10).

The number of workers<sup>59</sup> present in any one session over the research year also varies. The mean number of workers recorded as being in part or all of each session is 3.5. On three occasions there was only one worker present, and twice there were six workers present, both these figures being unusual. It was common for between two to four workers to be present for a whole session; other workers may also ‘float’ in and out of the room during the session. Table 4.2 below shows these figures:

*Table 4.2 Term-Time Numbers of Workers at the JU*

Mean number of Workers	3.5*
Lowest Attendance of Workers	1
Highest Attendance of Workers	6

\* The mean is calculated from 129 sessions.

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<sup>59</sup> The different ‘types’ of workers are explained below under the heading ‘social groups’ – all types of worker are included in the table apart from the young volunteers whose identification as a ‘worker’ was too ambiguous.

The workers are undecided as to the optimum number of workers to have in a youth club session. The evaluation records show that at times the workers perceived the need for more staff to successfully manage the behaviour of the young people:

“Busy session. Y/P not listen to staff. Needed more staff”  
(Evaluation record, winter: 43<sup>rd</sup> session)

Yet, at other times the workers suggest that the session is more successful with fewer staff:

“Good session with less staff”  
(Evaluation record, winter: 55<sup>th</sup> session)

Whilst the reasons for wanting more staff may be self-explanatory, as it is likely that more workers makes the space easier to control, *Kelsey* explains why she thinks fewer staff can sometimes be better:

*Kelsey* said that when there are more staff around the young people play the staff off one another. She said that she had told the young people that she was on her own and that she believed because she had told them this they were better behaved. I said that I would have thought that behaviour might be worse if there were less staff. I said this was really interesting for me to hear and it was something to think about. *Kelsey* said to me “you can put that in your report”. I said “I will!”. However, I was also reminded of the time when *Miya* and I were alone on the JU and the young people’s behaviour was quite out of control. This made me think that it might depend on who the worker is as to whether less staff means the young people are ‘better’ behaved.  
(Field notes, 57<sup>th</sup> visit)

As the extract from my field notes and the comments in the evaluation records show the number of workers to young people varies and the ratio does not appear to affect in any simple way the workers’ control over the behaviours in the JU. As I reflect in my field notes, the personalities of the staff appear more important than the numbers of staff.

The number of young people participating at the JU youth club is perceived to be relatively high in comparison to other youth groups. For one worker the large

numbers of young people participating in the JU makes it an unusual experience in comparison to the other youth groups she has experienced:

M: Erm, the JU is different to every club because like if I tell anyone, any of my other work mates like from the [name of a youth club] or anywhere, erm like the numbers we sometimes have like 40, 50 young people in the JU, it's just not, it's not a group it's not a club, it's yeah so different.

(*Miya*, Interview data)

One implication of large numbers of young people participating is that it is difficult for new people (including me) to get to know everyone and to build relationships with them. It is challenging for the workers to do one-to-one work with young people when there are so many other young people around. It is also difficult to do any kind of whole group activity, thus restricting the opportunities to form a whole group identity or facilitate group bonding processes. As also becomes apparent, it is difficult to establish an agreed set of group behavioural rules.

As noted above the young people do not always stay for the whole of a JU youth club session but there are certain predictable rhythms to their participation. In general, at the very beginning of a session there are only a few young people in the JU, around 5-10 young people, growing to around 25 after the first ten to fifteen minutes. The number of young people that remain in the JU after this time depends upon what is going on inside the JU and also what is going on outside of the JU. For example, large groups of young people will leave the JU if it is suggested there is a fight outside that they want to take part in or observe. In the final five to ten minutes of the session the numbers of young people tend to peak and then in very last few minutes reduce dramatically, with usually under ten young people left in the room.

Some workers relate the rhythms of participation to various types of potentially challenging behaviour<sup>60</sup>, such as causing “trouble” or “being cheeky”. This is illustrated in *Alexander’s* account of an ‘average’ day at the JU youth club:

A: “Okay, the JU is beginning at quarter to one, and the first fifteen minutes there are maybe fourteen, fourteen to twenty young person hanging around play erm play the games and it’s quite relaxed [V: yep] and then after the first fifteen minutes from half past one to quarter to two, there are coming more and more children [V: yep] in the JU and leave the JU so there is a lot of movement [V: okay] in the JU and sometimes there are thirty or more young persons in the JU and there’s some of them sitting on the table and on the chairs and having a chat, and throwing around stuff, playing connect four with the last week they played chess [V: oh?] yes, there is as well a bench around the play station...The pool tables are always used [V: yep] yep and we have as well special guys who always makes trouble, like toy fighting erm puts the light on and off, switch the light off, so in the end there is a lot of running around from the staff [V: okay] to tell them off ‘don’t do this, don’t do this’ and... In the end of the JU maybe five minutes before finishing, the JU is getting, becomes really hyper, quite busy, and I think the last ten or five minutes the young person I don’t know how to say check out?, running around and puts the light on and off and they getting, becoming quite cheeky at the end, so the end of the JU is always very, very busy”

(*Alexander*, Interview data)

*Alexander* discusses how variations in numbers of young people, corresponding to certain times in the youth club, are likely to be flashpoints for ‘problem’ behaviour. In her study of younger children, Brown (2007) examines the relevance of time (as well as space and gender) in understanding ‘problem’ behaviour and found that certain times such as the beginning and ending of sessions, and other periods of transition were identifiable as problematic. To understand further the nature of interaction and behaviour in the youth club, the next section describes which people choose to participate in the youth club and the differences in their participation.

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<sup>60</sup> Throughout the thesis, in the desire to hold onto a dynamic notion of challenging behaviour (see chapter 3, section 3.4.3), the phrase ‘potentially challenging behaviour’ is used to describe those behaviours routinely identified as a problem in the JU. The usage of the phrase potentially challenging behaviour is inspired by Becker’s (1973:181) discussion of the usefulness of the term “potentially deviant. The word ‘potentially’ is used to infer that I am not making a judgement that these acts are or should be considered inherently problematic or challenging just that they are likely to be deemed so, or are presented as so, in this setting – see chapter 5 for further discussion of behaviours that are challenged in the youth club.

#### **4.5.2 Social Groups**

The JU appeals more to certain groups of young people and workers than others. Some young people choose to spend nearly every lunch break they have at the JU; others attend for a while then do not return some 'groups' of young people are notably absent or underrepresented. Certain workers really enjoy working here and others described a very negative experience of participating in the JU. By looking at the different social groups participating and not participating in the JU, and the ways they participate, a social profile of the youth club is developed.

#### **Nationality and Ethnicity**

The young people participating in the JU mostly appeared to be Scottish. Of the young people I interacted with only one young person did not have a Scottish accent. All were of white ethnicity reflecting the census data for the local area that shows that nearly all the local population consider themselves to be white. The workers had more diverse national backgrounds. There were workers from the local area, but also different parts of the UK, various western European countries and Australasia, yet all were predominantly of white ethnicity.

#### **Socio Economic Group**

The young people participating in the JU are likely to be from a lower socio-economic group reflecting the known characteristics of the local area<sup>61</sup> - as an area of socio-economic disadvantage relative to the rest of the city. As the literature review, section 2.2 notes, young people from lower socio-economic groups are disproportionately labelled as having problematic behaviour within the education system (Kikabhai, 2002:2). It has been suggested that the clash between the 'working class' cultures of the pupils and the 'middle class' culture of the school and teaching staff is one reason why young people from 'working class' backgrounds are more likely to be disaffected with school and identified as behaving problematically

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<sup>61</sup> The young people were not asked directly about their socio-economic status and thus these are only assumptions based on local census data.



(Lyons and O'Connor, 2006:223). The JU youth club is of interest here as the group of workers represent a more culturally diverse mix, with workers from the local area and workers from very different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds.

### **Disability**

None of the young people or workers had any visible physical impairment. One boy was identified as having a medically diagnosed behavioural disorder. This boy was subject to close monitoring from one of the workers when he came to the youth club. The worker explained to me that she felt that other young people find this boy difficult to manage. She perceived the other young people as finding this boy annoying, excluding him from their play and interaction. The worker stated that she "purposefully tries to engage him in activities with her to avoid this from happening" (Field notes, 8<sup>th</sup> session).

### **Gender**

There are disproportionately more males than females attending this youth club. Attendance figures record an average ratio of around 5 boys to 1 girl participating in each session. Table 4.3 below shows that, over the research year, the mean number of girls attending JU sessions was 5.6. The mean number of boys participating was a much higher 25.8. The maximum number of girls that ever attended a JU session was 16, whereas it was 45 for the boys. There were no girls at all participating in 8 JU sessions, suggesting that there is a gendered nature to the youth club space with boys having a greater physical presence.

*Table 4.3 Gender of Young People Attending the JU in Term-Time*

Mean Number of Girls	5.6*
Lowest Attendance of Girls	0**
Highest Attendance of Girls	16
Mean Number of Boys	25.8*
Lowest Attendance of Boys	8
Highest Attendance of Boys	45

\* The mean is calculated from 128 sessions.

\*\*There were 8 sessions with no girls participating at any time.

Studies looking at the prevalence of young people identified as having challenging behaviour repeatedly find that the number of boys identified with challenging behaviours outweigh girls by a ratio as high as 10 or 12 to 1 (Visser, 2006:61). Visser (2006:61) notes there is a lack of empirically sound research into what is it about the behaviour of boys that makes them more likely to be identified as a problem than girls. Whilst this thesis does not aim to provide an answer to this particular question, much of the data analysed is drawn from interactions involving boys. This allows for an understanding of what it might be about boys' behaviour that youth workers perceive to be challenging.

The workers regularly categorise the young people on the basis of gender with 'the boys' and 'the girls' discussed and recorded on the evaluation sheets as if they are two distinct and identifiable collectives. Across the evaluation records, the behaviour of 'the girls' and of 'the boys' are recorded separately with such comments as "boys were very hyper"; "boys still fighting"; "boys farting" and "girls were a bit rude to workers and other young people". Often 'the girls' are discussed in terms of the number attending, reflecting concerns that the girls are usually in a minority to the boys. The evaluation records include statements such as: "more girls coming lately"; "good to see more girls"; and "not many girls". The girls are perceived by the workers to have a more transient engagement with the youth club. The girls are perceived to be attracted not by the activities but by the boys (whereas boys are perceived to be attracted by the kind of activities on offer – in particular the pool table). One worker comments that the girls only come into the youth club session "to wind up the boys" (Field notes, 5<sup>th</sup> session) and another that "the girls come in and out because they are coming in to see if there are any boys they fancy and if not they leave again" (Field notes, 3<sup>rd</sup> session).

The gender of the workers is mixed and fairly evenly split between male and female. Table 4.4 below shows that over the research year the mean number of female workers working in a JU session was 1.6 and 1.9 for male workers.

Table 4.4 Gender of Workers Working at the JU in Term-Time

Mean Number of Female Workers	1.6*
Lowest Attendance of Female Workers	0**
Highest Attendance of Female Workers	4
Mean Number of Male Workers	1.9*
Lowest Attendance of Male Workers	0***
Highest Attendance of Male Workers	4

\* The mean is calculated from 129 sessions.

\*\* There were 15 sessions with no female workers

\*\*\* There were 4 sessions with no male workers

The evaluation records show that is relatively unusual to have a session with only male or only female workers present, 110 out of 129 sessions had workers of both sexes present.

### Age

Age is a determining factor for participation in this youth club. During term time the young people participating in the JU are aged between 11-14 years of age. Older pupils attend the SU space. This age barrier is monitored by the workers and the young people and those thought not to belong are challenged by both groups. The segregation of young people by age relates to the workers' normalised views of age based competencies and needs. There is a perception amongst the workers that the older young people need less attention from the workers, have more advanced

social skills and are less likely to want to engage with a worker than the younger young people. During the school holidays, the young people are not segregated according to their school year and the main JU room and thru space are open to any young person in the local area. Age related behavioural expectations are still apparent as during a fracas between two boys of different year groups “one of the workers said they expected more of Greg because he is older” (Field notes, 18<sup>th</sup> visit).

The age of the workers varies from 16 to mid forties. The majority are in their early to mid twenties. All are referred to as workers not young people, even though as one of the workers pointed out to me, anyone under 25 is considered a ‘young person’ in youth work which many of the workers are. Their role in the youth club and associated status as a worker supersedes any age related categorisations.

### **Workers and Young People as Dependent Categories**

Participants in the youth club are generally either a ‘worker’ or a ‘young person’. These two categories are constructed as mutually exclusive groups in the discourse and practices of the JU (and correspondingly in this thesis). The two categories serve to mutually constitute each other in this context. As noted above in section 4.2, the existence of the youth work profession is dependent on the construction of young people as ‘other’; a unique identifiable collective that can be worked with (discussed in a UK context by Jeffs and Smith, 1999 and in a Canadian context by Skott-Myhre, 2006). Each category also has a different but related ‘reason’ for being in the JU; the young people receive a ‘service’ and the workers provide this for them. Adults regularly attending the youth club are presumed to be a ‘worker’. This is demonstrated in the struggles caused by my desire to be perceived in the unusual position of non-worker yet adult as Chapter 3, section 3.2 discusses further. Within the broad categories of ‘worker’ and ‘young person’ individuals have different

personalities and social statuses within the youth club, often related to challenging behaviour.

### **Workers**

There are five distinguishable types of worker involved in the JU: salaried workers, paid sessional staff, local volunteers, European volunteers and young volunteers. The five categories of worker found in the JU are categorised on the basis of their employment or voluntary status, professional qualifications and relationship to the local area. The salaried workers are employed on a salary basis by the YDA. They all have some form of professionally recognised qualification in community education/youth work. As well as face to face work with young people they also work on the managerial, strategic and fundraising aspects of the organisation. The sessional workers are staff paid on a sessional basis and are predominantly involved in face-to-face work with young people including in the JU. Usually the paid sessional workers live or have lived in the local area. They had some form of qualification and/or training but not necessarily at degree level. Local volunteer refers to those who volunteer with the YDA and live in the local area. These are usually young people who used to attend the youth groups as a 'client'. The European volunteers are from Western European countries. They had full-time voluntary positions with the YDA, including working at the JU. They also often choose to live in the local area. Some have relevant professional qualifications such as social work training. The fifth category of young volunteers was different to the other worker roles. The young volunteers were a short lived phenomenon in the JU. They were school pupils from older year groups who volunteered to work in the JU. They were not involved in the planning or evaluating of the sessions. Despite a positive start, where the young volunteers were perceived in the evaluation records to be helping out and doing well in the youth club, confusion over their position in the youth club led to their involvement being curtailed for the time being.

Next the personalities and social status of the workers are considered. The workers *Kelsey* and *Johnny*, although very different personalities, are both closely associated with the identity of the JU because they are present in nearly every session. They are the workers the young people expect to see when they turn up to a JU session. In the second half of the research year this consistent team of workers was joined by *Alexander*. Other workers, such as *Paul*, *Sarah*, *James*, *Dave*, *Miya* and *Luca*, joined in the activities of the JU more intermittently.

In understanding the practices around challenging behaviours in the youth club, it is useful to categorise the workers according to their role in challenging behaviour and in their relationships with young people. Certain workers, *Kelsey*, *Dave* and *Sarah*, have 'louder' personalities than other workers and thus appear to take on a more active role in challenging behaviour. They are the workers heard shouting instructions across the room and who are not afraid to challenge behaviour. Workers like *Johnny* have an established presence in the youth club but opt for a quieter approach. *Johnny* involves himself in the interactions of the young people but in a more subtle manner, moving closer to situations that look like they are about to escalate into something problematic, unlikely to shout across the room. *Miya* also has a much 'quieter' personality. Whilst she involves herself in social interaction in the youth club, this is often with young people who would themselves be identified as the 'quieter' ones (see next section) and was unlikely to intervene in a problematic situation. In many ways, *Miya* was marginal to the social interaction in the youth club, reflected in where she positioned herself in relation to activities in the room, often found at the side not in the centre of the room. Other workers are positioned along this continuum of marginal involvement in social interaction to very central involvement. My own experience of trying to access and become part of the social interaction in the youth club reflects the ability to move along this continuum as Chapter 3, section 3.2 discusses in more depth. These differences

reflect different personalities and social skills as well as a differing enthusiasm to engage in challenging behaviour.

During a JU session no specific worker is officially identified as being in charge but there is a certain hierarchy. In everyday practice *Kelsey* tends to lead in taking control of many challenging situations and is recognisable as being in a high position of power over behaviour in the youth club. *Kelsey* acknowledges her lead role in dealing with behaviour during her interview and it is also acknowledged by the other workers informally when one of them comments during a session evaluation that they should send “all the cheeky ones [young people] to *Kelsey* to sort out” (Field notes, 50<sup>th</sup> visit). Interestingly, *Kelsey* also has good relationships with many of the young people who participate in the youth club. She stands out as a worker that the young people seek out to talk to and interact with, and a person they will do things for that they do not do when asked by other workers. *Kelsey* has both respect and power in the youth club – central in social interaction in the youth club.

### **Young People**

Young people are categorised informally by the workers according to their social relations and behaviour. The workers talk of ‘old faces’ and ‘new faces’ in relation to the young people. The ‘old faces’ are those that are well known to the workers, usually through regular participation in this youth club or through other youth groups the workers work at. A status of being ‘known’ also depends upon how memorable interaction is with these young people. ‘Old faces’ tend to attend the JU on a regular basis, and often dominate the time of the workers and spaces in the youth club. It is noticeable when they are missing for any period of time. The workers usually have some kind of relationship with these young people and knowledge of their lives outside of the youth club. ‘New faces’ refers to young people that the workers do not recognise, have not yet formed a relationship with



and sometimes do not yet even know the names of. 'New faces' appeared intermittently over the research year, sometimes becoming 'old faces' and sometimes never reappearing.

The workers also classify the young people by their perception of the young person's popularity with their peers and the young person's power amongst their peers. When asked what types of young people came to the JU, the workers categorised the young people into: "victims" and "bullies", and "loners" and "popular ones". A further category the "tough ones" are described by *Kelsey* as "the sort of group in the school that are always fighting and causing the bother" (*Kelsey*, Interview data). These young people have often come to represent the concept of 'challenging' and this is examined in more detail in chapter 5, section 5.3. The JU is perceived by the workers to appeal to all these groups of young people (and those along the continuum) for different reasons despite the potential for conflict between the groups, an obvious one being the "victims" and the "bullies".

The hierarchical identities of the young people are open to transformation. This is highlighted in August, with the start of the new school year, when the group dynamics shifted in the JU. Those young people previously in year 2, who were now in year 3, were no longer allowed to participate in the JU youth club space. Those young people starting secondary school as year 1 pupils were welcomed to the JU. The young people who had been coming to the JU as year 1 pupils continued to participate but were now year 2 pupils. These changes are important, as it disrupted the established hierarchies of interaction and there was a 'battle' to establish new hierarchies, and ownership over spaces and activities. Like the observations made by Wilson and White (2001a:92) in their study of a recreation drop-in centre, the participation of new members appeared as both "a source of tension and a welcome change in scenery for the regulars" in the JU. Initially there was an increase in the

chaos of the youth club as the young people attending for the first time worked out where they could fit in this setting and tested the boundaries around behaviour:

I asked how yesterday had gone as it had been the first JU session of the new school year. Both the workers said it had gone fine but it was a bit crazy. *Sarah* did an impression of what the younger boys were like yesterday. She did an impression of someone squaring up. *Sarah* said that she had said to one of the other workers afterwards that there were a group of boys that would be in her behavioural group in a few years and laughed.  
(Field notes, 40<sup>th</sup> visit)

Similarly, the negotiation of new hierarchies is argued by Kilpatrick et al (2008:70), in their study of challenging behaviour in residential homes, to trigger disruption and challenging situations.

New public personas were created with these changes. Some of the previously very quiet year 1 pupils became central characters in their second year in the JU. One boy in particular, Richard, was a relatively quiet figure in the JU before the shift in population in August. Before August Richard regularly participated in the JU but without drawing attention to himself. He played on the pool table, often with at least one of his ear phones in his ear. I had found him not to be open to conversation with me. After August he became a much more lively and central character in the youth club and one of the young people who regularly invited me to play pool and join in his conversations. Richard no longer listened to music during the session, and adopted a 'cheekier' and louder role in the JU. This is noted in my observations:

Today Richard picked up a chair during a 'toy fight' I cannot imagine him doing that before the summer. He did not throw it but he is a lot more confident in the space and willing to demonstrate this confidence.  
(Field notes, 46<sup>th</sup> visit)

This change is also noted by the workers in the evaluation following this session when "*James* mentioned something about how Richard was now in charge in the JU" (Field notes, evaluation, 46<sup>th</sup> visit). The change in Richard's status in the youth club helps to show that for some young people social and power positions in the youth club are open to negotiation when a power vacuum is created. At the other

end of the spectrum, one of the previously very disruptive year 2 pupils, now in year 3, attempted to continue coming to the JU. In doing so he had to adopt a more approachable and appealing identity, so that the workers would bend the rules to let him stay. The renegotiation of my social position in the youth club (as referred to above and in the chapter 3, section 3.2.2) corresponded with this change in population in August.

Overall, the discussion of social groups participating in the JU, initially suggests that the JU is not a representative or diverse space in terms of traditional social categories – it is a predominantly white, able-bodied, male, ‘working class’ space. This is important because it helps create an accurate picture of the nature of the youth club. Furthermore, it has implications for the way in which the findings from this thesis can be generalised. However, within this micro-context there are diverse and different groups negotiating a form of co-existence, a negotiation likely to involve challenging behaviour. The categories of ‘worker’ and ‘young people’ are central to an analysis of challenging behaviour and interactions in the youth club because of the power relations that exist between these two groups, but these interactions will also depend on the personalities of individuals. The next section describes my interpretation of the nature of interaction in the youth club.

#### **4.5.3 During the Youth Club Session**

Towards the end of the JU session, the woman, who had been handing out leaflets to the young people advertising a dance class, asked *Kelsey* if it is always this chaotic, *Kelsey* smiled and said yes and something like, “it is like this every day”.

(Field notes, 28<sup>th</sup> visit)

This section explains what the participants do when they are in the youth club and how they interact with each other. Recording and analysing interaction in the youth club is challenging because of its chaotic nature, as Bradford et al (2004:10) note the difficulties in evaluating the ‘success’ or accountability of youth work because “[I]t is an informal form of work, being serendipitous, association-based and often

indeterminate and unpredictable.” The JU is argued to be an informal and unstructured, activity focused and dynamic, mildly ‘aggressive’ space that is simultaneously unpredictable and predictable.

### **Structure and Informality**

The JU is advertised as an ‘open provision’. This means the young people can arrive and leave multiple times during the session opening times. The ‘drop-in’ structure gives the young people a measure of control over how and when they use this youth club (Halpern et al, 2000:502). However, the timing of the session at the JU is co-ordinated and controlled by those who work there. The workers unlock and open the door signalling the start of a session. Also a worker calls out when there is only five minutes left of the session, demanding that the young people leave and locking the door behind them as they go. On occasion the workers also restrict access to the youth club during its opening times: closing a session early or asking a person or group of young people to leave on the basis of their behaviours and refusing re-entry to young people who move repeatedly in and out of the youth club. An example of the latter occurred when a group of boys repeatedly re-entered the room after leaving to ‘go fight’ outside:

*Kelsey* told me that after a few times of them coming in and out she had told the boys that after half past one they were not allowed to come back into the room if they had chosen to leave as they are only coming back in to get away from the 3rd and 4th years that are chasing them.

(Field notes, 11<sup>th</sup> visit)

This shows whilst there is flexibility for the young people to choose to come and go into this setting their movements are regulated, and can be restricted, by the workers.

The JU is a relatively unstructured social environment in comparison to other settings where adults work with young people. There is no programme of activities leading towards a goal (such as preparation for employment or change in eating

habits) nor is a curriculum of learning being followed (such as on peer leadership courses). In a preliminary study of environmental context and behaviours in Australian youth centres by Dimoulas (2004) she describes a similar setting to the JU:

“The large open plan integrated settings appeared to encourage high levels of informal social interactions, youth movement behaviours and hanging around. The settings were not restrictive, rigid and structured therefore behaviour tended not to be goal-directed and structured.”  
(Dimoulas, 2004:10)

Notwithstanding the pervasive subtle moral agenda of youth *development* work in general, the JU does not have an explicit agenda to change the young people’s behaviour or facilitate the growth of a particular skill.

The unstructured and informal nature of interaction is partly determined in the way the young people enter and join in with activities in the youth club. The young people arrive at different points in time and attend somewhat intermittently. At no point during a session does the group as a whole gather together. This means there is no opportunity to give out instructions on what to do in this space and/or to clarify expectations about behaviours. Halpern et al (2000:505) note that the variability in arrival times of the young people at the youth programs they studied meant there was no formal opening. They point out the advantages and disadvantages of this:

“The haphazard beginning of each day was comfortable for many youth, who like the youth programs precisely because they contrasted with the regimentation of school. Yet it also set a haphazard tone for the rest of the day”  
(Halpern et al, 2000:505).

This haphazard tone is apparent in the JU and it is added to by the absence of a collectively agreed and established code of conduct. Chapter 5, section 5.2, explores how the boundaries around acceptable behaviour become known in this context to

help understand what constitutes challenging behaviour or leads to challenging interactions in this context.

### **Activity Focused and Dynamic**

Social interaction is ongoing and always occurring in the JU. People are constantly engaged in physical and verbal interaction with others. In these interactions people talk, laugh, cry, tease, comfort, fight, flirt and challenge amongst other things. Specific activities that the young people, and sometimes the workers, regularly engage in within the main JU room include playing games such as: pool, table tennis, table football, the game console, board games and puzzles and consuming food and drink. The young people choose to engage with the games that are on offer and can leave them at any point. These activities do not require facilitators. During the school holidays there are more organised activities on offer such as pool competitions, organised games of football and cooking activities. These activities are organised by the workers and are possible because of the extended and more flexible timings than during school term-time. At times, in the JU, the young people also choose to draw pictures, write on the graffiti wall, throw objects at each other, climb the ladders, switch the lights on and off and set off the fire extinguisher. The young people also play with various objects of and from outside of the youth club: balloons, pool cues, table tennis bats, traffic cones, blu-tac, stickers, plastic bags and rolled up art work. Much of the play and interaction in the JU is spontaneous, with new games being created all the time and objects being used in new and creative ways. Whatever they are doing, the young people are nearly always doing something in the youth club:

“Whatever actually happens with [youth work] programmes, their language is mainly that of ‘activity’. A session may be described in a timetable as ‘drop-in’ but it is implicit that there will be activity on offer, for games, arts and crafts and the ubiquitous pool table have come to represent the relaxing, recreational features of youth work... projects always offer ‘things to do’”  
(Spence et al, 2006:59)

There is one exception to the informal way of negotiating involvement in the activities of the JU and that is the pool table. Having a turn on the pool table is regulated by a pool list. The pool lists are A4 sheets of paper stuck to the wall near to their respective pool tables. The list is a table with two columns and many rows. Starting from the top and working down; the young people write their name in one column on a row and the name of another person in the adjoining column on that same row. The pool lists are perceived to be necessary due to the popularity of the pool tables, a popularity that is perceived to override the young people's ability to negotiate turns on the pool table, as they do with the other games. The list determines the order of play on the pool table and provides a record of the names who are to play and those who have already played. The pool lists are important as they are used to resolve (the regular) disputes over whose turn it is to play on the pool table.

The JU is a very active and dynamic space. Moments of stillness occur in the JU but they are rare and momentary (or perhaps less visible behind the movement). In my early participant observation at the youth club I note that:

“There seems to be groups of young people constantly coming in and out of the provision [youth club]. This makes the room seem like a space in transition rather than having a fixed atmosphere or ambience”  
(Field notes, 3<sup>rd</sup> visit)

The JU is a place of doing things, interacting with others and moving around. The active and dynamic nature of being in the youth club is often recorded in the evaluation records and noted when it is missing. Descriptive and evaluative words like ‘manic’, ‘a bit mad today Y/P were hyper’, ‘kids rowdy, hectic session’, ‘busy/chaotic’, ‘noisy and difficult to manage’, ‘mad in office area – jumping on couch (girls)’, and ‘JU was loud y/p were hyper but no major problems’ are illustrative of the comments commonly applied to the young people and/or the session illustrating the workers’ perceptions of the action, noise and movement in the sessions. Less frequently, the relative calm and quiet of sessions (although these

tend to be applied to the session and not to the young people) are also recorded when they occur. Words such as 'chilled', 'quiet and pleasant', 'nice session today, no major hassles, all young people seemed to get on ok, chilled out!!', 'really quiet session and nice atmosphere', and 'calm quiet session' are used.

The young people entering the JU main room tend to involve themselves quickly with some kind of activity, whether a game or in interaction with other people. Young people who are alone and uninvolved in an activity are likely to be approached by a worker encouraging their involvement. Tellingly, very few of the activities on offer in the JU can be played alone. The pool sign-up sheets insist on each player having already identified a person to play against. Even with those games that are solo activities, for example in the case of the puzzles, it is rare to see a young person playing on his or her own with it as other people will offer advice or try to have a go themselves. Objects with more sedentary functions such as the sofa and chairs are sometimes spaces of calm, as young people sit on them and quietly eat their lunch. But they are also walked on, balanced on, jumped off and squeezed onto and even used as a means of transport:

The sofa is being moved with him [Nathan] sat on it... The sofa has been moved so that one end is still against the wall but the other end is now pointing out to the door, positioning the sofa diagonally in the room rather than its usual position flat against the wall. The boys move away from the sofa leaving the sofa where it is with Nathan still sat on it. A little bit later on *Kelsey* shouts over to Nathan on the sofa. She says something about putting the sofa back. He replies that he is going all the way home on the sofa.  
(Field notes, 47<sup>th</sup> visit)

There is a lot of movement around the room as the young people come in and out of the room; move from one activity to another; move around the object they are playing with. At times, movement itself is the activity, such as in games of chase between young people and when the workers move around the room monitoring the activities of the young people. There are also lots of physical interactions in the



JU when the young people's bodies are touching, for example through pushing, shoving, hitting, kicking, wrestling and hugging. The active and dynamic nature of interaction in the youth club gives the impression of a somewhat chaotic and disorderly space.

### **Mildly 'Aggressive'**

There is a mildly aggressive character to the JU, partly due to the competitive nature of many of the games being played but also because of the friendly and not so friendly insults and threats of physical violence that are ongoing in the background:

I was listening to the young people talk as they came through the thru-space. I heard what seemed to be some insults flying about. One boy said to another that he 'hit like a girl', another called someone else 'gay', another person was labelled a 'mong' and someone threatened to 'batter' someone else... As two of the girls (Samantha and Becky) walked though one of them said to someone else 'fuck off, ya fucking mong, I'll fucking batter you'.

(Field notes, 15<sup>th</sup> visit)

Many of these insults and threats are normalised in the youth club and treated as banter not as serious confrontations (banter is discussed in at various points in Chapter 7, section 7.2).

### **Unpredictable and Predictable**

The behaviours of the young people in the youth club are perceived by the workers to be both unpredictable and predictable. They are unpredictable because as *Kelsey* points out it depends on the mood of the people interacting in that space:

K: [...] no day when you're a youth worker, no day is ever the same [V: okay] you never wake up trying to predict what is going to happen [V: laughs] ever it just depends on what kind of mood you are in, what kind of mood the other workers are in, the young people mainly it just depends how they feel or whatever you can never, it would be impossible to even try and predict what is going to happen in a club session it's just impossible [K: laughs] you have to I think you if you're a youth worker you have to expect the unexpected all the time [V:okay] ken you can never 'oh that could never happen' because it probably will [K: laughs] erm.

(*Kelsey*, Interview data)

This unpredictability is increased because the JU is a drop in youth club:

“Drop-in and detached sessions are by nature unpredictable – even if the youth workers themselves have aims and objectives for the session. They do not know which young people – if any - they will be dealing with and in what combination and mood.”

(Spence et al, 2006:25)

However, at the same time there is predictability to the kind of behaviour that can be expected from some young people at certain times in the youth club. As *Alexander* commented in his interview:

A: ...they getting, becoming quite cheeky at the end, so the end of the JU is always very, very busy and yeah, sometimes boring time.

V: And boring? Busy and boring?

A: Busy but I says the boring, because “oh god the same like last week” [V: okay] “the same like yesterday”.

(*Alexander*, Interview data)

Certain potentially challenging behaviours such as young people being cheeky are expected in the youth club; they are predictable in that they are considered likely to occur and routine. However, as *Kelsey* notes above ways in which interactions around these behaviours will develop is unpredictable. In what way will the young people be cheeky, in what way will boundaries be challenged? The challenging aspect of the interaction is partly its unpredictable nature. Challenging behaviour is predictable in that the workers expect it to occur in the youth club, but unpredictable because the workers are unable to predict what will happen next.

In summary, the nature of interaction in the JU is predominantly unstructured and undirected. It is ‘normal’ in the youth club for the young people to be active and behave in bodily ways, to be creative in their interactions and to be mildly aggressive. The JU is not a peaceful, tightly controlled and ordered social setting. It is messy and disordered. Potentially challenging behaviour ordinarily arises in social interaction in the youth club, but the form that behaviour takes is often surprising.

## 4.6 Conclusions

This chapter provides an analytical description of the setting for this study. Exploring the principles, spaces, timings, people and practices of the JU the chapter provides a valuable context on what is 'normal' in this youth club whilst also providing information to allow comparison to other settings. To understand the purpose of this youth club, publicity material about the youth club and the YDA was considered, as well as the workers opinions on the role of this setting. The JU was created in response to perceived challenging behaviour of the young people and continues to act to keep the young people away from places their behaviour will be perceived as problematic. It is discussed by the workers, in various ways, as providing a 'safe' space for the young people and as a place for workers and young people to develop relationships with each other. The values of the YDA were considered in relation to their implication for practice in the JU. These values suggested that the workers will attempt to negotiate the boundaries around behaviour rather than impose authoritarian rule on the young people, and that the workers will have particular skills at engaging with young people perceived to be 'challenging'.

An image of the youth club was developed through a vignette of a 'typical' session at the JU, an annotated sketch and a description of the environment. Areas and objects that are desired in the youth club and that are sources of potentially challenging behaviour were highlighted. The open plan nature of the main JU room and relative ease of monitoring this space, in comparison to the more peripheral areas of the corridor and thru space, were noted. The impact of the location of the youth club within the school space and time was explored. It was suggested that, to some extent, behaviours in the youth club were influenced by the wider authority of the school and the restrictive aspects of the school timetable. At the same time both

the young people and the workers suggested that the youth club managed to carve out a somewhat distinct identity to the rest of the school.

Next the chapter described who participated in the youth club by looking at the numbers and patterns of participation and breaking this down into the traditional social categories, noting which ones were used to organise people and to interpret behaviour in the youth club. Age and gender were identified as salient. A more contextual understanding of the mix of social groups in this setting was then developed by examining how people are categorised within the youth club. The categories of worker and young people were argued to be of most importance as an organising feature. These categories are reproduced in this thesis, but there are certain assumptions behind these collective labels that were brought to the surface. In particular the way the category of worker is reliant on a certain construction of the category of young people as in need of their professional service. The context of the youth club as a group environment is argued to be imperative and to be remembered when looking at individual behaviours and face-to-face interaction.

The nature of interaction in the JU is suggested to be simultaneously predictable and unpredictable; an ordered disorder. The nature of interaction is argued to be influenced by the nature of the environment, location, structure, timing, activities and participants previously described. The dominant forms of interaction were described as unstructured, activity focused and dynamic. Mild aggression is suggested to be pervasive but not necessarily seen as problematic. The dominant features of interaction in this youth club resonate with the limited literature that describes open-access youth clubs suggesting that, although unique in some ways, the JU is recognisable as a typical youth club. The chapter contributes to the limited literature that attends to the everyday goings on in youth work settings.

This chapter has provided the contextual background necessary for the following data chapters. Normal behaviour in the youth club was suggested to, some extent, to be potentially challenging behaviour. The following chapter looks at how certain behaviours are constructed and reconstructed as problematic through social interaction and how problematic behaviours are challenged in practice.

## 5. Identifying Problems

I ask Richard if being in the JU feels any different to being in the school. He says yes. I ask him how? He is quiet for a while. He then said “you can do more of what you want in here but there are limits”. I asked him “like what?” He told me that “you are not allowed to fight - muck about and fight”. Richard then told me that he got chucked out last week for kicking someone. He explained to me that someone had hit him with a pool cue so he had kicked this person. He said one of the workers saw him and asked him to leave. I asked Richard if the other boy had to leave. He said no. I asked him why and if he had told the worker that the boy had hit him with the cue. He said he told the worker but she did not believe him.

(Field notes, 57<sup>th</sup> visit)

### 5.1 Introduction

In the above extract, Richard describes how a worker makes a judgement about his behaviour, drawing on her power in the youth club to identify his behaviour as unacceptable. Whilst behavioural issues, like the physical aggression described above, are an everyday occurrence in many youth work settings, very little is known about the challenging of young people’s behaviour in this context, in practice (Jeffs and Banks, 1999:94-5). To attend to this gap, this chapter explores the social processes involved in identifying certain behaviours as problematic in the youth club, what these behaviours are and the complexities of challenging these behaviours in practice. The chapter seeks to explain what kinds of boundaries around behaviour exist in the youth club.

The chapter, in some ways, speaks to the literature within the field of challenging behaviour that broadly accepts the socially constructed and context dependent nature of challenging behaviour but attempts to define what challenging behaviour is within a specific social setting by asking those working in that setting what they consider to be challenging/problematic (see for example Axup and Gersch, 2008; Lyons and O’Connor; Visser, 2006). Such studies found that low-level disruptive

behaviours (such as persistent infringement of rules or general rowdiness), aggressive behaviours and defiant behaviours are repeatedly perceived as challenging by teachers, for reasons relating to the role and responsibilities of the teacher in that institution (chapter 2, section 2.2.2). Do youth workers find similar or different behaviours challenging? How do these views of challenging behaviour relate to the way in which behaviour is actually challenged in practice? The chapter seeks to discover whether it is useful, or even possible, to create such a typology of challenging behaviour within the context of the youth club and what this might mean for an understanding of challenging behaviour as a social phenomenon.

A range of ethnographic data sources are analysed in this chapter: field-notes; conversations with workers and young people; and evaluation records. The chapter is split into two sections. The first section (5.2) explains how the workers and young people develop a shared understanding of what constitutes problematic behaviour in the youth club. Section 5.2 begins by discussing the absence of a list of written rules or behavioural policy in the youth club and explores how the boundaries around behaviour become known, and are sustained, through interaction. Certain processes of telling, denying and punishing are implicated in the identification of certain behaviours as 'not allowed'. Such rule-breaking behaviours are associated with the concept of challenging behaviour, as they are the behaviours most likely to be challenged by others. The section goes on to discuss how the workers also share an understanding of certain young people as 'challenging'. Finally, the section discusses the role of the evaluation sessions in constructing both people and behaviours as 'officially' challenging in this setting.

The second section (5.3) shifts the focus of the chapter from a consideration of how behaviour is continually being constructed as problematic in the youth club, to examining in more depth how the discourses and practices around behaviours have

come to be identified as problematic behaviour. Section 5.3 is concerned with understanding the complexities and contradictions involved in challenging these behaviours in practice. The section looks at the process of making judgements in regards to four 'problematic', but quite different, types of behaviours: fighting; swearing; dropping litter; and 'not playing properly'. The section ends by concluding what can be learnt with regards to the situational nature of challenging behaviour in practice in this context. The chapter concludes by bringing the findings of the two sections together.

## **5.2 Constructing a Shared Understanding**

This section considers the social processes involved in constructing a shared understanding of the boundaries around behaviour in the JU. Starting with a consideration of the 'official' rules that exist in the JU around acceptable behaviour, the section goes on to consider what these rules are and how they become known through interaction. Certain processes operate in the youth club that draw attention to, and construct, certain behaviours as problematic: telling; denying; and punishing. The discussion of punishments leads into a consideration of why certain young people, over others in the youth club, are associated with 'trouble'. The section ends with a discussion of how interactions in the evaluation sessions influence the challenging of behaviour in practice by the workers.

### **5.2.1 Learning the Rules**

One way of identifying the boundaries around behaviour in any institutional context is to look to the official set of rules targeting those participating in the setting. For example, around the school building where the JU is located, there are large signs with a list of school rules that pupils are expected to observe. Within youth work practice, ground rules are often established in conversation with young people and further conversations take place when young people transgress these rules (Spence et al, 2006:28). Rules create conditions and responsibilities for



participating in any social group and using the facilities of the setting. In this section, the ground rules for social behaviour are discussed. First, the visibility of any rules in the JU is discussed; the absence of a set of written rules from the perspective of the workers is explored followed by a discussion of how the rules are known through practice not paper. Secondly, those behaviours that are widely known to not be allowed in the youth club, identified by the workers and the young people, are considered. Non compliance to these rules – rule-breaking behaviour and authority challenging behaviour – is suggested to often be the first stage in a challenging interaction between a worker and a young person.

As noted in Chapter 4, section 4.5, there is a notable absence of written, codified rules for those participating in the JU. There is no list of rules up on the wall, nor stored elsewhere, for participants to see and refer to. The only visible instructions to participants are two posters on the walls one stating there should be ‘no bullying’ and the other ‘no dropping litter’. This lack of written rules makes it appear, as *Shona* articulates, that there “doesn’t seem to be a set of rules” (*Shona*, Interview data) at all. An alternative perspective is that there are ‘rules’ set by the workers for the young people. This is shown in the example below where two boys negotiate with a worker to temporarily change a ‘rule’ around play on the pool table:

One of the boys asked *Kelsey* if they could play a full game of pool. He added that the second years were away on a trip today at a theme park so there would not be anyone in today. *Kelsey* yes they could play a full game as it was the last session of the year. She then turned to me and said something like “see, I just make up the rules when I want to”.

(Field notes, 37<sup>th</sup> visit)

In the above example, the boys are aware of an established rule around behaviour on the pool table and negotiate with *Kelsey* to adapt that rule. To do this, the boys use reason. *Kelsey* enters into that negotiation adding in her own justification of why it is acceptable to change the rules (she notes the special circumstance; it is the last

session of the year), and the rule is then amended<sup>62</sup>. Negotiations of the rules, like this around the pool table, illustrate: that well-established rules do exist in the JU; the status of the worker as having control over these rules; and the potential malleability of certain rules.

*Kelsey*, as noted in earlier chapters, is a dominant and experienced worker in the youth club. She has the confidence to “make up” (negotiate) the rules in the immediacy of the request to change them; this is not the case for all workers. The absence of a set of codified rules of behaviour creates a sense of anxiety amongst some of the workers, particularly new workers, illustrated by the following reflection from *Alexander*:

A: [...] I think err it would be great for the staff to have totally clear the rules in the JU, what is allowed and what is not allowed. I never get erm explaining of the rules in the JU so I don't know do we have any rules for the JU? [V: okay] Yeah. Erm [...] the rules should be for the staff, for the staff to know what do I have to do when this and this happens? [V: okay] I think the rules are not necessary for the young people erm.

(*Alexander*, Interview data)

*Alexander's* comments suggest a desire to have a set of codified rules to help him in his work. Interestingly, he is not asking for a set of rules for the young people to learn and adhere to, rather he wants a set of rules so that he knows when to challenge behaviour and what to do.

Why is there an absence of codified rules in the JU, if it leaves some workers (and potentially some young people) confused about the boundaries around behaviour? Perhaps a set of codified rules do not exist because of the difficulties in collaborating

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<sup>62</sup> Entering into a process of negotiation over a rule, rather than simply breaking/enforcing a rule, can avoid the emergence of a more challenging situation. What happens when a negotiation is not entered into in this way, and a confrontation develops, is considered in relation to specific cases in section 5.3 below and is the substantive focus of chapter 6, section 6.2.

with the young participants to produce them. The nature of the open-access youth club makes it difficult to create the time and space necessary with all, or even the majority, of young people who participate to create a set of mutually agreed upon ground rules<sup>63</sup>. If a set of ground rules was produced and then displayed by the workers this would seem like a strangely authoritarian approach in the context of the setting. Also, some workers implied that the absence of a fixed and codified set of boundaries was necessary and desirable because what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour is open to change (and by implication should be open to change):

S: Aye because of the people [workers] coming in and went out like there's been a set of rules when one person [worker] has been in there then like what's been tolerable and what's been acceptable and then somebody else has come in and said "well actually we cannae throw them out [the young people] just because of that".

(*Shona*, Interview data)

*Shona's* comments suggest that there is an element of individuality, and thus inconsistency, in what is considered by the workers to be problematic behaviour in the youth club. The difference in an individual worker's tolerance levels and idea of boundaries around behaviour is presented as the reason why a set of mutually agreed rules around behaviour does not exist. This could also be seen as a reason to develop one at an organisational level if consistency is desired.

Whilst the JU may not have a written code of conduct to refer to, there are rules around social behaviour that become known through participation and observation in this setting. This is articulated by *Alexander*, who having earlier suggested there were no rules in the JU, later refers to "the rules" discussing how he came to know where the boundaries around behaviour sit in the youth club through experience:

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<sup>63</sup> There are some potential ways around this, for example creating a set of 'rules' displaying them and then inviting comment from the young people on them. These ideas were not explored with the research participants as there was no consensus that the absence of codified rules was a problem and it was not part of my remit as a researcher to become involved in their processes without invitation to do so.

V: And how do you know these are rules?

A: Erm, because I saw it, I saw it by my colleagues they told them [the young people] off by doing this and this, because of this I learned it is not allowed [V: okay]. I think err the rules growing up with experience. I think I get experience what is okay in the JU, what is not okay [V: okay].

(*Alexander*, Interview data)

*Shona's* comments about her internalisation of the rules support *Alexander's* experience:

S: [...] You dunno what is sort of tolerable or unacceptable or [...] so aye you dunno what to sort of say, aye or not to if there's no rules but then I don't know if it's so hard for me as it is for mebbe a volunteer because I've worked for so long I sort of know what the rules would be if there was rules [V: okay] do you know what I mean?

(*Shona*, Interview Data)

*Shona* suggests that because of the time she has spent in the youth club she automatically knows what the rules are – what would be on the list of rules if such a list existed. So, what are these rules?

Drawing on participant observation and conversations with the workers and young people<sup>64</sup> it is clear that there is a shared understanding amongst the participants in the youth club that the young people are not supposed to engage in certain behaviours. This does not mean that the workers and/or the young people agree with these 'rules' but rather that these are widely known rules about what young people are not allowed to do. Commonly identified types of behaviour that the young people are not supposed to engage in are: fighting; swearing; dropping litter; "mucking about" (e.g. ranging from setting off the fire extinguisher to throwing things around to kicking pool balls about to switching the lights on and off); not playing properly with the equipment (e.g. banging bats off the table tennis table; not adhering to the rules of play on the pool table); and accessing restricted areas (e.g.

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<sup>64</sup> The young people asked, via the question sheet, are not representative of all young people in the JU. Their answers are being used to demonstrate that it is likely young people in the youth club perceived there to be boundaries around their behaviour, and have knowledge of which behaviours are likely to be considered a problem by the workers.

being in the SU, the corridors, the resources cupboards without permission, and the balcony).

Furthermore, those participating in the JU also acknowledge that a young person is not supposed to challenge the worker's position of authority. As one young person pointed out "arguing with the workers" was something they would get into trouble for. Indeed, one of the workers is clear that defying the workers is not allowed: "obviously there are rules like dinnae be cheeky to staff" (*Shona*, Interview Data). This resonates with the literature on challenging behaviour in the classroom, where a young person's non-compliance with the teacher is identified as behaviour that is challenging per se (Visser, 2006:59; defined as "authority-challenging behaviour" (Lyons and O'Connor, 2006:221). Arguably any behaviour by a young person in the JU that breaks the 'known-rules' listed above is potentially challenging behaviour as it is a challenge to the authority of those who created the rules and reinforce the rules and yet authority-challenging behaviour tends to refer to a direct defiance (or resistance) to being controlled. A close examination of the social interactions involved in negotiating 'authority-challenging behaviour' is undertaken in chapter 6. Taking a step back, this chapter focuses on the creation and marking out of boundaries around behaviour in the JU beginning with the processes by which the rules around behaviour become known through interaction and how challenging has become identified with certain young people.

### **5.2.2 Drawing Attention: Telling, Denying, Punishing**

This section considers how attention is drawn to behaviour in a way that marks it out as potentially challenging behaviour within the JU. This involves the process of reprimanding a young person's behaviour, referred to in the youth club as a 'telling' (reprimanding and telling how to behave), the denial of engaging in certain behaviours and the process of punishing in the youth club. The interpretation of behaviour as challenging is suggested to be enmeshed in these processes as

behaviour needs attention to acquire a social meaning. The explicit and implicit actions of the workers and the young people are involved in this.

Within the everyday goings-on of the youth club, public 'telling offs' are common. The workers do also find quieter spaces to 'tell off' the young people, an approach advocated by some workers because of the perception that a public 'telling off' can be counter-productive in controlling behaviour and also humiliating for the young people (*Kelsey*, interview data). However, finding a quiet and private space in the JU is difficult, and much behaviour needs to be dealt with in the immediacy of it happening, thus most 'telling off' occurs in public. These 'telling offs' are part of the continual noise of the youth club, noticeable only as something unusual when they escalate. In a public 'telling off' the workers shout instructions across the room to the young people asking them to change their behaviour in some way or in expressing concern over their behaviour.

Such instructions imply that the young person's behaviour is perceived as something problematic by the worker. These instructions include direct and clear demands for a young person to "stop" doing something, such as swinging a pool cue or standing on the sofa. The workers also make more ambiguous assertions, open to interpretation. For example, the workers use statements such as "language" to challenge swearing and "play properly" to challenge play operating outside the expected boundaries of a game. The latter demands do not, unlike "stop", specify what action the young person should take. With these more ambiguous assertions the tone of what is being said implies there is a problem of some kind with what the young person is doing. The ambiguous statements also assume that the young people share an understanding with the workers of the meaning of "language" or "properly". Both forms of giving a 'telling off' from the workers, direct and ambiguous, are attempts by the worker to control the immediate behaviours of a

young person. They also serve another purpose at the level of the group. The very public nature of 'telling off' serves to construct a shared image of what behaviour is deemed unacceptable in this youth club. Telling off individual young people for their behaviour in this way contributes to the disciplining of the behaviour of all the young people participating in the youth club and in letting new workers know what behaviours they are expected to challenge.

Furthermore, it is not only the workers that publically draw attention to the behaviour of a young person. The young people themselves also suggest that the behaviour of another young person is problematic by instructing a worker or me<sup>65</sup> to intervene in some way to tell the performer of this behaviour off. This is done through the ambiguous statement "tell him" as in the example below:

The other boys put his hand on the counters as well and they were left in a kind of stalemate. One of them said to me "tell him". I did not do or say anything and just stood there watching.  
(Field notes, 42<sup>nd</sup> visit)

In the process of telling me, to tell him, the boy assumes that I will share his perception of the boy's behaviour as problematic. In other instances a young person will explain clearly why another young person should be told off:

As we were playing, Callum called Justin a "wang". Justin asked him to repeat what he had just called him and Callum said, "I said wang". Justin said something about not calling him a "wank" and Callum continued to insist that he had called him a "wang" not a "wank". The boy who had come over with Justin looked to me and said something about Callum being dirty and told me that I should tell him off.  
(Field notes, 29<sup>th</sup> visit)

The young people also draw the attention of the workers to certain behaviours when they ask the worker if they saw, or heard, the behaviour:

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<sup>65</sup> As an adult in the youth club, I am often perceived by the young people to have some authority. The tensions involved in this perceived role are discussed in the methodology chapter, section 3.2.

One of the older boys swore. The other older boy then turned to me and said “you hear that?” to me. I smiled and said that “I heard nothing”.  
(Field notes, 50<sup>th</sup> visit)

Like the instructions to “tell him” discussed above, questions asking an adult if they saw or heard something imply that if the adult had witnessed the behaviour they would interpret it as problematic:

One of the boys hit his opponent lightly on the head with the pool cue. The boy who was hit turns to me and to *Shona* and said “did you see that?” He looked directly at me (obviously I did see it but I choose to not say anything at all). Following my non-response he then looks to *Shona* for a response. She said she “saw nothing” but asked him “does it hurt?”  
(Field notes, 9<sup>th</sup> visit)

The process of one young person drawing attention to the behaviour of another young person with the assumption that the worker will share their interpretation of that behaviour as problematic is only possible if there exists a shared understanding of what problematic behaviour is. At the same time this process contributes to constructing and reconstructing an understanding of that particular behaviour as problematic.

The drawing of attention to the potentially challenging behaviour of others, and the reprimanding of that behaviour, is done with varying levels of seriousness and intent and with varying outcomes. As the examples above show *Shona* and I both acknowledge the boys’ comments but do not confirm the behaviours are problematic. On other occasions the worker might reprimand the person responsible for the behaviour. What is of interest is that, regardless of how seriously the instruction is made or taken, this ongoing process produces and reproduces a collective knowledge amongst those participating in the youth club of the rules of social behaviour, a collective knowledge contributed to as much by the young people as the workers.



Furthermore, the reaction to being reprimanded is also of significance in creating and sustaining this collective knowledge. It is common for those young people perceived to be engaging in problematic behaviours to deny responsibility, expressing their denial through phrases such as: “it wasnae me”, “I didnae do it” or in the case of being asked to move some rubbish off the top of the table football “it’s not mine it was here when I got here” (Field notes, 6<sup>th</sup> Visit). This denial by the young people is expected by the workers as illustrated in conversation between workers during a session evaluation:

*Sarah* said they would never be able to find individuals responsible for dropping litter. *Kelsey* added that even if you are stood watching the young person when they drop the litter, and they see that you saw them drop the litter, they will still say it “wasnae me” if you say to them you saw them do it.

(Field notes, 51<sup>st</sup> visit)

*Kelsey* also draws attention to the way a young person may deny responsibility for an action even when a worker has witnessed their engagement in that behaviour. Interestingly, some young people also express denials in situations where their actions are likely to otherwise have gone unnoticed:

Stephen picked up one of the cues, but the other one wobbled precariously at the end of the pool table. The wobbling cue then rolled off the table and landed with a small crash onto the floor, Stephen shouted out “wasnae me”. No-one had accused him of being responsible and no-one paid any attention as it happened or as he shouted except me who was looking over in that direction already.

(Field notes, 20<sup>th</sup> visit)

Stephen chose to assert his position as not responsible for the falling cue before anyone had even said anything, indeed it only appeared to be me who had noticed. There are different possible reasons as to why a young person would choose to deny responsibility for a potentially challenging behaviour but this is likely to be from fear of being further reprimanded (if already being told off) or to avoid punishment if pre-empting a telling off (punishment is discussed under the next heading). If pre-empted, the denial also serves to draw attention to a person who may not have

received that attention otherwise. What is more interesting, however, is the function these denials serve in relation to identifying the boundaries around behaviour.

Denials give status to the existing boundaries around behaviour as they act as an acknowledgement of 'wrong-doing' without challenging the boundary further. Whether self initiated or in reaction to being accused, a denial by a young person publically suggests that they recognise that the behaviour in question is deemed problematic. If a young person accepted responsibility for the behaviour and challenged the identification of the behaviour in question as problematic then this has potential to destabilise the construction of that particular behaviour as problematic<sup>66</sup>. Through denial a young person confirms the status of that behaviour as unacceptable in this setting.

This section now moves on to an exploration of the role of punishment in the creation of boundaries around behaviour. In comparison to the frequent low level 'telling off' of young people, punishment is relatively rare in the JU. This includes both the threat of punishment and actual punishment. What kind of punishments do the workers use to discipline the young people? The punishments that exist in the youth club are based upon the control of the space and materials within the youth club. *Johnny* describes the kind of incident below that leads to the workers shutting down the youth club – a form of group punishment:

J: "Aye, I can remember times when people have been asked to leave, maybe for like, they shut the whole JU not that long ago. I dinnae ken if you were here [V: I don't think I was] cos people were chucking stuff about it, it was just for the last ten, fifteen minutes. I think you were, everyone with the open bottles of juice and that [V: yep] that was that time, everybody just got

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<sup>66</sup> As shown earlier in the chapter under the heading 'rules' the young people do sometimes challenge the rules through negotiation – attempting to reason with a worker about why they should be allowed to do something that is normally not allowed. On occasion, a young person will challenge the identification of their behaviour as problematic and ask the worker to explain why they should not be allowed to do it, rather than accepting the attempt to discipline them.

asked to leave because they were just chucking stuff, that was Michael and that again [V: okay] it is mostly them that do it, so.”  
(Johnny, Interview data)

Exclusion is the core form of punishment in the youth club. If deemed necessary by a worker, a young person will be excluded or limited in their participations in all or some of the activities in a youth club session. Examples of this in practice include: individual young people or groups of young people (as in the example above) being asked to leave the current youth club for the rest of the session and sometimes for the next few sessions; a young person being told they cannot return to the youth club until they have fulfilled a requirement such as apologising to a worker; the youth club being closed early and all the young participants being required to leave; having access to a desired game or object denied, such as the pool table or the tuck shop.

The application of punishments by the workers has the potential to make clear where the boundaries around behaviour lie in the youth club to prevent them from engaging in that behaviour again:

K: [...] “the only reason I ask young people to leave because I think that if they’re maybe, no punished, punished isnae the right word but I canny think of another one so I’m gonna use it [V: okay] if they’re punished for something that they’ve done wrong then they’ll maybe think twice about doing it again [V: hmm, okay] and maybe begin to be like ‘right I canny be chucking rubbish about, I canny be hitting people in the JU’ ken, it’s never going to work but [K: laughs].  
(Kelsey, Interview data)

*Kelsey* reveals that, although uncomfortable with the word punishment, she uses sanctions to punish the young people to discipline them into behaving differently in the future. This is a very different process to the process of receiving a ‘telling off’. Being reprimanded, is a normal part of everyday interaction, applying a punishment is something unusual that marks the boundaries in a clear way, a set of firmer boundaries around the more flexible ones that are continually being transgressed.

The behaviours leading to exclusion, not unsurprisingly, correspond with those behaviours identified as not being allowed in the youth club. For example, aggressive behaviours: “bullying other young people” (Evaluation records, summer, 2<sup>nd</sup> session), “hit out at worker – banned until apologises” (Evaluation records, summer, 8<sup>th</sup> session), “asked to leave for hitting a boy” (Evaluation records, winter, 19<sup>th</sup> session). Exclusion also results from disruptive behaviours for example being “asked to leave for mucking up pool” (Evaluation records, spring, 21<sup>st</sup> session) or potentially harmful behaviours such as “trying to pull down the boys’ trousers” (Evaluation records, spring, 1<sup>st</sup> session), “asked to leave because they were chucking things again!” (Evaluation records, summer, 4<sup>th</sup> session), “few young people asked to leave for throwing stuff” (Evaluation records, winter, 21<sup>st</sup> session), “sent out for throwing chalk” (Evaluation records, winter, 54<sup>th</sup> session). Exclusion worthy behaviours also include those authority-challenging behaviours discussed above for example being asked to leave after “giving hassle, not listening” (Evaluation records, spring, 7<sup>th</sup> session) and “was being cheeky to staff so was asked to leave” (Evaluation records, summer, 25<sup>th</sup> session).

The behaviours leading to exclusion (the harshest of penalties) taken from the evaluation records include behaviours that on other occasions would not lead to exclusion. This shows that in practice the application of punishments is inconsistent, not necessarily providing a clear message about boundaries. Indeed, many of these behaviours are relatively common in the youth club and so it is often it is not an isolated behaviour per se that leads to exclusion but a culmination of behaviours over time. The workers sometimes adopt a process of giving warnings prior to exclusion or note in the evaluation records that they need to monitor the behaviour of a particular young person or group of young people. Once identified as being close to being excluded, it is likely the young person will be asked to leave one or

two sessions later. This inconsistency may also depend upon other factors as Halpern et al explain in relation to another youth club:

“Enforcement of the rules was uneven. In practice, the reaction of a youth worker to rule’s infraction depended on his or her mood, judgement of how much energy it might take and the perceived degree of risk to youth created by pushing him or her out of the program. On a day when a staff member was particularly stressed, even the smallest infraction could result in a sanction”

(Halpern et al, 2000:494)

Certain young people are, however, more likely than others to be asked to leave. These young people are those that have come to represent what it means to be ‘challenging’ in the youth club and are discussed next.

### **5.2.3 Difficult to Deal With**

Through the ongoing and public process of drawing attention to certain behaviours (as they are told off, denied and punished) as problematic during interaction the rule of how to behave in the youth club become known and certain behaviours become associated with being problematic. As well as certain behaviours, certain young people become identifiable as ‘challenging’ to the extent that these young people come to embody and represent the meaning of challenging to the workers.

The majority of young people participating in the youth club will at some point engage in potentially challenging behaviour and at some point have their behaviour identified as problematic by a worker. Yet, only a small minority of young people who participate in the youth club have the reputation of being ‘challenging’:

D: There’s, there’s certain ones I could pick out that you could say that they’re, if you were to pick out maybe five out of the twenty boys you would pick out of five that you know would cause trouble [V: okay] and that.

(Dave, Interview data)

In the absence of quasi-official labels of challenging behaviour, such as the use of SEBD in the formal educational system, the youth workers unofficially label certain young people as likely to behave in ways perceived to be challenging.

S: “[...] we, I know I do it I’m probably sub-consciously when I’m looking at them [the young people] ranking them with likeliness to kick-off or [P: hmm] or likeliness to cause offence...”  
(*Sarah*, Group meeting data)

Both *Dave* and *Sarah* suggest that the workers label young people in the youth club according to their previous behaviour or reputation for behaving in certain ways. They suggest the workers are able to identify some young people as more likely to be perceived as challenging than others.

The names of three boys, Michael, Henry and Danny<sup>67</sup>, emerge during field work as being perceived by the workers as particularly challenging to work with. They are identified by the workers in their interviews as challenging<sup>68</sup>, their names appear frequently on the evaluation records in a negative light and from observations of interactions in the youth club they are frequently being told off by the workers. The names Michael and Henry in particular are used by the workers to evoke what is assumed to be a recognisable image of a problematic young person in the youth club. This is demonstrated when the workers clarify what is meant by a ‘difficult’ young people through phrases such as: “like the Michaels, Henry?” (*Kelsey*, Interview data); “the Michaels of this world” (*Paul*, Group meeting data); “Michael and them” (*Miya*, Interview data). These boys are perceived to be ‘exceptionally’ challenging in some way in comparison to the ‘normal’ challenging of the majority of the young people participating in the youth club. What is about these young people that the workers find exceptionally challenging?

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<sup>67</sup> The majority of the individual interviews with the workers happened 5 months into the research and therefore before the second cohort of young people began participating in the youth club in August. Whilst this means the workers are only going to suggest names of young people from those young people participating in the first half of the research year, it is the way in which the young people come to represent challenging that are of interest and why they are perceived to be challenging. Also in the second half of the research year no young people emerge as being exceptionally more challenging than the others – perhaps as the young people are still working out their position in the youth club.

<sup>68</sup> Two girls are also mentioned as being two of the most difficult young people to work with. However, only one of these girls came to the JU and only on one occasion so the focus here is on boys who bear the label of challenging.

The workers refer to these particular boys as being disrespectful and ignoring them. This related to the 'rule' described above that it is not allowed to argue with or be cheeky to a worker. *Kelsey* sums up the general feeling of the workers when she says they "just dinnae bloody listen" (*Kelsey*, Interview Data). The boys are not perceived to be particularly challenging because of the specific acts they engage in, such as fighting. Instead they are perceived to be particularly challenging because of the way they conduct their inter-personal relations with the workers. These processes are discussed in more depth in chapters 6 and 7.

Those boys with a reputation for being challenging appear to have their behaviours closely monitored by the workers. *Dave* talks about how he defers his attention to the young people he thinks are likely to cause trouble and *Miya* states that it "on your mind" when they come into the youth club. This is also something I reflect upon in my observations:

I felt that the atmosphere in the room changed when Michael was present in it [...]. The room felt a lot calmer when Michael left the room. I thought that the staff seemed more relaxed (or perhaps this was more that I felt more relaxed) as prior to that the workers had seemed to be watching him and what he was doing all the time.

(Field notes, 11th visit)

Whilst the boys perceived to embody 'challenging' do perhaps test the boundaries more often than many other young people, because of this increased level of monitoring they are also more likely to be noticed for doing so and thus more likely to have their behaviour challenged. This is an interactive process that serves to confirm their reputation as 'trouble' or troublesome. I reflect upon the potential effect of constantly watching Michael during a youth club session in my field notes:

I also saw Michael come in and I clocked this in my head making a mental note to watch him as he is often getting in trouble for his behaviour. However, he was totally fine today. Perhaps I need to be wary of the labelling I am doing and the pre-conceptions I am forming about some of the young people who regularly participate in the youth club.

(Field notes, reflections, 14<sup>th</sup> visit)

In the reflections above I note that Michael “was totally fine today” and therefore not living up to his reputation of causing trouble. This is something that workers also note when they talk about other situations when they have “seen Michael and Henry behaving very differently in like evening clubs” (*Miya*, interview). So whilst Michael and Henry might on one level embody ‘trouble’ there is also awareness that they are not inherently challenging, they behave in different ways in different contexts. There is something of a tension in practice between the workers personifying these boys as challenging versus behaviours (not people) being challenging.

Whilst ‘being challenging’ is not the only role available to Michael, Henry and Danny in the youth club, this label is a powerful one. Michael, Henry and Danny do not shy away from the ‘being challenging’ role, actively performing this identity. The workers acknowledge that these young people might be playing at ‘being challenging’ because of the desire to maintain a certain public status of “coolness” (*Miya*, Interview data) in the youth club. *Kelsey* notes that when the young people are excluded from the youth club they are happy to be because of the kudos it gives them with their peers:

K: “They know they’ve done wrong and they love it, they get a kick out of it because if I’ve asked them to leave the JU [...] I’ll see them that night and they’ll be like “can I come back in the morning, am I still barred?” ken in front of their pals. And they love saying “I’m barred from the JU and that, and it’s like a big thing to be barred from the JU [K: laughs]”.  
(*Kelsey*, Interview data)

*Kelsey’s* view is supported by sociological studies of deviancy and problem behaviour in the school context that argue that boys act out and perform challenging behaviour in front of their peers, working to develop and maintain an identity as ‘challenging’ (see Lyons and O’Connor, 2006:225 for an overview of the various sociological studies of deviancy and problematic behaviour that suggest this).



This is not to say that all potentially challenging behaviour is an 'act'. On one occasion Michael and Henry were involved together in physically aggressive behaviour towards two workers. On the basis of this behaviour, the boys were excluded from the youth club session and told they could not return until they apologised to the workers involved. Michael was quick to apologise and rejoined the youth club as a regular participant. Michael is noted by *Kelsey* as one of the boys who knows how to play the game of 'being challenging' in public but 'being sorry' in private, both maintaining his image as trouble with his peers but also ensuring the workers will allow him to continue participating in the youth club:

K: ...a lot of the time if you address a young person in front of all their pals, then they're just going to be like "ah fuck you whatever you ken" but if you take a young person aside a lot of the wee ones ken the young people in the JU, the Michaels and that, that act the wee hard nuts and that but as soon as you take them aside before you even open your mouth they're like "I'm really sorry".

(*Kelsey*, Interview data)

Henry, however, tried to return to the youth club without apologising. This was unsuccessful. The result was a "Mexican stand-off" (*Sarah*, Group Meeting) between the workers, who continued to demand an apology, and Henry, who refused to apologise. The workers were concerned they had lost contact with a boy who they perceived to "need it" (*Paul*, Group Meeting). Henry stopped trying to come to the JU; a youth club he had previously been a regular participant in and one his friends still came to. He had presumably enjoyed participating in this youth club but felt strongly enough about not apologising to choose not to do so. This does not appear to be the actions of someone 'acting' at being challenging; it appears to be the actions of someone committed (for his own reasons, and these are unknown) to not apologising.

In summary, different workers identify the same young people as particularly challenging to work with. These young people have come to represent what

challenging means in the youth club; they have been informally labelled as trouble. Whilst these young people are perceived to break the rules around acceptable behaviours to a greater degree than other young people this is not perceived to be the reason why they are perceived to be challenging. The workers suggest they find these boys challenging to work with because the boys do not listen to them, defying the worker's authority to tell them what to do and to be listened to. Despite the representation/reputation of these boys as 'challenging', the workers acknowledged the boys behaved differently in different contexts.

The workers constructed the boys 'challenging' behaviour as a product of both psychological and social concerns. The boys were understood to have difficulties forming trusting relationships with adults and as needing to perform a certain social identity in front of their peers. This interpretation mediates the workers interactions with the boys over behaviour and is not formed solely by an individual worker's interaction with a young person, but also through communication with other workers about individual young people. A formal part of this communication occurs in the evaluation session – considered next.

#### ***5.2.4 The Role of the Evaluation Session***

This section considers how the social interactions in the evaluation of the youth club sessions and the behaviours of the young people shape a shared worker understanding of the boundaries around both the young people's behaviours and their own behaviours in the youth club. Following each youth club session the workers gather together away from the young people to discuss their interpretations of the session. In this process certain behaviours and individual young people are identified as needing to be monitored and certain images of young people are created. For example:

At the evaluation after the session, the workers were discussing Callum. They talked about how he can be quite clingy and also how he cheats at the

games you play with him. They also said that he tells a lot of lies about stuff but that afterwards he will tell you he was just lying.

(Field notes, 5<sup>th</sup> session)

Discussing young people in this way leads to a shared interpretation of what Callum is like, potentially influencing future interactions with him. I am also aware that my interpretations of the young people I interacted with are being mediated by the workers representations of them.

Although the discussions can be lengthy and involved, the evaluation record provides only a small space to record the workers' comments on the session – two or three lines. These comments usually refer to any challenging situations encountered during the youth club, any warnings given, any young people asked to leave and anything unusual occurring. The session comments recorded on the evaluation sheets serve as a collective and official memory of the nature of challenging behaviours in this youth club.

Comments recorded on the evaluation sheet are a product of the group interaction during the evaluation session. Different workers take responsibility for writing during the session but they all (to different degrees) discuss what to write down. The evaluation session offers an opportunity for the workers to debate what behaviour they should or should not be challenging, and how to deal with it in the youth club. At times this is an opportunity for a worker to highlight concern about the ways others are or (as in the example below) are not challenging young people over their behaviour:

At the evaluation there was a discussion about the consistency of workers in dealing with the different young people and their behaviour. This seemed to be about being both consistent in approaches from the different workers and in individual workers being consistent when dealing with different young people. *Kelsey* raised this as an issue. As she did so she gave a specific example (without naming of names) of an incident that had occurred today

where the workers stood nearest to the situation had failed to intervene with it. I got the impression that there was an implication that some workers were choosing not to intervene with some young people as it was too difficult.  
(Field notes, 19<sup>th</sup> visit)

In the extract above, the evaluation session provides *Kelsey* with the opportunity to raise perceived inconsistencies around dealing with young people's behaviour in the youth club as an issue. It is clear that the incident in question was in *Kelsey's* (influential) view, an incident that should have been challenged by a worker. By discussing it in the group environment the message is sent to all of the workers not just the workers who had avoided intervening. Thus, as a group exercise the evaluation sessions are likely to influence what behaviours the workers choose to challenge, and in how they challenge them, in their future practices in the JU. In doing so the evaluation sessions potentially serve to discipline the behaviour of the workers as well as recording the behaviours of the young people.

Section 5.2 analyses how, in the absence of a codified set of rules or behavioural policy, those participating in the JU identify the boundaries around behaviour. The young people, the workers and myself as a newcomer to the JU learn the 'rules' through experience, participation and observation. The rules become known as attention is repeatedly drawn by workers and young people to certain behaviours within the youth club session through the process of reprimanding: telling offs, demands of telling offs and denials. Challenging behaviour is suggested to both produce and be a product of the boundaries around behaviour in the youth club. The process of drawing attention to, and labelling certain behaviours as, challenging behaviour works to create knowledge about the boundaries around behaviour. Once the boundaries around behaviour are known they can then be challenged and challenging behaviour can be re-identified. Challenging behaviours and boundary making are thus embroiled in a complicated iterative process of constructing each other. This parallels ideas within the deviancy literature about deviant behaviour

marking out the boundaries around behaviour in any social system (Erikson, 1987:22).

A closer examination of the process of punishing, by taking the example of exclusion from the youth club, reveals that the nature of the rule-breaking behaviour does not determine the application of a punishment. Similar rule-breaking behaviour at other times does not lead to exclusion. It is argued that the culmination of behaviours over time and the association of 'trouble' with certain boys is influential in applying punishments. It is suggested that understandings of what 'challenging' means to those working in the youth club goes beyond rule-breaking behaviours and has become associated with individual young people; in this setting it is three boys in particular. These boys have come to embody the concept of challenging for many of the workers because of their defiance. This observation is followed up in Chapter 6, where the processes involved in interactions involving authority-challenging behaviour are analysed in depth. Attention is also given to the role of evaluation sessions in constructing a shared understanding amongst the workers in: how to interpret behaviour; what behaviours to challenge; and in creating shared images of individual young people through which any interpretation of behaviour then becomes funnelled.

By considering how the boundaries around behaviour become known in the youth club and how a shared understanding of the meaning of 'challenging' is constructed we learn what behaviours are widely acknowledged to not be allowed in the JU and from this can then explore these behaviours in more depth to understand further the nature of challenging behaviour in practice. This is the focus of the second half of the chapter.

## 5.3 Making Judgements in Context

This section explores the discourse and practices around four of the behaviours most frequently identified as problematic in the youth club: fighting; swearing; dropping litter; and 'not playing properly'. A focus on these behaviours, over the length of participant observation in the youth club, is of interest because it reveals many complexities and contradictions in the way these behaviours are interpreted and responded to by the workers. Trying to define what is meant by the four behaviours, and looking at how they are responded to in practice, provides insight into the nature of 'doing' challenging behaviour in the youth club.

### 5.3.1 Fighting

Fighting behaviours are assumed by the workers to be known to be problematic, that it almost does not even need to be said. *Kelsey* illustrates this when she states: "like obviously fighting we wouldn't have that" (*Kelsey*, Interview data). This assumption appears to also be held by the young people, apparent in the reaction of the boys when asked if they come to the JU to (play) fight; two boys laugh at the idea of admitting this (Field notes, 52<sup>nd</sup> visit) and another boy retracts his initial positive response to this question:

For question 6 I told him he could tick as many boxes as he like. He ticked play pool, play table football, meet/talk with friends, talk with workers, play on the play station, play table tennis, meet others and to fight. He then looked at me and said something like "oops shouldn't tick that". I told him not to worry he could tick what he wanted to. I reminded him that the project was nothing to do with the workers here. However, he still used the rubber on the end of the pencil to erase the tick from the box that said 'to fight'

(Field notes, 35<sup>th</sup> visit)

Despite being so 'obviously' not allowed, fighting remains a regular occurrence in the JU. Fighting, and related terms 'fight' or 'hitting', are recorded in 37 of the 129 session evaluation records as something to monitor. As these illustrative comments show fighting is an ongoing concern in the JU:

“Y/P still fighting a lot. To be monitored.”  
(Evaluation records, winter, 19<sup>th</sup> Session)

“Fighting still a problem.”  
(Evaluation records, winter, 24<sup>th</sup> Session)

No other specific type of behaviour of the young people is commented on so frequently in the evaluation records.

‘Fighting’ behaviours encompass a variety of different kinds of physical interactions, “bodily behaviours” of young people (Valentine, 2000:262). These physical or more bodily behaviours are an integral part of the social interactions and relations between the young people in the youth club. They include: kicking; pushing; shoving; slapping; hitting; wrestling; restraining; and throwing things at each other. These bodily behaviours can occur with different degree of aggression and varying levels of mutual consent. The degree of aggression and willingness to be involved in the ‘fight’ can also change during the physical interaction. Such physical interactions in the youth club can be momentary (like a slap around the head with a folder) or prolonged (like a wrestling move that holds a person in specific position for a time). Fighting behaviours are broad and difficult to pin down.

The variation in fighting behaviours and the predominance of physical interactions in relations between the young people suggests that challenging all fighting behaviours would be unrealistic for the workers, despite the assertion by *Kelsey* above that fighting is obviously not allowed. In practice, a distinction is made between “toy fighting” (also referred to as “play” or “fun” fighting) and “real fighting” (also referred to as “bad” fighting). ‘Toy’ fighting is generally considered by the workers to be non-problematic; there is no need to intervene and stop it. For

some workers 'toy' fights are considered acceptable as they are a 'natural' part of the interaction between boys this age:

A: "[...] toy fighting is sometimes allowed and I think it is necessary as well I mean guys at this age [V: okay] to have toy fighting."  
(*Alexander*, Interview data)

It is, however, difficult to determine the difference between 'toy' and 'real' fights, as the specific action might be the same for example hitting, kicking or holding in a 'head lock'. To distinguish between the two, the workers consider whether the young people involved are enjoying themselves, so "when they're laughing" (*Johnny*, Interview data) that is considered to be a 'toy' fight. A judgement is also made by considering the evidence of harm being caused. When I ask him directly how the judgement is made, *Alexander* jokes that he tells the difference between a 'toy' and a 'real' fight by the "blood" (*Alexander*, Interview data). Despite these means of making distinctions, one worker points out that the boundary between 'toy' and 'real' fights is actually quite blurred as 'toy' fighting "turns into a real fight most of the time so, or somebody will end up getting hurt anyway" (*Johnny*, Interview data).

The challenges in distinguishing between a 'real' and a 'toy' fight are apparent in the following extract:

In the busier final 15 minutes of the session whilst I was still playing pool with Shane I looked over at the sofa by the TV. There were three boys sat on the sofa. One of them was Damien. They seemed to play fighting on the sofa. Damien was kicked by one of the other two boys and the boy ran off, I think he left the room. Damien sat on one edge of the sofa and the boy that remained on the other edge. Damien was bowing his head and clutching his arm where the boy had kicked him. He remained in this position for a short while. I saw this but did not go over however I was a little concerned that he might have been hurt. As I was wondering whether to go over or not I saw *James* notice the way that Damien was positioning his body and *James* went over to the sofa. *James* spoke to both of the boys. After a little while *James* turned his back on them and Damien looked up smiling. The other boy called after *James* saying something like "see, I told you he was kidding you". I went over to talk to the two boys on the sofa in between taking my



shots on the pool table. I asked Damien if he was all right, and the other boy replied that he was messing. I said something about Damien looking so innocent and laughed. Damien looked up and smiled cheekily.  
(Field notes, 47<sup>th</sup> visit)

The example above is useful to show the difficulties the workers have in making judgements on the 'seriousness' of fighting and the existence of harm. The boys "kid" and confuse the worker. The possibility that the young people are not being serious raises dilemmas for the worker in deciding whether to intervene or not. The boys are having fun in the example above, partly at the expense of the worker who becomes part of their game.

This discussion suggests that the workers do allow fighting behaviours to occur without challenging them despite initial claims that fighting is "obviously" not allowed. Fighting is not automatically considered problematic by the workers despite a tacit assumption that it should be. The categorisation of fighting as behaviour to challenge is open to interpretation. The workers make subjective, in the moment, judgements on the appropriateness of intervening to stop a fight. Their intervention is based on an interpretation of the harm and good that could come from the 'fighting' for the young people involved. There are some real dilemmas in making that judgement as the intent to harm may not be there but could still result. Fighting behaviours, between boys<sup>69</sup>, are defined simultaneously as normal and problematic in the youth club.

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<sup>69</sup> Although the girls do engage in hitting, slapping and pushing behaviours, they do not feature in the evaluation records as fighting and do not leave the youth club with the boys when the boys leave to 'go fight'. There is not enough observational data on the girl's fighting behaviours to analyse.

### 5.3.2 Swearing

*Kelsey* said “language” to three boys that were sat on the couch. One of the boys responded to her asking ‘what did I say? She spelt it out for him as C-U-N-T. He said ‘I never knew I was saying it’. He seemed genuine.  
(Field notes, 14<sup>th</sup> visit)

The second set of behaviours considered is swearing behaviour, also known as “bad language”. Swear words are frequently used by young people in the JU for what appears to be a variety of reasons. For example, swearing is used during social interaction to express frustration (such as swearing when a shot is missed on the pool table) and for emphasis in conversation (such as saying “that was fucking funny” to stress how funny something was)<sup>70</sup>. Swearing is continually constructed as an undesirable behaviour. It is frequently and publicly challenged by the workers through the use of statements such as “stop swearing”, “language” and “mind your language”. As one boy quite simply stated “if you swear you get a warning” (Young person 1, Question sheet). However, in practice, it is not that straightforward as the workers do not always reprimand a young person when he or she swears. In fact, challenges to the use of swear words are noticeably haphazard in the JU. It is not just that different workers approached swearing differently. The same swear word, used in a similar manner, might at times be challenged by a worker but at other times ignored by the same worker. There is no sustained commitment to abolish swearing in the youth club.

The inconsistency and sense of apathy, across the workers, in challenging swearing can be explained in two main ways. Firstly, swearing behaviours are treated ambivalently by the workers, who at a personal level are not overly concerned about swearing, swearing behaviours are something they do not “really mind” (*Luca*, Interview data). This might be because they are able to ignore swearing

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<sup>70</sup> Swear words are also used (less frequently) in aggressive ways, although in these instances it is the aggression not the swearing that is the crux of the problem. For that the reason the focus here is on the use of swear words in everyday communication rather than as an aggressive “fuck you” type statement to someone else.

unlike other behaviours where immediate harm may be apparent and that forces the worker into taking action. Secondly, the workers perceived swear words to be intrinsic to (many) of the young people's way of communicating both inside and outside of the youth club. It is perceived by the workers to be part of the young people's "everyday language" (*Shona*, Interview Data). Because of this, many of the workers expressed the view that reprimanding the young people for swearing was effectively redundant, "hard to challenge" (*Shona*, Interview data). The perception that swearing is normalised in the daily interactions of the young people is summed up by *Alexander*:

"sometimes the guys are swearing and I know everyone in, for me everyone in [name of local area] is swearing [V: yep] on the bus everyone is swearing so it's, so sometimes I think it is stupid to tell them swearing off 'don't swear, don't swear' [V: yeah] everyone is swearing so ah, I think we have to, there should be more about the swearing it is not enough to just tell them off"

(*Alexander*, Interview data)

*Alexander* suggests that simply reprimanding the young people is not enough. If the workers want to prevent the young people from swearing they would need to take stronger action but if swearing is part of how the young people communicate this could result in tension between the workers and the young people.

So why do the workers continue challenging swearing in the way that they do given the above issues? *Kelsey* offers some insight into this:

K: "[...] swearing I mean that's not even an issue it really isnae, I mean I always say ken 'watch your language' but [pause] it's not really"

V: "So why do you say watch your language, just cos?"

K: "I dunno, cos I'd prefer it if they didn't swear [V: yeah] I would prefer it if they dinnae but they gonnae do it anyway regardless of what I say so, I dinnae mind I mean I dinnae mind if they are using it occasionally or if it's a slip of the tongue but if they're saying 'f-this, f-that like every second word then I think that [V: fair enough] that's quite bad cos if we're erm accepting that in the JU then they're going to be doing that within school and whatever

and they're just going to get into trouble if they're doing it anywhere else. I think it's important just to say that you shouldn't be doing that but sometimes young people don't even realise that they've swore."  
(*Kelsey*, Interview data)

*Kelsey* suggests that she thinks it is important to ensure the young people realise that the use of swear words to communicate is unlikely to be tolerated in other settings. She suggests she has a professional responsibility to challenge swearing when it occurs so that young people learn how to control their use of swear words. Occasional swearing is considered to be acceptable by *Kelsey*, as long as the young people know how to control their swearing and when it would be appropriate or inappropriate not to swear. So whilst *Kelsey* may not, personally, find the swearing behaviours challenging there is a sense that at a professional level she feels she should be seen to be challenging it/attempting to challenge it.

The process of challenging swearing behaviours in this way serves an interesting purpose in the JU. Swearing is constructed as a normalised challenging behaviour. Because the workers take a lenient approach to swearing, never excluding and rarely even punishing anyone for swearing yet at the same time acknowledging that swearing is against the 'rules' this rule-breaking behaviour is broadly deemed acceptable. This means a young person can present themselves as being 'challenging' by swearing, but can do so without any real risk to their participation in the setting. This is illustrated in the following encounter:

On pool table 2, one of the boys was saying "shit" really loudly and looking over in the direction of the workers. *Sarah*, with a smile on her face, walked over to the boy and said something to him like "you were looking right at me as you said that". The boy just smiled and continued to play pool and also swore again. Aside from what *Sarah* had said to this boy none of the workers said anything else to him about the swearing. The boy left the provision, with two other boys, soon after this. As he was walking past the workers on his way out he said something that included the phrase "mother fuckers" in it. Again no-one said anything to him and just ignored the swearing.  
(Field notes, 12<sup>th</sup> visit)

Through verbal and non-verbal communication (smiles on both sides) there is evidence of an unspoken agreement between the workers and young people participating in the youth club that swearing is unacceptable but in an acceptable way. In the encounter above, *Sarah* acknowledges the boy swearing openly in front of her and implies that she thinks he is purposefully swearing to challenge her. *Sarah* does not tell the boy off for this, or ask him to 'mind his language'. Later, the boy swears again and uses a more 'serious' swear word on his way out of the room, perhaps confident having previously tested out the worker's likely response and as he is on his way out anyway. Swearing functions as a 'safe' space in which the young people can test (and be seen to test) the boundaries around acceptable behaviour in the youth club.

Swearing, like fighting, appears to be perceived as simultaneously normal and problematic behaviour in the youth club. The inconsistency and leniency the workers take towards reprimanding young people when they swear is the product of a combination of the workers' ambivalence towards treating swearing as a concern and the difficulties and infeasibility of challenging a behaviour that is so normalised (and thus used so frequently and seemingly unconsciously). Yet they feel that they have some kind of professional responsibility to the young people to make it clear that such frequent and unconscious use of swear words is going to cause them trouble in other contexts outside of the youth club. Swearing is suggested to serve a useful function in the youth club because it is simultaneously known to be allowed and not allowed. Swearing is a means through which the young people appear to be challenging the boundaries around acceptable behaviour. These are boundaries that the workers expect and accept will be challenged but that they continue to reassert. These permeable and consequence free boundaries allow the young people to appear to 'be challenging' in a way that the workers do not find challenging at a personal level. The rule about swearing creates an 'acceptable' means for the young people to break the rules.

### 5.3.3 Dropping Litter

S: [...] just being able to say to them well this what you do and this is what you can do and make sure you put your rubbish in the bucket [V: laughs].

V: The litter it's always.

S: Aye it's a big thing.

(*Shona*, Interview data)

This section focuses on the litter problem in the JU. In the opening quotation *Shona* describes what she thinks young people coming to the JU for the first time need to know. She specifically highlights her desire that the young people put their rubbish in the bin. A request to 'not drop litter' is one of the few rules on public display (in the form of a homemade poster) on the wall of the JU. Rubbish (most commonly chips, sweet wrappers and empty juice bottles) is often evident on the floor at the end of a session. This rubbish is picked up by the workers after the session. There is, in the eyes of the workers, a 'problem' with litter in the JU. Litter is an issue which evokes (in contrast to the uncommitted and unemotional responses to swearing above) surprisingly strong reactions.

Throughout the year of fieldwork, the workers complained about the litter in the JU. This complaining increased following the introduction of the tuck shop after the summer holidays. Concern over the issue of litter led to the decision to introduce a new sanction to the JU, a relatively authoritarian and punitive measure in comparison to the workers' usual practices. A poster was put up on the tuck shop door informing the young people of this new sanction stating: "if there was litter left in the JU then the tuck shop would be closed" (Field notes, 52<sup>nd</sup> visit). To my knowledge this threat was carried out twice. Following the closure and reopening of the tuck shop the workers perceived the 'problem' with the litter to decrease, recording this apparent improvement on the evaluation records.

The threat of closing the tuck shop and going through with it contrasts with the more common and less punitive approaches taken to other potentially challenging behaviours in the youth. For example, it is the norm in the youth club for potentially challenging behaviour to be identified as problematic and/or verbally reprimanded in the moment and then forgotten without sanction. So what is distinct about littering behaviours? I suggest there are four important aspects to the litter 'issue' in the JU that made a more sustained, disciplining approach possible and feasible. Litter is tangible; there is identifiable evidence of the problem that makes it an easy target for intervention. Also, the sanction applied is meaningful and appropriate (it is logical to close the tuck shop in response to increased litter from the tuck shop and the tuck shop is highly valued by the young people who had been asking for 'tuck' for months before it opened. Therefore, it could be presumed that threatening to close the tuck shop would have some effect on the behaviour of the young people.

Furthermore, and saliently, the problem of litter is constructed as a whole group issue and can be addressed at the group level. At no point are any individual young people identified as being the main perpetrators of littering. In the discussion that preceded the introduction of the new sanction it was agreed that there was a need for the young people to take "collective responsibility" for the litter left in the JU (Field notes, 51<sup>st</sup> visit). Collective responsibility is more difficult to apply to other behaviours, such as fighting, where the individuals involved are easily identifiable by the fact that they are the ones in the fight. Collective responsibility was deemed an appropriate response because as *Sarah* argued, with agreement from others, the workers "would never be able to find the individuals responsible for dropping litter partly because of the difficulties of finding the individuals responsible" (Field notes, 51<sup>st</sup> visit). The workers were able to depersonalise their attempt to control the litter problem by introducing a collective sanction (no-one has access to the tuck-shop) collectively. They also depersonalised responsibility for this action as no individual

worker was identifiable to the young people as having introduced the sanction. A 'faceless' poster was put on the wall and when the threat was carried out the tuck shop doors were simply kept closed. The disciplining process as a whole was objectified.

Finally, the dropping of litter evoked strong feelings from the workers evident in their discussions of the issue:

*Sarah* asked me if I have observed the dropping of the litter. I said yes, she mentioned that it really annoys her. She said it annoyed her more than if a young person came up to her and said "fuck you" to her face. She said the way the young people just drop the litter is really disrespectful.  
(Field notes, 15<sup>th</sup> visit)

This association of littering with disrespect offers an explanation as to why the workers felt compelled to take action. It suggests the action of littering is taken personally by some of the workers. The workers' emotional attachment to the youth club implies that the dropping of litter represents a defacing of something they value, something they feel a sense of ownership and pride over:

*K*: it's no a big deal ken it only takes five minutes to clean up and even if we didnae do it the cleaner would do it anyway so it's [litter] no big deal but I just think that I always say "you wouldnae do it in your own house so didnae do it in mine".  
(*Kelsey*, Interview data)

*Kelsey's* comments suggest she thinks that litter should not be a big deal but that somehow it is. The problem with the dropping of litter is that it is perceived as the young people mistreating the youth club, and by implication, disrespecting the workers.

The issue of litter was constructed and treated as problematic behaviour in the youth club in an unusually strategic and punitive manner by the workers. It is suggested this occurred because the workers felt strongly about litter on a personal



level, it could be tackled at a group level and it was possible because the workers had access to a punishment with leverage to change the behaviour of the young people in regards to littering.

#### **5.3.4 'Not Playing Properly'**

The fourth and final behaviour under the spotlight is not playing properly. 'Not playing properly' refers to the playing of games and playing with objects in ways other than the way they were traditionally intended to be used. Throughout my observations of behaviour in the youth club are impressions of spontaneity and creativity in the way young people engage with the games and objects within the JU. Many of the young people look for the potential of play within an object, working out the possibilities of the object and/or game to make it more engaging for them in practice. This includes the (mis)use of objects such as: using plastic bags as rain hats (Field notes, 26<sup>th</sup> visit); the use of fire exit signs as musical instruments (Field notes, 42<sup>nd</sup> visit); the use of plastic cones as loud speakers (Field notes, 20<sup>th</sup> visit); to making up new games where traditional and accepted games exist. Examples of the creation of new games particularly emerge during play on the table tennis table.

Table tennis is an established sport with formal rules of play and scoring systems<sup>71</sup>. Particular 'roles' are assigned to the ball, the lines on the table, the net and the bats. However, a table tennis bat can be transformed into a weapon when used to hit someone and a means to create a 'rhythmic' beat if banged repeatedly off the table tennis table. The young people also often choose to play table tennis outside of the traditional boundaries of play including: volleying the ball without using the table (referred to as 'whacking' the ball at each other); playing away from the vicinity of the table – an 'on the move' game; volleying the ball and using other fixed objects in

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<sup>71</sup> According to the official website of the Olympic Movement, table tennis: "[...]is described as a "miniature" tennis that was played indoors in the 1880s and 1890s. The rules of the game were codified in 1922 by a Cambridge University student, Ivor Montagu".

the place of the table such as the floor or the pool table; kneeling down to play rather than standing up; aiming to hit the ball at or into a specific target such as another person or the bin; making changes to the scoring system. The alternative versions are often more active than a traditional game of table tennis and arguably more engaging for those involved.

These alternative forms of play on the table tennis table often evoke requests from the workers to the young people to “play properly on the table” (Field notes, 7<sup>th</sup> visit). These requests include relatively authoritarian statements from the workers such as: “if you are not going to play properly, don’t play at all” (Field notes, 32<sup>nd</sup> visit). Some workers are determined to ensure young people play in a certain way on the table tennis table as they discuss their strategies to ensure this as is revealed in the following discussion between *Chris* and *Dave*:

There was some discussion between *Chris* and *Dave* during the evaluation about the way that the young people used the table tennis. *Chris* said that he thought he had a good diversionary tactic to use when the young people were not playing table tennis properly. *Chris* said something about challenging the young people to achieve a certain score or challenging them to see how long they could keep the ball on the table. He said that this was a better approach than just telling them to keep the ball on the table. *Dave* said that he would say something to the young people about how they were supposed to be playing table tennis not tennis and would ask them what the difference between the two games was.

(Field notes, 40<sup>th</sup> visit)

Creative uses of objects by young people can lead to confrontations between a worker and a young person to (re)gain control over the object:

One of the workers, *Sarah* had a lot of midge bites today. She had with her a small tube that you placed onto the skin, pressing in the top of the tube, to relieve the bites. Towards the end of the session one of the boys, *Danny* had this tube in his hand. I think *Sarah* had been showing *Danny* how the tube worked. *Danny* went up to the girl playing mastermind and pressed it onto her neck. He said something about how cool this was and went round to do it to other people. *Sarah* started to laugh and said something like “oh no”. I got the impression that she regretted giving it to him. *Danny* was using the object as a means to surprise others, pretending to inject them with it. One of

the workers told him not to use it on people unless they had said it was okay. He seemed to ignore this. The worker asked for the tube back. However, I did not see Danny give it to her.  
(Field notes, 31<sup>st</sup> visit)

In the example above, the workers suggest Danny's use of the midge bite reliever to 'stamp' other young people is problematic because they might not want him too. In the example of the table tennis, it seems to frustrate the workers that the young people are not playing the game as they think it should be played, without questioning why the young people have chosen to play it differently.

When asked, the workers give one of two main reasons as to why they want young people to use equipment in the way it is traditionally intended: to prevent damage to the resources (for example to the bats from mishandling or losing the table tennis balls) and to prevent of disruption to other activities going on around (for example from the table tennis ball flying around the room). The examples of the on-the-move table tennis game and the midge bite reliever both represent an invasion of space, in the former an invasion of spaces around the room (not designated to table tennis) and in the latter an invasion of personal space in the stamping of skin.

In the instruction to a young person to 'play properly', there is an assumption that there is a single 'correct' way to play the game and that all participants share an understanding of what this is. The notion that alternative play is not playing properly suggests such play is considered to be wrong and 'deficient' in some way and that is why it should be considered to be problematic behaviour. Instructions to a young person to do something 'properly' are potentially a source of embarrassment to the young people who may not know, or be able to, 'play properly' having adapted the game to suit their needs. The suggestion that the workers hold a notion that each game or object has a purpose and it should be used within those bounds is shown below:

During the session Michael jumped onto the sofa by the TV and walked across from one arm of the sofa to the other arm. One of the workers shouted across to him that the “sofa is for sitting”, Michael responded with “I know” and continued to walk across coming down off the sofa only once he had reached the end.

(Field notes, 19<sup>th</sup> visit)

“Sofa is for sitting” encapsulates the notion that objects have a singular fixed meaning. Such fixed meanings sit uncomfortable with the processes of creative play that the young people appear to be engaged in. The exploratory approach to these objects that many of the young people take is, on the whole, actively discouraged and viewed as disruptive (to be minimised) rather than as creative (to be encouraged). This overlap between ‘being creative’ and ‘being disruptive’ is articulated by one of the workers:

A: ...Sometimes they [the young people] are too active [V: okay] pushing the [indecipherable] [V okay]. Sometimes I think they are really creative, they are developing a new game so around the ball in the JU [V: okay].

(*Alexander*, Interview data)

Play on the pool tables, however, contradicts previous findings. In essence, a JU pool game is not a ‘proper’ game of pool as there are fewer balls on the table at the beginning. This creative adaptation to a traditional pool game was developed by the workers to suit the context of the JU, not by the young people (who often request to play the ‘proper’ game). Within the confines of this adapted game of pool (where the rules of play are the same as the traditional longer game), the young people police the proper playing of a pool game. Disruption to pool games does occur (such as blocking the pockets with chalk or moving the balls around the table by hand) but it is created by those observing and commenting around the edges of the pool table not by those currently playing the game. The different approaches of the young people to accepted rules of play on the table tennis table than to the pool table demonstrate the young people’s agency in choosing when to cross the boundaries of traditional play and when to stay within them. The pool table also

shows how the workers are happy to adapt accepted rules of play when it suits their purposes.

The section on 'not playing properly' offers an example of how behaviour is very much a matter of interpretation. It is suggested that when the young people are not playing in ways that the workers perceive to be 'proper' they are demonstrating creativity and resourcefulness, potentially positive behaviours. Yet, these behaviours are likely to be perceived as problematic by the workers. They are often viewed in a negative light as destructive and disruptive, partly because of the way these behaviours are involved in the invasion of personal and physical spaces.

Section 5.3 discusses in more depth four behaviours that are constructed as problematic in the JU. These behaviours are shown to ordinarily occur within the youth club, similar to the low-level indiscipline noted in the literature on behaviour in schools (Munn et al, 2007). All four behaviours were ongoing during the research year, and with the exception of litter, no sustained strategy was undertaken to reduce or prevent the behaviours. The workers' reactions were often reactive rather than preventative. It is suggested that in the main these potentially challenging behaviours have become normalised in the youth club. There are different possible reasons for this. The judgements around challenging these behaviours are suggested to depend upon: ideas about potential harm/good of the behaviour; the involvement of personal as well as professional reactions to the behaviour; and beliefs about the possibility of changing behaviour.

The workers' responses to fighting behaviours initially appeared inconsistent but are shown to be based on 'in-the-moment' judgements about the nature of intent and consent in the physical interaction. This example illustrates clearly how difficult

it can be to make judgements about behaviours as they occur, and also highlighted why it would be difficult to take a hard line on these physical interactions. The example of the workers' interpretation of and response to littering offered an example of a clear attempt to solve the problem through a punitive and consistent approach. This is suggested to be because littering evoked an emotional reaction from many of the workers (perceived as defacing and disrespecting an important space) and because they were able to collectively and impersonally respond to littering with a punishment deemed appropriate and effective.

The issue of challenging the swearing behaviours of the young people is useful to show the paradoxes surrounding challenging behaviour in practice. Swearing was identified as acceptable unacceptable behaviour. This is demonstrated in the process whereby workers often challenge the swearing of the young people but there is no real threat of getting into trouble for swearing. Both the workers and the young people sustain the image of swearing behaviours as unacceptable but underlying this show of challenging behaviours is a tacit agreement that the swearing is contained within the acceptable boundaries of behaviour – the young people do not swear aggressively at the workers, and the workers do not respond aggressively to non-aggressive swearing. The discussion of not playing properly offered a different insight into challenging behaviours in practice, suggesting that the creativity of some of the behaviours deemed disruptive and deficient in the youth club is overlooked, highlighting the issue of interpretation in defining behaviour as problematic. Together, the exploration of the workers' responses to "obvious" rule-breaking behaviours in the JU show the complexities involved in challenging behaviour in practice.

## 5.4 Conclusions

This chapter offers insight into understanding the nature of challenging behaviour in the youth club: both the construction of young people's behaviour as challenging and the ways in which that behaviour is challenged by the workers. Working from the assumption that challenging behaviour is a social phenomenon; the chapter explained how social processes mediated the interpretation, creation and representation of behaviour as problematic.

The chapter began by considering the workers' representation of the JU as a space without rules, although as the opening extract from the field notes shows the workers and the young people have a clear idea that there are limits to how the young people can behave. It is argued that whilst there are no written 'objectified' rules for the workers and young people to refer to there does exist an unwritten and widely known set of rules used to govern the behaviour of the young people and the workers' responses to the behaviour of the young people. Interactions, that draw attention to behaviour as a problem, were found to construct a shared understanding of acceptable and unacceptable behaviours in the youth club. A 'telling' was described as the core process by which workers reprimand a young person for a certain behaviour or a young person requests a behaviour be reprimanded by a worker. This process of repeatedly identifying certain behaviours as problematic is furthered through the denials of this behaviour by the young people and when official sanctions are applied by the workers.

Official sanctions or punishments imposed by those in power (the workers) were shown to be rare in the youth club. Whilst punishments can provide a clear message about acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in the youth club (as the opening quotation to the chapter shows), an analysis of the way in which exclusions are

applied shows a single type of behaviour is unlikely to lead to exclusion, it is more likely to be the product of a culmination of behaviours and interactions rather than a single behaviour where the workers have lost control of a situation or a person. The chapter found there were certain young people who were consistently more likely to be identified as the 'most difficult to deal with' by the workers; young people who have come to embody the meaning of 'challenging' in the youth club. Their behaviour is perceived by the workers to be exceptionally challenging because of their repeated defiance.

Through observing interaction and questioning the participants, certain rules of behaviour emerged in the youth club making it possible to create a set of rules about what behaviours are not allowed in the youth club. These included rules about where the young people can go in the youth club, what they can do and how they can interact with others. The list of rules is widely known despite the absence of a structured and formal means of transmitting the rules. Authority-challenging behaviour in the form of not listening and defying orders from a worker was suggested to be more important than the breaking of individual rules. The initial behaviour may challenge the rules but not the worker, refusing to respond to the worker challenges the rules and the worker. Because defiance is suggested to somehow be fundamental to understanding the nature of challenging interactions, this aspect of micro-interaction is the focus of chapter 6.

To draw out the complexities of challenging rule-breaking behaviour as it occurs, this chapter looked in more depth at four commonly reprimanded behaviours: fighting; littering; swearing; and 'not playing properly'. It was found that challenging behaviour in practice is reliant on professional and personal judgements made in the moment as behaviour is interpreted for potential harm and good and decisions are made in regards to how, if it all possible, the behaviour can be



changed. In addition, by offering alternative interpretations of 'not playing properly' as a creative as well as disruptive force the role of interpretation in defining behaviour as problematic is brought to the fore. This section of the chapter found that judgements, interpretation and emotions are implicated in the process of challenging behaviour, a point that is picked up and developed further in chapter 7, as the significance of humour in this process is examined. The chapter suggests there is value in adopting a flexible approach to potentially challenging behaviour, when challenging behaviour is ongoing and perceived to be integral to the identity of those participating in this space. There remain, however, anxieties in doing this, especially from those with less experience in the youth club. The complexities of adopting this more flexible approach reflects the complexities of working with young people perceived to be 'challenging' within the value framework identified in Chapter 4.

Overall, the chapter suggests it is difficult to reach a subjective contextual definition of challenging behaviour because although certain types of behaviour are repeatedly acknowledged as problematic, in practice there are inconsistencies in whether and how these behaviours are challenged. There are rules about behaviour, but no rules on how to respond to rule-breaking behaviour. Throughout the chapter there is an ongoing tension between trying to discuss and understand the nature of challenging behaviour without fixing and determining what challenging behaviour is. The behaviours articulated as 'problematic' in the youth club, whilst constructed as unacceptable behaviour, actually seem to sit within the boundaries of acceptable and normal behaviour in the youth club. The behaviours are purported to not be allowed but yet they are allowed to continue – in the sense that they are ongoing, expected and uneventful. The behaviours might be allowed to continue because the young people attend voluntarily and if the workers adopted a more punitive approach this would reduce the number of young people attending. But these behaviours might also be allowed as they create a space for the young

people to perform challenging behaviours in a non-problematic way. There is a sense that the young people and the workers are involved in playing some form of interactive game of performing problematic behaviours and performing the challenging of these problematic behaviours. This means in practice, the majority of interactions involving potentially challenging behaviours, are 'held' or 'located' in the boundaries of acceptable unacceptable behaviours. Only occasionally do these interactions move across a further boundary into the realm of simply unacceptable behaviour.

## 6. Control in Practice

During the evaluation session, *Kelsey* said that she thought that in general today none of the young people were listening to the workers. She mentioned one girl in particular called *Becky*. *Kelsey* described *Becky* as a girl who “doesnae take a telling<sup>72</sup>”. *Becky* was also described as someone who can be disrespectful to the workers. *Kelsey* and *Sarah* described their experience of being in the Thru Space today. They described how *Becky* and some other girls had been bouncing and fighting on the sofas in this area. *Kelsey* said that when they asked the girls to stop doing this, they had said something like they “didn’t fucking care” and had continued to pummel each other.

(Field notes, 12<sup>th</sup> visit)

### 6.1 Introduction

‘Control in practice’ is a term used by Jeffs and Banks (1999:94) in their discussion of ‘Youth Workers as Controllers’. The term relates to the methods of practice used by youth workers to control the behaviour of young people during their participation in youth work activities. Youth workers are generally expected to manage, to some degree, the behaviour of the young people they work with. They are in a position of responsibility for the young people accessing their services and in a position of authority over that service and associated resources. Control in practice, despite raising “many of the biggest day-to-day ethical dilemmas” for youth workers, is little discussed (Jeffs and Banks, 1999:94). In the JU, negotiating control over the behaviour of self and of others is a mundane and ongoing process of everyday social interaction. These negotiations increase in visibility when a worker attempts to exert influence and control over the potentially challenging behaviour of a young person. At this point potentially challenging behaviour can develop into a confrontation between a worker and a young person over the young person’s

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<sup>72</sup> “Taking a telling” describes the process of a person listening to and accepting advice or being reprimanded for his or her behaviour. Not taking a telling is a form of not listening to someone else, usually someone in a position of authority. A ‘telling’ was introduced in Chapter 5, section 5.2 as relating to a ‘telling off’ or ‘telling what to do’.

behaviour. This chapter is interested in exploring what happens once this confrontation arises.<sup>73</sup>

This chapter is structured around the progression of a confrontational interaction between a worker and a young person over the young person's behaviour. To do this, these interactions are broken down into stages: workers attempting control, young people's responses to that control, and the workers' response to the young person's response and so on. This is a false separation of a much more fluid process (which is brought together towards the end of the chapter) but the separation allows for a discussion of the core options available to both the young people and the workers as the interaction progresses.

The chapter begins with a brief discussion of the kind of authority the workers have in the youth club. Following on from this, the ways in which the young people in the JU comply or defy with a worker's request to change their behaviour is examined and categorised. Focusing on defiant actions, section 6.3 starts from those moments when a young person refuses (whether directly or indirectly) to comply with the worker's request. The response of the workers to this defiant behaviour is then explored and categorised. The chapter as a whole, but particularly in section 6.3, considers the strategies the workers and the young people use to negotiate control and the processes that work to de/escalate confrontational interactions between workers and young people as these confrontations emerge and develop. The chapter assumes confrontations are an inevitable part of everyday life in the youth club. It considers the processes which facilitate the negotiation of these confrontations in a way that enables the ongoing co-existence of workers and young people in this space.

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<sup>73</sup> This focus excludes those approaches to controlling behaviour that adopt an impersonal and out of the moment response, for example the collective and strategic approach to reduce the littering in the JU, as discussed in Chapter 5, section 5.3.

This chapter emerges from the observation that the crux of the 'challenge' in challenging behaviours, when working with young people, arises not in the performance of a potentially challenging behaviour by a young person but when a worker attempts to control that behaviour and a young person resists that control (this is first indicated in chapter 5, section 5.2.3). This process of challenging authority through non-compliance and defiance is suggested in other research to be challenging per se, regardless of any other contextual factors (Visser, 2006:59). This chapter contributes to a debate of whether 'defiance' is inherently challenging by looking at what happens in practice when the young people defy the authority of the workers.

As the earlier literature review notes, there is little written about the immediacy of managing behaviour in the context of youth work (exceptions to this include Halpern et al, 2000; Jeffs and Banks, 1999; Spence et al, 2006; Stuart 2003, 2004) and even less empirical observations of these practices (exceptions to this are Stuart, 2003, 2004 and Halpern et al 2000 – none of which are UK based studies). Attending to this gap in the literature, the chapter considers how the workers and young people negotiate control over the young people's behaviour by looking at processes of control and resistance in interaction. To do this, the chapter analyses observational data of confrontational interactions between workers and young people in the youth club. These include, where appropriate, insightful interactions in which I participate.

## **6.2 Attempting and Responding to Control, Emergent Confrontation**

Despite the dearth of literature on the topic of managing behaviour in youth work practice, issues of controlling young people's behaviours are frequently faced by youth workers (Jeffs and Banks, 1999:96, Stuart, 2003:15). The reluctance to engage with the issue of managing young people's behaviour is suggested by Jeffs and Banks to be a contemporary one. They note that early practitioners (1940s to the 1980s) "held control and good discipline to be the key to effective youth work" and were willing to offer instructions on how to maintain good order (Jeffs and Banks, 1999:94). These early practitioners were also aware of the potential problems of using discipline in youth work practice, conscious of the need to differentiate themselves from teachers and were wary of excessive discipline (Jeffs and Banks, 1999:94-96). Similarly, Stuart (2003) found that some of the youth workers he interviewed for his study were reluctant to use terms such as managing behaviour or behaviour management (although they were unable to think of a suitable alternative) because of its associations with exerting direct control over someone and with behaviour modification rather than a negotiation (Stuart, 2003:243). The handful of academics that have written on the topic of managing behaviour in youth work practice suggest that youth workers have to find ways of controlling young people without "resorting to harsh and inappropriate stratagems" (Jeffs and Banks, 1999:96), advocating that youth workers need to operate from a position of "power-with", rather than power over young people (Stuart, 2003, 2004).

Those who have conducted research in the area of youth work practice found that workers generally managed dissent through negotiation where they had relationships with the young people that allowed them to do this. Dissent is suggested by Spence et al (2006:28) to provide an opportunity to have a conversation about ground rules, an opportunity to discuss why the young people are not engaged with an activity. Control of young people in youth work practice is

perceived to be necessary and justifiable when it is done in the interests of protecting the safety and wellbeing of the young people (Stuart, 2004:19) and promoting their welfare (Jeffs and Banks, 1999:98) or in the interests of equality of access and equality of treatment of young people (Jeffs and Banks, 1999:98). It might therefore be necessary to control young people's behaviour to change the atmosphere of a youth club, to prevent the oppression of individual or groups of young people and to ensure the young people are not putting themselves or others in danger (Jeffs and Banks, 1999:98-99). Jeffs and Banks (1999:99) suggest there is a need to avoid "unwarranted intervention and paternalism" when responding to a young person's behaviour. In the JU, the workers are in an awkward position where they are responsible for the young people's behaviour but do not necessarily have, or want to have, authority over that behaviour. Section 6.2 begins by considering the concept of worker's authority in the youth club and the way in which they try to directly control the behaviour of the young people.

### **6.2.1 Authority and Trying to Control**

"The youth workers need to be more tough if people are being fucking cheeky."

(Young person 1, question sheet)

The description of the sessions in chapter 4 creates the image of a chaotic, disordered and somewhat unpredictable space. However, this disorder was also shown to have an ordered nature. Interaction is structured by the school timetabling and monitored by the workers. The monitoring of behaviour by the workers means that (to different degrees and in different ways) they try to maintain overall control over the space and bodies interacting within it; to do so they try to control the behaviour of individual young people. To impose order on interactions in the JU the workers need to have the authority to do so. What does authority mean in this context, and where does it come from?

In most institutional contexts where adults interact with young people, adults are assumed to be in a position of power over young people. This is reflected in interactions in the JU as authority is bestowed onto those with adult status. The young people come to an adult (including myself) on the assumption that the adult has the power to sort out behavioural issues<sup>74</sup>. Chapter 5, section 5.2 discusses how the young people often ask an adult to “tell off” another young person. The young people also demonstrate their recognition that the workers are in a position of authority in the youth club when they ask a worker’s permission to go against the ‘rules’ of the youth club, for example if they want to play a full game of pool. In doing so, the young people adhere faithfully to the image of the workers as in a position of authority in rule-making and rule-breaking in this context.

The young people do not, however, always defer to the authority of the worker. At other times the rules are broken without permission from the workers to do so. At that point (as chapter 5, section 5.3 discusses) the workers have to decide whether to attempt to control that behaviour or to ignore it. To exercise control, the workers need to have authority. Some of this authority comes from the power they hold in being able to restrict access to the JU and resources within it. Authority also appears to come from the position that the worker holds in the youth club as paid workers, on the whole, exercise greater authority over the young people than the volunteer workers. *Lucas*, volunteer worker, perceives this to be an issue of respect:

L: Yeah it depends on I think the workers maybe [V: okay]. The volunteers er we are more er flexible [V: okay] the other workers, the proper workers are strict, more strict with them,

V: Okay, so do you think the proper workers have got more control over the, over the young people or?

L: Er, they.

V: Or enforce more?

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<sup>74</sup> My position in these power relations are discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, section 3.2.



L: The young people respect more [V: okay] respect them [paid workers] more than the volunteers. In, in the way of, I mean, in the way of they are aware of that he's the boss or [V: okay] she's the boss and but they, they are more free and so, they I don't know, they can speak, they speak more with you if you are a volunteer than if you are the boss [V: okay]

(*Luca*, Interview data)

*Luca* suggests that the young people pay more heed to the 'proper' workers, which are those workers that are paid, than the volunteers. From observing interaction in the youth club, authority appears to come less from the workers' status as paid or unpaid – that might be more to do with the workers' own perception of their authority to enforce rules - and more from their relationship with the young people. Those workers who appear to get along better with the young people, who the young people banter with and know the names of, tend to be more effective when they exercise control in the youth club over behaviour, in particular *Kelsey* and *Dave*. This is also a product of their personalities; both are fairly dominant, friendly and outgoing characters in this context. In contrast, *Miya*, a volunteer worker, feels the young people have no respect for her authority:

M: Well I don't think they have any relationship to me [M: laughs] erm I think most of them have a good relationship to *Kelsey* and she's the one, and *Shona* as well, and *Dave* [V: okay] because they know them very well and they are the ones that have respect, and well get most respect so I tried really hard to, for example to try them, to make them not go into the corridor or something, but they just don't listen to me and then erm so I just stopped trying [V: okay] and I gave up after a while and [pause] I think they don't really listen to *Johnny* as well because he's so young [V: okay] so [V: so why do you think?] it depends on the worker [V: yeah, okay].

(*Miya*, Interview data)

*Miya* suggests that relationships and respect are inter-related in the youth club and that any respect from the young people for a worker, depends on the worker – it is not automatic because of having a 'worker' status. She draws attention to the names of three workers, who all have connections to the local area as those who have respect because they know the young people so well. *Miya* does however point out that being from the local area alone is not enough, as she perceives *Johnny* who also

from the local area to be less respected by the young people because of his relatively young age.

Although the young people may not always, to the same degree, respect the authority of the workers to tell them what to do, the workers have to try and do so when they perceive the situation to demand it of them. The ways in which a worker attempts to directly exercise control over a young person's actions are by telling the young person what not to do/or what he or she should be doing – this can be a clear request with direct instructions (e.g. stop swearing) or a more ambiguous one (e.g. play properly). Such a request, at times, refers directly to a reason why the young person should change his or her behaviour (e.g. it is not safe, it is against the rules). The workers may include a threat with their request (e.g. stop doing that or you will have to leave) but this is relatively rare, and more likely to come during, not at the beginning of, a confrontation over behaviour. A verbal request is accompanied by non-verbal communication (such as a stern look or a move closer) and at times the attempt to control involves no verbal communication, such as moving across the room towards the young person whose behaviour is being targeted. The remainder of section 6.2 discusses the young people's initial, and related, responses to the preliminary attempt by a worker to control their behaviour. This is an analysis of the embryonic stages in an emerging confrontation. These responses are organised along a continuum of compliance to defiance categorised into three possible responses: simply doing as told, measured compliance/resistance and clear defiance. These are used as a framework to organise the analysis of the young people's actions.

### **6.2.2 *Simply Doing as Told***

'Simply doing as told' refers to the process of a young person complying without protest or challenge to a worker's demand that he or she change their behaviour in some way. In complying, the young person avoids the development of further

confrontation with the worker. Because of their fleeting and uneventful nature, processes of immediate compliance are easily overshadowed by the more 'dramatic' occasions of defiance by young people but yet they are part of the story of how control over behaviour is negotiated in the youth club. In looking at compliance as well as defiance, it is clear that in the youth club although certain young people are more likely to comply when asked to than others, and others are more likely not to, it is not the case that certain young people *always* comply and other *always* defy. Even those young people associated with 'trouble' sometimes comply when asked to. For example Michael, one of the boys who is suggested as representing what challenging is to the workers of the YDA (see section, 5.2, chapter 5), leaves when asked to by *Kelsey*:

Michael had what looked like a large plastic syringe (without a needle) filled with an orange liquid; the liquid was the same colour as the juice in the girl's bottle. The noise from the group had attracted my attention and the attention of the workers by the board games table. *Johnny* and *Kelsey* came over to where Michael was standing. When the workers came over Michael hid the 'syringe' from their view. He didn't say anything to the workers or to the young people stood around him. He was just smiling and holding onto the 'syringe' very protectively. *Kelsey* asked him to take whatever he had outside. Michael did make a move out of the room but he did so slowly and without revealing what he was holding.

(Field notes, 28<sup>th</sup> visit)

In this example, Michael retains control over the problematic object but does comply with *Kelsey's* request to take whatever he is holding outside. What is going on when a young person complies with a worker's demand to do something?

The process of compliance can be divided into two types: passive and active compliance on the part of the young person. At times a worker appears to have successfully controlled a young person's behaviour. This passive compliance refers to the times a young person does as a worker requests, but to do so the young person does not need to make any effort to change their behaviour – therefore it is unknown whether the young person would have changed his or her behaviour even

if the worker had not intervened. A common example of this in the youth club would be those moments when a worker hears a young person say a swear word and the worker exerts his or her authority to control that behaviour and says to the young person “stop swearing”. If the young person does not swear in the immediacy after the worker has said this, it appears that the young person has done as the worker has asked. This may be the case. However, the young person may also have not have been intending to swear again anyway. If that is the case, then the impression is one of compliance but really all that can be said is that the young person did not choose to go out of their way to defy the worker and swear again. The point is, with passive compliance, the young people have not had to actively relinquish control of their behaviour to the worker. The young person’s sense of self determination and autonomy is not threatened; they have not necessarily lost any control over their actions. In these instances, the young people have effectively ‘taken a telling’ – something the girls in the opening of this chapter were described by the workers as being unable to do – rather than doing as told.

On other occasions a young person chooses to allow a worker to control their behaviour, doing as they told to, even when it appears that, given the freedom to do so, they would rather be behaving differently. This active compliance refers to the moments where a young person does as a worker requests even when it goes against what the young person had initially wanted to do or had been in the middle of doing. The following example shows two boys doing as they are told to by a worker. In this example the active compliance occurs without protest and the boys walk away smiling:

*Kelsey* came over to the pool table. I am unsure what attracted her attention to come over to this table as the two boys there were peacefully setting up a game of pool. *Kelsey* went over and looked at the list of players for pool table 1. *Kelsey* said to the boys setting up that they were not next on the list to play. She looked again at the names. She then went over to the two boys who were playing on the games console and told them that it was their turn to play on the pool table. They got up and took over the game that the other

two boys had set up. Justin turned to the other boy he had been about to play before *Kelsey* intervened and said something about it being his fault. They were both smiling as they walked off.  
(Field notes, 32nd visit)

In this example the worker offers the boys a reason as to why they have to leave their game and let someone else play – it was not their turn. However, since the boys whose turn it was had not demanded their go on the pool table, the boys who had set up the pool balls could have been annoyed and argued with the worker but they simply do as they are told. Actively complying with a worker, when it means relinquishing control over something the young person appears to value doing, is infrequent. More often a more strategic approach is taken to compliance that involves a measure of defiance with it. This is discussed in the next section under the heading ‘measured compliance/resistance’.

### **6.2.3 Measured Compliance/Resistance**

Measured compliance/resistance refers to the strategic way in which young people, on the one hand, comply with a worker’s authority whilst, on the other hand, resist being controlled by the workers. This is a very common form of interaction in the youth club. It involves confrontations over a young person’s behaviour, whereby the young people re-assert some control over the situation and their own actions. The young people’s performances of compliance and resistance are ‘measured’ as although they do as directed by the worker they do so in their own terms and/or in their own time. These are performed in different ways.

One way in which the young people comply with the workers on their own terms is by doing as they are told but doing it in a way that is likely to be deemed unacceptable by the workers:

One of the boys dangled himself from the basketball hoop. At this point one of the workers asked him to come down. The boy did this by simply letting go of the hoop and dropping to the floor.  
(Field notes, 18<sup>th</sup> visit)

The boy in the example above had got onto the basketball hoop by climbing up the climbing frame running up the side of the gym wall. Instead of coming down that way he dropped from the hoop. In literal terms the boy fully complied with the worker and 'came down'. However, it is fairly safe to assume that the worker would have preferred them to come down the 'safer' way via the climbing frame as it is likely that the reason for asking the boy to come down was to prevent the risk of the boy falling. This process of literally doing what a worker asks is also used by Danny to his own advantage in the next example allowing him to both comply with what *Johnny* asks him to do and to also tacitly defy *Johnny*:

Danny was telling a story, he was quite animated and whilst he was speaking he knocked over one of the boxes of beads. A lot of people (including me) around the table laughed. *Johnny* told him to "pick up some of the beads". Danny picks up a few beads and puts them back into the box. He turns to *Johnny* and said "I've picked up some". There were still lots of beads on the floor.

(Field notes, 39<sup>th</sup> visit)

In these two examples the process of resistance is safe-guarded by the more visible process of compliance.

A second way in which the young people comply but assert control over the situation is through the use of sarcasm:

*Kelsey* asked one of the boys to "gonnae stop doing that with the cue please?" The boy said "sorry" very loudly and a little sarcastically but he did stop playing with the cue.

(Field notes, 17<sup>th</sup> visit)

Danny also uses sarcasm when made, under duress, to apologise to a boy that he is accused of making cry:

"Danny said "sorry" to the boy on the sofa in a very loud, exaggerated and almost sarcastic tone. Danny then turned and strode out of the room."

(Field notes, 19<sup>th</sup> visit)

In both these cases, the boys hint towards sarcasm but leave their behaviour open to interpretation. This ambiguity offers a space for the workers to ignore the defiance and the boys to avoid getting into further trouble.

A third way in which the young people comply to a worker's request but on their own terms is by showing their distress at having to comply

Tim walked up to the table and picked up the bat and started to play a game with one of the male workers stood there. There was a boy sat on the sofa next to the table tennis table. Prior to sitting on the sofa this boy had been stood next to the table tennis table. Tim and the male worker had been playing table tennis together for about a minute when *Shona* shouted over to the boy sat on the sofa. She asked him if he was waiting for a game of table tennis. The boy replied yes. *Shona* went over to the table tennis table. She pointed out to Tim that he had just walked up there and picked up the bat but that it wasn't his turn to play. Tim said that the other boy had just been sat there. *Shona* said that the other boy was to play now. Tim said something in protest and dropped the bat heavily onto the table and walked away.

(Field notes, 18<sup>th</sup> visit)

Tim demonstrates his unhappiness at having to do so, and at having his actions controlled in this way. Tim's actions as he walks away – dropping the bat heavily on the table – are an expression of anger; they are also a means for him to express some control over the interaction and reassert his autonomy over his actions. This is done primarily through non-verbal communication as Tim drops the bat and walks away without saying anything.

The young people also use time strategically to perform measured compliance/resistance. This occurs in two main ways. The first is when a young person pauses before complying. This wait in time may only be a few seconds but those few seconds are important as they represent, or give the impression, that the young people are thinking about what to do – that they have a choice whether or not to comply. Their action is much more than a mere submission to authority:

Stephen went out of the door holding the fire exit sign. *Sarah* asked if she could have the sign back please, she said that it needed to go back up on the wall next to the door. Stephen paused for a few seconds and then handed the sign back to her. *Sarah* thanked him.  
(Field notes, 42<sup>nd</sup> visit)

Other times the pause between request and compliance is longer as in this example where Lewis even cheekily asks if anyone wants to play a game with the ball he has just been asked to put away by *Kelsey*:

Lewis then went into the resources cupboard. He came out bouncing the basketball that the other boys had brought out earlier. He was dribbling the ball on the floor. *Kelsey* asked him to “put the ball back, please”. He did not respond to her and continued bouncing the ball near to the resources cupboard. As he was doing this, he said “does anyone want a game of basketball?” *Kelsey* was stood near to him but she did not do anything. Lewis then kicked the ball back into the resources cupboard and walked off. After this one of the workers shut the resources cupboard door and it remained closed for the rest of the session.  
(Field notes, 32<sup>nd</sup> session)

The time it takes for Lewis to comply, without a further demand from a worker, implies that he has control over when he complies even if he acknowledges his compliance was a given. This pause may include an initial expression of outright defiance as in the case of Michael below:

At pool table 1, I noticed *Kelsey* intervene in one of the games to ask the boys (who weren't playing) to keep away from the table She asked them to move back from the table. As *Kelsey* asked the group of boys to stand back from the pool table, only 1 boy (Michael) spoke back to her he said “nah”. Despite this he still did move after he said this.  
(Field notes, 6<sup>th</sup> visit)

In these interactions, the young person is demonstrating the possibility of defiance, playing with it, before eventually complying. The effect is to reduce the apparent control the worker has over the young person's behaviour. The young person makes the point through his or her actions that they are in control of his or her own actions, not the worker.



A young person's compliance can also be momentary, as in the cases where the young people comply with what the worker asks them to in that moment but a few moments later they directly defy the worker. The worker gains control of the situation and leaves; on leaving the young people 'undo' their compliance and re-assert their control over their own behaviour:

*Sarah* came over to the resources cupboard. She asks the boys to leave the room and they do. *Sarah* is then distracted by something else and the boys go back into the resources cupboard  
(Field notes, 54<sup>th</sup> visit)

In the following example Stephen complies (although he explains to *Johnny* that he will have to defy him) and waits until *Johnny* is out of sight before doing what he has just been told not to:

*Johnny* came back into the room as two boys were throwing a bottle half full of liquid at each other. *Johnny* went over to the TV corner where the bottle had just landed. He asked Stephen (who had picked up the bottle) not to throw the bottle back. Stephen said something like "I am going to throw it back at him" (referring to the boy who had thrown the bottle at him). Stephen did not throw the bottle straight away while *Johnny* was still stood there but as *Johnny* walked away Stephen then lobbed the bottle back across the room.  
(Field notes, 21st visit)

The young people actions are strategic as they negotiate control over what they can and cannot do by patiently waiting and giving the appearance of compliance. In these examples the boys are willing to give the workers the impression that the workers have control over their behaviour before dismissing the worker's demands as soon as the worker is no longer monitoring them.

The process of responding to a request from a worker with measured compliance/resistance is suggested to be a strategic action by the young people to negotiate self-determination in the face of being controlled and to create a space of resistance without escalating the confrontation over the behaviour. The young people's actions serve to create a space where control can be shared. This process is

articulated by *Paul* in an evaluation session when he recounts his earlier interaction with a girl who he had been trying to get to leave the art department, *Paul* noted after some time of telling the girl she needed to leave:

[...] that the girl said she would leave but by the other door rather than the door the worker suggested she leave by. *Paul* said that he interpreted this as her retaining control over the situation whilst still leaving as requested.  
(Field notes, 20th visit)

*Paul* identifies the key to the process of simultaneous compliance and defiance, as he interprets the girl's actions as allowing her actions to be controlled without relinquishing all the control to the worker. The girl continues to exercise power over the situation, when power is being exercised over her. This is an example of negotiation in action between the worker and the young person over a young person's behaviour. Whether this process of negotiating shared control works to de-escalate the emerging confrontation is going to depend on what happens next, how the worker responds. When the young people respond to a worker's attempt to control their behaviour with measured compliance/resistance the confrontation is more likely to escalate than if the young person has simply done as they were told. However, it is more likely to de-escalate than when the young people are more obvious with their defiance, a process under consideration in the next section.

#### **6.2.4 Clear Defiance**

In the cases of 'clear defiance' there is no attempt by the young person to show compliance to the worker's demands. The young person refuses to do as asked by a worker. Clear defiance occurs when a young person actively chooses to dismiss an instruction from a worker, such as in the example below:

At the beginning of the session, one of the boys was swearing quite loudly. The boy said "shite" and *Johnny* said to him "no swearing". The boy then said "crap" and proceeded to shut the door to the provision behind him as he left the room.  
(Field notes, 13<sup>th</sup> visit)

In this example, the boy directly defies *Johnny* before strategically leaving the session, avoiding further confrontation over his behaviour. In the next example, a

boy directly defies *James'* request not to play a final short game on the pool table. This boy also leaves the session after he has finished but did not do so in a hurry like the boy swearing above and thus took the risk of further confrontation over his actions:

*James* told the two players on pool table 1 that they could have two more shots each on the black ball. One of them potted the black ball and then they both left. *James* reached over to put the white ball down one of the pockets. Another boy who had been stood around the edge of the table brought out 3 of the coloured balls and lined them up near to one of the corner pockets. *James* said "no" to the boy and something about how "it was time to go". The boy ignored *James* and took hold of a cue. The boy took shots on each of the three balls potting them in turn as *James* and I stood around the table. The boy had to give the last ball an extra push with his hand to get it to go down the pocket. The boy then left the youth club.

(Field notes, 47<sup>th</sup> visit)

The boys in the two examples above do not try and justify their defiance in any way to the workers, effectively closing off any negotiation over their behaviour as they simply refuse to do as they are told to by the workers. They communicate this non-verbally by refusing to engage in verbal communication with the worker, simply continuing their game. The refusal to negotiate also occurs in the process described in chapter 5, section 5.2, where the young people deny any responsibility for the behaviour being challenged by a worker and on the basis of this denial are also refusing to do as the worker asks, for example pick up litter they have been accused by a worker of dropping.

In other examples of clear defiance a young person may explain to a worker their reasons for being defiant. For example, Stephen (who has recently moved into year 3 at the school) is no longer supposed to be coming to the JU during term-time but he still does. On one occasion, *Johnny* tells Stephen he has to leave the JU and that he can go to the SU if he wants to. Stephen does not leave; instead he reasons with *Johnny* telling him he says he does not like going to the SU. Stephen directly defies *Johnny* and remains in the JU – Stephen does this by telling *Johnny* he is going to ask,

another worker, *Sarah* if he can stay. Stephen stays for the remainder of the session spending his time near *Sarah* and metaphorically out of *Johnny's* reach (Field notes, 49<sup>th</sup> visit).

In other incidences of clear defiance a young person may question the logic and authority behind the worker's instructions to change their behaviour. In one example of this, *Johnny* had asked Danny to stop hitting the top of the table football with his rolled paper artwork as it might get broken, in response:

Danny pointed out to *Johnny* that the top of the table football was glass and he was hitting it with paper so it was not going to break. Danny said this in a way that seemed to imply he thought that the worker was being ridiculous and he continued to use his artwork to hit the top of the table football.  
(Field notes, 19<sup>th</sup> visit)

Later on another worker, *James* tells Danny to stop leaning on the table football and hitting it with his artwork, Danny asked *James* to tell him why he should, in response:

*James* said to Danny that he was disrupting the game and that he was making it hard for Callum to play. Danny turned to Callum and asked him if he could still play the game. Callum said he could still play. Danny repeated this to *James*. *James* then said something about Danny annoying Callum. Callum responded to this by saying something like "Danny was not annoying him as he was ignoring him".  
(Field notes, 19<sup>th</sup> visit)

Danny, through a process of wanting to know why he should allow his behaviour to be controlled by the workers, reveals the incongruity of the reasons given by the workers and uses that as a means to justify his refusal to do as they ask. Danny refuses to accept that the workers simply have authority to tell him what to do without giving a reason as to why.

Section 6.2 began by considering the way in which the workers, from their position of authority, attempt to control young people's behaviours by telling them to

change their behaviour in some way. The young people have the option of complying or defying with that request, and often their response is a complicated mixture of both. The response that a young person chooses is difficult to pre-determine as it appears to very much depend on what is going on in that moment and the relations with those involved. Although it is difficult to predict the specific response of a young person when attempts are made by a worker to control his or her behaviour, it is suggested that there are three main options available to the young person, that create different kinds of spaces from within which the worker has options of how to respond. The examples given in section 6.2 only show the first stage of the negotiation of control, the emergence of a confrontation between a worker and a young people. Section 6.3 focuses on the development of a confrontation between a worker and a young person, considering what happens after a young person resists a worker's attempt to control his or her behaviour in some way – looking therefore at those times a young person responds with measured compliance/resistance or clear defiance.

### **6.3 In the Face of Defiance, De/Escalating Confrontation**

During one holiday youth club session, Kirsty and Danny have been running around the youth club threatening to “batter” each other with the table tennis bats they have in their hands. The workers told them both to put down the bats. Danny put down his bat, but Kirsty blatantly defied the workers and ignored their demand. Not unsurprisingly, Danny is aggrieved that he has put down his bat and Kirsty has not. He complained about this to the worker. The worker responded by saying that Kirsty had been asked to put her bat down but that “there isn't much else they could do if she didn't do it” (Field notes, 19<sup>th</sup> visit). This worker's comment is interesting as it reveals a sense of powerlessness and lack of options that the workers may feel when dealing with defiance in this context. So, what actions do the workers engage in if a young person refuses to do as they ask?

The workers respond to this challenge in a variety of strategic ways: pursuing control, waiting and watching and letting go. Similar to the responses the young people engage in, in response to the workers telling them to do something, these further responses from the workers can be placed on a continuum of holding onto and relinquishing control. How this public negotiation or confrontation over control develops between the worker and the young person is analysed, and the processes that help to de/escalate confrontational interactions between workers and young people over a young person's behaviour are examined. Throughout any confrontation or negotiation the young people and the workers may adopt a variety of the responses or strategies described above and below – they are not mutually exclusive.

### **6.3.1 Pursuing Control**

Pursuing control refers to the decision by a worker to persevere with their attempt to gain control over the behaviour of the young person. In these instances the workers appear committed to managing the young person's behaviour and continuing the confrontation until the young person acquiesces.

One way the workers appear to take control of a young person's behaviour following defiance is by moving closer to the young person. This happens on those occasions where a worker has initially attempted to control a young person's behaviour from a distance – usually by shouting an instruction to them:

During the session one of the boys stood up and balanced on top of the metal radiator grill that runs around two sides of the room. He was reaching up to the overhanging balcony. *Sarah* shouted over to the boy asking him to come down off the radiator. The boy shouted back to *Sarah* something like "it's cool". She shouted back something like "I know it's cool, but it's not safe to be up there". The boy made no move to come down from the radiator instead he started to walk along the top of it. *Sarah* walked over to where the boy was and he came down.

(Field notes, 44<sup>th</sup> visit)

Following two attempts to 'shout down' the boy from the radiator without success *Sarah* makes a move towards the boy. At this point the boy comes down. *Sarah's* effort to move across the room is a very tangible display of her commitment to take control of the boy's behaviour without engaging in further verbal confrontation. A similar process appears in the emerging confrontation between Rob and *Kelsey*. Rob is sat on the edge of the table tennis table playing with his mobile phone as two other young people are playing a game of table tennis:

*Kelsey* then shouted over to Rob that he was not to sit on the table "please". Rob ignored her like he had ignored *Johnny* [who had also asked him to get down]. In response *Kelsey* got up from the board games table she was sat at and walked across the room towards the table tennis table. *Kelsey* got as far as between pool table 1 and pool table 2 when Rob got off the table tennis table.

(Field notes, 14th visit)

In both of the examples above, further confrontation is avoided. There appear to be two important elements at work to enable this to happen involving the 'space' between the worker and young person. Firstly, the initial space between the worker and the boy provides the boy with a barrier from behind which he can be defiant. Secondly, the time it takes for a worker to cross this space and get close to the boy gives the boy time in which to comply with the worker whilst also maintaining some control over the situation (as in the process of measured compliance/resistance above). In these examples, the movement of the worker to get closer to the young person is as important as the outcome of being close to the young person in terms of taking control. The move is symbolic. The worker gives the impression that he or she is going to pursue the change in behaviour he or she is demanding. Before the workers are in a position where they need to decide or not to take further verbal action the young people change their behaviour as requested. The young people comply both *in their own time* and *in time* before the workers reach them.

Another way in which the workers continue to try and take control in the face of defiance is to stand firm and simply repeat their demand to the young person. They

are likely to do this if they judge the situation important enough – this usually involves behaviours where physical harm appears to be occurring:

Rob had another boy in a headlock. Rob had one of his arms around the neck of the other boy. I was later told by one of the workers that this is a wrestling move called the 'sleeper'. The theory is that you hold someone's neck and head in this position until they 'fall asleep'. *Kelsey* told me and the other workers in the evaluation that the boy's face was going purple. I watched *Kelsey* ask Rob to stop doing what he was doing to this boy and let him go. She had to ask him at least twice before he let the other boy go. When Rob did let the boy go, the boy fell to the floor as if unconscious. *Kelsey* and *Johnny* stood over the boy who appeared to be pretending to be unconscious and Rob walked off towards pool table 1.

(Field notes, 14<sup>th</sup> visit)

In this instance, there is an urgency to get Rob to let go of the young person and a real need to as the young person being held in the sleeper position is potentially being hurt. As *Kelsey* notes this harm is quite visible to the worker as the boy's face is going purple. Rob releases the boy from the headlock after *Kelsey* has repeatedly asked him to. Following this the workers do not reprimand Rob, focusing their attention on the boy who is potentially harmed.

In some situations (where it is possible) the workers take control of an object involved in the confrontation rather than focusing on the young person's behaviour:

*Dave* told off one of the boys for playing on pool table 1 whilst also having his name up on the list to play on pool table 2. *Dave* was often strict on the rules regarding signing up for and playing pool. Following this, the boy went to write his name on the list for pool table 1 as well. Tim got quite annoyed with this boy. Tim told *Dave* what the boy was doing. *Dave* said to the boy that he would score out his name on the sheet if he continued to write it up there. The boy continued to write his name up there and *Dave* walked over and scored it out.

(Field notes, 13<sup>th</sup> visit)

In this situation the boy does not re-write his name, and the confrontation ends with *Dave* scoring out the boy's name. It could, however, have easily developed into a battle over the list. In this case the boy 'let it go' and did not retaliate to *Dave's* actions. Space was perhaps created for this, as *Dave* directed his attention to the object



in dispute rather than the boy. *Dave* took control of the object but not control of the boy's behaviour - not reprimanding the boy for his behaviour and thus providing a space for the boy to save face in the interaction.

On other occasions the workers' decisions to take control can lead to further confrontation. In a similar vein to *Dave* in the above example, *Graeme* makes a threat and follows through with it. *Graeme* introduces a new rule after the boys at the pool table ignore his demands that they stop swearing. When the boys continue to swear, *Graeme* persists with his new rule and takes pool balls off the pool table. This had mixed results in terms of stopping the boys from swearing (perhaps because their swearing is not deliberate) but *Graeme* continues enforcing his new rule. Tom, one of the boys playing, gets more and more aggrieved by *Graeme's* persistence in enforcing the new rule which disadvantages Tom a lot in the game and he ultimately loses the game. This confrontation culminates in Tom claiming that Michael (the other player) had cheated because of the way that *Graeme* had been taking his balls off the table and Tom then picking up one of the remaining pool balls and throwing it down forcefully onto the pool table (Field notes 19<sup>th</sup> visit). *Graeme* may have exercised his power over Tom but he did not gain control over Tom's behaviour. Also Tom retains a feeling of victimisation and frustration that shortly after leads to a brief altercation with another worker over his perceived lack of respect for one of the workers, with Tom responding that he did not think he was treated with respect by the staff. And later on Tom walked out of the youth club session before it finished after an angry exchange with a worker. When I asked about the circumstances surrounding Tom leaving the worker told me:

[...] that Tom had left early after he was asked to stop doing something. The worker said Tom had complained about this as he felt other young people had not being asked to stop doing things or told off for other stuff.

(Field notes, 19<sup>th</sup> visit)

The focus on Tom's experience over the course of a session shows that being firm and inflexible with a young person can have a counter-productive effect. Tom was

riled by his treatment during the pool game and this led to him having an ongoing feeling that his behaviour, more so than the other young people, was being monitored and controlled.

The workers also take control of a situation through using their power to control access to the setting. This is done through the use of threats and through the use of negotiation – sometimes simultaneously. Threats of exclusions or threats to bring in the teachers (as chapter 4 discusses, section 4.3) are used by the workers when they feel the situation is out of their control. Whilst the threat to bring in the teachers never became a reality, the threat of exclusion was applied (if infrequently). Exclusions are used by the workers to take control, as they remove the ‘problem’. *Kelsey* states “If I get stressed, I do [ask a young person to leave], I admit it” (*Kelsey*, interview). *Kelsey* ‘admission’ also reveals her disappointment at having to ask a young person to leave as well as her recognition it is about her feeling out of control “stressed”. *Dave* describes what happens when the workers can no longer control the behaviour of the young people:

“Most of the situations are easily, well not easily, but they can be controlled [V: okay] but if not then that’s when we have to sort of ask them to leave [V: okay] which we dinnae like doing but then if the situation gets that bad then it cannae be resolved, we have to ask them to leave. Whether it’s one of them, two of them, or a crowd of them.”  
(*Dave*, Interview data)

To regain control over the youth club space the workers remove those posing a threat to the internal stability and to the maintenance of the boundaries around behaviour. At times the whole session is closed early removing all the young people. When the workers take such action they are taking control of the space; reclaiming the space as they exclude all the young people from it. In doing so, the workers clearly display their power over the young people to remove them from the setting. This is done not in negotiation with individual young people but as a last resort when the workers feel they have no other option.

However, at times the workers have to offer a deal to the young people to get the young person to do as they are asking them to, including leaving the youth club. The workers' control over access to the youth club and resources within it provides them with the leverage to do this. This is crucial leverage, because as the interaction between the worker and Kirsty at the beginning of the section showed, the workers have limited options if a young person refuses repeatedly to do as they have asked. If a young person who has been asked to leave refuses to do so, the worker is in an awkward position with limited options available to make the young person leave. It is at this point that it can be useful to offer the young people a deal:

The workers recorded on the evaluation sheet that Danny and Michael had been asked to leave today. *Kelsey* remarked how they had actually left really easily when it can often be a real struggle to get them to leave. She said that Danny had been refusing to go until Michael had said "come on let's go" and Danny went with him. *Kelsey* said she thought it helped that she had said if they left now then they would be allowed back in to the underground tomorrow.

(Field notes, 22<sup>nd</sup> visit)

*Kelsey* refers to a bargain she makes with the young people to encourage them to leave. Michael plays his role in brokering the deal, and encouraging Danny to leave with him. Further confrontation is, at this point, avoided.

The workers on one occasion refuse to negotiate with a young person (Henry) who has been excluded from the youth club for hitting a worker. The workers insist that the boy apologises to the worker before he is allowed back in. Henry refuses to apologise, and chooses instead to no longer participate in the youth club – having the power to do so because of the voluntary nature of participation. This outcome was perceived as necessary but undesirable by the YDA staff team at their group meeting about challenging behaviour in their youth clubs:

J: I think probably what you're talking about is being fair i.e. if we do [pause] put in something process that involves sanctions then you know do we lower those sanctions?

S: Change them...

J: For someone like [name of girl] when you know [P: hmm] somebody else you'd throw the book at them.

P: Yeah.

S: Yeah, so there's.

J: So for example Henry's still not allowed in the Underground because he won't apologise to Johnny.

P: Is it Johnny?

J: Er, so he you know.

S: It's a Mexican standoff now he's not coming anywhere near it.

J: Yeah he's not coming in.

P: So we've lost somebody who really needs it?

J: Hmm, well personally I think he was actually a danger in there [P: hmm] so I wouldn't let him in anyway so but [P: um-hmm] well the next step we need to get is where if you know somebody's coming in and [p] lighting a lighter in someone's face and they will not even acknowledge staff then I'd say "no way, you can't have them in".

P: Um-hmm.

J: I mean erm.

S: He also.

J: The health and safety around that is just horrific.

*(James, Sarah and Paul, Group meeting data)*

This discussion is of interest as it shows that the workers consider being flexible important in how they respond to the behaviour of different young people and construct different boundaries dependent on their perception of the young person. They are however clear that whilst they perceive Henry to "need" the youth club and contact with the workers, they cannot back down and let him back into the JU

because his behaviour has become, in their view, a “danger” – these boundaries are non-negotiable. The workers have exercised their power to take control of the space in the JU; maintaining it as, in their view, a safe space. They have, however, sacrificed their relationship with Henry to do so.

### **6.3.2 *Waiting and Watching***

In contrast to making another move to taking control of a situation, it often appears as if the workers are not taking any action in response to young people refusing to do what they have asked them to. Actually, on closer examination, the workers are engaged in what appears to be a process of strategically ‘waiting and watching’. This makes sense when the most frequent form of defiance by the young people is measured compliance/resistance involving complying in their own time and on their own terms. Waiting and watching creates a space (monitored by a worker) for the young people to decide what to do. Illustrative examples of this include *Johnny* telling two boys to stop fighting (they are engaged in what looks like ‘toy’ fighting) on the sofa. They ignore him and continue fighting. *Johnny* does not ask again but continues to stand next to the boys and after a short while they stop (Field notes, 28<sup>th</sup> visit). In another example, introduced above (section 6.2.3) in reference to a young person’s measured compliance/resistance, *Kelsey* asks Lewis to put the ball back. Lewis ignores her but she remains close to him and waits:

Lewis then went into the resources cupboard. He came out bouncing the basketball that the other boys had brought out earlier. He was dribbling the ball on the floor. *Kelsey* asked him to “put the ball back, please”. He did not respond to her and continued bouncing the ball near to the resources cupboard. As he was doing this, he said “does anyone want a game of basketball?” *Kelsey* was stood near to him but she did not do anything. Lewis then kicked the ball back into the resources cupboard and walked off. After this one of the workers shut the resources cupboard door and it remained closed for the rest of the session.

(Field notes, 32<sup>nd</sup> session)

In using this example to firstly illustrate a young person’s measured compliance/resistance (see section 6.2.3) and then secondly, here, to illustrate a worker’s strategy of watching and waiting the flow of this relatively ‘silent’ but

strategic interaction is captured. In both of the examples given in this paragraph, the boys comply with the workers after some time has passed. In both examples the workers also maintain physical proximity to the boys and the problematic behaviour. The actions of the boys could be interpreted as choosing to stop fighting or putting the ball back of their own accord or as doing what the worker has asked them to – most likely a combination of both.

Waiting and watching does not always lead to compliance and it might be used in conjunction with other responses. Also, it might not always be the most appropriate response for the workers to take. In the examples above, the young people are engaged in what could be interpreted as playful behaviour. If they were involved in a violent and aggressive fight with each other the workers may have to take more assertive action to take control of the situation more quickly. The workers' response of waiting and watching evolves in conjunction with the young people's actions and the nature of the behaviour being 'struggled' over. The workers display a level of trust that the young people will stop in their own time. They do not, however, walk away and leave the young people alone, they continue to monitor the behaviour – surveillance (through close physical proximity in these instances) being a form of control in itself. The action of waiting and watching also provides space for the workers to decide what their next action will be as well as space for the young people to decide whether to continue with what they are doing or alter their behaviour. This all happens implicitly through interaction. Control is being negotiated tacitly, often through non-verbal communication, not through overt verbal bargaining strategies.

### **6.3.3 Letting Go**

In the face of defiance the workers sometimes 'let go' and back down from their attempt to assert authority over a young person and get him or her to do something. This can happen in different ways. In the example of Kirsty at the beginning of

section 6.3 and her refusal to put down the bat, the worker involved demonstrated a feeling of powerlessness and perceived it unlikely that further confrontation would lead to Kirsty putting down the bat. Researchers in Spence et al's book on youth work practice refer to their experience in one youth work setting of observing "a series of 'small battles of will' between the young people and the workers" (Spence et al, 2006:36). These small battles of will are familiar to interaction in the JU. This is an illustrative example of such a 'battle':

There were two boys stood near the table football eating their sandwiches. They put down and left their empty sandwich wrappers on the edge of the table football. *Kelsey* went over to the table football, and asked them to "move it", referring to the sandwich wrapper. The boy said "it's not mine it was here when I got here". *Kelsey* looked at them, she seemed to consider what they said and then moved away, leaving the wrapper where it was sat on the edge. She neither made them move the wrapper nor challenged what they had said but nor did she pick it up herself and put it in the bin. The wrapper was still there at the end of the session, at which point the workers who go around and pick up the rubbish put it in the bin.  
(Field notes, 6<sup>th</sup> visit)

In this example, neither the worker nor the young people put the rubbish in the bin. The worker does not try and force the boys to put the rubbish in the bin – she lets it go.

In the following example, *Danny* defies the request of both *Johnny* and *Sarah* to stop throwing food. Rather than forcing the issue and insisting that their request is met, *Sarah* engages *Danny* in conversation about something else and in this example the food throwing stops:

*Danny* was eating his lunch at the board games table. He offered a piece of his flapjack to *Sarah*. She thanked him for the offer of the food but said no. *Danny* then offered me a bit and I responded the same as *Sarah* had. He was quite insistent. When nobody took a piece he broke a piece of the flapjack off and threw it across the room in the general direction of *Johnny*. He then threw some more. When a piece narrowly missed *Johnny's* head, *Johnny* told *Danny* to stop throwing bits of food at him. *Danny* laughed and continued to do it. *Sarah* then also asked *Danny* to stop throwing the food. *Danny* also ignored *Sarah's* request. *Sarah* tried to engage *Danny* in a conversation about

his dental braces. She was commenting that she thought he didn't seem to have any braces the last time she saw him but that they had reappeared today. He was pointedly winding her up in a fun way, by first denying that he had braces on now and then making her think she had the wrong word for it (she is not from Scotland) and then denying he had ever had a conversation with her before about his braces. She took it good naturedly and was laughing as he tried to confuse her.

(Field notes, 20<sup>th</sup> visit)

*Sarah* gives the impression that she is no longer trying to stop Danny from throwing the food, that she has decided to 'let go' of her desire to change his behaviour. However, she then appears to move onto a different strategy, one of distraction. In this instance, this technique works well as it is a subtle means of gaining control over a situation whilst avoiding further confrontation. This is useful when the young person is refusing to listen to direct demands to change their behaviour. Engaging the young person in another activity is an indirect way of negotiating control over behaviour. Actions like these do not involve the use of authority to negotiate control and avoid the kind of confrontations that have been the focus of this chapter.

In the examples above, the worthiness of the struggle seems important as the wrapper can be left there without causing any harm, the throwing of the food and Kirsty running around with bat are potentially annoying and disruptive but they are not causing visible harm or damage. If the workers had chosen to insist upon their authority being adhered to by the young people in these situations, they would have been further opening up that authority to being challenged. It would also likely lead to an escalation of the confrontation as it would be difficult for either the young person or the worker to 'let go'. When the workers 'let go' and decide not to insist on their demands being followed by a young person this may be interpreted as the worker losing control over the young people's behaviour but this may be seen as a strategic action rather than a defeat. The same applies when a young person



chooses to comply (whether through the process of measured compliance/resistance or by simply doing as told).

The above section has explored the different actions workers take in response to a young person's subtle or clear resistance to the workers' attempts to control their behaviour. The workers' responses in the face of this defiance were categorised into: pursuing control; waiting and watching; and letting go. The actions the workers adopt are shown to depend upon a mix of contextual factors: the nature of the behaviour under dispute (especially if it is causing immediate harm); their determination to demand respect for their authority; and the way in which the young person performed their defiance. The workers' responses involve different degrees of confrontation: with taking control being very confrontational; waiting and watching relying less on confrontation and more on the disciplining effect of supervision and distraction; and letting go being a process of minimising the escalation of the confrontation. The workers, on the whole, demonstrated resilience to being defied, helped by the way in which most of the defiance by the young people is momentary and merged with compliant behaviour.

## **6.4 Conclusions**

This chapter began as a study of confrontational interactions between workers and young people. In exploring the ways in which both social groups respond to these confrontations, the focus shifted from confrontation to understanding the interactive processes that create space in a confrontation for compromise and cooperation. In many ways 'control in practice' is about the everyday mini-power struggles between the workers and the young people. The issue of power, and power relations, is suggested to be an important theme when working with young people perceived to have challenging behaviour (Humphreys and Brooks, 2006:20).

Successful control in practice in the youth club is argued to rely on a process of sharing control with rather than exercising control over. Which is an approach advocated by Stuart (2003, 2004) in his work on behaviour management in Australian youth work. Control in practice is judged a 'success' in the youth club when it does not compromise the values underpinning the youth work practice in this setting. Such values include: facilitating the young peoples' desire to continue participating in the youth club and engaging with the workers and protecting the welfare and safety of the participating young people. The overriding tension in 'control in practice' is between enabling the young people to participate in the youth club on their own terms and constraining their behaviour to reduce the risk of harm to themselves or others.

The process of sharing control can only occur in practice with the cooperation of both the worker and the young person. As in any process of negotiation, if one person opts out of the negotiation process then the negotiation breaks down. The process of sharing control is not easy, requiring adept social skills, especially when this process occurs under the watch of the rest of the group. Control in practice is not only about the control over specific actions but it is also a display of power to others. This parallels the process in chapter 5, section 5.2, where the public nature of a 'telling' identifies for the group (those observing as well as those participating) that certain behaviours are deemed unacceptable in the youth club. These (often invisible) processes intermingle to influence the actions of the workers and the young people and suggest that it is important for those involved in the confrontation to maintain a sense of control at a personal but also a public level.

The young people negotiate their share of control, when the workers exercise control over them, through the strategy of measured compliance/resistance and the workers do the same in response with their strategy of waiting and watching. In the

process of sharing control, someone has to 'let go' at some point to ensure the confrontation is contained. At times, the young people let go as shown when they actively and passively comply with a worker's demand. At other times the workers let go, shown when they decide not to force their authority and back down during the struggle over behaviour. The workers also let go when they choose not to respond to the resistance element of the young people performing measured compliance/resistance. Finally, the young people sometimes let go when the worker pauses their request for the young person's behaviour to change, changing their behaviour before the worker is possibly compelled to ask them to change it again.

There is a recurring narrative about the unpredictability of behaviour in the youth club (see the last part of section 4.4, chapter 4 that introduces this narrative); suggesting that the way in which a confrontational interaction will develop is difficult to predict. However, this chapter provides evidence that there is an element of predictability to the way a confrontation develops, as some behaviour is more or less likely to encourage other behaviour in a confrontational interaction and the escalation or de-escalation of that situation. For example, the process of letting go is suggested to be more likely to occur when a space is created for those involved in the confrontation to 'save face'. This is particularly important in the group context:

*"The more effective youth workers generally tried to enforce rules and set limits in ways that did not lead to escalation of a situation, and allowed youth to maintain a sense of control, thereby allowing them to avoid being humiliated in front of their friends."*

(Halpern et al, 2000:494)

It is also important for the workers to feel that they can also save face. Of salience is not getting into a position in the interaction where this process is no longer an option for those involved. When this happens social relations break down, an undesirable result in relation to the purpose of the youth club. The way in which the workers and young people tend to negotiate confrontation implies there is an

understanding from both groups of the need of the other to maintain a sense of control, as both create moments and spaces for the 'face saving' to occur.

Starting from the assumption that challenging interactions involve a process of control and resistance, this chapter explored the dilemmas of dealing with defiance, and the strategies for coping with coercion. In doing so, the role of verbal and in particular non-verbal negotiation are highlighted as crucial in understanding how control in practice operates in the youth club. This chapter shows that most confrontations over a young person's behaviour are resolved without drama in the youth club through the use of indirect communication about behaviour. Indirect requests are deemed less threatening than direct requests and allow space for save-facing (Pomerantz, 2005:26). It is argued that it is important emergent confrontations are resolved or contained in a way that is generally agreeable to both the worker and the young people to sustain their co-existence in the youth club. This is able to happen in the youth club because defiance is generally accepted by the worker. The workers do not ignore defiance but neither do they attempt to eliminate it completely. At the same time the authority of the workers to exercise control in this setting is generally accepted by the young people as the young people find ways to challenge this authority without attempting to destroy it completely. Challenging interactions are suggested to be social phenomena that ordinarily arise when working with young people. The negotiations involved in these interactions are embedded in the experience of being in the youth club. A closer look at how this experience is managed is the focus of the following chapter exploring the significance of humour and fun when participating in challenging interactions in the youth club.

## 7. Having a Laugh

Question: How many youth workers does it take to change a light bulb?

Answer 1: The light bulb doesn't need to change, the system needs to change

Answer 2: It depends on whether the light bulb wants to change

Answer 3: None. When you are burnt out, it is better to curse the darkness

Answer 4: None. We empower youth to change the light bulbs

Answer 5: None. The proper procedure is to refer cases of burn out to an Employee Assistance Professional

Answer 6: They won't change it but it will take 50 of them to write a paper on coping with the darkness

Answer 7: None. The bulb isn't burned out, it's just differently lit (<http://www.youthwork.com/humor.html> (accessed 07/05/09))

### 7.1 Introduction

Having a laugh refers to the observation that humour is significant in understanding challenging interactions in the youth club. Opening the chapter with a joke about youth work may not mean much to those who have not worked in this field nor to those who have not grown up within a culture that uses the 'change a light bulb' story as a means to structure jokes about various 'types' of people. The joke, therefore, highlights the situational nature of humour – an ongoing theme throughout the chapter.

This chapter builds upon the previous chapters to further develop arguments about the nature of boundary work and the negotiation of control. A focus on humour, notably 'having a laugh', provides a vehicle to navigate some of the paradoxes and complexities of challenging interactions. The thesis could not have been written without discussing humour, as it is fundamental to the experience of being in the youth club and emerges as a substantial theme in coming to a contextualised understanding of challenging behaviours as a social phenomenon when working

with young people. In previous chapters, a look at 'rules' offers insight into how the 'official' boundaries around behaviour are continually being marked, challenged and maintained, and 'control in practice' creates knowledge about a fundamental aspect of challenging interactions – control and resistance – and the general processes that defuse or escalate a challenging interaction. Those findings provide a stage from which the role of humour in producing and negotiating challenging interactions can be witnessed. In presenting these observations, a more complex picture of the nature of challenging interactions in the youth club is produced and presented.

Within the literature looking at work with young people perceived to be challenging, there is some attention given to the role of humour. Firstly, humour is suggested by some authors to be one process through which young people challenge those in position of authority. It is argued that humour is used to test the boundaries of teachers (Dubberley, 1998) and youth workers (Luxmoore, 2000) to work out what relationships are possible with these people, and also to resist the institutional norms of school (Woods, 1976). Secondly, leading on from the first point, having a sense of humour is also seen as a necessary characteristic for teachers and youth workers alike. Humour is identified by 'disaffected' pupils as a desired teacher characteristic (Davies, 2005:308), and argued to be an essential personal quality of any youth worker (Spence et al, 2006:35) to the extent that whilst Richardson (2001:27-28) argues that a worker always needs more than one tool to be effective, "a sense of humour is an absolute requirement for long term success" with challenging youth. Related to this, humour is perceived to be a vital component of effective practice with young people perceived to be challenging (Cole et al, 1998, Visser, 2005a:238), including defusing potentially violent situations (Barter et al, 2004 in Kilpatrick et al, 2008:19).

Finally, humour is also suggested to be an effective means of relieving stress – a coping strategy for those facing challenging behaviours on a daily basis (Visser, 20005a; Woods, 1983) and useful as a means of dealing with the “immediate reality” of youth work (Spence et al, 2006:35). The literature suggests that humour is significant in work with young people perceived to be challenging because: it helps to build relations between the adults and the young people; it is used to test out boundaries and people; it has the potential to defuse tense situations; and to also act as a stress reliever for practitioners.

To examine the role of humour in working with young people and challenging behaviour, the first section of the chapter begins by examining the culture of humour that pervades interaction in the youth club, and the role of teasing and banter in social relations and interactions. Following on from this, the interpretation of behaviour as ‘humorous’ and/or ‘challenging’ as it occurs is explored, drawing on ideas about the situational nature of humour and of challenging behaviour. The strategic use of humour by young people to test the boundaries around behaviour is then considered, followed by a consideration of how the young people draw a line around acceptable and unacceptable banter/teasing during an interaction.

In the second section of the chapter, the focus shifts from the production of challenging behaviour in interaction to the management of challenging situations. Firstly, the strategic use of humour to pre-empt or defuse challenging situations is considered, followed by a look at the ways in which the workers use humour to manage emotions in their professional roles. This includes a consideration of the occasional use of sarcasm towards a young person by a worker following a particularly challenging interaction and also the use of humour and laughter as the workers share stories about challenging behaviour - behaviour that may or may not be perceived as funny in the moment of encountering it.

## 7.2 Borderline Behaviours

“Rory had a cone as a microphone - humorous but borderline at times.”  
(Evaluation records, spring, 32<sup>nd</sup> Session)

Borderline behaviours is about the inter-relations between ‘humorous’ and ‘challenging’ behaviour. To set the scene, this section begins by providing a working definition of humour with an overview of the nature of humour and laughter in the youth club. Following this, the examination of the boundaries between the humorous and the challenging begins with illustrations of the funny side of potentially challenging behaviours. Next, the dualistic functions of humour are considered, complicating the categorisation of behaviours as humorous or problematic. The strategic use of humour by the young people to challenge personal and behavioural boundaries is then examined. This is followed by a look at how people draw their own lines around humorous and challenging behaviour in the youth club.

### 7.2.1 Happy Pills: A Culture of Humour

Lewis said he usually kept a hammer in his sock. As he said this, Lewis and his friend began laughing. Lewis then said that out of school he carried a pocket knife around with him. I said “oh, do you?” He replied that he carried it in case he got stabbed. I started to say something about how that did not make sense when he and his friend burst out laughing again. I got the feeling they were laughing at what Lewis had said but I did not really get the joke. [...] After the boys left, *Kelsey* and I were stood chatting and laughing together. *Kelsey* said it seemed like the young people were on “happy pills” today.  
(Field notes, 35<sup>th</sup> visit).

Notes about humour and laughter feature heavily in my observations of social interaction in the youth club, as well as in my own experience of building field relations (as chapter 3, section 3.2 discusses). This reflects the general culture of humour that exists in the youth club<sup>75</sup>. So what is being interpreted as humour? Humour or humorous behaviours are understood in this study as a social

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<sup>75</sup> There are of course moments without humour in the JU, including those times when a young person is upset, even crying. Furthermore, and part of the discussion later in the chapter, is that the source of humour for one person can be a source of pain for another. However, overall this recreational space has a pervading ambience of fun and good humour.



phenomenon (much like challenging behaviour), an inherently interactive process requiring both a performer and an audience<sup>76</sup> (Robinson and Smith-Lovin, 2001:123). As an interactive process, humour is being broadly defined to include a range of behaviours for example: joke telling; insults and bantering; game playing; funny stories; and funny performances (Kehily and Nayak, 1997:85). Humour is interpreted here as any interaction where humour is intended or where actions are interpreted as humorous. The production of humour is indicated by various verbal clues (announcing something is funny, declaring something should be seen as funny, attempts at jokes) and non-verbal communication (in particular laughter). Humour is created, dissolved and recreated in the ongoing flow of social interaction in the youth club. As Sanford and Eder argue in their discussion of humorous behaviour during adolescent peer interaction:

“Humorous behaviour [...] seldom composes an entire episode or segment of interaction. Instead it is usually interjected into the normal flow of interaction. Humorous behaviour may be verbal, nonverbal, or both: it is closely tied to the ongoing interaction and conversation. Thus this type of humour is both spontaneous and context dependent”  
(Sanford and Eder, 1984:240)

Humour is often uneventful in the youth club but imperative to social interaction in this space.

Laughter, as a form of non-verbal communication, is an important part of social relations, used as an indication of humour, an external expression of finding something funny<sup>77</sup>. Laughter and giggling permeate the sounds of the youth club. To illustrate the variety of sources for this laughter, listed here are a few examples of laughter as it occurs in interaction in the youth club. Laughter often accompanies physical interactions, for example when running around:

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<sup>76</sup> It is recognised there are times when humour occurs without an audience. For example, times when people catch themselves doing something funny and are amused – where the performer is also the audience. However, the focus here is on humour-in-interaction.

<sup>77</sup> It is acknowledged that laughter is not always an expression of humour but for the purposes of identifying humour in interaction, looking for laughter is useful as long as that laughter is considered in context.

“a couple of boys were chasing each other around the room laughing and shouting “tig” when they caught one another.”

(Field notes, 47<sup>th</sup> visit).

Kehily and Nayak (1997:76) refer to this kind of humour in interaction as “physical humour”. Examples of physical humour between the young people can lead to concern from a worker as *Alexander* demonstrates in the example below when he moves closer to survey the interaction:

Two boys started to push each other by pool table one. They were pushing against each other and moving across the room towards the sofa. *Alexander* followed them across the room. He did not approach them but it looked like he was watching them. The two boys fell on top of one and another on the sofa. *Alexander* stood still next to the sofa. The two boys sat up laughing with each other.

(Field notes, 55<sup>th</sup> visit)

This also links to discussions about the difficulties in determining the difference between a play and a real fight, as discussed in detail in chapter 5, section 5.3. Mutual laughter also occurs in conversation, as people share a joke or observation, for example:

A couple more boys arrived they were shocked that the other boys were already there. The boys who arrived first said proudly that they had arrived at ‘five past’. They then laughed at the next set of boys who were running up to the doors, saying something like ‘look at them running’.

(Field notes, 23<sup>rd</sup> visit)

And laughter can be at the expense of someone else in the conversation, someone who is part of the joke but not in on the joke as in *Sarah’s* case below:

The girls told *Sarah* they had a new word for today. They said the word and *Sarah* said ‘fuck-arse?’ and they laughed and said ‘no, fat-arse’.

(Field notes, 15<sup>th</sup> visit)

Related to this, banter<sup>78</sup> and teasing are common forms of communication between participants in the youth club, with people often being made into objects of fun – usually light hearted fun, for example:

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<sup>78</sup> Banter is defined as “the playful and friendly exchange of teasing remarks”, to “talk or exchange remarks in a good humoured teasing way” (The New Oxford Dictionary of English, 1998:136)

One of the boys asked me what my name was. I said it was “Vicky”. The boy asked me to repeat what I had said and he said that he thought I had said “dicky”. The boys all laughed  
(Field notes, 41<sup>st</sup> visit)

Laughter is also inspired by the actions of others when they do something perceived to be funny whether intentionally or not:

One of the boys was balancing on the table with his feet on one of the chairs. He turned to talk to someone who came into the room and fell right off the table pushing the chair with his feet. There was laughter including from him and he just got back up again and balanced on the table.  
(Field notes, 20<sup>th</sup> visit)

These examples of ordinary instances of humour and laughter in the youth club illustrate the kind of culture of humour that exists in the youth club and the kinds of behaviour and interactions that provoke laughter. It is difficult to imagine being able to fully belong in the JU without developing a sense of humour to withstand and participate in the continual friendly banter and sometimes not so friendly teasing. Many of the examples provided could also be interpreted as potentially challenging situations, i.e. laughter at the expense of others, not being included in the joke, not understanding the joke. This relationship between ‘challenging’ and ‘humorous’ behaviour is now explored in more depth.

### **7.2.2 The Funny Side of Challenging**

What is funny about challenging behaviour? The young person in the following extract neatly introduces the contradictory and irresolvable nature of potentially challenging behaviour in the youth club. The boy describes a paradox, which both he and I giggle about:

The next question [on the question sheet] asked: what kind of stuff annoys you that other people do in the JU? The boy read this aloud and wrote “mess up your game of pool”. The next question was: do you ever do stuff on purpose to annoy other people in the Underground? The boy wrote “yes. Move their pool balls”. I giggled and said “but you just wrote that really annoys you”. He said “I know” and giggled as well.  
(Field notes, 35<sup>th</sup> visit)

Being able to laugh at his own hypocrisy, a hypocrisy displayed by many of the boys in the youth club (who perform actions they find challenging in others) reflects the culture of humour that surrounds some potentially challenging behaviours in the youth club and the way people play along with this.

From the perspective of an observer not intimately involved in the interaction, there can be something very funny about potentially challenging behaviour:

*Graeme* intervened in the boys' pool game. *Graeme* asked Tom to stop swearing. Tom didn't respond to *Graeme* and the boys continued to swear. After a while *Graeme* said that each time the boys swore he would take away a pool ball. Taking away a pool ball meant putting it down one of the pockets and therefore effectively potting the ball. I heard *Graeme* then say that it would be the opponent's balls that would be taken off the table (this meant that if you swore you were helping your opponent to win as they would have one less ball to pot each time you swore). This additional, and crucial point, did not seem to communicate to other people in the room, as Tom looked confused and one of the female workers, *Shona* (who was sat at the board games table) shouted across to Tom. She said something to Tom along the lines of how what *Graeme* had just said didn't make sense as he would only win faster if he swore as all his balls would be off the table. Tom latched onto this. He stood upright, with his pool cue at his side, and said loudly across to *Graeme*, that *Graeme* was an idiot because if he took his balls away for swearing then swearing would help him to win. Tom then stood there and said "fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck" and then continued with his game of pool. No-one said anything to him and I couldn't help smiling.

(Field notes, 19<sup>th</sup> visit)

There are many interesting processes occurring in this extract, not least *Shona's* encouragement of Tom to challenge *Graeme*, but what I want to focus on here is the way in which Tom's behaviour illustrates the blurring of potentially amusing and potentially challenging behaviour.

Tom's actions are potentially amusing as he plays on a perceived 'mistake' in *Graeme's* new rule. Tom quickly uses the space created by this 'mistake' to directly

challenge *Graeme* and suggest he is incompetent. Whilst amusing for those of us watching, it is also relatively straightforward to recognise this interaction as a challenging one for *Graeme* both in terms of having his authority defied in this way and in deciding how to respond after Tom has embarrassed him in this confrontational manner. This example offers an introduction into the simultaneous evoking of humour and a challenge in a single interaction. The following example also illustrates this, where Michael's behaviour is both funny and challenging:

Michael also dropped some beads on the floor, as he did this *Johnny* said to him 'Mi-chael' and Michael said back to him 'John-ny'.  
(Field notes, 39<sup>th</sup> visit)

*Johnny* is attempting to discipline Michael by saying his name in an exaggerated manner and accusatory tone as a means to point out his 'wrong' behaviour – dropping the beads. In response, Michael simply applies the same tone and manner to *Johnny's* name; this is funny from my perspective observing this interaction. It is funny partly because it is challenging.

Observing the interaction above between Tom and *Graeme* and between Michael and *Johnny* may not make everyone smile, but I found it amusing. What amuses a person, in the same way what someone finds challenging, is very situational; the expression of humour or the reaction to something potentially amusing, like something potentially challenging, is socially mediated. The humour in Tom's behaviour is funny because of the set of circumstances surrounding the interaction but only funny to certain people watching. This is illustrated when, after I smile at the interaction between Tom and *Graeme*, I record in my field notes a concern about doing so:

"Smiling is a natural reaction for me in that situation but I feel the workers could be annoyed with it and it might also encourage the young people to 'misbehave' more"  
(Field notes, 19<sup>th</sup> visit)

I am uncomfortable expressing my inner feeling of amusement externally in case it affects my relationship with the workers, a relationship integral to my access to this space but yet I find Tom's actions amusing. This is a product of my liminal position in the youth club not worker and not young person. I am conscious of the 'risks' socially of expressing amusement at Tom's actions.

A similar process occurs when *Dave* responds seriously to the 'playful' behaviour of the boys in public, but expresses amusement in private:

*Dave* came back into the main JU room holding some sello-tape. He was laughing as he told me and *Miya* that some of the boys had got hold of this sello-tape and had sello-taped round the head of another boy. He said that when the boy had taken the sello-tape off, the sello-tape had pulled out some of the hairs in the boy's eyebrow. *Dave* put the sello-tape in the storage cupboard and left again. He then came back again and told us that the boy's eyebrow was fine.

(Field notes, 25<sup>th</sup> visit)

On a personal level *Dave* appears to find this amusing, as a worker (in his social role) he does not express this in front of the young people, and having shared his amusement with the workers and me he also reassures us that no harm was done to the boy ensuring no damage is done to his status as a responsible worker. By the nature of the role of a worker in the youth club, he or she cannot necessarily share in the amusement of the young people. It would be incongruent for the worker to find the teasing or humiliation of one young person by another funny even if other young people did. It simply would not work in the context of the youth club.

### **7.2.3 The Challenging Side of Humour**

Having looked at what is funny about challenging interactions, it is also important to consider what is challenging about humorous interaction. As introduced in the examples above, humour is a matter of interpretation and position. Humour is also as Av-Gay (2008:1) explains multi-faceted and paradoxical in nature:

“A joke can be perceived as funny by one and as humiliating by another. A joke can be used to insult others as well as to create friendly connections between individuals.”  
(Av-Gay, 2008:1)

Quite clearly, some performances of humour can be defined as potentially challenging behaviour (hurtful and humiliating) but whilst simultaneously functioning more ‘positively’ for others, such as forming bonds. If parallels are to be drawn between the nature of ‘humorous’ and ‘challenging’ behaviours then the multi-faceted nature of challenging behaviour may become apparent in exploring challenging humour further. The ways in which humour functions as challenging behaviour include: the potentially exclusionary nature of humour (Lockyer, 2006:43-44); the potentially upsetting nature of humour as in the case of derogatory humour; and the oppressive nature of humour, for example gendered sexist humour (Kehily and Nayak, 1997:70). The issue with humour is that it often thrives by operating at the boundaries of ‘acceptable’ behaviour.

Sharing humour can be a powerful means of developing bonds, but this is often at the expense of others. So whilst some are laughing with each other, others are being laughed at:

Towards the end of the session Caroline and Sally walked past the board games table. Caroline said something to Duncan about a mark on the sleeve of his shirt. As he looked down she laughed and said “made you look”. The two girls then left the room laughing.  
(Field notes, 48<sup>th</sup> visit)

A young person being laughed at is potentially problematic if it causes upset to the person. The lengthy extract below is included because it shows the processes of inclusion and exclusion in operation during social interaction:

During the last 15 minutes of the session I was stood near to pool table 2 with a group of around 12 boys. Two of the boys were going up to the other boys and saying a word to them and then bursting out laughing. The word sounded like ‘adhist’ to me. After one of the boys said ‘adhist’ again I asked him what the word he had just said was. He did not respond to me. Another boy came and sat down on the edge of the board games table. I went over to

him and asked him if he knew what this word 'adhist' meant. He said yes. I asked him what it was. He shook his head. I asked "are you not going to tell me?" He shook his head again. I went over to *Johnny* and asked him if he knew what the boys were saying. He also shook his head. The two boys then came over to *Johnny* and me. The boys said that the word meant goodbye and they said "adhist *Johnny*" and burst into laughter. *Johnny* stood there silent but smiling, I laughed as the boys were laughing - it was infectious. I also said something like "yeah right" in response to their claim the word meant goodbye. Their laughter implied it meant something else, something more mischievous. The boys started to say another word to other people. This one sounded like 'adross'. I asked the two boys saying these words if they were foreign words. One of them told me they were Latvian words. I asked them how they knew Latvian words. They pointed towards a boy stood next to the pool table. This boy smiled at me. I said something to him about it being very powerful knowing the meaning of all these words that others did not.

A little bit later on the boy who had told me he knew what the words meant, but would not share their meaning with me, stood very close to the Latvian boy. He asked the Latvian boy to tell him what the word meant. The Latvian boy shook his head, the boy asked again, and the Latvian boy kept on shaking his head. The Latvian boy then led the two boys, who had been running around saying these words, away from the pool table. The three of them huddled together with their backs to the pool table. When they returned to the pool table the two boys, who had been running around, knew a new Latvian word that they starting to say to the other boys. At one point one of these two boys called the Latvian boy by one of these words. The Latvian boy went towards him with his fist raised. It was difficult to tell whether this was in jest or not. The other boy ran round the pool table laughing and the Latvian boy went back to where he was standing and did not chase him.

(Field notes, 47<sup>th</sup> visit)

In this example of boundary making through humour, the Latvian boy and the two boys running around laughing are sharing an insider's joke related to the meaning of the Latvian words they are speaking. Their joke is based on the ignorance of those they are saying the words to. I am eager to find out the meaning of this word, as is another boy and we are directly excluded from knowing. As the three boys bond we are left feeling frustrated. We know the words have some mischievous, probably offensive meaning because of the way the boys 'in the know' are laughing between themselves. Our eagerness to know adds to their fun of knowing and not telling.



There is a contradictory process of the boys in the know bonding in the process of excluding those not in the know (Lockyer, 2006:43-44 discusses this dualistic function of humour).

Humour can also cause upset. In the youth club the young people make fun out of other young people on the basis of the haircut, their clothes, their home-life and the way they sound. These behaviours, if not or even when between friends, are potentially offensive and hurtful. Making fun of other people in this way is potentially problematic because of the likelihood of upset being caused and possible damage to a person's self-esteem within the youth club. In regards to the designated purpose of the youth club space, described in chapter 4, section 4.2, having fun is part of this but so is creating a safe space. A space not achieved for all, in particular for certain individuals for whom the space is somewhere they are often teased or made fun of. The JU is described by one of the workers as the place one boy gets "most bullied in" (Field notes, 54<sup>th</sup> visit). This is a young boy who does not engage in banter in the same way as the others, unwilling to, unable to or uninvited to. The line between friendly banter and teasing bullying is blurry and complex for the workers to navigate:

"[M]uch depends on the tone, body language and the history of the relationship between the individuals in order to distinguish verbal abuse from teasing or jokiness"  
(Munn et al, 2007:54)

Interpretations of behaviour as friendly or harmful are heavily dependent on the micro-context.

Within the youth club, the young people also regularly tease the workers. This varies from making fun of their resemblance to an animated movie star:

The boy then told *Luca* to "phone them" [the workers in the office] again. *Luca* did not say anything and kept his head down reading the newspaper.

They said “phone them Buzz”. The boy then said to a boy stood with him that *Luca* looked like Buzz Lightyear [a cartoon character]. I laughed and *Luca* smiled and continued to read.

(Field notes, 37<sup>th</sup> visit)

To accusing a worker of breaking wind, much to the amusement of those around:

*Dave* was playing Connect 4 against a young person. Some boys were playing on the pool table. The boys were holding their t-shirts and jumpers up to their noses as if there was a bad smell in the room. One of the boys said to *Dave*, “did you drop one?”, he then accused another worker of “letting one go”.

(Field notes, 24<sup>th</sup> visit)

Such teasing of workers (and me) by some of the young people also includes making fun of the football team they support, making fun of their bodily characteristics, what they are wearing and how they speak. The usual worker response is to acknowledge and take the teasing good-naturedly like *Luca* does above. Teasing or testing the workers in this way provides a means for the young people to find out what kind of person they are and what kind of relationship is possible with them. The teasing may be challenging to the worker, but it is serving an important social function in developing relations. As something of an unknown entity to the young people in the youth club my ability to take a joke and my boundaries around being insulted were often tested out. This is illustrated in my interactions with Danny:

Whilst I was chatting to Lianne, Danny started to repeat what I was saying and mimicking my accent. This made everyone laugh again. He then used my accent to say things like “your voice is really annoying” and “you should shut up now”. Whilst I am not sure whether Danny was serious or not, it was funny and it did seem to be good natured. I responded to Danny by telling him that I could not help the way I spoke and that this was just my voice. Again as I was speaking Danny would repeat words that I said and emphasise my accent [...] The conversation changed but Danny continued to mock my accent for the rest of the session episodically. The three of them also started to call me Vicky Pollard after the Little Britain TV character.

(Field notes, 38<sup>th</sup> visit)

Danny’s behaviour is potentially offensive but on this occasion I chose to interpret it as amusing. My interpretation was mediated by the fact that everyone else around

the table was laughing and my desire to continue engaging with this group of young people. I am also accustomed to my English accent being made fun of. My reaction was a mixture of personal (I did not feel offended), social (I felt under pressure to not feel offended) and professional responses (I wanted to develop good field relations with these research participants).

In a context where teasing, humour and play dominate, the process of having a laugh with the young people is important to ensure continued engagement with the young people. This is well articulated by *Kelsey*:

K: “[...] I think that the way that you build up a relationship with a young person is by having a laugh with them [V: okay] by having fun with them. I mean if they can see that they can have a joke and a laugh and stuff with you then they will start to trust you and they will want to come and play a game with you again.”

(*Kelsey*, Interview data)

There can, however, be tensions between having a laugh and being recognised as in a position of authority. In the following extract, *Dave* is engaging playfully with the young people in what appears to be a lot of fun for all. In doing so, *Dave* chooses to ignore the rule of not allowing the young people to play in the corridor instead helping to transform the corridor into a play space. He is also engaging in physically active playful behaviours, uncommon for workers, if very common for the young people:

Towards the end of the session a group of boys and *Dave* were out in the corridor. The boys were running up and down the corridor and *Dave* was trying to stop them from doing this. His attempts to stop them did not appear serious. They looked like there were playing a game. [...] The boys were laughing and *Dave* seemed to be enjoying himself. In many ways the worker seemed to be like a ‘big’ young person himself and the boys seemed to be getting on well with him. As they ran towards him *Dave* would reach out his arms as the corridor is quite narrow he could almost reach to both sides of the corridor walls with his arms making a good attempt to block the boys running past. *Dave* would almost ‘collect’ the boys in each arm as they tried to run past him. He also lifted the boys up so that he had boys hanging off each arm. The boys seemed to be really enjoying this game. [...] As the

end of the session was called in the main JU room *Dave* tried to steer the boys from the corridor towards the exit door in the thru-space. Once the boys were in the thru-space they wouldn't leave. The boys seem to think the whole thing was still a game and were now not taking *Dave's* attempts to get them to leave seriously. *Kelsey* came through into the thru-space. She asked the boys that *Dave* was grappling with to "leave now" as it was the end of the lunch break. The boys then left.

(Field notes, 48<sup>th</sup> visit)

When *Dave* tries to shift from being playful to being serious the boys refused to take him seriously seeing, or choosing to see, his attempts to assert authority as a continuation of their game. The boys only left when *Kelsey* asked them to. This suggests that as *Dave* engaged in the kind of physical play and humour usually only engaged in by the young people, he moved into the young person group but at the same time lost his adult authority. It took the intervention of *Kelsey* to get the boys to do as they were being asked. So even showing a sense of humour can itself be challenging dependent on the role adopted or wanted in the youth club.

Humour can also be oppressive. For example, when a boy loses at pool to a girl the other boys see this as a reason to tease him:

One of the boys asked Karl who won he said 'she did'. Stephen teased him for "getting beaten by a girl" and "ripped by a girl".

(Field notes, 28<sup>th</sup> visit)

The boys also accuse boys who are perceived to be playing badly at pool as "playing like a girl" (Field notes, 28<sup>th</sup> visit). Whilst this teasing is a bit of fun for (some of) the boys, the behaviour is also potentially oppressive to females in the youth club whether taken, or intended, seriously or not. It has the potential to reinforce a stereotype of females as somehow less competent than males at playing games.

Humour is shown to be both a negative, as well as a positive force in regards to social relations in the youth club. When there is possibility of humour in a

challenging interaction, this can make responding to the challenge more problematic than when there is no humour involved. This idea is developed furthering by considering the nature of ambiguity in joking behaviours next.

#### **7.2.4 Only Joking**

Liv said something about staying at home tonight and smoking ganja<sup>79</sup>. The girls were laughing. The comment about smoking ganja was made twice. After the second time Sammi turned to me and said “by the way we’re only joking”.

(Field notes, 44<sup>th</sup> visit)

Because as, Emerson (1969:169) argues, “normally a person is not held responsible for what he does in jest to the same degree that he would be for a serious gesture” dealing with potentially funny and challenging behaviour is complex. Acting in jest creates a space for the young people to behave in ways that would not be deemed acceptable if they were being serious – complicating the interpretation of behaviour as problematic or not. This reflects the difficulties identified in chapter 5, section 5.3 in distinguishing between ‘real’ and ‘playful’ fighting. Is behaviour perceived to be problematic when performed ‘seriously’ not problematic when performed ‘in jest’? Or does the performed seriousness not matter if the outcome is the same?

The process of performing potentially challenging behaviour behind the safety of a joke is illustrated when a young person physically threatens a worker or challenges a worker to a fight:

At one point during the session one, quite small, boy squares up to *Johnny*. The boy does this holding a cue in his hand it looks as if he is threatening *Johnny* with the cue. This looks funny to me as *Johnny* is twice the size of the boy. The boy points the cue at *Johnny*’s chin. *Johnny* didn’t react at all. The way the boy squared up to *Johnny* was in an unthreatening manner as it seemed to be more of a mock threatening rather than a real threatening. Also as it seemed that the action was not taken seriously by *Johnny* this also made it the boy’s actions seem less threatening.

(Field Notes, 9<sup>th</sup> visit)

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<sup>79</sup> ‘Ganja’ is one of the names used to refer to the drug Cannabis.

In the above example the jest is implied rather than explicit. The way the boy is acting suggests that he is not really threatening *Johnny*. This is again very situational humour, funny because of the implausibility of one of the boys threatening a worker in this way. In a similar example, the ludicrous nature of a situation is made obvious for all to laugh at:

There were a group of boys in the corridor (they looked older than those in the JU)... As we turned the corner a short boy (at least half the size of *Dave*) said something to *Dave* like, "come on then let's fight, since you're so wee and I'm so big". The workers and I were laughing.  
(Field Notes, 35<sup>th</sup> visit)

The implication that a threatening action is in jest may be made explicit if the worker appears to be taking the behaviour seriously:

During the session Sarah told me a story about how one of the boys had come up to her in the corridor said "I'm going to batter you". She told me how she had said "come on", meaning come on be serious. She said that the young person however had taken her "come on" to mean come on then try and batter me and had said to her something like "I was only joking" and then looked at her like she was weird. She was laughing about this.  
(Field notes, 21<sup>st</sup> session)

The above example also neatly illustrates how easily confusion can abound in interactions. The line between serious and playful is difficult to determine in observation and in the interaction. This ambiguity is inherent in the humour process, and the confusion is what causes amusement for *Sarah* as she recounts the story and laughs about the experience.

Acting in jest confuses the boundaries around acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. The behaviour performed would usually be considered to be potentially challenging behaviour. However, because the behaviour has been identified as 'only a joke' there is an expectation that the behaviour will not be taken seriously and redefined as non challenging behaviour. Yet, the processes of being challenging and being challenged may still exist – so in that sense it remains potentially challenging behaviour. Negotiating the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable funny

behaviour, such as those actions involved in bantering and acting in jest in the youth club, are considered next.

### **7.2.5 That's Shan**

Shan is a word used to mean something is 'out of order' or to denote unacceptable behaviour towards someone else. Interestingly, for this thesis it can mark the crossing of the boundary from shared humour to no longer funny. Bantering between people friendly with each other offers insight into the negotiation of the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable bantering as it occurs during interaction. This is apparent in the discussions between Jack, Richard, Duncan and I in the extract below. The three boys were relatively friendly in the JU, often playing together and also often including me in their games and conversations. This is an example of an everyday interaction between the four of us:

Jack was eating a large ice cream in a cone shaped sweet from the tuck. He said to the group around the table: "bet you can't do this" and he took a big bite off the sweet. Richard called him a "homo". The two of them playfully started to square up to each other saying "come on then" and gesturing at each other. They both laughed. A little bit later on Jack made fun of Richard's hair for being curly. Richard then made fun of Jack for having big ears. Jack said he would rather have his ears than Richard's hair. Duncan said that he liked Richard's hair and that it was better than Jack's hair. Jack called Duncan a "fatty". Duncan said that he knew he was fat. I said sarcastically that they all being "absolutely lovely to each other today". Richard said that calling Duncan fat was "shan".

(Field notes, 55th visit)

The above interaction starts with Jack 'showing off' taunting the others as he eats his sweets. Richards responds with what is perceived to be an insult in the youth club calling Jack a 'homo'<sup>80</sup>. Jack and Richard then engage in playful physical interaction pretending to be aggrieved with each other but laughing along. The teasing exchange continues as Jack insults Richard's hair and Richard insults Jack's ears. At this point, Duncan enters the interaction 'defending' Richard's hair, and at the same

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<sup>80</sup> Homo is short for homosexual, words like 'homo', 'gay' and 'gaybo' are used as teasing insults in the youth club, again an example of the potentially oppressive or discriminatory nature of humour in interaction, this time towards homosexuality.

time 'attacking' Jack's hair, stating that Richards's hair is better than Jacks. In response Jack calls Duncan a fatty. Breaking the chain of exchanging insults, Duncan acknowledges that he is fat without insulting Jack back. At this point I decide to join the interaction with a sarcastic comment on how lovely they were all being to each other as I feel sympathy towards Duncan. Following this, Richard states that calling Duncan fat was unacceptable.

As the interaction above unfolds many different things are going on that relate not only to what is being said but the social relations between the participants. The process of trading insults is a means of demonstrating friendship and playing within the bounds of those relations and knowledge of each other. The interaction also shows how easily teasing can shift from being acceptable to becoming unacceptable and the atmosphere can shift from one of play to one of seriousness. Duncan inferred jokes about his weight were unacceptable by no longer 'playing along' with the unwritten rules of responding back with another insult instead agreeing with the comment with a serious tone. To break the tension I felt the need to say something and following this Richard validates Duncan's response by calling the 'fatty' remark "shan". This interaction shows that engaging in 'playful' insults in interaction is a carefully negotiated process that has the benefits of strengthening friendships as they play and laugh together and get to know one another's boundaries but it is also a risky strategy that could potentially lead to the degradation of relationships as 'invisible' lines are crossed if this boundary testing is not well managed.

In other interactions, the declaration that something is 'shan' is made on the behalf of other people. In the following example Lianne steps in to 'protect' me from Danny's insults:



Later on Danny said something to me about me needing to speak his language. I asked him to teach me his language. He turned to me and said “fuck off, you stupid bitch, that’s my language”. I said okay. Lianne and Samantha were laughing. Lianne told me that I could tell Danny to stop or to tell him not to say that if I wanted too. Lianne then told Danny he was been “shan”.

(Field notes, 38<sup>th</sup> visit)

Lianne both laughs with Danny at me, implying she find his behaviour funny, and then draws a line under his behaviour declaring it ‘shan’ and by implying that I would be justified at this point to insist Danny stops treating me this way. Although I do not tell Danny to stop, Lianne’s social support to do so would have been crucial if I had decided to.

Section 7.2 began by introducing the nature of humour and laughter in the youth club. The substantive part of the section explored how behaviour can be funny because it is challenging, and challenging because it is funny. The findings suggest that the boundaries between what is funny and what is challenging cannot always be resolved. Those participating in the youth club navigate the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable humour behaviour in their interactions, drawing lines for themselves and for others. Interestingly, humour is also used to draw those lines – the role of humour in managing challenging interactions is discussed next.

### **7.3 Managing Behaviour and Emotions**

Section 7.2 discussed the parallels and interconnections between humorous interactions and challenging interactions, to further an understanding of challenging behaviour as a social phenomenon. This section moves the discussion onto the role of humour in managing encounters with potentially challenging behaviour. It begins with an examination of the significance of humour in pre-empting a challenging interaction as it emerges and ends with an exploration of the use of

humour as a coping and bonding strategy for the workers as they discuss their experiences of challenging interactions.

### **7.3.1 Controlling and Defusing**

Humour is one of the strategies used in attempts to control or change the behaviour of others. In the extract below, the worker attempts to make the young people self-conscious about their behaviour so that they stop fighting. She does this by implying their behaviour means something romantic rather than something aggressive:

There was some noise over by the board games table. I heard *Sarah* say something like “now we all know you love each other but put each other down.” I looked over and there were two small S1 boys pushing and fighting with each other in the small space between the board games table and the cupboard next to the wall. They boys moved to the edge of the board games table near to the door. I saw one of the boys throw a shoe at the other boy. This boy then picked up the shoe and came back over to the boy and it looked like he hit him with it. The boy who had originally thrown the shoe then picked up one of the board games boxes and went to hit the other boy on the head with it. Whilst this was happening *Sarah* had stood up from her chair and moved closer to the boys and was asking them to stop what they were doing.

(Field notes, 45<sup>th</sup> visit)

This approach to exercising control over the behaviour of the young people is more insidious and subtle than the processes described in chapter 5 and 6. In taking this approach *Sarah* avoids confronting the boys and drawing attention to their behaviour as problematic. However, if this specific approach is frequently adopted, there is a risk of normalising heterosexual behaviour over homosexual behaviour, as the boys are expected to be embarrassed if they do indeed ‘love each other’. The value of humour in this situation is to make light of the boys’ fighting and defuse the situation. Although, in this interaction, this approach fails to stop the fighting and *Sarah* has to make another move, moving closer to the boys and re-asserting her authority demanding explicitly that they stop (processes explored in chapter 6).

On another occasion, *Sarah* makes light of the behaviour of a group of boys in what appears to be an attempt to bring their 'sexualised' behaviour with the balloons under control:

A major feature of today's session was balloons. *Sarah* had given balloons that she had found in the resources cupboard out to a couple of the boys. This led to a lot of the boys wanting a balloon. The boys were having a lot of fun blowing (or in some cases trying to blow) up the balloons. The balloons were long in shape. Jonathon was walking around the room pretending to hit people with his balloon but not actually hitting them. He was also rubbing his hand on the balloon to make a really awful squeaking noise. I said to him that the noise went right through me like someone scratching their nails down a chalkboard. He held the balloon smiled at me and continued to rub the balloon. At one point Jonathon was walking around with the balloon between his legs. A lot of the boys had been doing this and making the balloon wobbled by rocking backwards and forwards. Jonathon was still rubbing the balloon as he was doing it. One of the boys made a comment to him about how sad he must be if he had to wank a balloon. Lot of the other boys laughed. *Sarah* said that if the "willy talk" continued she would take the balloons off the boys.

(Field notes, 56<sup>th</sup> visit)

*Sarah* is attempting to stop the boys from talking about masturbation. However, she does not directly refer to this, and instead asks them to stop their "willy talk" or she will take away the balloon. In doing so, *Sarah* avoids drawing attention to, and potentially furthering, the talk about masturbation. *Sarah* may also herself be embarrassed to directly refer to this topic. She reduces their talk about a sexual activity to "willy talk" making it seem babyish and silly. The boys did stop the chat and gestures about masturbation. They removed the balloons from their legs, returning to 'play' fighting using the balloons as swords.

In the next illustration humour is also used to belittle potentially challenging behaviour in a similar way as the challenge is turned into something childish. *Kelsey* uses sarcasm and humour to try and stop Lewis from repeatedly swearing, implying that this swearing should be interpreted as immature and not funny:

Lewis was playing with the puzzle that needs to be separated and put back together again. He and his friend were sat at the far corner of the table near to the table football and I was sat next to them. They seemed to have the giggles as they were laughing a lot. Lewis was repeatedly saying “fucking wanker” when I first came over. He was laughing whilst he was saying it and his friend was laughing. Lewis seemed to be saying that he was only saying because another boy at the table had said it to him and he was just saying to tell others what this boy had said to him. His laugh was infectious and I found that I was smiling. *Kelsey* caught my eye and I thought she looked as if she wanted to laugh as well. I did not laugh aloud and I turned away from Lewis and his friend to break into a broad smile. As I was doing this, *Kelsey* said something to Lewis and his friend like “oh that’s really funny, saying fucking and wanker”. It seemed to me that she was saying this in a way that implied they were immature to find swearing like that funny and that she hoped this might stop them from doing it.

(Field notes, 354<sup>th</sup> visit)

*Kelsey* uses the ‘forbidden’ swear words in her sarcastic response to Lewis’s behaviour. In doing so, the comedy value of the words as ‘forbidden’ is theoretically reduced as *Kelsey* attempts to reclaim control of the words and the situation. Seemingly successful in this instance, as my field notes go onto record Lewis stops saying “fucking wanker” repeatedly.

In these processes the workers use humour and making light of behaviour to avoid the emerging confrontations that chapter 6 discusses occurring as the worker does not specifically demand the young people stop what they are doing (the exception to this is when *Sarah* does demand the boys stop their “willy talk”). Their strategy appears to be one of almost insidious control – to embarrass or belittle the young people into behaving.

Humour is also used strategically by workers and young people to defuse the tension in a challenging interaction, with the aim of deescalating the situation. In the altercation between *Graeme* and Tom in section 7.2, under the heading ‘the funny side of challenging behaviour’ Tom declares *Graeme* to be an idiot because of a

perceived incongruity in *Graeme's* new rule and sanction and thus goes onto exploit it. At this point, there is an opportunity for *Graeme* to acknowledge that his initial rule, before the additional explanation, was 'wrong' and laugh about it alongside Tom. A difficult thing to do in the face of Tom's actions but this would have had potential to defuse the situation and may have led to a more 'successful' session for Tom, who ended up leaving the session early and expressing frustration at *Graeme's* actions. To recognise the humour in Tom's performance might have brought Tom and *Graeme* closer together. Such an approach is one of the 'lessons' suggested in Richardson's (2001) book. Reflecting on his experiences of working with challenging youth, and using an example that could easily have occurred in the JU, Richardson (2001:26) suggests that "appropriate humour can help thwart potential power struggles". The process of these struggles and the importance of finding a 'way out' from the power struggle are detailed in chapter 6.

Laughing, if judged carefully, defuses emerging tension in an interaction. Again the use of humour is very situational. In the following example, *Shona* laughs away Michael's suggestion that I am eyeballing him – eyeballing being an extremely confrontational behaviour – whereas if I had laughed at that moment it may have fuelled Michael's apparent show of distrust of me:

I was stood by pool table 1 near to *Shona*. One of the more 'tough' looking and behaving boys, Michael saw me looking at him walking around the pool table. I then heard him say to *Shona*, whilst looking over at me, "she eyeballing me?" I heard *Shona* laugh and say "no she's not". This defused the situation and he ignored me after that.

(Field notes, 11<sup>th</sup> visit)

At this point I had formed no relationship with Michael and if I had laughed he have perceived my laughter as further confrontational behaviour. In the next illustration, Michael himself breaks the growing tension during the youth club session around Tom's behaviour by laughing and commenting on the way everyone appears to be focusing on Tom:

Tom picked up one of the pool balls and threw it down hard onto pool table 2. The ball bounced off and flew in the direction of *Graeme* and myself. *Graeme* caught the ball and at the same time there was a chorus of Tom's name being called out, it seemed by workers and young people alike. Michael laughed and commented on how many people has said Tom's name as that point.

(Field notes, 19<sup>th</sup> visit)

Michael draws attention to the way in which Tom is becoming victimised during the session. Sometimes the defusing of a situation is a by-product of someone making a funny observation rather than a purposeful attempt to get people to laugh. The observation that something funny has occurred creates a 'pause' in the developing tension; a space for the direction of the interaction to change.

### **7.3.2 Thank-you for coming!**

The use of sarcasm by the workers is worthy of a little attention. Although it is noted above in section 7.2 that the workers very rarely engage in the teasing of young people, there are occasion when sarcasm is used in response to the experience of a challenging interaction. The use of sarcasm in this way is often perceived as a display of power; a means to put someone 'back in their place'. Woods (1983:119) argues that teacher sarcasm and showing up of a pupil is a particularly "virulent and noxious form of humour" disapproving of the use of sarcasm in this way by teachers. In the relatively rare where sarcasm occurs (examples given below), it is always after a particularly challenging interaction with a young person. Like the young people acting in jest above, sarcasm allows the workers to express opinions and feelings about young people (usually an expression of frustration) that would otherwise probably be deemed unacceptable.

In one illustrative example, *Paul* becomes upset at Stephen's behaviour towards him, as Stephen tries to take a seat from him when sat in a group. Firstly, Stephen tries to 'dismiss' *Paul* out of the chair with a wave of his hand and then actually pushes *Paul*. At this moment, *Paul* is clear to Stephen that he has crossed a line, as he

tells him he is going too far. Stephen responds by backing off and finding somewhere else to sit. A bit later on, as Stephen is leaving *Paul* said goodbye to him and added a comment about “Stephen enjoying his anger management classes” (Field notes, 20<sup>th</sup> visit). *Paul’s* comments, made in front of the group of young people, are derisive towards Stephen referring to Stephen’s earlier aggressive attempts to get a chair from *Paul*. This was an unusual comment from this worker, suggesting that on this occasion, whether consciously or not, there was a need to confirm his control over the earlier exchange with Stephen or express his anger at it under the cover of humour.

In a further example, when Tom walks out of the youth club session early following a series of altercations with the workers, I note that “one of the workers shouted after him something like “thank-you for coming!”.” (Field notes, 19<sup>th</sup> visit). This sarcastic comment was probably borne out of the frustration of the ongoing altercations between Tom and different workers over the course of the session. In shouting out like this, the worker is refusing Tom the ‘last word’ in what had been an ongoing power struggle. In using sarcasm, the worker appears to be engaging in a similar process to the way the young people use sarcasm to regain control of a situation (in the process of measured compliance/resistance of chapter 6, section 6.3). It is also situational humour, a shared joke between the workers – the implication being that if Tom had not chosen to come to the youth club session that day then the session would have been ‘easier’ to manage. Telling a young person they are not welcome, goes against the values of the youth club (see chapter 4, section 4.2) therefore this is something that could only be expressed in jest, in this case in its opposite form. The discussion of the use of sarcasm by the workers suggests that humour is part of their daily coping strategy in working with young people they perceive to be ‘challenging’ and thus helping the two groups to co-exist in the youth club. The role of humour in the emotional work around challenging behaviour in work with young people is now examined in more detail.

### 7.3.3 Professional Humour

*Dave* said it was really annoying when you had to pick up chips, especially those ground into the carpet, off the floor. One of the workers made a joke about eating the chips.

(Field notes, 51<sup>st</sup> visit)

This section focuses on interactions between the workers where they use humour to discuss, describe and communicate about the potentially challenging behaviour of the young people. The use of humour to communicate about the perceived challenging behaviour of young people and the experience of challenging interactions functions as a coping and supporting strategy for the workers as well as being a part of the process of bonding amongst the workers. The section begins with a discussion of the emotional management involved in work with young people.

Work with young people involves great deal of emotion management, integral to all 'people work' (Mann, 2004:205). Working with young people perceived to be 'challenging' is also likely to be emotionally demanding. Within the Scottish teaching profession there is evidence that the ongoing low-level student 'challenging' behaviour impacts negatively on teacher morale (Wilkin et al, 2006:iii). For one European volunteer the experience of working in the JU was extremely disheartening:

M: Yeah I mean it's, it's not a very nice feeling if you just get ignored [by the young people] and [V: okay] I guess at first I, I tried hard to get respect and tried to, how do you say? Like, tell them something and I was just run over almost [M: laughs].

(*Miya*, Interview data)

This experience led to *Miya* emotionally detaching herself from her experience of being in the youth club:

M: yeah but [V: it's something about] it's just, inside myself I just the JU is for me is I'm not bothered by anything [V: okay] because I gave up, I just gave up and it's, I just come here to let the thirty minutes past and then I go away.

(*Miya*, Interview data)



In contrast, *Kelsey* offers a more positive experience of working with young people she perceives to be 'challenging' as they serve to motivate her to do this work describing them as her "favourite kind of young people" (*Kelsey*, Interview data). Most workers sit between the two extremes of *Miya* and *Kelsey*. All have chosen to continue working in the youth club so it can be assumed they enjoy it on some level, but the emotional stresses of encountering challenging interactions on a daily basis exist. *Miya* and *Shona* tell me after their in-depth interviews that they have enjoyed having the chance to have a "good blether" about behaviour (*Shona*, Interview data). This suggests that the opportunity to 'offload' some of their experiences of managing challenging behaviours is useful. So how does humour fit into this?

Often drawing on the work of Arlie Hochschild's 1983 work on 'emotional labour', other writers have argued that humour is used in a variety of different professions as a form of "emotion work", a coping strategy in the workplace (Mawhinney, 2008, Sanders, 2004). For example, Mawhinney's (2008) ethnographic study of informal interactions between teachers in the teachers' congregational spaces demonstrated the 'positive' use of humour to combat teacher stress and provide a form of social support. Teachers' informal interactions are suggested to revolve around humour, often joking about their pupil's behaviour – laughing at the students. Mawhinney (2008:203) suggests humour is sometimes used in this way as a means of relieving frustration, away from the young people. It is perceived as a chance to express emotions that would be unprofessional to express in the classroom.

During field work and preliminary analysis of the data it became noticeable that the workers often laugh about potentially challenging behaviour. Rather than expressing anger, the workers are laughing as they retell 'challenging tales' to me. This includes the ongoing incidents of 'theft' of the youth club resources, such as the stealing: of the washing up liquid (Field notes, 3<sup>rd</sup> visit); of marshmallows from the

cupboard (Field notes, 8<sup>th</sup> visit); and of the games console and a board game (Field notes, 40<sup>th</sup> visit). Furthermore, despite the considerable inconvenience of being locked out of the thru space by a group of young people (as none of the workers can go home until the thru space is forced open by a janitor) I observe that “[t]he workers seemed amused at first rather than angry by what had happened.” (Field notes, 16<sup>th</sup> visit). In general, the automatic response of a worker to is to retain a sense of humour despite the potentially problematic implications of an incident. The examples given above all involve worker reactions to an incident they discover, once the young people are out of sight. There is no challenging face-to-face interaction between a worker and a young person over the behaviour. The examples are of humour being used between the workers in the face of something out of their immediate control.

The workers also tell humorous stories about interactions they have with young people over their behaviour, making fun of what the young person does or says in that interaction. For example, making jokes about ongoing problems such as the fire extinguisher being repeatedly set off without reason<sup>81</sup>:

Someone said how this boy was the one who always let the fire extinguisher off. *Kelsey* mentioned how the same boy had come up to her the other day, after the fire extinguisher had been refilled, and said that’s a new seal on there with his eyes all wide and lit up. The workers and I laughed. One of the workers said something about this boy having a fire extinguisher fetish. (Field notes, 24<sup>th</sup> visit)

It also includes representing the young people’s behaviour as funny, even if at the time it was deemed problematic for the worker. During the summer holidays *Kelsey* and *Danny* were involved in a confrontation when she insisted he share some truffles he had made:

*Danny* came into the room holding a plateful of truffles. He came over to us and said something about “that fucking *Kelsey*, she’s a fucking radge, says I

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<sup>81</sup> The fire extinguisher being repeatedly set off is problematic for the for health and safety reasons and because the YDA has to pay to replace/refill the fire extinguisher.

have to hand these out". [...] *Kelsey* came into the room. One of the girls and *Graeme* repeated to *Kelsey* what Danny had said about her. *Kelsey* asked Danny to talk with her. They went out into the corridor together. It looked like *Kelsey* was telling Danny off.  
(Field notes, 38<sup>th</sup> visit)

Later during the evaluation session:

*Kelsey* told the story of what had happened with Danny and the truffles. She told this like it was a funny story. She said that Danny and the other boys making the truffles had taken so long that there was not time for anyone else to make any and that they had made lots of truffles. She said that Danny thought since he had made the truffles he would get to have them all. *Kelsey* said that when she told him he would have to share them out, he had not wanted to. She said that she had asked him if he "seriously" thought he was going to get to eat them all and he had replied that he had.  
(Field notes, 38<sup>th</sup> visit)

*Kelsey* represents Danny's behaviour as being mistaken and makes a joke out of his assumption that he would get to eat all of the truffles. As baking is an unusual activity in the youth club, never occurring in term-time, Danny's confusion over what would happen to what he made is understandable – why should he not get the rewards of his hard work? The use of humour in telling the story of the experience, making Danny's behaviour into the joke allows *Kelsey* the space to safely share this experience and to relieve some of the tension of the conflict she experienced with Danny. She is also able to get validation of her interpretation of the situation and the way she dealt with it, if her colleagues share her amusement. In a conversation between salaried workers (once again involving Danny<sup>82</sup>) about how to deal with the issue of challenging behaviour in their youth groups the workers all contribute to the joke laughing at the perceived farcical nature of Danny's attempt to insult a girl:

C: And what about Danny the other day he called, what was that girl? Can't remember her name, called her a 'fat anorexic slag' [Laughter within the group].

S: Fat anorexic slag [S: laughs] that is.

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<sup>82</sup> Danny is also one of the boys identified in chapter 5, section 5.2, as embodying challenging in the eyes of the workers.

C: I was like Danny come on get it right.

[Group laughter]

P: If you going to insult someone.

C: Aye that's what I said to him, that's what I said to him, at least get it right you know.

S: Fat anorexic!

[Group laughter]

J: Probably had a copy of the Viz comic.

[Group laughter]

(Salaried Workers, Group meeting data)

Together these examples illustrate the use of humour by the workers to share their individual and group frustrations about behaviour they witness and experience, and also how humour is used to test out whether other workers will validate individual interpretations of behaviour. In the times the workers share stories and share laughter they are also bonding as a group acknowledging their shared experiences.

Humour also allows the workers to express negative feelings about those young people whose behaviour is often perceived to be challenging in the youth club. In the following example, *James* and *Sarah*<sup>83</sup> make a joke about the 'positive' implications of two boys being absent from the youth club:

The workers commented that the boys who had recently moved into S3 still wanted to come to the JU even though they should now be attending the SU. The workers were concerned that these S3 boys were not coming to the SU. One of the workers said that boys like Michael and Rory were "big bullies" and it would not be fair on the S1s and S2s to have them in the JU. *Sarah* said something in a joking fashion about maybe it was good to have a break from

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<sup>83</sup> It is perhaps worth noting, that *James* and *Sarah* are both salaried workers in relatively high positions of power in relation to the other workers – this may give them more freedom to express these opinions than other workers might even if they were also doing it in jest.

Michael and Rory. She then said she shouldn't say things like that and slapped herself on the wrist. Later on the workers were again talking about the absence of boys like Michael and Rory from the SU and what they could do to encourage them to return, *James* who was walking past the table said something like "'maybe that wouldn't be such a bad thing" [the boys being absent for a while], he said this with a smile and the other workers laughed. *Sarah* said she had just said a similar thing to *Johnny*.  
(Field notes, 42<sup>nd</sup> visit)

The workers are aware that their role dictates they should be encouraging Michael and Rory to come to the youth club as evidenced by their initial concern and *Sarah's* self-reprimanding. However, the workers are often in conflict with these particular young people during a youth club session, which is likely to be stressful. In jest both *James* and *Sarah* are able to express a sentiment about young people perceived to be 'challenging' (a sentiment likely to be shared by the other workers) that would be potentially unprofessional to express seriously. As Woods (1983:115) argues humour "allows the expression of conflict in socially acceptable ways".

The workers, as a collective, share a 'good' sense of humour. This is helpful when challenging encounters are ongoing. This is not to say all the workers always laugh to the same degree about the same behaviours but that on the whole jokes are made about potentially challenging behaviour and amusement is found within challenging situations like the 'lock out'. Certain workers, in particular *Kelsey* and *Sarah* are more likely to make jokes and lead the laughter but others share in it. There are of course potential risks associated with the workers using humour in this way. There is the potential for humour to be perceived as disrespectful to the young people (as their behaviour is being mocked) and it can create barriers between the workers and a young people, with the development of an 'us' and 'them' mentality. The process of identification between the workers serves to simultaneously differentiate them from the young people. Humour is known for this dualistic function (Lockyer, 2006:43-44).

Much of this shared humour and laughter occurs during evaluation sessions. As such the evaluation session offers a safe space to explore and reflect upon the tensions and stresses in the work in which the workers are engaged. It is an important space for the workers to relieve stress and bond as a group. This worker-only space parallels the function of the teachers' lounge in schools, described as a:

“[...] congregational space [...] safe for teachers to express their thoughts and feelings, whilst fulfilling their need to release tension. In essence, the social support within these spaces helped to ease the hardships of the emotional labour of the profession. The emotional labour of the profession would not allow for these expressions of feelings and perspectives within the classroom.”

(Mawhinney, 2008:207)

Interactions between workers in the evaluation sessions are shown in chapter 5, section 5.2, to be an important part of the process in identifying the boundaries around behaviour in the youth club, and are suggested here to play a role in managing the emotional aspects of challenging behaviour. The evaluation session is an important 'background' space in the construction and management of challenging behaviour, and thus in understanding the processes surrounding challenging interactions in the youth club.

Throughout much of this section there is an ongoing theme of interpreting challenging encounters and potentially challenging behaviour as something to be laughed at – this links to discussion in section 7.2 about the relationship between the challenging and humorous behaviour. However, in this section humour has been shown to be part of the process of managing behaviour and emotions in challenging interactions. Humour is suggested to operate as a mechanism of control to pre-empt the escalation of a challenging situation. It is used strategically to embarrass the young people into behaving in a different way and as a means to create the space (identified as needed in chapter 6) for the interaction to be redefined and/or defused. The workers also occasionally use sarcasm in their interactions with a young person following a challenging encounter with them, using humour as a

means to express frustration with a situation and/or to regain a sense of control. Saliently, humour was also shown to operate as an important way of communicating about challenging interactions between the workers, in private away from the young people. In this context, humour was shown to operate as a coping, supporting and bonding process for the workers. Overall, humour is significant in the management of behaviour and emotions for those working and also participating in the youth club.

## **7.4 Conclusions**

In his discussion of the use of humour in the classroom, Woods (1983) states humour is known to function in many ways:

“As an instrument to protect and develop the self, as political weapons to defend against or strike at an enemy, as a social regulator to highlight norms, as a bargaining counter, or as a cement for social relations – humour has been shown to be used in all these ways”  
(Woods, 1983:111)

This chapter has explored the significance of ‘having a laugh’ in the youth club in relation to understanding challenging behaviours as a social phenomenon when working with young people. Beginning with a joke about the characteristics of youth workers, this chapter explored the nature of humour and laughter in the youth club and how this relates to challenging behaviour. Although empirical research is largely absent on the issue of humour and challenging behaviour, there is a consensus that humour is significant in work with young people perceived to be challenging. Humour was suggested to be significant because it acts as a means to bond groups, to test boundaries, to defuse tense moments and to cope with difficult situations. The findings in this chapter confirm these different uses of humour. Humour was found to facilitate the co-existence of workers and young people in this space. It also served to mark out differences between groups of people, in terms of who was included in the joke and who could find it funny. The chapter also found that the situational nature of humour offers valuable insight into the

situational nature of challenging behaviour and that humour allowed for the expression of otherwise unacceptable emotions and behaviours. Furthermore, a discussion of humour opened up additional ways to interpret challenging behaviour in practice with a focus on paradox, ambiguity and even fun.

The chapter began by arguing there is a culture of humour and laughter in the youth club particularly around bantering and teasing behaviours. It is suggested that to fully 'belong' in this youth club it is necessary to belong to this culture – to be able to take part, with good humour, in the teasing and bantering interactions. This set the context for the discussion of humour suggesting humour and laughter were important in maintaining social relations in the youth club. As the chapter progressed, it emerged that this general culture of humour facilitates the belonging of diverse groups in the JU (workers, young people and myself). This was shown when people bonded through shared humour and engaged with each other through the use of humour. However, within the general culture of humour and having a laugh in the youth club there were shown to be different cultures of humour for the young people and for the workers. Humour marked the boundaries around acceptable behaviour for the different groups – there were things the workers joked about together but could not do so in front of the young people and there were things the young people laugh at that the adults do not find funny or cannot find funny by the nature of their role in the youth club. My liminal position between the two groups showed the existence of the two different cultures of humour clearly.

The discussions of the funny side of challenging behaviour and the challenging side of humorous behaviour are used to argue that there is a fine line between funny and challenging behaviours in the youth club. The situational nature of humour is drawn out most in this discussion and at the same time the situational nature of challenging behaviour is exemplified. In particular the sometimes quick-witted and



farcical nature of some potentially challenging behaviour is used to demonstrate how it can also be considered funny. Equally, the potentially harmful and hurtful nature of some humour clearly shows how such behaviour can also be challenging if it threatens the 'safe' and inclusive space of the youth club (highlighted as integral to the role of the JU in chapter 4). It was argued that an interaction could be interpreted as having both humorous and challenging elements; the interpretation was suggested to depend upon a person's position in the interaction and his or her social role in the youth club.

In examining further the relationship between what is interpreted as funny and what is interpreted as challenging, the young people's strategic claims to humour were identified as a process by which they created a space to test out the boundaries around behaviour as well as to express emotions they could not express in seriousness. It was suggested that when behaviour is in jest (or claimed to be in jest) the boundaries around acceptable and unacceptable behaviour are blurred causing further dilemmas for the worker in terms of how they respond. At the same time, the young people were shown to operate their own markers around acceptable behaviour by pointing out when something was out of order, when it was "shan". This process suggested that the boundaries around acceptable and unacceptable behaviour are constantly being negotiated and worked out through interaction. Because humour, and in particular banter, operates at the boundary of acceptable behaviour, these behaviours draw attention to the process itself. This suggests that it is important to understand challenging behaviour as a changeable entity, contextual to the setting but also situational to the moment – always a borderline behaviour.

Whilst the first half of the chapter was about the significance of humour in the interpretation and performance of behaviour as challenging and/or funny, the second half of the chapter explored the role of humour in controlling potentially

challenging behaviour (both pre-empting and defusing challenging situations) and in making the experience of challenging interactions more manageable for the workers. It was found that the workers strategically use humour to control problematic behaviour and that the workers and young people attempt to defuse the tension in challenging situations through humour. It is suggested that this occurs through a process of producing an alternative definition of behaviour or situation. The examples given showed how humour is used by the workers to embarrass young people into behaving differently and to change the social meaning of a person's behaviour into something they do not desire in an attempt to stop them from behaving in that way. The careful interjection of humour into a tense situation is argued to create the necessary space (see the conclusion in chapter 6) for the situation to defuse. Furthermore, humour was also shown to be a means for the workers to express emotions about young people they perceive to be challenging through the use of sarcasm in front of the young people and by laughing about and at the behaviour of the young people when only workers are present. The latter is argued to function to bond the workers together as a group and to act as a kind of coping strategy, a means to relieve the stresses of their role where problematic behaviour and challenging encounters are ordinary and ongoing.

Overall, humour is shown to facilitate an understanding of challenging behaviour as a social phenomenon in the youth club as well as being an important part of the social relations in this youth club. The chapter suggests that future work on challenging behaviour as a product of interaction, not individual problems, would benefit from a close examination of the significance of humour in this process. The findings from this chapter are brought together with the findings from earlier chapters in the following conclusion chapter.

# 8. Conclusions

## 8.1 Introduction

This research was conducted because, whilst the socially constructed and interactive nature of challenging behaviour is widely acknowledged in the current literature, there are very few studies that explore the processes involved in the conceptualisation of challenging behaviour as a social phenomenon, focusing instead on individual problems. Reflecting the exploratory nature of the research the initial aim was quite broad: to contribute to a contextualised understanding of challenging behaviour as a social phenomenon when working with young people. The thesis does not claim to present the 'ultimate' conceptualisation of challenging behaviour but its findings have implications for the current dominant approaches to understanding challenging behaviour when working with young people. To explain the significance of the study's findings, this chapter synthesises the central findings found across the substantive chapters, constructing a thematic narrative of how the chapters relate to one another. The findings are then considered in relation to their contribution to the existing literature about, and practices around, challenging behaviour in work with young people. The chapter ends with a reflective discussion of the boundaries of this study and the possibilities for future research in this area.

## 8.2 Key Themes and Findings

Behaviour perceived to be problematic was found to be an everyday part of social interaction in the youth club. This finding was introduced in chapter 4 and further illustrated in the data presented in chapters 5 through to 7. The **normalisation of behaviour perceived to be challenging** is argued to be an important redefinition when approaching the issue of challenging behaviour (Grundy and Blandford, 1999). Because challenging behaviour is normalised in the youth club, it is also

constructed as, in the main, acceptable; something expected and absorbed into the everyday goings on. So whilst certain behaviours were repeatedly identifiable as 'problematic' (by the workers and the young people) there was no strategic attempt or collective desire by the workers to eradicate misbehaviour entirely from interactions in the youth club (chapter 5). This is important because if such attempts were made then the numbers of young people participating are likely to have reduced significantly.

In many ways, the boundaries around behaviour appear to be clearly delineated in the youth club as there is a shared understanding of the 'rules'. In practice, these were **permissive boundaries** – often transgressed, re-instated, transgressed, re-instated and so on – an ongoing iterative process. It was found that challenging behaviour in practice (both the testing of boundaries and the challenging of that behaviour) functioned to mark out the boundaries around behaviour. Equally the boundaries were necessary for potentially challenging behaviour to exist. Through social interaction the nature of the boundaries around behaviour and the nature of challenging behaviour are co-constructed. The repeated identification of certain behaviours as problematic gives the impression of static boundaries around behaviour. Yet, in practice, these boundaries are shown to be flexible. This finding helps to illustrate the concept of 'rubber-boundaries' discussed by authors such as O'Regan (2006) and Visser (2003) but it also develops the idea further as it suggests that the 'flexibility' in the boundaries are not imposed by the adult in authority but rather they are created and tacitly agreed upon through interactions between the adults and the young people. This agreement has to be tacit so as to maintain the impression that the boundaries were 'fixed' as otherwise there would be nothing to push against. Rarely did the study observe a transgression of the rules to the extent that the position of the workers or the participation of the young people was compromised (chapter 6). These permissive boundaries are important as they create

a space where the young people can 'be challenging' and the workers can 'do challenging' without threatening the social functioning of the youth club.

This is not to suggest that 'being' and 'doing' challenging is simply a negotiated performance. The workers were able to articulate, sometimes quite strongly, why they felt the need to challenge certain behaviours, for example when behaviour has the potential to cause physical harm as in the case of fighting (chapter 5). These reasons were related to what the workers saw as their professional role in the youth club. Whilst this could infer that it is possible to create 'typologies' of challenging behaviour within the context of the youth club (similar to work done in the context of the classroom see Axup and Gersch, 2008; Lyons and O'Connor, 2006; Visser 2006), chapters 5, 6 and 7 went on to clearly illustrate the very **situational nature** of interpreting and responding to young people's behaviour. This supports the argument that there is a need for the continued and full recognition of the contextual nature of interpretations of behaviour as challenging (Cooper, 1999a:10-11; Clough et al, 2005:9). This should be at the level of micro-interaction (in the immediacy and fluidity of the moment) rather than just at the level of the social setting (the wider and fixed context). It is also to acknowledge the importance of social positions and the expectations attached to different social roles in mediating interpretations of behaviour as challenging (chapter 7).

Linked to the situational nature of interpreting behaviour and the idea of permissive boundaries is the finding that **ambiguity** is often involved in the performing of and responding to potentially challenging behaviour. The study found that the young people and the workers used ambiguity (whether consciously or not) to negotiate boundaries and relations with others. Uncertainty over the meaning and intent of behaviour created challenging situations but also enabled them to be defused and accepted. These findings suggest that it is important to allow for a degree of

uncertainty and ambiguity in identifying and negotiating challenging behaviour when working with young people. Indeed, the desire to define challenging behaviour may be deemed superfluous. Of course, this makes the role of the worker more challenging as they are without rigid, mechanistic rules of how to identify or respond to young people's perceived challenging behaviour. A key finding then is the need to ensure workers are comfortable and skilled in managing this ambiguity and uncertainty as opposed to managing challenging behaviour.

The study found that the workers made **judgements in the moment** when faced with rule-breaking (chapter 5) or authority-challenging (chapter 6) behaviour. This is related to both the situational nature of interpreting behaviour as challenging and the absence of a codified set of rules of how to respond to the perceived challenging behaviour of young people. Such judgements were not always related to the nature of the behaviour displayed by the young person, rather the worker's response was mediated by a complex web of emotional, social and professional influences. This finding parallels ideas around the importance of reflective practice and 'reflection in action' for professionals (Schön, 1983). Whilst reflective practice is suggested to underpin youth work practice (see Thompson, 2005; Turney, 2007), its role in negotiating challenging interactions is under-examined and could be further extrapolated. This would offer an alternative to the development of mechanical rules (tips, tools and techniques) and behavioural policies on how to manage challenging behaviour.

In observing the interactions around rule-breaking behaviour and in listening to the workers talk about what was challenging to them, the study found that the initial boundary testing/rule breaking behaviour is not of itself 'challenging', the challenge comes when a worker attempts to control that behaviour and the young person does not comply. This was illuminated in the workers discussions of the boys who had

come to represent the notion of 'trouble' in the youth club. These boys engaged in similar behaviour to the other young people but they were described as more 'challenging' than the others because they simply "did not listen" to the workers (chapter 5). To further explore the issue of control and resistance in challenging behaviour, chapter 6 focused on the micro-interactions around 'control in practice' and the development of challenging interactions between a worker and a young person/young people. The study found that these challenging interactions were best conceptualised as mini **power struggles**, small battles of will (Spence et al, 2006: 2006:36). The construction of a challenging interaction as a power struggle, and the ethics of engaging in power struggles for the youth workers (Jeffs and Banks, 1999), highlights the importance of giving critical attention to the issue of 'power' when conceptualising challenging behaviour.

The focus on social processes revealed that the development and negotiation of challenging interactions involves much **non-verbal communication**. Non-verbal communication was apparent in: the very bodily behaviours of the boys (chapter 5); the strategic negotiation of challenging interactions (chapter 6); and in many performances of humorous/challenging behaviour (chapter 7). Non-verbal communication is, usually, a more subtle and less direct means of challenging the boundaries/behaviour of others. In particular, it was shown to be invaluable to the process of defusing challenging interactions. It is argued to create a situation where direct confrontation can be underplayed and create spaces for those involved in a confrontation to save face and 'back off' (Pomerantz, 2005:26).

The study suggests that negotiating challenging interactions requires adept **social skills** from both the workers and the young people. In particular, the young people are skilled at pushing against but rarely breaking the permissive boundaries and in strategically using humour and non-verbal communication. This links to a further

finding, that there is much **creativity** involved in potentially challenging behaviour, for example the ways in which the young people change the meaning of an object (chapter 5) or respond with a quick-witted remark (chapter 7). Equally, the workers were found to require highly developed social skills and to be creative in their 'in-the-moment' responses to the behaviour of the young people. Understanding the social skills and creativity involved in the negotiation of challenging interactions is important as challenging behaviour is usually discussed in relation to the deficiencies of a young person; their inability to interact 'normally'; and their incapacity to manage their own behaviour.

Finally, in a context where challenging interactions ordinarily arise in daily practice, and where being involved in these interactions is fraught with dilemmas rather than certainty, the study found that it was important to have processes in place that made the ongoing experience of challenging interactions **manageable**. Reflecting findings on 'emotion work' with teachers (see Mawhinney, 2008), the study found that laughter and humour was an important 'coping' strategy as it allowed the workers to express emotions that might otherwise be deemed unacceptable; to receive feedback 'safely' on the decisions that had taken; and to facilitate a bonding process between the workers (chapter 7). The study also found that some workers coped better with the ongoing nature of challenging interactions than others. These were the workers that expressed empathy with the way the young people behaved and had the confidence and skills to back off and laugh off an emergent confrontational interaction.

Together the key findings suggest that in understanding challenging behaviour as a social phenomenon in the youth club it is necessary to understand that not only is challenging behaviour a part of social interaction, it is an ordinary everyday part of that social interaction – the boundaries around behaviour are constantly being



tested and behaviour is constantly being challenged. Challenging interactions come into existence when people engage in a mini-power struggle to control their own or others behaviour – a feature of the co-existence of different kinds of groups in this space. A further key overall finding is that in the youth club the boundaries around behaviour have a flexibility that accommodates (much) rule-breaking and authority-challenging behaviour; a flexibility that also allows for the necessary ‘inconsistencies’ in challenging behaviour in practice. These flexible or permissive boundaries are argued to be the product of ongoing negotiation between the workers and the young people – a negotiating process that often involves non-verbal communication and humour. Situational interpretations and in-the-moment judgements about the behaviour of others are found to be more important in this context than the existence of formal policies and procedures and firm boundaries in pre-empting and negotiating challenging interactions.

In discussing the key thematic findings of this study the fruitfulness of conceptualising challenging behaviour as a social phenomenon is demonstrated. Building on this, the following section discusses more explicitly the contribution of these findings to existing literature.

### **8.3 Contributions**

This study emerged from dissatisfaction with the dominant and limited conceptualisation of challenging behaviour as an objectively determined attribute of the individual, the young person *with* challenging behaviour (Tobell and Lawthom, 2005:90). Chapter 2, section 2.2, noted that the concept of challenging behaviour refers to an interactive process (Lyon’s and O’Connor, 2006:223) and that any definition of challenging behaviour is socially constructed (Porter and Lacey, 1999). So what contribution does this study make to a contextualised understanding of

challenging behaviour as a social phenomenon when working with young people? The findings suggest that to theorise challenging behaviour truly as a product of social processes it is valuable to adopt more precise and accurate terminology. For example, if the 'challenging behaviour' under discussion is actually rule-breaking behaviour or authority-challenging behaviour or disruptive behaviour then it is important to be clear about this. Such descriptions of the nature of behaviour provide the necessary explanatory context as to what the challenge is being made to (for example, to a set of rules, a person's authority, and/or the social order). This would go some way in countering the currently confusing ways in which the term 'challenging behaviour' is used at present (see chapter 2, section 2.2.2).

The study also suggested the phrase 'challenging interactions' could replace 'challenging behaviour' in those studies committed to understanding challenging behaviour as a product of social interaction, as it firmly places the 'challenge' within the unfolding interaction and bypasses the difficulties of talking about challenging behaviour without attributing it to an individual. This is similar to Kilpatrick et al's (2008) reasons for using the term 'challenging situations' as "[...] 'situations' is used to refer to the total context while, in general, behaviour relates more specifically to the young people." (Kilpatrick 2008:2). Challenging interactions can offer some conceptual clarification and importantly demands attention to social processes rather than individual problems. This was shown to be important in this study as the 'challenging' of challenging behaviour was found to arise, not from the initial rule-breaking or authority-challenging or disruptive behaviour, nor at the point when the worker takes steps to challenge that behaviour, but at the point that the challenge is resisted.

The findings in this thesis suggest that practitioners and policy makers would benefit from shifting their concerns about how to manage the problem of the

challenging behaviour of young people (see for example Cowley, 2003; O'Regan 2006a; 2006b; Rogers, 2004) to thinking about how to make ordinarily arising challenging interactions manageable. This would mean focusing less on strategies to control and discipline young people and reflecting more on the processes of social interaction in particular critically attending to the role of power relations. This involves further consideration of the 'positive' social functions of challenging interactions in the context of the setting instead of thinking of 'challenging' as inherently problematic and a negative force. This goes beyond the recognition that challenging refers to a difficult but also stimulating experience (O'Regan, 2006a:6) to considering how challenging interactions are an important part of the process of building relations with others; identifying and understanding the nature of the boundaries around behaviour; and developing and practising social skills. The findings of this thesis show that challenging interactions are an everyday part of negotiating social relations with others.

Additionally, as the emergence and development of challenging interactions is extremely situational and requires 'in the moment' judgements, the principle that every organisation working with young people should have a behavioural policy with "clear policy guidelines and practice statements on handling troubled and troublesome young people" (Jamieson et al, 2000:10) is undermined. The study suggests that rather than constructing a policy to determine how practitioners should respond to behaviour they perceive to be challenging, it is more productive to help practitioners reflect upon the experience of being involved in challenging interactions. This reflection could be framed by an understanding of the values and principles underpinning their work. This speaks to the work of those developing lists of principles for work with 'challenging' young people (Visser, 2002; 2005) but it suggests these principles have to be critically attended to. For example, as well as looking at what works and why (i.e. a solution to the problem of challenging behaviour), this study suggests it is imperative to consider whether what works is

ethically sound. It is also important to recognise that the desire to control can serve to create challenging interactions, as the worker and the young person engage in a power struggle over the young person's behaviour (see Pomerantz, 2005). This study therefore suggests that it is important to look at the process of co-operation as well as the process of control. This speaks to the work by Graeme Stuart (2004) who considers how power can be shared between a worker and a young person, rather than how power can be exercised over a young person. This is an important reconceptualisation of how to approach the perceived challenging behaviour of young people with implications beyond youth work settings.

In many ways, the thesis has been about how two different social groups, with very different social roles, work out on a daily basis how to co-exist in the same space. The use of non-verbal communication and humour are suggested to be particularly important in this. In particular, the findings of this thesis are likely to be of use to teachers experiencing the ongoing low level indiscipline, the 'daily hassles' perceived to be the most 'challenging' and wearying to deal with (Boyle et al, 2005; Axup and Gersch, 2008:147; Munn et al, 2007:71). Can the processes of defusing challenging interactions and of making the experience of challenging interactions manageable be transferred onto the classroom setting? If not, why not?

Overall, the findings of this study contribute to the body of literature that challenges the dominant conceptualisation of challenging behaviour as belonging to the individual – the young person *with* challenging behaviour (Tobell and Lawthom, 2005:90). Additionally, the findings create knowledge about the nature of youth work practice, making a small contribution to the substantial gap of knowledge about everyday youth work practice (see also Spence et al, 2007) detailing the ways in which workers and young people interact, and in particular, providing empirical evidence of the concept of 'control-in-practice' (Jeffs and Banks, 1999:94). The

findings suggest that whilst there is unpredictability to the nature of youth work practice there are also discernable patterns in the ways in which the workers respond to the behaviour of the young people. The findings also have wider implications for the ways in which power relations between adults and young people are conceptualised. At the level of micro-interaction the worker and the young person are argued to be engaged in a power struggle, involving conflict but also co-operation. Whilst adults are often assumed to have power over young people in institutional settings, the power the young people exercise over adults must also be considered. The social processes involved in negotiating challenging interactions implies something more complex than assuming there are 'unequal power relations' when adults work with young people. Power and control are also being created and recreated in and through the interaction. The workers may have ultimate control over the setting, but the youth club is meaningless if the young people choose not to participate. At the same time the young people need to behave in ways that do not destabilise the position of the workers otherwise the continuation of the youth club is untenable as the workers may refuse to participate.

This study is situated within the subject area of Childhood and Youth Studies, yet very little of the literature drawn upon was sourced from within the subject area. Whilst it is difficult to draw boundaries around what constitutes Childhood and Youth Studies, and it could be argued that any research involving child and youth issues is part of the subject area, there are certain books and journals that form the core of recent resurgence of pre-dominantly sociological interest in this subject area (often linked to the edited collection of James and Prout, 1990). This body of work is recognisable in its study of the relationship between social structures and the agency of child actors and the focus on the socially constructed nature of childhood. Studies of the concept of 'challenging behaviour', however, remain firmly in the domain of education studies and psychology; existing only on the margins of childhood and youth studies research. At the same time, the meaning of challenging

behaviour is of interest to the central debates in childhood and youth studies as challenging behaviour is constructed as a 'child-like' or 'youth-like' behaviour. Aside from adults considered to have an intellectual disability, it is rare to hear the phrase 'adults with challenging behaviour'. Furthermore, the dominant conceptualisations of challenging behaviour construct the young person as a victim of their circumstance (whether genetically or socially determined) and their agency is underplayed in the process. The findings from this study suggest understanding challenging behaviour as a social phenomenon offers insight into constructions of childhood and youth more generally.

#### **8.4 Reflections and Future Research**

"Research should therefore not be thought of as providing static 'truths' but as reflecting our best understanding at a particular time"  
(McKechnie and Hobbs, 2004:274).

As the opening quotation suggests any knowledge on a subject is partial and situational. The knowledge may be challenged and/or built upon by future research. Indeed, reflecting upon the 'limitations' or boundaries of this study opens up new research avenues. This involves drawing out the implications of the way in which the research was conducted for the findings. It also involves explaining any questions that emerge from, or that remain unanswered by, the study; aspects that the data and analysis in this study cannot shed light on.

It is especially worth reflecting upon the advantages and disadvantages of certain methodological decisions and constraints, for example my gender, in doing this research. Whilst female childhood and youth researchers may not face the 'suspicion' that male researchers in the subject area do (Horton, 2005), being a female clearly English university researcher in this youth club dominated by boys from a different background to my own meant my initial social access was

challenging in ways that would be different had I been male, Scottish and 'local'. How the boys related to me and me to them is likely to have been affected by these differences and thus influenced the data collected. An object of fun, and of sympathy, and also of attention, I was a relatively non-threatening figure in the youth club (female and an outsider). This perhaps allowed me access to conversations and interactions in a way that may not have been possible as a male or 'local' researcher and meant I got to experience the process of initially being on the margins of the youth club physically and socially to being accepted in a more central position. This meant I got insight into the challenging interactions involving the dominant, most likely to be labelled 'challenging', boys and also the challenging interactions involving the 'quieter' ones – who may often be excluded from research on this topic area.

This research also focused on a very specific age group, those emerging out of childhood into their teenage years, in their first and second year of secondary school. As age was suggested by some of the workers to be an important factor in the nature of challenging interactions in work with young people, it would be informative to explore if the general findings of this thesis translate into work with young people of younger and older ages. Choosing to work with this age group also affected the nature of the data collected; I found it particularly challenging to form research relations with this group of 11-14 year old boys (some girls) in a way that would have facilitated interviewing or group discussions. Yet, on familiarisation visits to the primary school aged youth club and as part of the management committee to a youth club for young people aged 15/16, in the same area and run by the same youth agency, I had very different experiences. The younger young people asked me questions; invited me to play in their activities; and were quick to tell me about medication they were on for their behaviour. The older young people, in particular a group of 15 year old girls, suggested I should be doing the research with them. There seemed to be something particularly challenging about engaging with

the young people in the youth club I chose (a reflection mirrored in the comments of some of the workers) in comparison to my experiences of these other youth groups. In a project, however, on challenging interactions this appears appropriate. Although it may have restricted the type of data collected, it offered valuable insight into the concept under study.

The decision to focus on one youth club setting was important to gather the rich, detailed data needed for this exploratory study. Given the findings from this study, there is scope to conduct further research into both other non-classroom settings and classroom settings looking at challenging interactions but with a more comparative perspective. In particular inter-agency work and how challenging behaviour is constructed and responded to when professional cultures clash would be of interest (as indicated in the brief interactions between the teachers and the youth workers in this study). In hindsight it may appear that an opportunity was missed to do just that in this study given that the youth club was located in a school, but a decision was made to focus on the youth club setting and not to follow individual cases of young people into their classrooms to avoid individualising the issue under examination and to avoid creating further data that would detract from the central aim of this study. It would, however, be particularly interesting to conduct research into a youth club with a better gender mix, given the under-representation of female young people in this study, especially considering the 'gender dimension' to challenging behaviour (Kilpatrick et al, 2008:5) and the relationship between social behaviours and ideas about masculinities and femininities (Frosh et al, 2004). Mill (2001), for example, conceptualises violence as an issue of masculinities in schools.

The approach taken in this research meant that whilst the views of the workers on experiencing challenging behaviour were collected through individual interviews



and group discussions, the views of the young people on their experience of the workers challenging their behaviour are relatively absent (for reasons detailed in chapter 3, section 3.3). The data collection was led by participant observation, a decision justified by the focus on social interaction. The views of young people on the concept of challenging behaviour or their involvement in challenging interactions could be taken up in future research. Are the young people aware of the strategies they use in negotiating challenging interactions; is it a conscious or unconscious process? Do they perceive the adults that work with them to be 'challenging'?

This focus on social interaction, rather than personal experience, meant that whilst the issue of the emotional aspects involved in experiencing challenging interactions on an everyday basis in a professional capacity were raised in chapter 7, section 7.3.3, it was not fully explored. This study found humour to be an important part of this process but what else helps the workers deal with this aspect of their work? Certain workers were more at ease with encountering challenging interactions in their work, why this is could be explored in much greater depth through a focus on emotions and emotional work in work with young people perceived to be challenging.

In doing this study, I adopted a broadly social constructionist and interactionist framework, interested in exploring what could be learnt from approaching the issue of challenging behaviour in work with young people in this way. This, and the nature of the setting, dictated the methods to be adopted. It meant that unique stories about challenging behaviour emerged and in order to analyse these stories various other analytical perspectives were drawn upon. An alternative way to approach the study would have been to have adopted a much stronger analytical framework from the start and to 'test out' the theory through the data collected. This

was not appropriate for this exploratory study but what the study does do is suggest possible theoretical frameworks of interest for future studies adopting a similar approach. The issue of power and control is critically important and thus it seems any future research developing this issue may wish to consider how theorists such as Michael Foucault are used to conceptualise work with young people (see for example Fitzsimons, 2007; Pini, 2004) and to make links between this and practices around challenging behaviour (see for example Watson, 2005). The strategic negotiation of challenging interactions (introduced in chapter 6) could be theorised further, for example through the use of Erving Goffman's work, as childhood and youth researchers have done in relation to other types of strategic interaction (see for example McIntosh and Punch (2009) research on sibling interactions). Finally, if the issue of emotional labour in work with young people around challenging behaviour was to be followed up, then Arlie Hochschild's work would be an obvious starting point (as illustrated in the work on teachers informal interactions by Mawhinney, 2008). It was necessary for this study to have a guiding but not prescriptive theoretical framework. Future studies however could build on this exploratory work by using theory in a more deductive and deterministic manner to examine how the concept of challenging behaviour in practice speaks to these theories. The findings in this study suggest that understanding challenging behaviour as an ordinarily arising social phenomenon has implications for how we understand the concept of power relations and the negotiation of social interactions between adults and young people.

Overall, this thesis argues that it is fruitful to conceptualise challenging behaviour as a social phenomenon – something created in the moment – in advancing an understanding of the complexity of 'challenging behaviour' in practice. In doing so, alternative perspectives of challenging behaviour have been put forward; perspectives that locate the 'challenge' in the interaction not in the person, and perspectives that do not automatically assume challenging equals problem. This is

an approach that accepts that challenging interactions are an integral part both of social relations and everyday negotiations over power and control. A salient aspect of this process is the need to keep multiple interpretations of behaviour alive at all times. In doing so, the study raises a question beyond this thesis: why is there a continued persistence in fixing labels to young people and their behaviour; and why do some of these labels appear to apply only to young people? This thesis does not claim to offer a solution to 'challenging behaviour', indeed that was never its aim, what it claims is to highlight the often paradoxical and messy nature of working with young people in a way that offers insight into the processes that help to make encountering challenging interactions a more 'positive' or 'manageable' experience for all involved.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Information Sent to the YDA Management Committee

### Proposed Research with YDA's open provision

Vicky Plows: PhD Student in Social Policy, University of Edinburgh  
Sessional Youth Worker, FABB Scotland

#### About the research project

##### **Research Title**

An exploration into the process of inclusion/exclusion: young people and 'challenging' behaviour

##### **Summary**

This research project will look at the relationship between 'challenging' behaviour and the inclusion of young people in leisure spaces and activities of their choosing. The project will consider the points at which behaviour is viewed as 'challenging' or 'problematic' and the effect this may have on the inclusion of the young people into certain spaces or activities. The aim of the research is to explore everyday practices of working and interacting with young people to learn more about the process of inclusion and exclusion in relation to behaviour.

##### **Background and Relevance**

The focus on 'challenging' behaviour is of theoretical and practical significance. 'Challenging' behaviour is a particular test of the drive towards 'inclusive' policies in a variety of environments. Research in the school environment has demonstrated that the inclusion of young people with 'challenging' behaviour has been the most difficult for school staff. There needs to be a greater understanding of the reality of putting inclusive policies into practice for this group of young people. These inclusive policies include a disability rights approach, as some young people with 'challenging' behaviour are categorised as having a behavioural disability as well as the right of all children to access leisure provision.

Much of the research into the process of inclusion for young people with 'challenging' behaviour is based in the classroom environment. This is a very specific kind of space where the emphasis is on curriculum teaching and learning. This often means the teacher needs to maintain order by disciplining or excluding young people whose behaviour is disruptive or challenges the teacher's authority. To build on and provide a contrast with this work, this project will look at young people's leisure spaces, where the adults involved are youth workers/volunteers. This is important as the leisure space is very different to the classroom space and a youth worker's role is different to a teacher's role. This provides opportunities to learn something different about the reality of inclusion in relation to 'challenging' behaviour.

##### **Research Questions**

The initial research questions are based around three main themes.

- 1) *The labelling or interpretation of behaviour as 'challenging'* - what kinds of behaviour, in what situations, at what time and involving what kind of interaction are seen as 'challenging'?
- 2) *Boundaries of behaviour* - how do young people in the provision challenge the rules and accepted ways of behaving and how do others (young people and youth workers/volunteers) respond to this?

- 3) *The process of inclusion and of exclusion* - how are young people included/excluded in the provision, both formally and informally, and how is this process connected with 'challenging' behaviour?

To answer these questions the research project will take the form of an ethnographic exploration of everyday interaction at a youth work leisure provision.

## **The Research Project and the JU**

### **Why your provision?**

I chose to approach your provision because of the ethos of your work and the function of your provision. Firstly, your group was set up to meet the needs and preferences of young people and to minimise the potential for anti-social behaviour in the area. Also your provision is attended voluntarily by the young people and is a point of contact for the young people with youth workers and volunteers. Overall, the JU is doing work where much can be learnt about the process of inclusion in relation to 'challenging' behaviour. I will take extensive steps to ensure that the provision and all of the participants remain anonymous in any output from the project.

### **What taking part would involve**

The type of research I am doing requires ongoing contact with the provision. If you agree to become a part of the project I would like to visit the provision on a regular basis, over a 12-month period. I would hope to begin the research with the start of the new school term in January 2006.

I would:

- Begin by simply *observing* and getting to know the place and people and letting people get to know me
- *Extend my fieldwork* to other spaces that the young people attend – for example day trips, other local clubs etc
- If appropriate, and once they have got to know me, talk a bit more formally to the young people and the workers/volunteers (in groups or individually) about behaviour and inclusion in the form of *semi-structured interviews*

The research would mostly involve me:

- Hanging around the Provision, a few sessions a week.
- Chatting informally to the young people and workers/volunteers.
- Watching what is going on.
- Taking notes after the session.

The role I would like to take in the provision is:

- Helping the workers/volunteers to set up and clear up.
- One where I will not have to deal with any behavioural issues (unless there is a child protection issue and there is no-one else around).
- Answering any questions that anyone may have about the research

What will you get from the research?

- Summary sheets of 'findings so far' and 'final findings' to the provision
- The opportunity to feedback your opinions on my findings
- Feedback activities in the provision with the participants, if they want this.

## **My Background**

I have an undergraduate degree in Social Geography. For my dissertation I interviewed volunteers in community centres to learn about the relationship between a 'sense of community' and volunteering. I have just completed an MSc in Childhood Studies. This furthered my understanding of youth and child policy.

I have practical experience of working with children of different ages in a voluntary capacity. For almost two years I have been employed as a sessional youth worker, with FABB Scotland. I work mostly with secondary school age disabled and non-disabled, young people. The aim of these youth clubs is to provide inclusive leisure opportunities for all young people. It was in this role that I developed a practical interest in the way the young people with 'challenging' behaviour test the drive to inclusion in very complex ways.

### **Further Information**

If you have any further questions the research, want to know more about me and my experience and/or would like to see the short or full research proposal I would be happy to provide these on request. I also have an enhanced Disclosure Scotland form and a fully completed ethics form approved for this research. The ethics form covers issues such as informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, child protection issues and any conflict of interest. These are issues that, if you agree to take part in the research, we would discuss in more detail prior to the start of the research.

I have provided my contact details below. Please feel free to contact me for more information on any aspect of the research or if you have any comments to make. I have also provided the background details of my supervisors who are providing me with guidance on this project and my manager at FABB Scotland who is happy for you to contact him.

### **Contact Details**

Vicky Plows  
E-mail: v.plows@sms.ed.ac.uk

Telephone:  
Office: \*\*\*  
Home: \*\*\*  
Mobile: \*\*\*

### **Supervisors, University of Edinburgh**

Dr Kay Tisdall  
Senior Lecturer in Social Policy, School of Social and Political Studies  
Course Director, MSc Childhood Studies

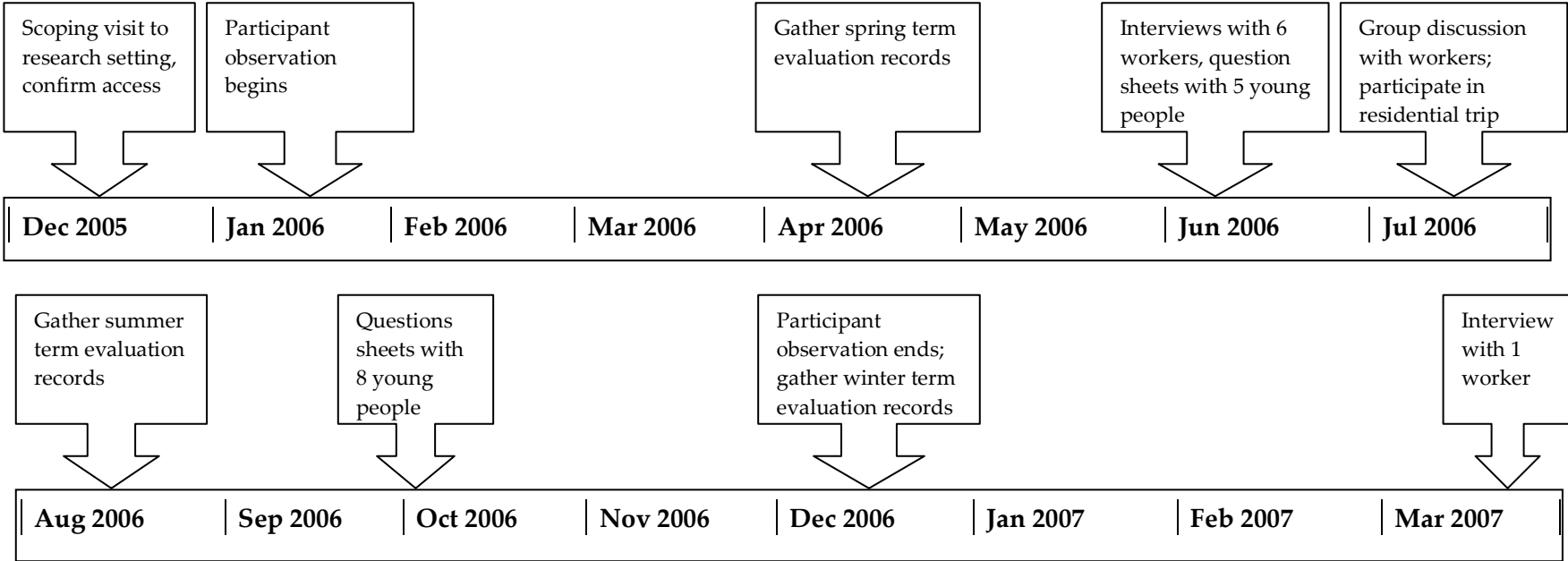
Professor Liz Bondi  
Professor of Social Geography, School of GeoSciences  
Head of Institute of Geography and Co-Director of Counselling Studies

### **FABB Scotland**

Andy Aitken, Inclusion and Project Co-ordinator  
FABB Scotland



**Appendix 2: Timeline of Data Collection Activities**



# Who am I, Why am I here?



## ◎ Who am I?

My name is **Vicky**.

I am a research student at the University of Edinburgh.

## ◎ Are you a worker?

No, I am not a worker or a volunteer worker.

## ◎ What are you doing here?

I am doing a research project looking at young people in their leisure time.

I will be hanging around the club for the next few months.

## ◎ Why are you doing that?

I want to learn about the different ways that people use the club and the different ways people behave in the club.

I am interested in what happens when people behave in ways that other people do not like.

## ◎ Will I be in your project?

I will write about what I see in the club, so you might be in the project but I will not be using any names and nobody will be able to identify you. I will also make up a pretend name for the club so that nobody will know which club the project is about.

## ◎ What if I have more questions?

You can come and ask me any questions you like about what I am doing.

## Appendix 4: A5 Information Leaflet for JU Participants

### Research Project at the JU

#### **What is the research project?**

It is about young people and different kinds of behaviour.



#### **Who am I?**

Vicky.

I am a researcher from the University of Edinburgh.

#### **How am I doing the project?**

I am hanging around and observing what happens in the JU. Later on I write notes about what I have learnt.

I have made up a pretend name for the club and the people who use the club. I have done this so that nobody will know which club or people I am writing about.

If you still do not want me to write about you, you can tell me not to.

#### **Do you have more questions?**

There is a poster on the wall in JU about the research project.

You can come and ask me any questions you like about the research project.

Appendix 5: Information Sticker worn by Researcher



## Appendix 6: Question Sheets used with Young People in the JU

### Research Project:

Researcher: Vicky from the University of Edinburgh

Your view on what happens at the JU

Q.1	Are you: Female <input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/>
Q.2	How old are you?
Q.3	Which Underground do you go to? (tick one) JU <input type="checkbox"/> SU <input type="checkbox"/>
Q.4	How often do you come to the JU? All the time <input type="checkbox"/> Most days a week <input type="checkbox"/> Once a week <input type="checkbox"/> Not very often <input type="checkbox"/>
Q.5	Why do <u>you</u> come to the JU? Play board games <input type="checkbox"/> Play play station <input type="checkbox"/> Play pool <input type="checkbox"/> Play Table tennis <input type="checkbox"/> Play table football <input type="checkbox"/> Meet others <input type="checkbox"/> Meet/talk friends <input type="checkbox"/> To (play) fight <input type="checkbox"/> Talk with workers <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know <input type="checkbox"/> To chill <input type="checkbox"/> Anything else?

Q.8	Is the JU different to other places in the School? Why/Why not?
Q.9	Can you behave how you want to in the JU? Why/Why not?
Q.10	What kind of things are you not supposed to when you are in the JU? Why?
Q.11	What happens if you do something you are not supposed to do? Is that okay with you?

Q.12	Have you ever been 'told off' by the workers? What happened?
Q.13	What kind of stuff annoys you that other young people or workers do in the JU? Why?
Q.14	Do you ever do stuff to on purpose to annoy other people in the JU? What do you do?
Q.15	How would you describe the JU to other young people?
Q.16	Is there anything else you want to add or ask me?

- Thank you very, very much.
- I will be in the JU until Christmas if you want to speak to me again or ask me any questions.

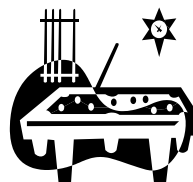
## Appendix 7: Information Sheet with Question Sheet

### Research Project at the JU

Researcher's Name:  
**Vicky**, from Edinburgh University

#### Your view on what happens in the JU:

Can you do what you want? Do you like what others do?  
What do you think about the JU?



#### What the Research Project is about

I am doing a research project on activities and behaviour in the JU and how some behaviour is seen as a problem by others.

I want to know what you think about what goes on in the JU and how people deal with different behaviour in the JU.

#### What this is about

I am Vicky, a researcher from the University of Edinburgh. You may have seen me hanging around at the JU.

These questions are for my research project on different behaviours in the JU and how some behaviour is seen as a problem by others.

I want to know what you think about behaviour and how people deal with different behaviour.

#### Talking to Vicky

You do not have to talk to me at all and you do not have to answer any questions you do not want to. You do not have to give me a reason.

You can also tell me anytime after we have finished talking if there is anything you wish you had not said and I will not use it.

#### What happens to what you say

Next year, I will be writing a report of what I learnt at the JU.

If is okay with you my report will include what we talk about today and I will be using what you say but not your real name. I will also give the JU a fake name.

I will not be telling anyone who works at the JU what you say.

After we have chatted I will ask you if there is anything you would like me not to include in my report.

#### Do you have more questions?

I will be coming along and continuing to observe at the JU until Christmas so you can speak to me again or ask me any questions.

**Thank you very much**

## Appendix 8: Interview Topic Guide with Workers

### Introduction

1. Thank you very much for agreeing to talk with me today.
2. As you know I have been coming into the JU for a few months now observing and then writing notes about the session for my research project. The project is looking at 'challenging' behaviour in youth group settings. I wanted to talk with you today so that I can learn about your experience of working/volunteering at YDA. The information that you give to me will be used in my research project. Our discussion will help me to better understand the types of behaviour that are seen as 'challenging' by workers and volunteers and how the youth group works with young people who are thought to be 'challenging'.
3. I have a few important things that I want to go through together before we get going with the discussion. These are on this consent form.
4. The discussion should last about 20-30 minutes.
5. There are no right or wrong answers to any of the questions and some of them might seem really obvious or stupid to you. I really just want to know about your views and experiences on behaviour in the youth group.
6. (show mini-schedule) These questions will be about what you think about working at the JU, the kind of rules that exist in the JU, what happens if these rules are broken and about different kinds of behaviours in general and your experiences and views of dealing with different behaviours.
7. I would like to record the discussion, as this easier for me that taking notes whilst talking with you. Is it okay with you if I switch the recorder on?
8. I am going to start with some questions about how you first got involved with YDA and the JU.

### 1. FIRST INVOLVEMENT WITH YDA AND THE JU

Can you tell me how long have you worked/volunteered at the JU?

Can you tell me how you first got involved as a worker/volunteer at the JU?

Did you come to any of the YDA groups before you were a volunteer/worker?

Do you think that coming to the JU as a young person has helped you when you are working/volunteering at the club?

### 2. ABOUT THE JU

*I am interested in learning what you know about the setting up of the JU and the purpose of the JU?*

Can you explain to me what you see as the purpose or point of the JU?



### 3. WORKING AT THE JU

*I am interested to know what you think about how much freedom the young people have to do what they want in the JU and the kind of relationship there is between the workers and the young people.*

What did you think about today's session, what was the behaviour of the young people like?

How does this compare to other days at the JU?

Can you tell me what you like the best about working at the JU?

Can you tell me what you like the least about working at the JU?

Pretend I have never been to the JU, how would you describe an 'average' session to me?

(beginning, end, busiest, quietest) (different times of the year)

Is there anything that you would change about the sessions at the JU?

Thinking back over the sessions that you have worked/volunteered at the JU, is there anything that has happened that really stands out to you?

Have you worked at other youth clubs (YDA and elsewhere) similar/different to the JU?

### 4. RELATIONS BETWEEN WORKERS/VOLUNTEERS AND THE YOUNG PEOPLE

What do you see as the role of the workers/volunteers? What is your role?

Can you tell me how would you describe the relationship between the young people and the workers/volunteers to someone who has not been to the JU?

How much freedom do you think the young people have to what they want to do and behave how they want to behave in the JU?

How much control do you think the workers and volunteers have over the young people in the JU

Can you tell me how strict you think the workers are in the JU? (strict enough?)

### 5. DIFFERENT TYPES OF BEHAVIOUR

*The next few questions are about what you think about the sorts of things that young people might do in the JU.*

Can you give examples of things that happen in the JU that you find the most annoying?

Are there any young people in particular that you are thinking of when you talk about these behaviours? Why do you think of them?

Can you give examples of behaviour that you find the difficult to deal with?

Can you give examples of behaviour that you find the easiest to deal with you?

You seem to take a \*\*\* role in the JU regarding behaviour. Why?

Are there any young people in the JU that you find 'challenging' to work with?

Can you explain why they are 'challenging'?

Can you tell, me why do you think that some young people behave in ways that workers feel they have to ask them to stop?

If you had to, could you pick out the young people who often get into trouble and those who do not?

What do you do/think if you see a young person who you know often gets into trouble come into the club?

## 6. RULES AND BOUNDARIES

*I would like to know more about the rules in the JU. I am especially interested in the times that these rules are broken and what happens when the rules are broken so my next few questions are about this. I want to know about your views not what you think you should say, so remember to say whatever you like.*

Can you try and list some of the things that you know that the young people are not allowed or supposed to do in the JU?

Who sets the rules?

Who enforces the rules? (YP?)

Can you tell me which rules you think are the most important?

Can you tell me which rules you think are the least important?

Can you think of any rules you would get rid off or that you think are a bit pointless?

Would you still ask the young people to not break these?

Can you think of any rules you would like to add to add to this list?

Are there any young people that come to the JU that you would say often break the rules?

Can you give me any examples of young people over stepping the line? (pushing the boundaries too far?)

## 7. RESPONSES AND EXCLUSION

*Young people (like everybody else) do things they are not supposed to do or behave in ways that other people do not like or find worrying. Different workers/volunteers respond to this behaviour in different ways, I am interested in how you respond to problem behaviour and how you feel about this.*

Thinking about the times that you have worked/volunteered in the JU can you explain to me what might happen if a young person behaves in a way that others do not like or who break the rules?

Looking at the list of rules, if a young person were to break these rules, can you tell me what would be your response? Your response might be to do nothing.

So if a young person....

What would you do?

Would you feel happy doing this?

Would you feel confident doing this?

Gender, age, been in trouble before etc... make a difference

I have noticed that sometimes young people swear and a worker will say something to them and other times young people are allowed to swear? Do you know why this might happen?

Thinking back over the times you have volunteered at the JU:

Can you remember a time when you have seen a young person break the rules or done something you thought they should not be and you have said or done something about it? (WHY?)

Can you remember a time when you have seen a young person break the rules or done something you thought they should not be and you have not done anything or say anything about it? (WHY?)

Can you tell me how do you feel when you see young people behaving in a way you do not like in the JU?

Can you tell me how do you feel when you have to ask a young person to stop behaving in a certain way?

Thinking back over the sessions you have worked/volunteered at the JU can you remember times when young people have been asked to leave the session before it had finished?

Are there any other times that you can remember when young people were asked to leave?

Is it the same young people that get asked to leave to the club all the time?

### **8. AND FINALLY...**

What advice would you give to a new worker/volunteer coming to work at the JU?

What would you tell the primary school kids moving up to the High School about the JU?

What would you tell them to expect?

How would you tell them they should behave?

## Appendix 9: Information and Consent Form for Workers Interviews

### INFORMATION & CONSENT FORM

#### The Project

The research project is about young people and 'challenging' behaviour in informal youth group settings. I am interested in what kinds of behaviour are seen as a problem in the youth group and how other people respond to this behaviour.

#### Key Information

Thank you again for agreeing to take part in the project. Before we start I would like to emphasise a few key things.

1. Your participation is entirely voluntary. This means that if there are any questions you do not wish to answer or if you wish to end the discussion at any point please just say so.
2. What you say will be treated as confidential. This means that I will not be telling anyone else who works here what we discuss. Your name will not appear on any research findings and when I write the report I will be careful to make sure you cannot be identified. I will also be using a false name for the youth group and its location.
3. I will be using the information from our discussion to help write the final research report. Direct quotes from our discussion may be part of this written report. You can tell me not to use parts of, or all of the discussion in the final report at any point now or in the future.

Do you have any questions about what I have just gone through on this form?

Should you have any questions or queries at a later date my contact details are below:

Vicky Plows  
Social Policy Postgraduate Offices  
Fourth Floor 10 Buccleuch Place  
University of Edinburgh  
Edinburgh, EH8 9LL.  
☎ 0131 650 3929

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Please sign this form to show that we have gone through the contents together and you are willing to take part.

\_\_\_\_\_ (signed)  
\_\_\_\_\_ (printed)  
\_\_\_\_\_ (date)

**Title:** An exploration into the processes of inclusion/exclusion in informal youth spaces in relation to young people and 'challenging' behaviour'

**Summary:** This research project will look at the relationship between 'challenging' behaviour and the inclusion of young people in informal youth settings. The project will consider the points at which behaviour is viewed as 'challenging' or 'problematic' and the effect this may have on the inclusion of the young people into certain spaces or activities. The aim of the research is to explore everyday practices of working and interacting with young people to learn more about the process of inclusion and exclusion in relation to behaviour.



**Research themes:**

- 4) The labelling and understanding of behaviour as 'challenging' - what kinds of behaviour, in what situations, at what time and involving what kind of interaction are seen as 'challenging'?
- 5) Boundaries of behaviour - how do young people in the provision challenge the rules and accepted ways of behaving and how do others (young people and youth workers/volunteers) respond to this?
- 6) The process of inclusion and of exclusion - how are young people included/excluded in the provision, both formally and informally, and how is this process connected with 'challenging' behaviour?
- 7)

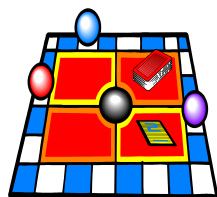
**Research methods:** To answer these questions the research project will take the form of an ethnographic exploration of everyday interaction at a youth group open access club, with the aim of also participating in trips out and residential. The ethnographic exploration will involve observation of interaction in the youth club and discussions with the workers and young people. The youth group has been chosen as a positive example of working with young people who may be considered 'challenging'.



**Why Bother?:**

- 'Challenging' behaviour is a particular test of the drive towards 'inclusive' policies in a variety of settings. There needs to be a greater understanding of the reality of putting inclusive policies into practice for this group of young people.
- Most of the research into the inclusion of young people with 'challenging' behaviour is based in the school classroom. This research has demonstrated that the inclusion of young people with 'challenging' behaviour has been the most difficult for school staff. Less is known about more informal youth spaces that young people choose to be in.
- This project will look at a youth group setting. This is important as the youth club is very different to the classroom space and a youth worker's role is different to a teacher's role. Also, the young people choose to attend youth groups whereas attendance in the classroom is compulsory. This provides opportunities to learn something different about the reality of inclusion in relation to 'challenging' behaviour.

Good bye




and



Thank-You

to all the young  
people at JU



It has been great fun doing my research  
project at the JU – inside the card is some of  
the stuff I found out... 

from **Vicky**

## Appendix 11: Findings Feedback Sheet for JU

### Research on the nature of challenging behaviour @ the JU:

Some early ideas on what I have learnt from you all for my research...

#### Boundaries

- Young people are constantly challenging the boundaries around behaviour in very *creative* ways. This includes changing the way that games are traditionally played, adapting the rules when necessary to suit them and also in the imaginative way that they use objects.

#### Humour

- Young people and youth workers use humour and funny actions to *negotiate* the boundaries around behaviour. Humour helps to build relationships and these relationships play a role in what is considered challenging behaviour and how it is dealt with.

- Young people often 'play' at being challenging. Youth workers are always making judgements about the 'seriousness' of behaviour and how to respond.

- Being in the JU is often about having fun. The difference between what is fun and what is challenging behaviour is complicated.

#### Youth worker's role

- Behaviour that is challenging to a youth worker can be seen as a positive as well as a negative thing.

- Behaviour is a problem if the JU is no longer a 'safe' space for everyone.

- Behaviour itself, such as breaking the rules, is not necessarily challenging. The behaviour becomes challenging when a worker asks a young person to stop the behaviour and the behaviour continues or escalates into something else.

#### Young people's role

- Young people might not label the behaviour of other young people as challenging. Some young people talked about behaviours that annoyed them although they often said they would behave that way too!

- Young people often responded to the challenging behaviour of other young people themselves, by referring to the rules or by challenging them physically or verbally. Sometimes young people would ask a youth worker to become involved.

## **Appendix 12: Thank you Stickers for Gifts**

**Thank-you** to everyone at the JU for the time I spent here doing my research project.  
from **Vicky**  
Research student @ Edinburgh University