



An Identity Process Theory Account of the Impact of Boarding School on Sense of Self and Mental Health: an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Accepted: 18 February 2021/Published online: 08 March 2021
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Abstract

Boarding schools exist to provide education for children, but this involves the child leaving the family home and residing in an educational institution. Identity Process Theory suggests that such a change in circumstances can threaten the child's identity, which triggers coping strategies and impacts on the individual's self-concept during both childhood and adulthood. This study undertook an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with five adults who boarded as children. The focus was on exploring participants' beliefs in terms of how the boarding experience affected their sense of self. Emerging themes relate to the (i) coping strategies used by participants during childhood, such as amnesia, compartmentalising, compliance and acceptance, and (ii) long-term effects of boarding on identity, self-concept and intimate relationships. Findings also highlight the interplay of factors such as privilege and social class, which were reported as motives for participants' parents choosing boarding for their children. The study raises important questions about the long-term health impacts of sending children away to board.

Keywords Boarding school · Sense of self · Mental health · Identity process theory · Interpretative phenomenological analysis

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Boarding has existed in the UK for centuries and involves a child entering an educational residential institution, or boarding school, for most or all of their childhood (Walford 1986). There has been a decline in boarding school attendance in the UK: in 1998, 1% of UK school age children attended boarding school (Department for Health 1998), but this figure had reduced to 0.5% by 2017 (Independent Schools Council 2017). Parents' reasons for sending their children to boarding school vary but amongst upper social classes, which reflect the social class amongst whom boarding is most commonly associated, wanting the child to learn how to assimilate or acculturate into the social class to which they were born appears to be an important motivating factor (Howard 2007; Walford 1986). Not all children at boarding school are from the upper classes, as many aspirational parents wish their children to benefit from a private education. Nevertheless, regardless of social class, boarding school invariably results in a change from a home to an institutional living environment, without the familiar faces and routines of family members (Schaverian 2015).

The term 'boarding school syndrome' (Schaverian 2015) has been used to refer to the psychological and emotional difficulties that some children exhibit as a result of attending boarding school, which are asserted to be long-lasting and detrimental to the identity of the individual in both childhood and adulthood. In addition to mental health problems, such children are understood to be at risk for developing a strategic survival personality as a means of coping in the absence of relational attachment (Duffell 2000). This is consistent with studies demonstrating a positive association between schizophrenia and parent-child separation during childhood (Paksarian et al. 2015), increased rates of self-harm in people separated from either one or both parents before the age of fifteen (Astrup et al. 2017) and greater psychiatric symptoms in young people due to parental separation versus parental death (Canetti et al. 2000). Similarly, studies of indigenous people in Canada who were removed from their families and placed in boarding schools as children report high rates of mental health issues and substance use (Evans-Campbell et al. 2012).

According to Identity Process Theory (IPT; Breakwell 1986), this change can threaten the child's nascent identity and trigger permanent changes to their self-concept. Self-concept in this respect can be understood by two different but arguably complementary paradigms: Social Identity Theory (Tajfel 1979) and Dramaturgical Self (Goffman 1959). Social Identity Theory proposes that a sense of social identity and belonging is derived not only from the groups to which people belong but, also from the groups to which they do not belong (Tajfel 1979). This has important implications when considering children in boarding school, whom without the close proximity of parental figures to intervene and guide their choices, can experience emotional and identity challenges due to the significant (and often sudden) transition occurring during the childhood developmental period.

The Dramaturgical Self paradigm reflects a different perspective on self-concept and maintains that individuals adopt roles when around other people and that identity is largely 'performed' (Goffman 1959). This includes the notion of 'front' and 'back' regions, by which an individual presents a different, socially acceptable face to the social world, whilst relaxing their behaviour when alone (Elliott 2001). Goffman's theory (1959) provides a useful adjunct to Social Identity Theory in the context of boarding, as it acknowledges that a sense of agency may inform or regulate a child's changes to self-concept, whilst accommodating the idea of social interaction as a type of performance.

According to the aforementioned IPT, identity is made up of two dimensions: content and value, and the identity of an individual depends on the extent to which four principles remain stable: continuity, distinctiveness, self-esteem and efficacy (Breakwell 1986). Sending a child

to boarding school has the potential to affect all four of these guiding principles: because (a) by removing the child from the family home and local school, the ‘continuity’ of their social identity is ruptured and the child is deprived of former social roles; (b) within the new educational institution, the child is no longer unique and loses the ‘distinction’ of being known and loved by family and peers; (c) perceived abandonment may lead to a loss of ‘self-esteem’ as the child comes to terms with these fundamentally altered circumstances and (d) ‘efficacy’ is arguably undermined in an institution, with its reliance on a tightly controlled routine that allows for little choice for the individuals within (Goffman 1961). According to IPT, such destabilisation of the four guiding principles is likely to trigger an attempt at coping with the threat, followed by an enforced change of identity as children adapt to the new social roles expected of them.

A small number of empirical studies (e.g. Evans-Campbell et al. 2012; Partridge 2012) have sought to directly investigate the potential negative effects of boarding school on well-being and psychosocial functioning. However, none of these studies have specifically explored the lived experiences of ex-boarders in terms of the long-term effects on their sense of self and identity. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to explore the role played by boarding school in identity formation based on the experiences of adults who attended boarding schools in childhood. In particular, the focus was on capturing the lived experience of the participant, including the perceived effects on identity processes over time. In the present study, IPT (Breakwell 1986) was used as a framework to explore the extent to which participants’ experiences aligned with an established theory on identity development processes.

Methodology

Design

Although there are some studies into the psychological effects of boarding school (Duffell 2000; Duffell and Bassett 2016; Partridge 2012; Schaverian 2011), research into this area is minimal. Such prior research has largely been intervention-based or auto-ethnological, predominantly qualitative and sometimes anecdotal. However, when studying areas of research that are not easy to quantify, such as the perception of self-concept, a qualitative methodology is deemed to be particularly suitable as it allows for in-depth and detailed data analysis but also for the emergence of unexpected findings (Barker et al. 2002).

Therefore, in the present study, a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews (SSIs) was employed to explore participants’ experiences of identity as a result of their time at boarding school. The SSIs were recorded and then analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al. 2009; Smith and Osborn 2003).

Participants

Participants were purposively recruited through an association of people who attended boarding school as children, which made its members aware that the study was taking place. The association is based in the UK and exists to support former boarders and their partners, as well as provide relevant information to people considering boarding for their children. Participants were excluded if (a) they had attended boarding school for less than 2 years, (b)

did not board at school, (c) were aged under 18 years and/or (d) disclosed a current diagnosis of mental illness.

The final sample of participants comprised five UK adults who had been to boarding school during their childhood. The mean number of years of attendance at boarding school during childhood was 9.4 and participants mean age at the time of the SSI was 52 (see Table 1 for participant demographic information; alias names have been used to protect participant confidentiality).

Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by Skype or telephone call (1 interview was conducted by Skype and the rest by telephone). All interviews were recorded and then transcribed on a verbatim basis. Examples of questions included in the SSI are (a) What recollections do you have of life before boarding school? (b) Do you recollect your first school? (c) Can you talk about the impact of being away from home on your relationships – then and now? (d) Can you talk about the experience of family life from a distance and how this has shaped current family relations? and (e) Can you describe the impact of boarding school on your identity/sense of self? Ethical approval for the study was provided by the researchers' academic institution based in the East-Midlands of the UK. All participants provided informed consent and participants did not receive any financial incentive for enrolling in the study.

Data Analysis

IPA is a qualitative method that is founded in a double-hermeneutical approach, as the researcher is exploring the meaning-making of the participant, who is trying to make sense of their own experience (Pietkiewicz and Smith 2012). IPA, which seeks to gain insight into the lived experience of participants, is not only interpretive but also phenomenological and social constructionist as it takes account of the context of the experience. Whilst IPA focusses on the meaning-making of the participants without theoretical framing, it can provide an accessible approach to phenomenological research which allows for a complete and detailed account from the individual's frame of reference (Coyle and Turner 2000). The interpretivist epistemology, social constructionist paradigm and the relativist ontology of IPA facilitate participants providing interpretations of their own identities as they see them, within the social context of their childhood experiences at boarding school.

IPA prescribes the need to analyse each interview individually (Smith et al. 2009) in order to gain insight into each participant's 'life world'. Therefore, the interview recordings were listened to at least twice, and each transcript was read multiple times. In one margin of each

Table 1 Participant demographic information

Name (alias)	Gender	Age	Age at starting boarding school
Margaret	Female	73	10
Simon	Male	35	9
Peter	Male	65	9
Sarah	Female	57	4
Tim	Male	30	8

transcript, annotations were made of initial ideas relating to meaningful content. Codes were then formulated which corresponded to similar types of responses or patterns of meaning. Groups of codes were then used to form emergent themes which were noted in the right-hand margin of the transcript. The process of code and theme identification was repeated iteratively as a means of refining for relevance and accuracy. Master and subordinate themes were then identified (see Table 2).

Validity and Reliability

In order to increase rigour and transparency, the present qualitative study followed Yardley's (2011) core principles for evaluating the validity of qualitative research: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, coherence and transparency, and impact and importance. This involved careful consideration at the interview stage, to ensure researcher bias did not unduly influence the participants' responses. Furthermore, a copy of the final thematic structure was sent to participants for comments (all participants were happy with the thematic structure and there were no requests for changes). Findings were also discussed amongst the research team for the purposes of objectivity and to ensure participants' responses were accurately conveyed and interpreted.

Results

The data analysis results in four master themes, each with different numbers of sub-themes. The master- and sub-themes are shown in Table 2 and discussed further below.

Master Theme 1: Initial Experience of Being Left at School

This master theme reflects the experience that all participants had relating to being left at boarding school as a child. Attending boarding school ordinarily involves leaving home, the family, friends and joining a group of unknown individuals in an institution which typically operates using a structured timetable. This is likely to affect all four identity principles of IPT (Breakwell 1986), with the potential to reflect an acute threat to the child's identity. Indeed,

Table 2 Overview of master and sub-themes

Master themes	Sub-themes
1. Threat: 'it was like being taken into care'	
2. Coping strategies: 'I have to cope as I have no choice'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Intra-psychic (assimilation/accommodation) b) Interpersonal c) Intergroup
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Dissociation and denial ii. Compartmentalism iii. Acceptance
3. Limits to coping: 'I did not cope'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) At school b) Afterwards c) A lost adolescence
4. Self-concept now: 'the making of me'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Who am I? b) Boarding School Persona
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Compliance i. Rebellion ii. Cruelty

responses by participants indicate a sense of the emotionally overwhelming nature of this life-changing experience.

Margaret supports this sentiment directly and conveys feeling a sense of abandonment:

I think it's a sort of dread...that's the, you know, that's actually home sickness or what's would call, a sort of deep grief.I think a sense of confusion ... sort of not kind of knowing what was happening to me but there's nothing had been explained. (Margaret)

In discussing this threat, Simon appears to have difficulty in finding suitable words to capture the emotional impact he experienced. For example, he uses the qualifier 'very' twice and then contrasts it with the joy he felt at being reunited with his family, which could be indicative of how difficult he finds it to reflect on the negative memories that he harbours.

Yeah I was very very upset, I've never been so upset since, apart from maybe possibly, the first time I came out I cried with happiness, that's not something that has happened since. (Simon)

This image of a child who is upset initially is restated again by Simon, along with further information from the adult perspective about the process of switching off emotions as a child at boarding school:

You are totally shutting down emotions that are quite normal to have, so I remember crying a lot the first night and probably the next day a little bit as well. (Simon)

A sense of loss was also reported by Peter:

Well, you lose everything and you start again. (Peter)

Master Theme 2: Coping Strategies

Master theme 2 captures the memories that participants have in terms of the coping stages they experienced as part of coming to terms with the boarding school environment. IPT asserts that the individual facing a threat to the directing principles of their identity will apply intra-psychoic, interpersonal or intergroup coping strategies to try to expunge the threat (Breakwell 1986). In the case of the boarding school child, the threat of being left at school is transient as it becomes the normal way of being. Therefore, when faced with the initial threat the boarding school child may try to make use of the most basic coping strategies, the 'intra-psychoic' choice, but when this fails, they may move on to more cognitively advanced 'intra-personal' or 'intra-group' coping strategies.

Sub-theme 2.1: Intra-psychoic Coping Strategies

Sub-theme 2.1.1: Dissociation and Denial Tim recounted a sense of confusion upon arriving at boarding school, and he contradicts his initial response that he has no memory, by describing a memory:

I don't remember them saying goodbye. I think I tried to look for them or something like that. I'm not even sure if that's the real memory or not but I do remember sort of the moment of them leaving or realizing that they had left and then feeling quite scared or sad but I don't, I don't recall that detail. (Tim)

Peter reinforces the emotional impact of his experience by describing a dissociative process:

Of that first time at school and the threshold moment - I have no memory.... So, I suspect that it was just too overwhelming for me to deal with at the time. (Peter)

Sarah refers directly to her lack of a sense-of-self at that time, by recognising that at such a young age, she did not have the language to make sense of her experiences. Her repetition of the word 'think' could be seen as a compensatory cognitive defence against feelings. This is supported by the recognition that she does not cry to this day, as she believes it to be ineffectual:

I have no real recollection of a destruction of identity, I mean there's no real self there. You have to think... At four, it was more feelings without the language to make sense of it. Like I think, I suppose I felt homesick, I think it was like being taken into care. (Sarah)

In terms of the assimilation and accommodation of the threat posed by attending boarding school, for some participants, there appeared to be a level of cutting off, which Breakwell (1986) refers to as denial. This type of deflection is a well-documented short-term response to threat, which Simon contextualised as follows:

That is a trauma that is going to make you stop feeling emotions after doing that, because initially you are a normal kid having a normal reaction to adversity, feeling betrayed and let down by your parents. (Simon)

Sub-theme 2.1.2: Compartmentalism or the Split Self Breakwell (1986) describes a coping strategy that involves assimilation without accommodation or evaluation, by which an individual takes on the new identity but keeps it completely separate from the existing self. The literature on boarding school children echoes this, describing a split in the psyche, which leads to an 'encapsulated self' (Schaverian 2015), with the home identity and school identity kept compartmentalised. Margaret explained this as follows:

I think when I was sort of 13 or 14 I put enormous amount of weight and I was 14 when I was 14. So, I wasn't attractive to young men and when I got home, I think it was so disconnected, home life and school life but I didn't really have relationships. (Margaret)

Peter contextualises the split identity as being between his 'conforming' and 'rebel' self:

I was very split if you like between the conforming and the rebel. And they were very separate identities. (Peter)

For Sarah, the split felt like two completely separate existences:

I didn't think about school when I was at home at all. It was like it didn't exist. My brother and I just had fun playing in Majorca, out on the boats. I didn't used to feel bad the day we left for school but the day before, when we were packing I hated it. And at school, home didn't exist. (Sarah)

This compartmentalising approach to life appeared to stay with Sarah into adulthood, which she articulated as follows:

I compartmentalise very easily. I moved as an adult back to Jersey... I had my own place, and then I visited friends later...it's like I can be in one place and not think at all about home... I find it very... too easy to compartmentalise. It's sort of like I have different compartments of people. (Sarah)

Margaret's experience in this context was very similar to Sarah:

the other place is going to be better but because home wasn't really happy that you sort of longed to be back at school with your friends and then at school and unhappy, so, you long to be home we've got a lovely home and we do entertain people but I would much rather be away from home. (Margaret)

As a coping strategy, compartmentalism can be temporarily effective but IPT (Breakwell 1986) asserts that it is not ideal, as it leads to identity stagnation and is not a permanent solution; the point at which the psychic boundary can no longer hold will lead to enforced accommodation or a different coping strategy.

Sub-theme 2.1.3: Acceptance Participants described a form of resigned acceptance of boarding school, which according to IPT, manifests when other tactics fail on account of an overwhelming threat to distinctiveness, continuity and self-esteem. Breakwell (1986) asserts that this is not capitulation to the threat but a form of creative adaptation in order to compromise. This is consistent with how Tim reported his internalisation of the experience:

I think I was the same kind of going back and forth between school and home but that kind of mode of being whatever it is has been quite withdrawn and sort of getting on with things by yourself and sort of dealing with your own problems. (Tim)

A similar stoic acceptance appears to be present in the following extract from Margaret:

It was more that you, you know, whatever happened, you get on with it. (Margaret)

And, a lack of self-efficacy appeared to be present in language used by Peter:

So, I have to cope because I've got no choice. (Peter)

Tim also made reference to strategies used by others to help facilitate his acceptance of the change:

I remember it was, yeah, sort of framed in sort of being adult and being grown up, I remember sort of felt like, kind of important for sure, I remember being framed in terms of being sent away to school to become knights or something – just sort of cope with everything by yourself. (Tim)

Studies into the long-term effects of childhood trauma identify alterations in identity as a core feature (Knefel et al. 2015). This includes issues with maintaining a coherent sense of self, including dissociative symptoms such as amnesia and depersonalisation (e.g. Van Dijke and Ford 2015; Van Dijke et al. 2018). These dissociative tendencies have been identified in previous research on school boarders and are typically construed as a survival mechanism for coping with the immense loss of primary attachment (Duffell and Bassett 2016).

Sub-theme 2.2: Interpersonal Coping Strategies

Boarding School is an environment that invariably demands enforced socialisation, as the students within must share space with their peers, including sleeping in dormitories with other students. In this sense, boarding schools are akin to the total institution of Goffman's (1961) treatise, in which he describes the myriad damaging effects of forced intimacy and desegregation on the individual. According to IPT (Breakwell 1986), this corresponds to the interpersonal coping strategies of isolation, passing, negativism and compliance. Goffman (1959) described this as playing the role and asserts that it serves to turn the child into the 'boarding school' child.

Sub-theme 2.2.1: Compliance or Obedience Compliance is sometimes used as the first choice of interpersonal coping strategy and is associated with feeling powerless when subjected to threat (Breakwell 1986). Whether this fundamentally alters identity structure depends on how cynically the individual adopts the demanded identity; certainly, social approval through compliance is more likely to lead to permanent changes. However, within this is a double-bind situation: non-compliance leads to anxiety, whilst compliance affects the principles of self-esteem, distinctiveness and continuity.

For Simon, the way to survive the experience appeared to be by obeying the rules at the expense of these principles, although he cannot explain his childhood thought processes as an adult:

I will try to curry favour with authority, to stay out of trouble. That was the way to survive as far as I was concerned. Don't know why staying out of trouble has anything to do with trying to be happy, but it was. (Simon)

For Peter, his identity was both tied to the hierarchical nature of the school and adaptable to his circumstances.

I just thought I had a problem with authority and authority figures. So, I would be very conforming and very intimidated by them. (Peter)

Sub-theme 2.3: Intergroup Coping Strategies

The last of the three IPT coping strategy approaches refers to group memberships. According to Breakwell (1986), other ways to manage threats to identity involve looking to one's in-group for support and action or alternatively having multiple group memberships. When children are removed from the family, they invariably lose their most significant in-group and must seek out a replacement in-group as a perceived matter of survival (Waldfogel 2006). Both within the institution, and amongst children, group dynamics are rudimentary and this is reflected in the following participant accounts:

Sub-theme 2.3.1: Rebellion Group support can help those who are facing threat to identity, as it prevents isolation and allows for information sharing and consciousness raising (Breakwell 1986). In an environment of permanent socialisation, finding a group of individuals can be a considerable resource, not only as a means of protection

but also due to engaging in group action. According to participants of this study, group action typically assumed the form of acts of rebellion as a means of providing a small sense of power over the situation. The advantages of this to the threatened individual are clear; the rebellion provides increased self-efficacy which, in turn, increases self-esteem.

For Tim, this behaviour was part of the norm for his group, although as an adult, his attempt to define it leads him to use the term ‘mild delinquency’:

I was kind of a rebel in terms of, definitely the second school as well, so, in my group of friends who used to be things like sort of smoke cigarettes and later on drinking and sort of very occasionally take drugs and so it’s around that kind of, I don’t know, mild delinquency sounds harsh. It’s a strange term to use but being like, sort of slightly rebellious. (Tim)

For other participants, group belonging resulted in some challenges, as the desire to conform to the group sometimes undermined the need to comply with school rules:

I really, really hated it in case we were found out. So, I was following, you know, to an extent because I didn’t want to be thought to be as a sort of weedy one or pathetic one. (Margaret)

Sub-theme 2.3.2: Cruelty For children attending boarding school, besides the lack of close family members to take care of them, they invariably must live in an artificially constructed society that involves being permanently surrounded by peers. Not only can this impact the natural development of identity but the fact that such children lack the moderating and mediating effects of traditional caring attachment figures could lead to increased levels of bullying (Smokowski and Kopasz 2005). In the present study, memories of peers were largely negative, with participants referring to a clear hierarchy and an overall sense of needing to stay on the right side of the bullies.

According to Margaret, the bullying often involved silent treatment but sometimes extended to physical violence which left her silently fearful:

I remember she had her whip in the dormitory and she used to whip people and and I’m absolutely trembling with this girl and everybody sort of knew what she’s like but then you didn’t – nobody would dare say to anybody, no idea that you would complain about anything because you learn very quickly that you just sort of get on with it and that was, you know, part of life. (Margaret)

Tim described the inexorable pervasiveness of the bullying experience:

It was sort of a kind of collective verbal bullying of, you know, sort of a particular people and it’s sort of just words.... It was quite public ... being in a boarding school, you know, it’s sort of around the clock and there’s no escape from it. (Tim)

Sarah reported feeling near the bottom of the hierarchy of power amongst her school peers:

My memories of school in the UK were of groups of girls and awareness of my place within it... I often felt intimidated by girls and well... I was very aware of the power dynamics within that. I mean, I wasn’t one of the top dogs, I was pond life and I knew it. (Sarah)

For Simon, friendships were forged out of fear:

Spontaneity was lost. I had friendships, I made friendships based on fear, I'm still quite fearful of my friends from boarding school ... scared of my compatriots, my contemporaries as much as older people. Maybe consciously, people are either school bullies or schoolteachers to be placated or be wary of. No basis for constructive friendship. (Simon)

Master Theme 3: Limits to Coping

Sub-theme 3.1: At School

A person can use forgetting as a tool to cut links with the past (Breakwell 1986, p.177), which disposes of the identity threat. The fact that many of the participants in the present study report that they cannot remember much of their childhood could imply undertones of psychogenic amnesia, which is often a result of trauma (Freyd 1994).

In this regard, Peter's memory is very sporadic, although there is a contrast between the first recollection of a 'complete blank', and then the qualifying statement, of 'instances' and 'scant memories':

It's just complete blank. I've got memories of instances at boarding school, of various things that happened with people, in groups, some play and sports or whatever. But I have very scant memories of the whole experience. (Peter)

Sarah recognises the cause of her amnesia on being left at the school:

I basically, well, I think it was the trauma that stopped me remembering. (Sarah)

However, she goes on to explain that this was chronic and that the amnesia continued throughout her time at school:

I don't have many memories of the school. It's funny I don't remember much of school or anything. (Sarah)

Sub-theme 3.2: On Leaving School

For some participants, the coping mechanisms utilised whilst at school affected their transition to the world outside following completion of their time at school. For example, Simon explained that life at university overwhelmed his coping strategies:

I didn't cope. I lost lots of nights' sleep, I lost a lot of friends ... I wasn't coping. I got a 2:1 and I don't know how ... not being able to sleep for weeks on end, feeling quite left out, not having sexual relationships, being far too scared to do that. Going red in the face around people, generally being unhappy. (Simon)

For Peter, the experience of not coping did not happen immediately on leaving school, as he found different coping strategies through joining a company and marrying a dominant woman.

And I went through very interesting phase in my 40s. I went through a car crash divorce and I lost and everything else, lost everything and had to start myself over againI

mean, part of the reason why marriage broke down was because I didn't know who I was before so I became the good son, the good husband, the good father. (Peter)

Sub-theme 3.3: Lost Adolescence

An element of their identity change is described by some of the participants as a lost adolescence. For Simon, there is a sense that he had to be sent away to learn how to be like his family:

If I stayed in the family, I'd have been quite a different animal that the rest of my family, they would have had to deal with an actual teenager. (Simon)

This is revisited later, when Simon reflects upon his experience of adolescence as the 'good boy', when he had no opportunity to be authentic:

I'm sure adolescence isn't particularly easy even if you are at a day school but I'll never know because when I was an adolescent I just carried on being a good boy and later I got into therapy and in analysing my BS experience, I was furious, I was so angry, and I still am. (Simon)

For Sarah, the identity crisis arising from a lost adolescence resulted in low self-esteem:

I went through a, what I call my sex, drugs and rock n'roll phase – well, it was in my, up to my 20s ... I think that was me going through my teenage years. I suffered very low self-esteem for years – actually, probably until about ten years ago. (Sarah)

Master Theme 4: Fundamental Change or 'The Making of Me'

This master theme reflects the sense that participants have of themselves as adults, as a result of their time at boarding school. Previous research has detailed that ex-boarders have problems with identity due to the lack of a family in childhood to mirror and accommodate them; instead, the children must adapt to the institution (Schaverian 2011).

Sub-theme 4.1: Who Am I?

Margaret summarised the long-term effects of boarding school on identity as follows:

A total loss of identity because it had been really squashed at an early age and that was the boarding school person. I mean that was totally squashed ... very difficult to know what ones needs and wants and desires were because, you know, you didn't have them or you were told not to have them. (Margaret)

This lack of self-knowledge reflects Margaret's experience of growing up in an environment where the awareness of the perception of others replaced a self-evaluation. This phenomenon is mentioned again by Peter, who recognised his chameleon-like approach in his first marriage:

I can adapt very quickly into other people's situation. So, in my relationships even when I was married for 16 years but I felt like I was in her life. I didn't feel it was a shared life ... So, we did eventually buy a house. It felt like it was her house. (Peter)

This contrasts somewhat with the transformation Peter has experienced in recent years, when he finally feels that he has a self-concept and self-efficacy:

And I think since I met my second wife ... I've adapted into who I am. I've become an autonomous human being, autonomous adult. (Peter)

Peter draws attention to the catalyst for this, which he experienced as a complete breakdown, and which IPT (Breakwell 1986) attributes to the failure of coping strategies:

I mean, I went into a very depressed clinical depression and attempted suicide and then recovered from that. And had to sort of literally say, "I'm starting again, who do I want to be? How do I want to be?" (Peter)

For Sarah, whose boarding school exposure started at the age of four, the perceived impact on her appears to have affected her life choices on an ongoing basis:

I married a man with Asperger's, so there is no intimacy and that feels... safe. I honestly think that for Boarding School, for us Boarding School people, that alone is the default position; I get to be independent, self-sufficient...not under surveillance. (Sarah)

Sarah appears to have chosen a life partner with whom she can stay alone and therefore 'safe'. The implication here is that other people are unsafe, and this is supported in her comment on childcare:

well I find delegating the care for my two boys very hard. I can't do that.
(Sarah)

Not only does Sarah indicate a lack of trust in others here, but there appears to be a reference to, and rejection of, her past in the choice of the words 'delegating care'.

A further example of a rejection of the boarding school past appears in Simon's contemplation of his sense of self:

I reject the boarding school upbringing, but I'm still quite lost because I don't work so I don't have a work identity. I work as a Yoga teacher but I don't do it that much, I don't work for my living. A strong sense of self? No. (Simon)

Sub-theme 4.2: Boarding School Persona as a Social Construction

IPT (Breakwell 1986) is unequivocal about the role of social context in relation to the processes of identity. The threat and coping strategies are all dependent on, and limited by, the social milieu into which they are projected. A boarding school is a very particular social matrix, representing as it does the Bourdieusian 'field' in which 'habitus' is developed and shared amongst the children of the privileged (Bourdieu 1986). Parental expectations inherent in this choice of education are reflected in the norms of the school and can ultimately lead to a state of identity foreclosure (Marcia 1980). This is consistent with a review of longitudinal research indicating a longitudinal link between parenting and identity (Meeus 2011).

For Simon, whilst his education was about teaching him how to be the right class, he juxtaposes this with the contrasting idea of a 'local' person. By being sent geographically further away from his family, he learns to be a member of both his family and his social class:

I think it's down to class really, a class prejudice, because if I weren't at a Boarding School, I would be a different class to my parents, with local loyalties rather than socially defined ones. I'd be much more of a local guy than if I were not sent away I think ... (Simon)

This is reinforced by the contrast between the prestige and the feelings; the former is all important, to the detriment of the latter:

Sent away to some gilded prestigious place where that mattered – the prestige – the actual feelings of people there are immaterial. (Simon)

The boarding school persona is cynically summed up by a generic type, using glib adjectives such as 'charming' and 'diffident':

...and you have your charming boarding school personality to rely on – Hugh grant sort of diffident.... Yeah. (Simon)

Margaret uses the word 'privileged' to describe the education and goes on to explain how that made her feel a sense of responsibility:

Because you've had this privileged education and you know all this stuff that Mr. and Mrs. Average didn't know, you have somehow told them, let them know – you're sort of superior and with that goes a huge sense of responsibility. (Margaret)

The words 'superior', 'responsibility' and 'Mr and Mrs Average' suggest that for Margaret, the message she received was that those who do not exist in this elitist setting are inferior. A further long-term effect for Margaret was that this falsely created superior personality with its superficial achievements and accomplishments was only a construct:

I left school early and was this mini adult, I think I lived for, probably about 10 years in that state... I could manage myself, I could take on the world and sort of worked with it. I think it's very hollow inside. I wouldn't have the language to say, I didn't know who I was because what I thought I was the outward appearance which my mother drummed in very successfully and the fact that, you know, social standing, friends I had, we spoke the same language which carried you along. (Margaret)

Tim also uses the word 'privilege' in describing his identity but goes on to qualify this by expressing discomfort due to 'unfairness':

...it's that sort of private education and privilege and all of that. It's something and I, you know, I never really embraced and I felt, I sort of sensed the unfairness and said that sort of difference that it creates was kind of wrongit's something that have a weird relation with and sort of quite frankly embarrassed in some contexts. (Tim)

For Tim, there is a sense that he has had an identity thrust upon him that he did not ask for, but he cannot entirely dispose of. This is also reflected in Simon's words, in which he sums up his relationship to this unasked for 'privilege':

It was ten years of my childhood, I spent two thirds of my life in an institution with all boys, and all my family were educated in the same way, it was the making of me, that was who I was, regardless of how I felt about it and I live the rest of my life trying to come to terms with it. (Simon)

Participants use words such as ‘diffident’, ‘superior’ and ‘charming’ to describe the boarding school persona, but this is juxtaposed with the word ‘hollow’ and the sense that the child has no choice in this situation. This sub-theme also concerns the role of prestige and privilege in this identity production, both as a reason underlying their parents’ choice and as the outcome of experience. IPT describes a fundamental change in identity as the final result of the coping strategies failing in the face of threat to identity, and the outcome of this experience is a change in identity that may not be welcome (Breakwell 1986). Within this, there is also a sense of the way in which identity processes contribute to the reproduction of social inequality (Callero 2018).

Discussion

The impact of boarding school on later life identity is relatively under-researched. This qualitative study aimed to advance scientific understanding by exploring the experiences of self and identity change amongst five individuals who attended boarding school as children. Findings highlight the lasting impact of attending boarding school on identity formation as well as on psychological well-being more generally.

In summary, all participants of the present study recounted an experience of losing everything they had ever known as part of becoming an unexceptional member of an institution. This resulted in an experience of reduced self-determination and self-esteem that, in line with IPT, constituted a threat to participants’ identity. The severity of this threat in such young children is uncertain, because as one participant of this study pointed out, at the age of four, there may not yet be a developed identity. Nevertheless, whilst IPT has typically been used to examine threat to an existing identity, it describes the various strategies by which an individual attempts to cope with identity threat, including intra-psycho, interpersonal and intergroup strategies (Breakwell 1986). Given that all three coping strategies were described by participants of this study, IPT could be a useful framework for understanding the impact of boarding school on identity formation. The fact that participants’ responses give examples of amnesia, dissociation, denial, compartmentalism and acceptance lend credibility to this.

The literature on childhood trauma asserts that children tend to use very simplistic but effective coping methods, such as dissociation, due to their relative powerlessness (Nash et al. 1993). These methods are effective in the short term but often lead to fundamental long-term detrimental effects on the mental health of the individual (Nash et al. 1993). Indeed, according to IPT, there are limits to the utility of the coping strategies which, when they have failed, can ultimately lead to a complete revision of the structure of identity.

A key factor influencing the effect of boarding school on identity formation is the length of time the child remains at boarding school, as the longer the threat goes on, the greater the impact on coping ability. Another factor relevant to this study is social context, which according to IPT can limit the choice of coping strategies, including the available social groups and how the ideology affects self-efficacy (Breakwell 1986). For example, as highlighted by participant responses in this study, the imposed and unescapable social interaction with school age peers was not always a positive experience.

Given that IPT draws heavily from Social Identity Theory (Tajfel 1979), the hierarchical nature of the boarding school, with its clearly defined in-groups and out-groups, would go some way to explain a change in identity in the growing child. However, the present sample of participants draw attention to the lack of choice over who they could spend time with and for how long; in this sense, SIT and therefore IPT may not provide a sufficient theoretical framework. Goffman’s dramaturgical

self (1959), with its exploration of performance and the notions of ‘front’ and ‘back’ may provide a more appropriate explanation, as the young people are permanently playing to an audience and rarely given an opportunity to relax and develop an ‘offstage’ identity.

This social context is a significant factor in challenging the child’s opportunity to develop a cohesive self-concept. According to Goffman (1961), life in an institution leads to desegregation and disculturation which not only disrupts the natural development of the child during their time at school but also renders the act of leaving school as a further threat to identity. Although some participants did not find the initial act of leaving school to be challenging, most described difficulties in adapting to and living a life outside the institution. When asked to describe how they view their self-concept as a result, all participants recognised aspects of their identity that had been altered, and more than one participant stated that they would never overcome some challenges in spite of ongoing psychological therapy. Furthermore, when asked if they considered their sense of self to be well defined, there was a general consensus that on leaving school there was little self-concept and a need to adapt to the people around, with some poor choices of relationships made as a result. This reference to a lack of self-concept indicates a lack of moratorium and instead a state of diffusion (Marcia 1980; Meeus 2011).

According to the literature on boarding school syndrome (Schaverian 2011), the boarding school persona refers to a set of characteristics that are found in the ex-boarder which have developed as a consequence of the boarding experience. Participants of this study appear to acknowledge aspects of themselves as being outwardly charming and capable, in-keeping with holding a position or background of ‘privilege’ and/or ‘superiority’. This ties in with Goffman’s dramaturgical self (1959) and the need to learn the manners to play the role; there is a sense that the purpose of boarding school is to learn how to do this. However, one participant also described this learnt persona as ‘hollow’, with more than one participant referring to serious interpersonal problems due to the lack of a defined self-concept.

Whilst the small sample size used in this (and many other qualitative studies) limits the generalisability of the findings, it privileges the individual participant and allows for a richer depth of analysis (Pringle et al. 2011). Nevertheless, the fact that all participants were recruited via a support group may have increased selection bias toward individuals with a negative view of their boarding school education. Furthermore, whilst the long period of time between school attendance and SSI may have resulted in recall-bias, this does not necessarily undermine the validity of participants’ current perspective of how boarding school influenced their sense of self. Further research is clearly needed to gauge the extent to which the experiences identified in this study are relevant to other individuals in the UK who have attended a boarding school. This includes individuals who have attended boarding school more recently, given that the mean age of participants in this study was 52 (i.e. the boarding school experience today is likely to be different than it was 40 years ago).

Furthermore, from a reflexive standpoint, it should be noted that one of the authors (FS) attended boarding school as a child. IPA is compatible with the researcher having self-awareness of the phenomenon under investigation, as it offers greater insight into the experience and allows for follow-up questions that come from a place of recognition. Nevertheless, it can also moderate objectivity and result in assumptions about common experiences that may not have been relevant to the participant (see [Methodology](#) section for a description of steps taken to maximise objectivity and validity).

Overall, this study aimed to provide an in-depth idiographic approach to the exploration of a childhood spent at boarding school and the impact on the developing sense of self, as well as the long-term effects on identity. As qualitative studies in this area are few, the present study provides

useful insights into the long-term psychological effects of adults who previously attended boarding school. Whilst further research is required to ascertain the relevancy of these findings to children currently attending boarding school, findings indicate that participants of this study experienced different degrees of distress as a result of attending boarding school, with significant pressure to fit in with peers. The general description is that of a clearly defined external persona, who knows the rules of the game but contrasts with a much less well-defined internal self-concept. In the words of one participant, 'it was the making of me, that was who I was, regardless of how I felt about it and I live the rest of my life trying to come to terms with it'.

Author Contributions All authors were involved in the writing of the paper. Furthermore, we confirm that all authors are responsible for all contents of the article and had authority over manuscript preparation and the decision to submit the manuscript for publication.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Informed Consent All procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible committee on human experimentation (institutional and national) and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000 (5). Informed consent was obtained from all patients for being included in the study.

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