PRIFYSGOL CYMRU
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
UNIVERSITY OF WALES
Trinity Saint David
SWANSEA - ABERTAWE

AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF PEER AND MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS IN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Dissertation in Psychology

2018

DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degrees and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degrees.

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This dissertation is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts Counselling Studies and Psychology

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This dissertation is the result of my own independent work/investigation, except where otherwise stated.

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Abstract

This paper presents a qualitative study on student's experiences of peer and mentoring relationships at university. A key focus is placed in how such relationships impact students' during their time of transition to higher education. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six second year undergraduate university students. Transcripts of the interviews were subjected to interpretative phenomenological analysis. The results section provides the reader with a detailed account of the ways in which students experience their peer and mentoring relationships, and how these relationships contributed to their time in higher education. During the analysis, the four superordinate themes that emerged were 'Support' 'The search for a sense of belonging' 'The paradoxical peer relationship' and 'Role change and adjustment'. The findings of this study are considered in relation to the existing literature in this area.

Key words Students, Relationships, Support, interpretative phenomenological analysis.

Chapter 1 - Literature Review

The central aim of this study will be to provide an in-depth exploration of individual student responses to questions relating to both their experiences of making the transition to higher education and their lived experiences of peer and mentoring relationships within the university environment. Whilst acknowledging that there has been a considerable amount of research conducted in relation to mentoring relationships, the majority of this research has been carried out within the workplace as opposed to the University environment (Ragins & Kram, 2007). In addition to this, whilst there is a substantial body of work focusing on peer relationships, such research has been carried out in schools and has focused on academic performance as opposed to focusing solely on students making the transition to higher education (Kilburg, 2007). Thus, this particular study will take a novel approach to this research area, by attempting to explore second year undergraduate students' lived experiences of peering and mentoring relationships, and how relationships affect students during this time of transition. Second year undergraduate students have been selected as the most appropriate participant sample for two predominant reasons. Firstly, there is already an existing body of literature exploring such relations to an extent in first year undergraduate students, less has focused on second year undergraduates. Secondly, it seems within reason to propose the notion that second year students will be able to provide more detailed accounts of their experiences in both making the transition to higher education and the peer and mentoring relationships that they have developed, this is due to the fact that they have previously had one years' worth of experience as an undergraduate university student to reflect on and discuss with the researcher.

When attempting to conduct research in the area of student relationships it seems of relevance to bring to light Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. It was suggested by Erikson (1950) that with the start of a young adult's life, comes the development of intimacy. This involves the process of identity formation. Erikson (1950) proposed the notion that individuals progress through eight psychosocial which are centred on both emotional and social development. During each stage, one is faced with a psychosocial crisis, which will either result in a positive or negative outcome for the individual's personality development. Throughout his work, Erikson continuously emphasises the role of society and culture. Due to the nature of this study, it seems of high importance to place central focus on Erikson's sixth stage which he titled 'Intimacy vs Isolation' this stage concentrates on young adulthood and places central focus on relationships. Erikson (1950) held the belief that forming relationships is a vital factor of human development. Erikson's theory has been praised for not placing central focus on affiliations of a sexual nature, but also acknowledging that intimacy includes friendships. According to Erikson, individuals who successfully pass through his eighth stage will find success in developing meaningful relationships with others, failure of this stage is suggested to result in loneliness and isolation.

Whilst acknowledging that Erikson's theory is one of the most famous theories of personality within the area of psychology and has been repeatedly credited for emphasising how exactly outside social interactions contribute to the finding of one's own identity (Harms, 2010) it is of high importance to note, that there are various criticisms that must be taken into consideration when attempting to thoroughly evaluate this theory. It has been suggested by Kroger (1996) that Erikson contradicted himself a number of times throughout his theory, one of his major contradictions became apparent when he suggested that females find difficulty in forming an identity until they find a suitable partner, it is clear that such a statement contradicts the notion of identity crisis being resolved during a specific time

period. In addition to the criticism put forward by Kroger (1996), Erikson's theory was also criticised by Cole and Cole (1989) for conducting more research with males than females. In addition to this, Erikson was criticised by Louw (1998) for not paying enough attention to cognitive development, whilst Erikson does place some focus on emotional development Louw (1998) argues that this is too little. It has been suggested by Waterman (1985) that not only does Erikson's theory appear to be more applicable to males than it is to females, it also places a considerable amount of focus on childhood and infancy compared to adult life. Marcia (1980) noted how Erikson fails to consider those individuals who enter a journey of rediscovery later on in their lives, thus, such individuals form a different understanding of oneself and one's life as a result of various changes and experiences throughout life.

It has been suggested by Shaffer (2009) that throughout his theory, Erikson is very unclear about the cause of development, thus, he fails to state the experiences one must have to successfully complete one stage and progress to the next. His theory is therefore considered as being descriptive as it does not provide any appropriate explanations regarding why or how such development takes place. In addition to this, Erikson's theory is predominantly based on ethical principles as opposed to scientific data and is therefore not considered as being a strong scientific theory as it fails to meet the basic standards of scientific support (Feist & Feist, 2006). When analysing Erikson's theory, it becomes apparent that whilst he held the viewpoint that identity development was predominantly dealt with during adolescence, he did, at times, suggest that an individual's identity continues to develop during the years of adulthood. It was brought to light by Sokol (2007) that Erikson did not provide enough detail in relation to what this process looks like. Thus, various researchers have criticised him for extending his theory beyond adolescent years and failing to provide a sufficient amount of detail relating to this. Whilst there are a variety of differing criticisms that must be considered when attempting to evaluate Erikson's theory, it seems of

equal importance to acknowledge that whilst his theory has, and continues to inspire a number of research studies, his literature has also been recognised for stimulating over 50 years of literature within the area of social science. Thus, still to this day, Erikson is viewed as being an especially relevant figure in this field (Shaffer & Kipp, 2010).

Whilst it is of high significance to consult psychological theory proposed within the area of adult relationships, it is of equal importance to explore relationships from a far more extensive perspective. Due to the nature of the current study, particular attention will be paid to peer and mentoring relations. When carefully examining the previous literature proposed within this area it can be seen that there is an existing body of work focusing on these relationships, however, few studies have explored how students experience such relationships when making the transition to higher education. It seems that a sufficient amount of literature has been proposed in an attempt to explore individual experiences of peer relationships, however, such research has linked these relationships to increased academic performance, as opposed to focusing on the benefits and difficulties students may experience when engaging in such relationships (Lundberg, 2003). It is clear when analysing the existing body of literature, that research surrounding peer relations is rapidly growing (Marsh et al, 2006).

Whilst the transition to higher education can be a positive experience, thus one is embarking on a journey which will result in one being in their desired future career. For many, starting university can be a time of unsettlement, thus one can experience feelings of panic, as a result of the need to adjust to an unfamiliar environment whilst also having to meet new academic demands. It has been suggested by Hussey and Smith (2010) that a key reason for negative emotions when making the transition to higher education is the separation from their already established peer and family relations. A sense of belonging is a factor that frequently appears when analysing the literature within the area of transitions to higher education (Goodenow 1993). According to Parkes (2014) this sense of belonging can be

facilitated through professional, social and academic interactions. It has been suggested by Libbey (2004) that a sense of belonging in students is of high importance in relation to the promotion of positive educational experiences and is strongly associated with academic achievement and student wellbeing. In addition to the literature proposed Libbey (2004) is the suggestion that students' need to form social connections with their peers in order to be content in the new environment that is university, this notion was first proposed by Scanlon, Rowling and Webber (2007) and later echoed by Maunder (2017) who suggested that social interaction with peers plays major role in adapting to university life.

A growing body of empirical literature appears to be suggesting that one of the most important factors for students undertaking higher education is the relationships that they develop within the university (Darwin & Palmer, 2009). Contemporary research carried out by Maunder (2017) attempted to explore the area of attachment and adjustment in university students. The study was conducted with 135 psychology and criminology undergraduate students, participants for this study were asked to complete a questionnaire that measured their levels of attachment to their university peers. The predominant aim of the study was to measure how this attachment affected the students' adjustment to university life. The results of this study suggested that those with strong attachments to their peers displayed higher levels of adjustment to life at university as opposed to those who experienced difficulties in forming relationships with their peers, such students demonstrated lower levels of adjustment to university life. Whilst the research conducted by Maunder (2017) brought to light the role of social relationships at university and how such relations promote a positive student experience, it is of importance to note that 107 participants were female, thus, the results of the study could be considered as more applicable to females than males. In addition to this, results of a study conducted by Heaven, Ciarrochi, Cechaviciute and Vialle (2005) has suggested that experiencing a sense of membership, thus, belonging to what is considered as

the ‘normal’ group within university displayed a positive association with better adaptation to the university environment. In addition to this, previous literature within this area has proposed that acceptance within a peer group at university can be viewed as a factor that works against depression and social anxiety within the student population (La Greca & Harrison, 2005).

Whilst placing focus on the attachments that students form with their peers and mentors, it also seems of high relevance at this point to acknowledge the subject of university belonging. This can be considered as a wider subject area than relationships in the university. Thus, university belonging can also refer to the extent by which a student will identify and commit to their institution. This phenomenon was described by France, Finney, and Swerdzewski (2009) as ‘university attachment’ this particular type of attachment is viewed as a separate element to attachments with peers and mentors. University attachment is demonstrated when one finds an emotional connection to the institution in which they study (France, Finney, & Swerdzewski, 2009). Thus, one feels content in considering themselves as a member of the university, whilst also feeling proud of their university. It is of high importance to note that a student may feel that they have developed deep and meaningful relationships with their peers, however, they may not experience such a strong attachment to their university. One may also experience a sense of belonging within their university environment whilst not being so connected to their peers. Thus, France, Finney, and Swerdzewski (2010) made a clear distinction between the two elements of university attachment. This distinction stemmed from previous research in the area of social identity, which suggests that one is able to develop an attachment to a group, regardless of the amount of contact that they have with the group members (Tajfel, 2010). It can be seen conducting a thorough analysis of the previous literature in this area, that overall, research proposes that both attachment to peers and attachment to university contribute to students experiencing a

sense of belonging, whilst also allowing a successful adjustment to university life (Maunder, 2017). In addition to this, it seems of high relevance to note the statement put forth by Astin and Feldman (1994) which suggested that a student's experience of university is significantly more positive for those who are studying on a campus which has a strong orientation toward students, thus, such students display higher levels of satisfaction, overall.

In addition to the study conducted by Maunder (2017) it seems of high relevance to consult the results of a study carried out by Swenson, Nordstrom and Hiester (2008). The research was carried out in college with 271 first - year students. In this particular study the students were making a transition from school to college. The researchers conducted a longitudinal study that attempted to explore the possible link between peer relationships and adjustment to higher education. The researchers placed central focus on social, academic, emotional and institutional attachment. The results of the study suggested that close relationships with peers are of high benefit to students overall, however, such relationships are particularly beneficial during the first half of the academic year. It becomes clear when analysing the results of this study that close relationships with peers in college were associated with better emotional well-being and adjustment to college. In addition to this, students who expressed interest in common college activities such as study groups within the college and student societies were noted as having a greater institutional attachment, whilst those students who experienced feelings of alienation from peers were associated with poor emotional adjustment. It seems that the results of research conducted by Swenson, Nordstrom & Hiester (2008) can be considered as being in light of previous findings which has linked the subjects of isolation, loneliness and insecure attachment styles with depression (La Greca & Harrison, 2005).

Whilst it is of high importance to analyse the previous literature proposed in relation to peer relationships, due to the nature of this present study, it is of equal importance to closely

examine research in the area of mentoring relationships. Regardless of the growing body of literature suggesting that mentoring within educational settings is key for student success (Heinrich, 1995), it seems that few studies have placed central focus on how exactly such relationships impact on student's perceptions and experiences of university. In addition to this, there appears to have been a large amount of research exploring the effects of mentoring relationships in the workplace as opposed to university. According to Amey and Moore (1988), mentoring can be considered as any form of professional interaction whereby an individual of superior experience provides advice and acts as a role model to one who has less experience in a specific discipline. Thus, a mentor is an individual who supports their mentee through an important transition, mentoring can therefore be applied in relation to personal growth, career development and various other areas that involve positive progression (Murrell & Blake-Beard, 2017). A broader definition of this term was later put forth by Murray (2001) who defined a mentoring relationship as a one to one relationship that is formed for the purpose of developing or learning specific competencies. According to Allen, Lentz and Day (2006) mentoring relationships not only involve a variety of benefits for the mentee, but such a relationship is of high benefit to the mentor. Whilst increasing one's own visibility in their professional realm, mentoring is also suggested to be extremely rewarding for the mentor (Allen, Burroughs & Poteet 1997).

Previous literature proposed by Canter, Kessler, Odar, Aylward & Roberts (2011) has supported the notion that mentoring relationships are of high benefit to both mentors and mentees. They conducted a qualitative study in an attempt to determine these benefits. Their results suggested that the mentees experienced both feelings of increased confidence and a sense of encouragement from their mentors. Whilst the mentors that were interviewed for this study displayed enhanced job satisfaction and a sense of achievement, the subject of personal satisfaction was also brought to light, this was related to encouraging the development of

academic growth in students. In addition to this, a study conducted by Gilles and Wilson (2004) suggested that mentors experience enjoyment in sharing their expertise whilst they also gain new personal insights. Furthermore, research carried out by Heirdsfield, Walker, Walsh and Wilss (2008) echoed the findings put forth by Canter, Kessler, Odar, Aylward and Roberts (2011), data was gathered from 220 first year undergraduate students. The researchers conducted semi- structured interviews and found that students consistently expressed gratitude toward their mentors for supporting them through the transition to university. The subjects of both emotional support and academic support appeared repeatedly, students who had moved away from their families suggested that they experienced reassurance and comfort from their mentors, whilst students who were experiencing feelings of worry in relation to academic demands, experienced a reduction in these anxieties. Overall, mentoring was considered as being of high benefit to the students, in a variety of different ways. One thing that became apparent when analysing the results of this study is that the benefit of mentoring seemed to be extremely individual. Thus, it was the needs of the mentee that appeared to be what determined the benefits and the nature of the relationship.

When analysing literature in the area of mentoring relationships, it becomes apparent that there is a need for more specific and in-depth analyses as it seems that, currently, there is only a small body of work that has placed focus on how mentoring relationships contribute to student's experiences of education. However, there seems to have been a significant improvement within in the research area over recent years, whilst this area of research does still appear to be growing (Bernier, Larose, & Soucy, 2005). It has been suggested by Zachary (2000) that a mentoring relationship between academics and students in higher education is vital for new students attempting to adjust to university life. This viewpoint has been echoed by Hezlet (2005) who noted how such a relationship allow for an increase in

both skill based and cognitive learning, whilst also suggesting that there is an evident relationship between lack of learning and negative mentoring relationships. In a study conducted by Lee, Eric Krauss, Suandi & Hamzah (2014) it was documented how the learning expectations of the student are of high importance in the mentor/student relationship. These researchers employed a correlational study in an attempt to determine any potential associations between learning outcomes and mentoring relationships. This was explored in the form of knowledge. The study was conducted with 90 undergraduate students ranging in ages 18-24. All participants were engaged in a one to one mentoring relationship for a minimum of 12 months. The data drawn from the surveys suggested that students benefited from their relationships with their mentors, whilst mentoring relationships enhanced the student's knowledge, the researchers reported that this knowledge was acquired through the skill of reflecting, thus engaging with the mentor, expressing any concerns and reflecting on already existing knowledge, provided students with both confidence, enhanced self - worth and motivation in relation to expanding on their current understandings.

Chapter 2 - Method

Participants

Participants for this study were six undergraduate university students who had been in higher education for a minimum of two years. They were recruited at the University of Wales Trinity St David through the use of the Psychology Experiment Management System and their age ranged from 18-24. Participants were considered for inclusion if they were undergraduate university students who has been studying for a minimum of two years. A homogeneous sample was used as the overall goal of the research was to understand and discuss the concept of peer and mentoring relationships in depth. The participants were given information about the study and all read and signed consent forms which allowed for the

interviews to be recorded. Participants' names have been changed in order to safeguard their anonymity. The study received the ethical approval of the Department of Psychology at University of Wales Trinity St David (see appendix D) All interviews conducted for this study were conducted at the university.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study utilized an experiential – qualitative approach using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The data was collected through the use of semi-structured interviews. The researcher was first informed by an interview schedule which was carefully designed to focus on the key areas of this research. The researcher decided to employ the semi-structured interviewing technique as this is what allowed participants to provide in – depth accounts of their individual experiences as university students, whilst also being able to openly discuss their peer and mentoring relationships. In addition, the interview schedule included questions which encouraged the participant to discuss their experiences of making the transition to higher education. The data drawn from these interviews was then rigorously analysed with the use of IPA. When conducting the analysis, the researcher closely followed the four-stage process which is discussed in depth by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). The researcher made initial comments following close analysis of the interview transcript which were then translated in to emergent themes. Following close examination of these, the researcher then made connections between the reoccurring themes and created a master table of themes for each transcript. Found in the master tables are supporting comments provided by participants and sub themes. The researcher repeated this for each of the six interview transcripts, resulting in six individuals' table of themes. The researcher then searched for any evident themes or patterns across these tables. Following the appearance of a coherent pattern of themes, they were then nested within the super – ordinate themes and documented in a group table.

The materials used for this study consisted of informed consent forms, which provided detailed information relating to participation in this study whilst clearly documenting that the interview would be audio recorded (see appendix B) An interview schedule was used in order for the researcher to thoroughly prepare the interviews. The schedule consisted of 12 questions, with prompts, which focused on student experiences of peer and mentoring relationships (Box 1.1 provides a brief example of questions that were asked during the interview. Questions that focused on peer relationships were designed in a way that the participant would be able to discuss the relationships that have been established and how these relationships have developed, changed or remained the same over the duration of participant's university course. In addition to this, the participants were asked questions in relation to the characteristics of their peers. As with the exploration of peer relationships, there was a similar focus placed on mentoring relationships, specific focus was placed on the ways in which student's relationships with their mentors have impacted on their experiences of higher education (see appendix A). Each participant was provided with a debrief form once their interview was complete which documented the contact details of both the researcher and the supervisor of the study (see appendix C). A digital voice recorder was used in order to record all interviews. A pc was used to transcribe all data collected.

Pilot Interview

The researcher conducted a pilot study in order to determine the appropriateness of the questions. The pilot study was successful, with no amendments needing to be made to the interview schedule. As a result of this pilot study the researcher was confident to begin recruiting participants and conduct the study.

Fig 1.1 A small sample of interview questions asked during the study.

Example of questions used during the interview focusing on peer and mentoring relationships

- **Can tell me about the peer relationships you have established at university?**
- **In what way do you feel that these relationships have contributed to your time in higher education so far?**
- **Can you tell me about the mentoring relationships you have established at University?**
- **Can you tell me a little bit about your mentoring relationships at the very start of the course compared to now?**

Fig 1.1 A small sample of interview questions asked during the study.

Chapter 3 - Results

Key findings of this study are presented in table 1. Four predominant themes emerged during the themes that emerged during the cross – case comparison of the group: 'Support' 'The search for a sense of belonging' 'The paradoxical peer relationship' and 'Role change and adjustment' (this table can also be found in appendix E).

Table 1 – Master themes for the group

Emergent Themes	Master table of themes for the group			Participants contributed Page/line		
	Mary	Lisa	Anna	Kathleen	Mark	John
1. *Support*						
- Support from peers and its beneficial effects during the time of transition	1.19		1.16	4.12		2.37
- The beneficial impact of the mentoring relationship	6.13	7.33	8.14	11.9	7.9	7.22
- The impact of support upon self-concept	6.7		10.16	2.24		
- Similarities between students and their contribution to the development of peer relationships	2.13			4.22		2.25
2. *The search for a sense of belonging*						
- The need to 'fit in'	7.3	1.2	8.6	1.16		2.15
- A need to adjust the self	5.2			9.10	5.24	
- Fear of the unknown		3.41	8.5	5.5	3.29	
3. *The paradoxical peer relationship*						
- A lack of self-belief					3.17	3.12
- Competitiveness amongst peers	5.33	1.23	8.38	9.27		2.8
- The tendency to depend on peers	3.15		3.24			
	2.4		2.3			
4. *Role change and adjustment*						
- Work/life balance				8.17	4.35	4.20
- Loss of connections	4.19	5.31	6.12	7.9		
	4.34	4.26				

Support

The superordinate theme ‘support’ was identified in all participants accounts. All participants referred to the beneficial support they experienced as university students, particularly during the time of transition. Four sub-themes illustrate the various dimensions of support to them: 1) Support from peers and its beneficial effect, 2) The beneficial impact of the mentoring relationship, 3) The impact of support upon self-concept, 4) Similarities between students and their contribution to the development of peer relationships. In addition to this it seemed that support had a considerable influence on the ways in which students perceived themselves. It appeared that the similarities between students played a significant role in the development of peer relationships.

Support from peers and its beneficial effects during the time of transition

Whilst the beneficial impact of support from peers was frequently brought to light throughout the interviews, it seemed that it was of particular benefit to students during the first year of university. It was apparent that the development of peer relationships at the time of transition was very much associated with academic support. Mary had established a number of strong relationships with her peers, in which she discussed using a positive manner. Mary placed a considerable amount of emphasis on the support that she has been provided with from her peers. The beneficial impact that Mary’s relationships had whilst she was making the transition to higher education was undeniable:

> Seeing my friends here can cheer me up, or take my mind off whatever is bothering me at the time…When I am stuck with something, certain modules I can’t get my head around see but the girls help me out. - Mary

Mary placed a somewhat heavy focus on her personal characteristics, suggesting that her own personality traits could be a possible reason for her establishing such strong connections with her peers at University. Throughout the interview, Mary discussed how the

support provided by her peers impacted on her mood, specifically when feeling low. This implied that Mary's peers play a significant role in her state of well-being. The subject of motivation was also brought to light during the interview, the responses provided my Mary suggested that during experiences of difficulty in relation to university assignments, she felt able to approach her peers and ask for their assistance. This was something that was also evident throughout Anna's interview, it seemed that the participants frequently turned to their peers when facing academic struggles:

> So when I am in the counselling lectures I spend more time sitting with others than by myself, I think that's also because I am not so big with the counselling stuff. – Anna

In addition to the responses provided by Anna, the concept of support from peers presented itself during the interview with Kathleen. What particularly emerged during this interview was the impact that support seemed to have on Kathleen's view of self:

> It makes me feel like I'm not the only one who doesn't understand. - Kathleen

It seemed that support from Kathleen's peers considerably improved her self-concept, I was particularly interested in how this impact seemed to originate from reassurance. Kathleen discussed how she experienced feelings of reassurance when she was not the only one in her class who found difficulty in forming an understanding of a given phenomenon. This seemed to be viewed as a form of support, thus, it was something that promoted group interactions and the opportunity to face academic challenges together:

> I can get anxiety sometimes, just about certain subjects and stuff, like sometimes I don't feel like going to certain modules because I don't fully understand them, but I feel reassured when I know that the girls will be there too. - Kathleen

The support provided by Kathleen's peers also made a significant contribution to her academic achievement. Kathleen's account also suggests that her relationships with peers seemed to operate as a factor that worked against undesirable emotions.

This sub-theme allows a comprehension of how the establishment of strong peer relationships at university can be of considerable benefit to students during the time of transition. It can be seen from the participants' accounts that the support from peers not only allowed a sense of reassurance, it also was beneficial in terms of facing academic challenges.

The beneficial impact of the mentoring relationship

The beneficial impact of the mentoring relationship was an issue that was viewed from a positive perspective by all participants. It seemed that mentoring relationship especially benefited students when attempting to settle and face new, unfamiliar academic demands at university. There was an extreme sense of support presented which appeared to be considerably beneficial to participants' engagement with university work, providing them with increased levels of motivation:

> I find that the fact the lecturers explain things so well has really helped me improve my grades. - Anna

When Lisa was asked about her mentoring relationships that she had established at university, it seemed that she felt extremely supported by her mentors, and able to approach them for help when needed. Lisa particularly spoke about her personal mentor as opposed to the other mentors:

> I feel like I have a really trusting relationship with all the mentors on the course especially my personal tutor from day one, the staff made it clear what was going to be involved with the course, that made me feel more at ease. - Lisa

Lisa found comfort and reassurance in the time spent with her personal tutor, which was time used to specifically focus on Lisa as opposed to focusing on the class as a whole. It seemed that Lisa's experiences of peer relationships at university were somewhat weak, this was noted when Lisa discussed how she had experienced difficulties in establishing relationships with others in her class, thus it seemed that a close relationship with her

personal mentor had constituted for the lack of relationships with her peers. The support provided by her mentor appeared to fulfil the requirements for the caring social relationship that Lisa had hoped to establish with peers at the very start of university.

All participants discussed the concept of mentoring relationships in a way which suggested that they had all developed strong mentoring relationships at university. The level of care for students displayed by mentors seemed to be very much appreciated. Participants seemed to find comfort in the reassurance of knowing that there was a mentor. It appeared that participants found comfort in the reassurance of knowing they had mentors who were able to be approached for support when needed. The beneficial impact that the mentoring relationship had on the students' engagement with university work is illustrated vividly by John and Mary:

> They always help us prepare, we get emails reminding us of stuff and informing us of deadlines I think that is really helpful it shows that they care about us and encourages us to put full effort in. - John
>
> It definitely made a difference at the beginning of my course, I think in the beginning I was finding it hard to make this massive jump from college. - Mary

The ways in which participants discussed the support provided by their mentors captured the beneficial impact of these relationships, particularly during the time of transition. This sub theme allowed an understanding of how the input of mentors in higher education impacts on student's overall experience of university.

The impact of support upon self-concept

The impact of support upon self-concept was strongly associated with both the support from peers and the support from mentors. It seemed that being provided with a sufficient level of support at university improved the view that participants held of themselves. The support from peers was particularly linked to self-concept during analysis of with Kathleen.

Kathleen seemed to place focus on the academic abilities of her peers, illustrating how peers experience difficulties in the same areas that she did. This seems to have helped her to feel less separate from her peers and more connected, promoting an enhanced belief in the self in relation to academic capabilities:

> it's also nice to have it explained by my friends than somebody else in the class because I feel like they're not really judging me, they're not thinking that I'm stupid. - Kathleen

This beneficial impact on self - concept also emerged during Anna's interview. Anna, however, focused on the support provided by her mentors as opposed to peers, she placed a heavy focus on how her perceived view of the mentor's opinion of her affected her individual view of the self. In addition, this sub – theme brought to light how participants very often seemed to view the opinions and concepts of others of heightened importance, particularly in relation to academic abilities:

> I think they make us more…. confident too, you know, it's like they believe that we are capable of doing it, so we believe we are capable of doing it. - Anna

This sub – theme captured how support was very strongly linked to the participants' self-concept. The support from both peers and mentors enabled students to place focus on their own academic capabilities, this resulted in increased confidence levels for participants.

Similarities between students and their contribution to the development of peer relationships

It seemed that the similarities between participants and their peers played a considerable role in the development of strong relationships. Shared goals frequently emerged as a factor that contributed to the establishment of strong bonds within peer relationships. The fact that all participants were studying the same course subject, facing the same academic challenges and were focused on a somewhat similar final goal were all factors that seemed to enable students to feel comfortable with one another. The similarities between

participants and their peers seemed to present an unconscious awareness of empathetic understanding displayed by university students in relation to the realities of student life.

During the first interview with Mary there seemed to be an apparent link between spending time with her peers and the completion of university work whilst this was interpreted as support from peers, Mary's responses also implied that she found comfort in spending time with her peers as a result of the similarities between them. The fact that they were both facing the same academic challenges and shared future goals promoted an increase in time spent together:

> We get to spend time together as friends and manage to meet all our deadlines together. -Mary

During Kathleen's interview there was focus placed on the subject of encouragement. Kathleen provided responses that implied a strong sense of group membership at university. Kathleen's concept of the self as a member of a peer group seems to have developed as a result of shared goals and the recognition of similarities between the self and peers. In addition to the responses provided by Mary and Kathleen, this sub-theme also emerged during analysis of John's interview. There was a notable positive impact on the emotions experienced by John and a decrease in stress levels as a result of feeling that his peers were going through similar experiences to himself, it seemed that by this, John was more likely to engage with the support provided by his peers:

> I think that's something that we're all doing together as well, it's like we start together and we finish together but yeah just gives you a feeling of support I suppose. - Kathleen

We're all in it together and that takes the weight off a bit, when you're stressing about an assignment it's always nice to go and talk to one of your peers who are obviously experiencing the same thing' -John.

The Search for a Sense of Belonging

This superordinate theme was presented in a way that emphasised individual differences in the participants experiences of making the transition to higher education. Three sub themes were identified: 1) The need to fit in, 2) A need to adjust the self, 3) Fear of the unknown. Whilst conducting the analysis, the researcher noted an extreme need within participants to belong within their university environment, this was especially prevalent during the time of transition, it seemed that fulfilment of this need was found within stable peer relationships. The results therefore suggested that participants who did not present themselves as having such strong connections to their peers were still in search of belongingness, the researcher therefore concluded that a sense of belonging has a considerable effect on the transition process.

The need to fit in

It was apparent to the researcher that participants frequently introduced the need to fit in with their university peers. During Lisa's interview it seemed that she experienced a lack of connections with her peers. The idea of developing strong relationships seemed important to Lisa as she discussed giving this particular thought before she started university. It was interpreted by the researcher that Lisa started university with the hope to establish strong peer relationships. It was clear that at that time, she experienced anxieties in relation to the opinions that her future peers may form of her:

> I was a bit worried that I wouldn't fit here, people don't instantly take to me, it takes getting to know me and then that's when I bond with people. - Lisa

This theme also frequently appeared in the data presented by Kathleen, it could be seen that during the beginning of her time at university she made a conscious attempt to fit in with her peers. Once Kathleen had passed through this stage it also became clear that she had

formed her peer relationships, these processes seemed to go hand in hand. During the latter half of the interview Kathleen discussed herself as being a ‘member of the group’ at this point, it became clear to the researcher how the development of strong peer relationships contributed to this sense of belonging and group membership status:

> I was so taken up with trying to settle in and stuff but it all happens at the same time I suppose because as soon as I felt that I had settled in I had made all my friends here too. - Kathleen
>
> …when you first start at University you are just trying to fit in here, with someone or a group, maybe without even realising it. - Anna

A need to adjust the self

This sub-theme presented itself frequently and emphasised how participants very often experienced the need to change themselves in a way that made them more ‘suited’ to the typical identity of a student. Mark seemed to disassociate himself from his previous friendship group, this disassociation seemed to be linked to the changes of self, Mark no longer seemed to find enjoyment in the activities that he used to engage with, he was more focused on achieving high grades at university. It was apparent that Mark identified a ‘pre - university’ and a ‘post - university’ identity, the two of these identities presented different behaviour patterns and different social preferences. Whilst Mark may have been attempting to belong with university peers, it seemed that he lost a sense of belonging within his social group outside of university:

> I don't want to see so much of them anymore I feel like I've had to change to an extent now I don't really fit in so much with them anymore. -Mark

Kathleen's adjustment seemed to take place during the second year of her degree, it appeared that she reached a state of realisation, during her second year in which she attempted to change her behaviour patterns and her attitude towards university. I noticed how

Kathleen was putting in a considerable effort to her assignments and showing a genuine care in relation to her achievement at university. Whilst the second year of studies introduced an improvement in grades for Kathleen, it seemed that her peer relationships also developed and were presented as being based on the academic demands of university. Within John's account, it seemed that this need to adjust the self was accompanied by having to give particular thought to his typical way of talking and behaving in order to avoid possible judgement from others:

> I manage my time a lot better this year and it's nice when we all get time off together so that we can meet up and do our work together, so we still get the group feeling. - Kathleen
>
> I have to always think about how I behave, I have to think before I speak you know, like what I'm going to say. - John

Fear of the unknown

This sub-theme emerged particularly during the interviews held with Anna, John and Mary. Unlike other participants, Anna did not experience any extreme worries in relation to the concept of starting university, however, the concept of fear was strongly linked to the subject of being alone. This fear experienced by Anna was so prevalent that during the very start of her course she attached herself to a group that she later realised she was not so fond of, this attachment of the self to this particular peer group was interpreted by the researcher as a simple avoidance of loneliness:

> When I first started, there was a mixture of feelings really, it is weird… When I first started here, it was about getting friends just so I wouldn't be on my own. - Anna

However, in the responses provided by John, fear appeared to originate from the aspect of academic challenges. He implied that at the start of his course he felt at a disadvantage in comparison with his peers, this feeling appeared as a result of taking a break from the

educational system. In addition, Mary was also nervous during her time of transition, during the interview Mary seemed to link this nervousness with the perception of others and the opinions expressed by them in relation to her making the decision to start university, thus, the researcher interpreted a lack of encouragement from Mary's associates outside of university:

> I took a year out between to get my head around what I wanted to do and I think that made me umm kind of lacking then with my writing skills and stuff. So I experienced a lot of different emotions' - John
>
> Hmm scary I guess, a lot of people didn't really get why I was doing it, I was definitely nervous yeah. - Mary

It was clear that the participants experienced some fear before starting university, this appeared to be linked with unfamiliarity. Fear of the unknown seemed to originate from anxieties in relation to the opinions of others, participants seemed to place a heavy focus on what others may think of them and seemed to somewhat assume that their peers may form negative representations of them.

The Paradoxical Peer Relationship

This particular superordinate theme emerged as a predominantly significant result of the study as this was a concept that was not identified when reviewing previous literature. The sub-themes 'A lack of self - belief' 'Competitiveness amongst peers 'and 'The tendency to depend on others' were frequently brought to light during analysis. Whilst it could be seen that participants benefited from strong relationships with their peers, it seemed that, at times this benefit was accompanied by some negative aspects in the relationships. It was of interest how participants very often acknowledged the presence of negative aspects in their peer relationship but placed far more focus on discussing their relationships from a positive perspective.

Competitiveness amongst peers

It was clear when analysing the transcripts that there was a strong sense of competitiveness amongst the participants and their peers. Whilst the majority of participants expressed how they had established strong connections with their peers, there was also an awareness in relation to the disadvantages of these relationships and the possible negative impact they are able to have on one's experience of university. The subject of competitiveness seemed to predominantly appear, being repeated at various points during participant's interviews.

During Mark's interview he discussed how, for him, receiving lower grades than his peers introduced a range of negative emotions. It could be seen that Mark viewed his peers as being competitive amongst each other and had observed them discussing their university grades in a competitive manner on more than one occasion. Mark decided to distance himself from this:

> It can really put somebody down if they think they're not doing as well as somebody else. - Mark

During Mary's interview she discussed positive characteristics in her peers whilst also identifying the existence of competitiveness amongst them. In addition, Anna discussed how she, at times, experiences positive emotions when she received a higher grade than her peers, Anna was slightly reluctant to share this with the researcher and seemed to experience some guilt. The positive emotions expressed by Anna were associated with the need for feelings of achievement and accomplishment that Anna seemed to be lacking:

> No one wants to discuss rubbish marks, so the whole comparing grades thing can really get on my nerves sometimes. - Anna
>
> They are all really lovely people but what I do sense sometimes is like .. (pause).. this need to do better than someone else. -Mary

The tendency to depend on others

This sub-theme shows how participants at times, appeared to be both reliant and dependent on their peers. For instance, throughout Anna's interview, it was clear that she had developed some strong peer relationships, however, during the analysis a sense of reliance became apparent to the researcher which presented Anna as very dependent on the academic assistance of her peers at University, this dependency seemed to discourage Anna to challenge herself which meant that she faced difficulties in completing her work independently:

> I am not so big with the counselling stuff…They always help me. They get it a lot better than I do. - Anna

It was apparent that John's responses seemed to coincide with Anna. There seemed to be loss of independence, discouraging him to think for himself. In addition, the researcher also discerned a tendency in John to be easily influenced by his peers. John seemed extremely aware in relation to this and noted that it was not a positive aspect of his relationships with peers. In addition to this, Mary presented a sense of relief that originated from the help of her peers:

> Sometimes a lot of us will follow each other instead of just making up our own mind…But, sometimes it can be a bit of a block on my own way of thinking. - John

> We all help each other out thank God. - Mary

A lack of self-belief

The ways in which Mary discussed her relationships with peers suggested that she was not only reliant on them, but she strongly believed that they had stronger capabilities than what she did. When Mary was discussing how her relationships had changed over the

duration of the course, the subject of academic development was brought to light. Mary placed no emphasis on her own academic development, she only discussed this concept in relation to her peers suggesting that there was very little acknowledgment of any growth within herself as illustrated in the following quote:

> You know obviously there has been loads learned over time, our friendships have probably got stronger over time, I'm so glad the girls are there though I'd be stuffed on my own. - Mary

Whilst Anna's strong support network was viewed as a positive aspect of her experience of university, the researcher also acknowledged that there was a lack of belief within herself and a sense of admiration towards peers. Anna's responses at times, implied that she viewed her university peers as being of higher intelligence than herself. Anna discussed how her relationships with peers were very much based on support, whilst discussing the help they had provided for her when faced with academic difficulties, it became apparent to the researcher that whilst she made every attempt, she believed that she was unable to provide an equal level of support for them. The manner in which she discussed this, suggested that the support from her peers had guided her to believe that she has plays less of a role in this supportive relationship as her peers have a better ability to comprehend the university work:

> They get it a lot better than I do I mean I do try to help them as much as I can too. - Anna
>
> People do better when they got their friends helping them out. - Mark

Role Change and Adjustment

This superordinate theme captured the realities of student life. Two sub – themes emerged 'Work/life balance' and 'Loss of connections'. During analysis it was clear how the participants had been required to make a number of changes to their personal life which very

often, resulted in less time spent with family members and friends outside of university. This particular theme highlighted the importance of having an awareness in relation to the number of commitments one must make when starting university that have an impact on the personal life of students'. In addition, this theme emphasised how the changes that take place in students over the duration of their degree impacted on family relationships, thus a lack of understanding displayed by others seemed to contribute to the loss of already established connections with family members and friends outside of the university environment.

Work/Life balance

During Lisa's interview, she discussed herself as being the caregiver within her family environment. Lisa discussed the difficulties that she found in trying to work around her commitments outside of university whilst still achieving the best grades possible in her assignments. The researcher noticed at this point a strong sense of determination within Lisa. A genuine care appeared in relation to the grades and feedback received at University. It seemed that Lisa worried a lot about the commitments she had outside of university and expressed concern that these commitments may affect her academic work. This implied that a lack of time prevented Lisa from spending as much time on her university work as she would like to:

> It's hard, juggling a life full of various tasks, taking care of family whilst trying to meet deadlines, trying to fit in enough working hours without letting it affect your marks at uni. - Lisa

In addition to responses provided by Lisa, Mary discussed how her busy schedule impacted on the amount of time spent with her family members. Mary discussed this in a manner which suggested that she wished for more time able to be spent with her mum. Kathleen discussed how she found difficulty in the transition process and a lack of time significantly contributed to this. Throughout the interview Kathleen discussed how she, at

times, experienced anxiety. Kathleen found that long walks in parks was something she used to do when she lived at home with her family in order to prevent anxiety, however, since starting university this became something she was no longer able to do. Kathleen seemed to find it difficult in familiarising herself with the concept of having to dedicate what used to be 'free time' to time now spent completing university work:

> I've got a lot less time on my hands I think that definitely took me time to get used to that. - Kathleen
>
> I spend less time with my mum now, I think that's because we are both so busy. - Mary

Loss of connections

This subtheme presented itself in a way that allowed an understanding of how commitment to university is very often accompanied by the loss of free time and already established relationships. Lisa seemed express an emotional outlook on the fact that she was missing out on what she referred to as 'quality time' with her daughter. The way in which Lisa discussed her realisation relating to the importance of time, encouraged the researcher to interpret that whilst Lisa was emotional regarding the decrease in time spent with her daughter, her way of dealing with this emotional aspect of the situation was by focusing on her overall goal which could potentially have a beneficial impact on her daughter's future. Lisa's hard work also seemed like an attempt to set a positive example, encouraging her daughter to believe in herself:

> We are spending less quality time together … pause… sometimes that gets me down, I am mainly doing this for us, I want her to see what she can do if she puts her mind to it. - Lisa

Viewing the 'loss of connections' from a differing perspective was the light in which this theme presented during John's interview. Whilst John's view coincided with Lisa's with

regards to the negative aspect of not having such a great deal of time to spend with his family members, the responses he provided also implied that John felt dissociated from his family members. John emphasised how university had become a significant part of his life and therefore, it is very often something he desires to introduce as topic of conversation:

> It kind of seems to drive this wedge between us, it's like I have conversations with my family now about stuff that I have been talking about in lectures and they don't get it I think sometimes my family members get frustrated with me if I go on and on about university. – John

However, as a result of the responses provided by John's family members on occasions where he has attempted to do this, it seemed John was less likely to talk about university with his family members. The researcher interpreted this part of John's account as a lack of connection with family members as a result of a limited understanding in relation to the realities of John's life and course subject. He was therefore more likely to spend time with his university peers, which contributed to the development of those relationships.

In addition, a loss of already established connections was presented by Kathleen. Responses were provided which suggested that since Kathleen started university, members of her previous friendship groups made less of an effort to spend time with her, whilst Kathleen presented as though there was little concern in relation to this, it was clear that it was something she had given thought to:

> I see on Facebook and stuff when they've all gone out but I haven't actually been invited. – Kathleen

This particular sub theme was frequently apparent during analysis, the manner in which participants discussed the loss of their already established relationships suggested that this was unexpected when they made the decision to start university. The loss of connections was accompanied by a strong sense of emotions such as sadness as a result of losing time with

loved ones. However, the determination within participants to successfully complete their degree seemed to somewhat overrule these negative emotions.

Chapter 4 - Discussion

This study placed a key focus on student's experiences of peer and mentoring relationships. The researcher was particularly interested in exploring how such relationships affect students' whist making the transition to higher education. When analysing the findings of this study one can see that student life does indeed involve a number of complexities. The results of this study can be seen to coincide with the majority of previous literature proposed within this area. It is of high interest at this point, to refer back to the literature brought to light by Hussey and Smith (2010) which placed focus on the process of making the transition to higher education and factors that accompany this transition. These researchers proposed one of the predominant reasons a student will experience negative emotions when making the transition to higher education is the separation from their already established peer and family relations. The results of the present study can be seen to resonate with these research findings, with the loss of connections being brought to light by participants in four of the six interviews conducted. In addition to this, the results of this study appear to be somewhat associated with the literature proposed by Parkes (2014) who discussed a sense of belonging and the importance of this during transition. The results of the present study emphasise the need for a sense of belonging within university and the ways in which students appear to be searching for this, especially during the beginning of their course. It was noted by Parkes (2014) that social and academic interactions play a key role in establishing this sense of belonging. This is indeed a suggestion that can be complemented by the results of this study. However, although Parkes (2014) made belongingness a key area of his research, it appears that a heavier focus was placed on the factors that facilitate this sense of belongingness.

The research proposed by Libbey (2004) seems to coincide with the findings of this present study as both academic achievement and student well - being were strongly linked to the subject of belongingness as were strong peer relationships. In addition to this, the key findings of the present study support the notions proposed by Maunder (2017) who suggested that a major role is played by interaction with peers in the process of adapting to university life. This notion was supported as it becomes clear when analysing the results of this study, that the majority of participants who presented as having strong peer relationships appeared to pass through the transition and adaptation process with very few difficulties, whilst those who discussed the absence of peer relationships appeared to experience a sense of isolation during their transition period and faced stress as a result of facing academic challenges alone.

Key findings presented by Tight (2011) which suggested that both a sense of belonging and social integration are extremely important factors when one is attempting to make the transition to higher education are also supported by the results of this study with the importance of relationships and a sense of belonging frequently appearing within the results as an essential factor for students starting university. The results of the study conducted by Heaven, Ciarrochi, Cechaviciute and Vialle (2005) focusing on belongingness and group membership can be somewhat supported by the findings of the present study as participants who discussed themselves as being members of the peer group also discussed what was viewed by the researcher as a positive experience of transition to university. In addition to this the results of the study carried out by La Greca & Harrison (2005) appeared to be in some way supported by these present findings with participants discussing how strong peer relationships seemed to decrease stress levels and provide a form of support for students when they found difficulties with assignments. However, it is of high importance to refer back to the paradoxical peer relationship presented in the present study which allowed a comprehension of how peer relationships do not always have only a beneficial impact on

student's feelings, with many participants in the study expressing a decrease in self-belief as a result of competitiveness amongst peers. Thus, whilst the responses focusing positive aspects of the peer relationships supported these findings, the discussions regarding negative aspects did not.

This study did not show findings related to those proposed by France, Finney, and Swerdzewski (2010) who carried out research focusing on university attachment. This was not a factor that was presented by participants in this study. Literature proposed by Canter, Kessler, Odar, Aylward & Roberts (2011) is indeed supported by the results of the present study echoing the notion that having a strong and stable relationship with a mentor increases confidence levels and also provides one with a sense of encouragement which originates from the mentor. The results of this study can be considered as being in light of literature proposed by Heirdsfield, Walker, Walsh and Wilss (2008) which focused on the associations between a strong mentoring relationship and emotional support, reassurance in relation to academic demands and a feeling of comfort. These findings were all echoed in this present study with every single participant discussing how their mentoring relationships have been of benefit to them, not only during the time of transition but throughout the duration of the course. The findings proposed by Lee, Eric Krauss, Suandi & Hamzah (2014) which suggested that students who engaged with their mentors benefited from an increase in confidence is also a finding that is able to be supported by the results of this study.

The present study explored the role of peer and mentoring relationships in the university environment. Whilst there is an existing body of literature proposed in this area, this study has explored these relationships from an in-depth perspective allowing participants to provide detailed accounts of their individual experiences. The findings of this study appear to support the findings of previous research in this area. However, it seems of high interest to note, the existing body of literature in this area fails to document the negative aspects of peer

relationships. This study introduced an alternative perspective to the concept of peer relationships allowing one to comprehend how at times, the complexities inherent to these relationships can be seen as paradoxical. The qualitative design seemed to work well due to the nature of this study, allowing participants to provide in – depth accounts of their lived experiences as university students.

Conclusions drawn from this study should be interpreted with the acknowledgment of the limitations to the study. A key limitation was found in the sample used for this study. The participant sample was not only of limited size, there was an unequal distribution of males and females, however, it seemed that for this particular study, gender differences, did not seem to impact on the results. In addition to these limitations, it seemed that the research could have benefited from including some questions attempting to explore the concept of university attachment which seems of high interest when reviewing the literature proposed by France, Finney, and Swerdzewski (2010). This could indeed be considered as an area for further research. The final limitation to this study is the fact that the researcher was a psychology undergraduate student. Thus, there was a risk of the researcher making interpretations subconsciously based on their own feelings in relation to the matters discussed. However, this was a matter that the researcher remained aware of and made every effort during the analysis to avoid by strictly adhering to the key principles of IPA suggested by Smith Jarman and Osborn (1999). The key findings of this study suggest that mentoring relationships are able to have extreme beneficial effects on a student's experience of university, these relationships seem to provide confidence, encouragement and support. It seems that these relationships are particularly important during the time of transition. In addition to this, the nature of peer relationships seems to be slightly more complicated than what one may first expect. The notion that peer relationships provide students with support and a sense of belonging was supported by the results of this study. However, the results of

this study also suggested that student's relationships with their peers introduced feelings that were at times, very conflicting with the notion of peer relationships being of only benefit to students, thus it seems of equal importance for research to consider the negative aspects of these relationships which can be seen in the findings of this present study.

Personal Reflexivity

As a result of carrying out a qualitative study, I feel I gained a substantial amount of knowledge in relation to both the advantages and the disadvantages of taking this particular approach to research. One of the key advantages identified was the in-depth richness of the information that can be obtained through the use of interviews, which I feel is very often unable to be obtained through the use of quantitative research. One disadvantage that was present was the responsibility I felt was placed on me in relation to the interviewing skills used and my interpretation of the results. Overall, I felt comfortable when conducting the interviews. Whilst I felt slightly nervous when interviewing the first participant, confidence was a feeling that increased with each interview over the duration of time. Being an undergraduate psychology student myself, introduced the possibility for my own experiences to interrupt the interpretation process through subjective validation. When reflecting on every aspect of this study, the one thing I would do differently if conducting similar research in the future, would be to allow a longer duration of time for interviews to completed. The most satisfying part of conducting this study was being provided with such in-depth accounts in relation to the realities of the participants lives as students, whilst the most challenging aspect for me was attempting to ensure that participants remained 'on track' in terms of topic areas. It seemed very easy for participants to divert and begin discussing subjects of little relevance to the study. I approached this issue by first being aware in relation to this possibility, when this occurred I made use of the scheduled prompts to encourage participants to focus their responses on the key areas of research.

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Appendix A – Interview schedule

- Introduce myself
- Introduce my participant
- I am currently conducting qualitative research exploring student's lived experiences of peer and mentoring relationships
- I would like to ask you a few questions in relation to this. Please be aware that all data collected for this study is anonymised and will remain confidential
- Just so you know, this interview should take between 30 – 45 minutes is that ok? I just need you to sign this consent form *provide participant with consent form
- You have the right to withdraw from this study at any time.
- The interview will be recorded, is this ok with you? *remind participant of confidentiality and check if the participant has any questions prior to the interview starting.

Start the recorder and begin the interview.

Focus on peer relationships:

Can you tell me about the peer relationships you have formed at University?

*Classmates? Friends outside university? How do you feel about these?

What do you think can be considered as positive characteristics in your peers?

*I'd appreciate it if you could give me a little more detail.

In what way do you feel that these relationships have contributed to your time in higher education so far?

*Could you give me some examples please?

How do you feel that being a student has impacted upon your relationships with friends and family?

When comparing your peer relationships at the start of your course to your peer relationships now, do you feel that there have been any changes in your relationships over the duration of this time?

Focus on mentoring relationships:

Can you tell me about the mentoring relationships that you have established?

*Personal tutors and other mentors

How do you feel that your relationships with your mentors have contributed to your experience of higher education?

*Can you elaborate on that?

Can you tell me a little bit about your mentoring relationships at the very start of your course compared to now?

In what way do you feel that having a relationship with a mentor at has contributed to your academic achievements?

Focus on perception of self:

Can you tell me a bit about how you have found adapting to university life?

How would you describe yourself?

*How do you perceive yourself? Content? Positive? Unsatisfied?

How would you describe your friends and family members' perception of you?

* How do your friends perceive you?
* How do you feel about that?

Appendix B – Consent form

PRIFYSGOL CYMRU
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
UNIVERSITY OF WALES
Trinity Saint David
SWANSEA - ABERTAWE

Interview Study Consent Form

I understand that this research is being carried out by a final year Psychology student for their dissertation. This study will explore participants' lived experiences of peer and mentoring relationships at university.
I give my consent to participate in the interview that will take a maximum of 30 minutes.
I understand that I am participating in the interview on a voluntary basis and I am free to decline to answer any question, or to leave the interview at any time without giving a reason.
I also understand that I can withdraw from the research at any time.
I understand that all information provided is confidential and will be anonymised through the use of pseudonyms or numbers. Other names mentioned during the interview will also be anonymised. The interview data will be stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act.
I understand that the interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Only the researcher will hear the audio recording of the interview in full.
I am aware that if I have concerns about the study I can discuss these concerns with the researcher or the academic supervisor at any time during or after the study.
I also understand that at the end of the study I will be provided with a debrief form and the opportunity to discuss any issues with the researchers
I, _____ agree to participate in the study conducted by XXX School of Psychology and Counselling, University of Wales, Trinity Saint David, Swansea, under the supervision of Dr Lymarie Rodriguez.
Participant signature:_____
Date:_____

Name and Signature of researcher taking consent:
_____

_____

Appendix C – Debrief form

School of Psychology
Townhill Campus
Swansea

Study Debrief Sheet

Thank you for taking part in the study.

The aim of this study was to explore students' lived experience of peer and mentoring relationships at University. We specifically wanted to find out the ways in which these relationships contribute to a student's time spend at University

If you wish to withdraw your data from the study you must tell the researcher now. After this point, all of your data will remain both confidential and anonymous therefore, this will not be traced back to you.

If taking part in this study has raised any questions please speak to the researcher XXXX on XXXXX contact the academic supervisor Lymarie Rodriguez on lymarie.rodriguez@uwtsd.ac.uk or 01792 482107.

Thank you once again for taking time to participate in this study.

XXXXXX

BA Honours Psychology and Counselling Studies

University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Swansea

Appendix E – Master table of themes for the group

Emergent Themes	**Master table of themes for the group**			**Participants contributed Page/line**		
	Mary	Lisa	Anna	Kathleen	Mark	John
1. *Support*						
- Support from peers and its beneficial effects during the time of transition	1.19		1.16	4.12		2.37
- The beneficial impact of the mentoring relationship	6.13	7.33	8.14	11.9	7.9	7.22
- The impact of support upon self-concept	6.7		10.16	2.24		
- Similarities between students and their contribution to the development of peer relationships	2.13			4.22		2.25
2. *The search for a sense of belonging*						
- The need to 'fit in'	7.3	1.2	8.6	1.16		2.15
- A need to adjust the self	5.2			9.10	5.24	
- Fear of the unknown		3.41	8.5	5.5	3.29	
3. *The paradoxical peer relationship*						
- A lack of self-belief					3.17	3.12
- Competitiveness amongst peers	5.33	1.23	8.38			2.8
- The tendency to depend on peers	3.15		3.24	9.27		
	2.4		2.3			
4. *Role change and adjustment*						
- Work/life balance				8.17	4.35	4.20
- Loss of connections	4.19	5.31		7.9		
	4.34	4.26	6.12			

Appendix F- Individual Table of Themes – Interview 1 - Mary

Emergent Themes	Page/Line	Key Words
1. *Support from peers* Display of emotions as a result of feeling able to seek advice. Comfort found in the empathetic understanding Displayed by peers.	1.22 2.37	'It's nice to talk to other people experiencing the same thing because they can understand.
2. *Importance of course subject* The expectations of individuals seeking a career within the field of psychology	1.28	'I think even though it's kind of expected, we're all studying psychology'
3. *Reliance on others* The disadvantages of peer relationships The absence of independence An awareness in relation to the impact of relationship upon self	2.8 2.15 2.16	'Sometimes a lot of us will follow each other instead of making up our own minds'
4. *Shared goals* The willingness to trust as a result of common factors in peer relationships Lower levels of anxiety as a result of peers experiencing similar feelings	2.25 2.28	'We're all in it together'
5. *Fear of the unknown* Conflicting emotions during transition Disassociation between self and peers	5.8 3.25	'I experienced a lot of emotions'
6. *Loss of connections* A lack of understanding displayed by those out of education	4.20	'It kind of seems to drive this wedge between us'
7. *The beneficial impact of the mentor's support* Impact of the mentoring relationship upon participants overall university experience Consideration and appreciation of mentor's support	6.33 7.22	'I knew they were there at the start and I know they are there now'

Appendix F- Individual Table of Themes – Interview 2 - Lisa

Emergent Themes	Page/Line	Key Words
1. *Support from mentors* The appreciation of genuine care The liberation of stress Beneficial impact of mentor's support during transition	6.27 6.35 7.33	'They make the whole journey easier' 'I think even though it's kind of expected, we're all studying psychology'
2. *Independence* Feelings of achievement from accomplishing tasks alone Challenging the self The use of eustress as a motivator	2.10 8.26 5.19	'I will get through independently'
3. *The need to belong* Attempts to form connections Anxiety in relation to the opinions of others	1.2 3.41	'It's taken time to fit in'
4. *Lack of connections/isolation* The experience of loneliness Lack of involvement in group activity Undesirable impact on overall university experience	1.9 2.20 3.8	'I wouldn't go, even if I was invited'
5. *Lack of support* Academic challenges Comparison of support for the self with support for 'in – group' members	1.16 1.23	'They're all helping each other'
6. *Loss of connections* Woke/life balance Realisation in relation to the importance of time The management of different commitments	4.26 5.31	'We spend less quality time together'

Appendix F- Individual Table of Themes – Interview 3 - Anna

Emergent Themes	Page/Line	Key Words
3. *Reliant on others* Finding comfort in the company of peers The beneficial impact of peer relationships when experiencing academic difficulties	1.16 2.3	'I am not so big with the counselling stuff'
4. *The experience of admiration* Lack of belief in self The importance of trust	8.38 7.35	'They get it a lot better than I do'
3. *The need to be supported* Impact on self - concept Changes in perceptions relating to the role of the mentor	10.16 8.14	'They always help me'
4. *Competitiveness amongst peers* Feelings of embarrassment	3.24	'No one wants to discuss rubbish marks'
5. *Fear of the unknown* Anxieties in relation to loneliness Reluctant to seek support The importance of peer opinions	8.13 8.33 8.35	'You don't know what to expect'
6. *Loss of connections* Positive changes within self	6.30 6.12	'We used to spend so much more time together'
7. *The need to belong* Difficulty in the concept of independence The importance of establishing peer relationships	8.6 3.28	'You are just trying to fit in here'

Appendix F- Individual Table of Themes – Interview 4 - Kathleen

Emergent Themes	Page/Line	Key Words
1. *The need to belong* The development of peer relationships The concept of the self as a group member	1.16 4.12	'I was so taken up with trying to settle in'
2. *Group behaviour* The loss of one's own independence The completion of work becomes dependent on peers	9.10 9.27	'One person becomes stressed and so does everybody else'
3. *Support from peers* The strength of relationship is dependent on similarities Positive impact on self-perception	2.24 4.22	'I turn to my close friends when I feel stressed.
4. *Anxiety* Attachment to mentors A lack of control Early focus placed on the concept of relationships at university	13.10 8.39 5.9	'The fear took over the passion I had to study'
5. *Loss of connections* Isolated by previous friendship group Adjustment to having less time	7.9 8.17	'I see a lot less of them now than what I did before'
6. *Realisation* Experiences regret in relation to past attitudes The development of future plans	11.5 11.26	'This year has been massive for me'

Appendix F- Individual Table of Themes – Interview 5 - Mark

Emergent Themes	Page/Line	Key Words
1. *Isolated from peers* Identification of the self as a non-group member Increased stress as a result of feeling segregated from peers	2.6 6.11	'They only help their friends'
2. *Independence* A sense of achievement The development of routine resulting in low expectations	4.7 6.35	'I don't really rely on anyone here'
3. *Expectations vs Reality* The initial hope to develop peer relationships Comparison of the self with friends	3.29 3.33	'None of us really gel'
4. *Maturity* Belief in the self Notable changes in treatment from others	4.35 5.3	'They treat me more like an adult now'
5. *Loss of connections* The importance of family support The significance of the opinions of others	5.23 5.24	'I see a lot less of my family now'
6. *Delayed transition* Replacement of peer relationships with mentor support The absence of peer relationships	7.25 7.34	'It is something that I am still getting used to'
7. *Competitiveness amongst peers* Negative impact on feelings Frequent observations made in relation to group behaviour	3.17 3..27	'They spend a lot of time comparing their grades'

Appendix F- Individual Table of Themes – Interview 6 - John

Emergent Themes	Page/Line	Key Words
1. *Support from peers* Display of emotions as a result of feeling able to seek advice. Comfort found in the empathetic understanding Displayed by peers.	1.22 2.37	'It's nice to talk to other people experiencing the same thing because they can understand.
2. *Importance of course subject* The expectations of individuals seeking a career within the field of psychology	1.28	'I think even though it's kind of expected, we're all studying psychology'
3. *Reliance on others* The disadvantages of peer relationships The absence of independence An awareness in relation to the impact of relationship upon self	2.8 2.15 2.16	'Sometimes a lot of us will follow each other instead of making up our own minds'
4. *Shared goals* The willingness to trust as a result of common factors in peer relationships Lower levels of anxiety as a result of peers experiencing similar feelings	2.25 2.28	'We're all in it together' 'I experienced a lot of emotions'
5. *Fear of the unknown* Conflicting emotions during transition Disassociation between self and peers	5.8 3.25	
6. *Loss of connections* A lack of understanding displayed by those out of education	4.20	'It kind of seems to drive this wedge between us'
7. *The beneficial impact of the mentor's support* Impact of the mentoring relationship upon participants overall university experience Consideration and appreciation of mentor's support	6.33 7.22	'I knew they were there at the start and I know they are there now'